Using Learning Management Systems to Support Students' Collaborative Learning in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

LMS are web-based systems used for the distribution and management of course materials and to support communication between students and instructors. An LMS can also support peer collaboration by allowing students to create their own project sites. In our campus' LMS use we found a wide proliferation of student-initiated project sites created specifically to support learning activities taking place outside of the classroom and outside of the course website.

Here we present data from system logs, surveys, interviews, and case studies to investigate how students use project sites to facilitate peer learning.

WHY USE PROJECT SITES

Providing project space inside the LMS provides students with the convenience of having one integrated environment for both course and project work. Students use project sites to:

Broadcast information (resources, announcements)

Build collective knowledge (chat, discussion, wiki)

NOT as a replacement for other modes of communication with group members
    94% still use email
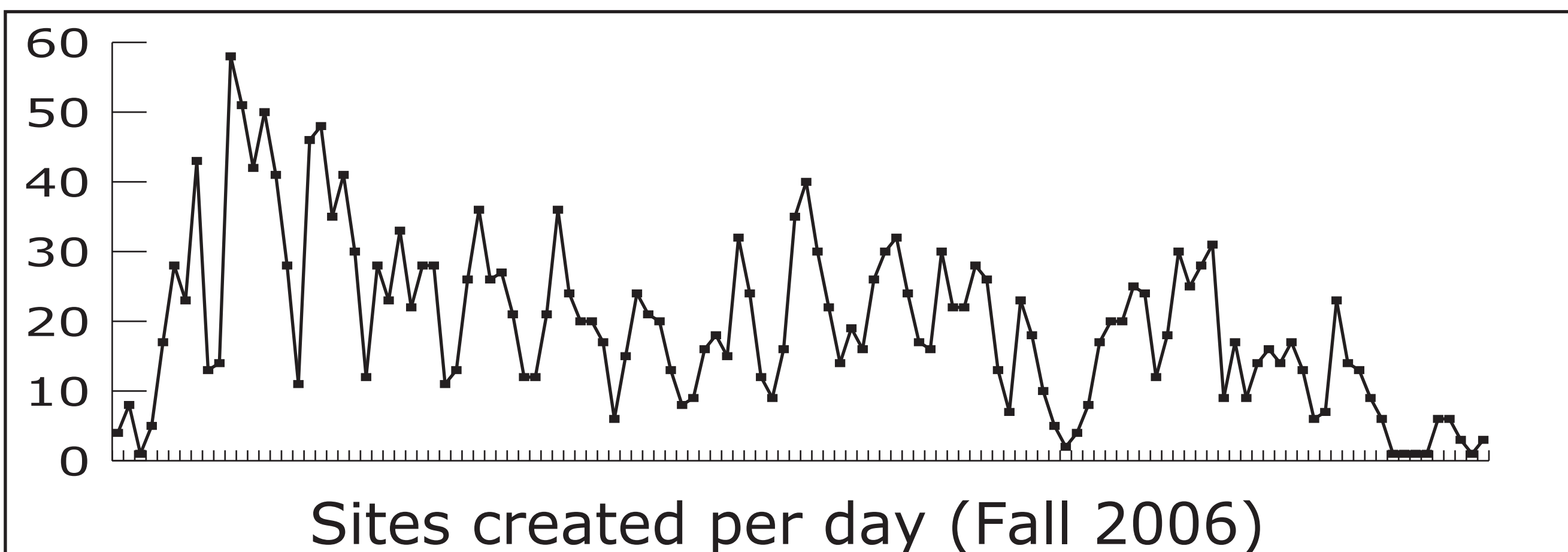   92% still meet face-to-face
    73% still use the phone

PROJECT SITE USE

1,110 new project sites were created by students in Fall 2006
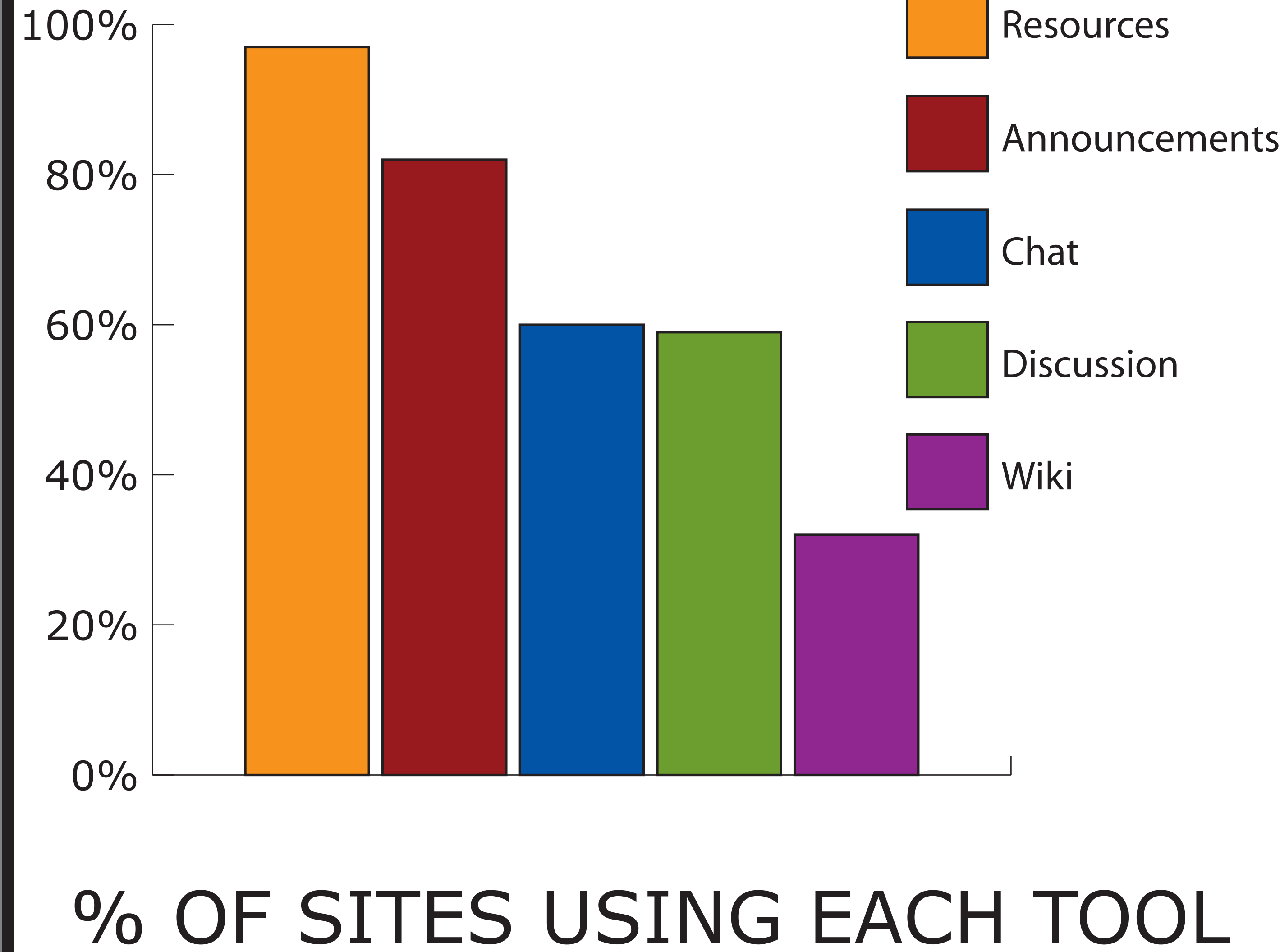
70% are used for course-related projects

62% are used for just one term

76% are accessed at least a few times per week

Sites created per day (Fall 2006)

% OF SITES USING EACH TOOL

Legend:
- Resources
- Announcements
- Chat
- Discussion
- Wiki

TYPICAL SITES HAVE

62 resources
9 announcements
61 chat messages
9 discussion posts
25 wiki revisions
4 registered members

MOST VALUABLE BENEFITS

52% "helps us manage project-related activities"

25% "improves my communication with other participants"
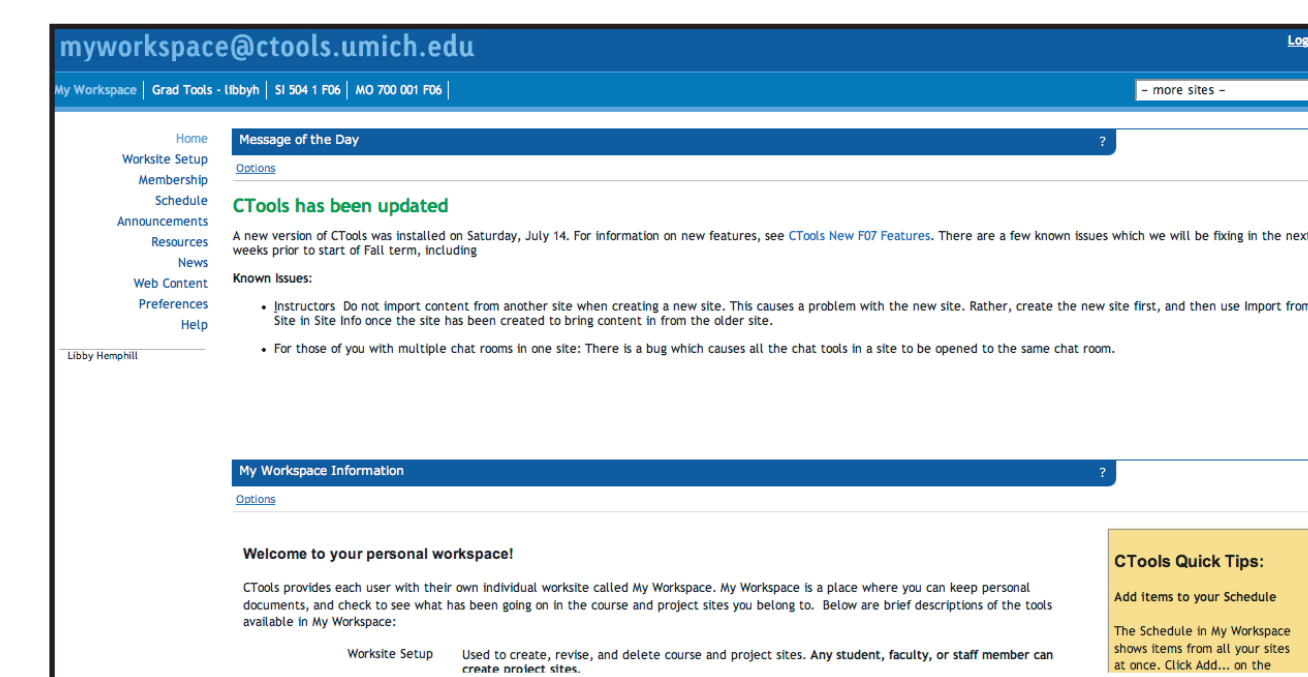
14% "saves us time"

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

As LMS become ubiquitous in higher education, it will be increasingly important to move the focus from faculty use to student use to determine how students can best leverage the capacities of LMS in service of their own learning.
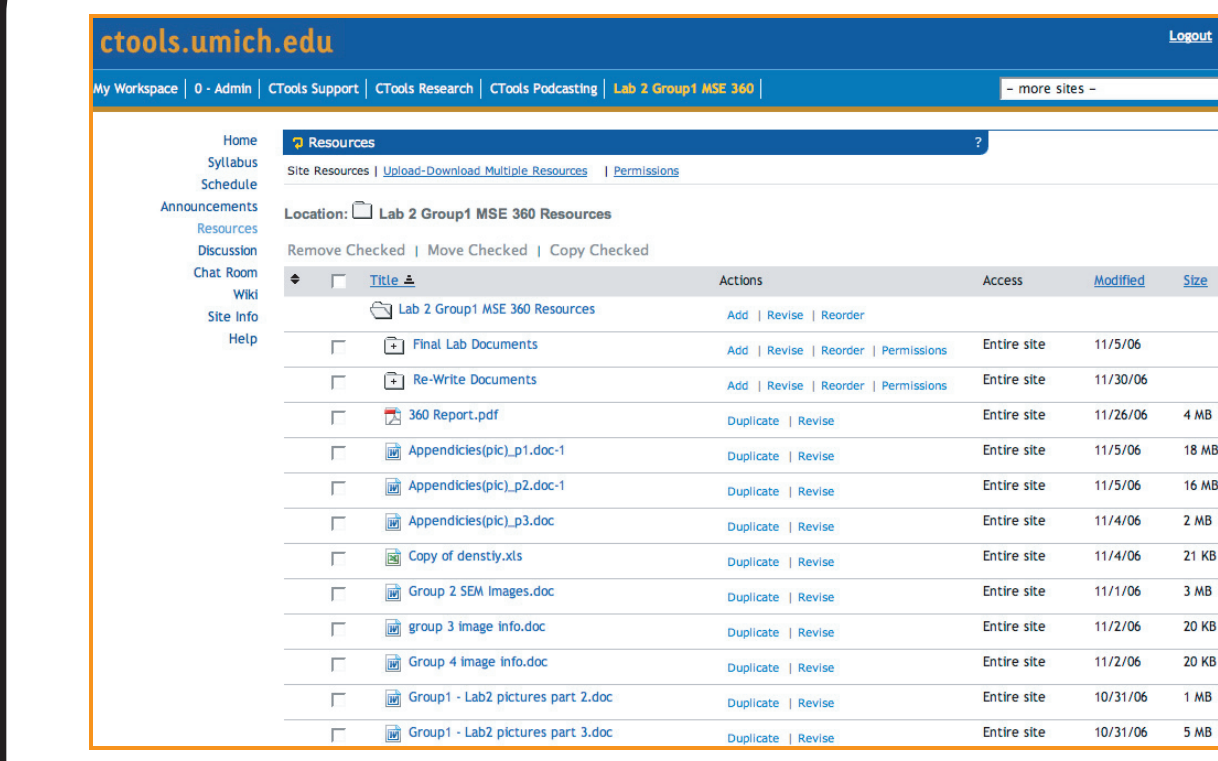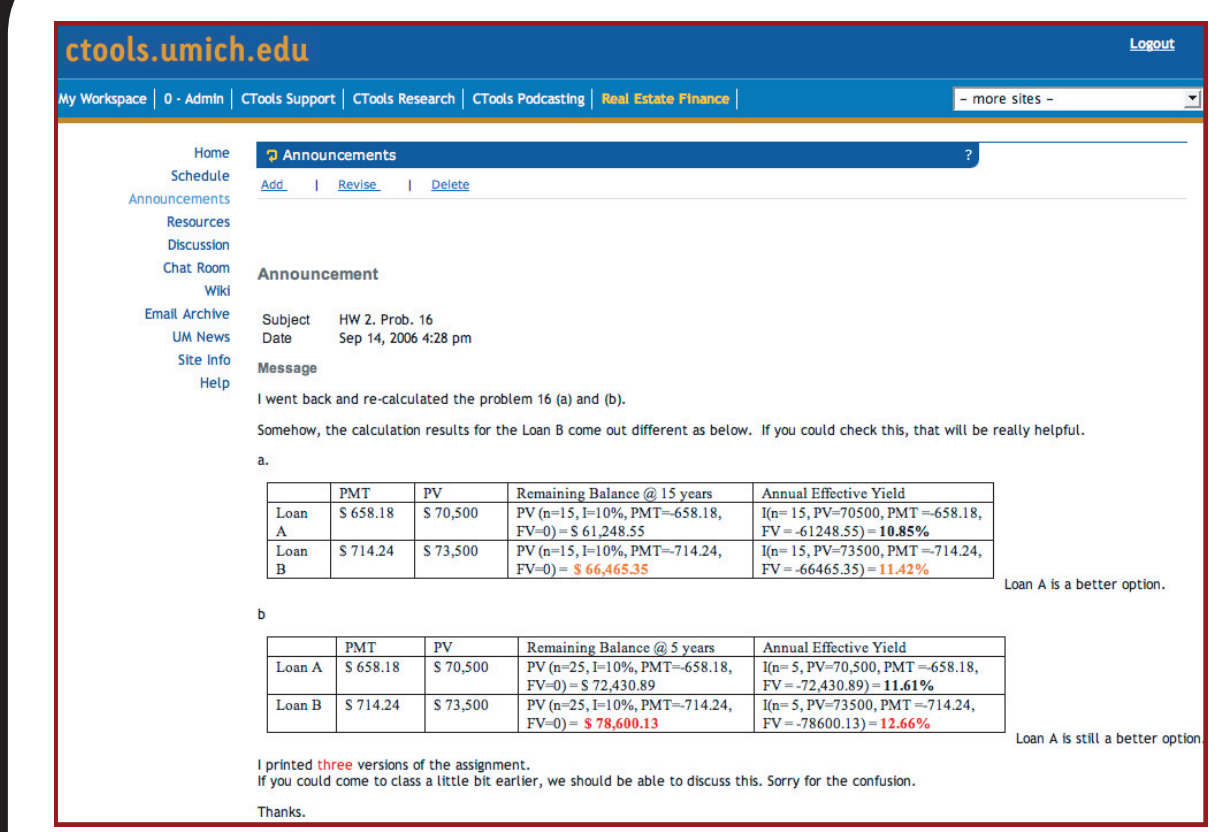

RESOURCES

"I think because [in] email it is very difficult to see the history of a document and the history of what you got. [Resources] was like a central place where [we] could post it and everybody could access it."


ANNOUNCEMENTS

Groups used the Announcements tool not only to schedule face-to-face meetings but also to retain a record of their completed work and to discuss future plans (i.e. who would speak first in a group presentation). This allowed site participants to keep a shared record of conversations.
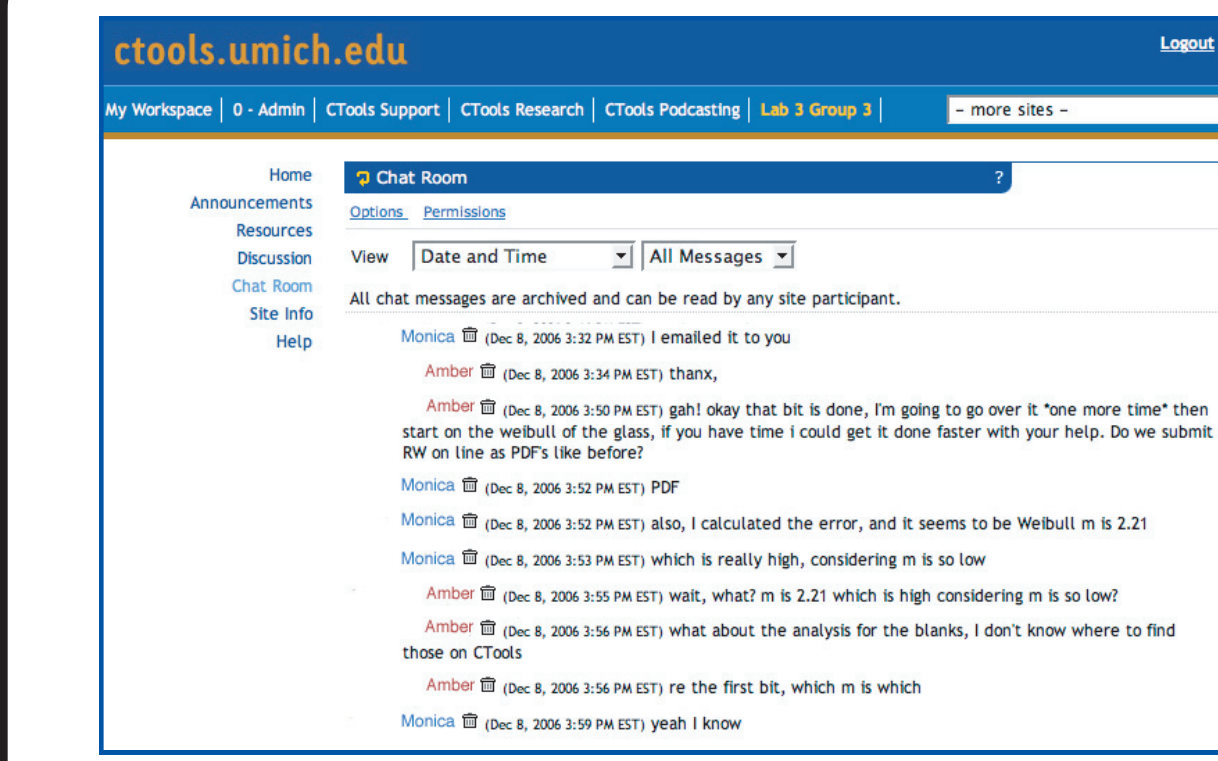

CHAT

"[During] our final project and a couple other reports where it was really tough, and we really needed to be working on it all the time we would be on the chat room working on it constantly. [We] wanted to be sure we were doing the right thing or other people had answers or stuff like that."
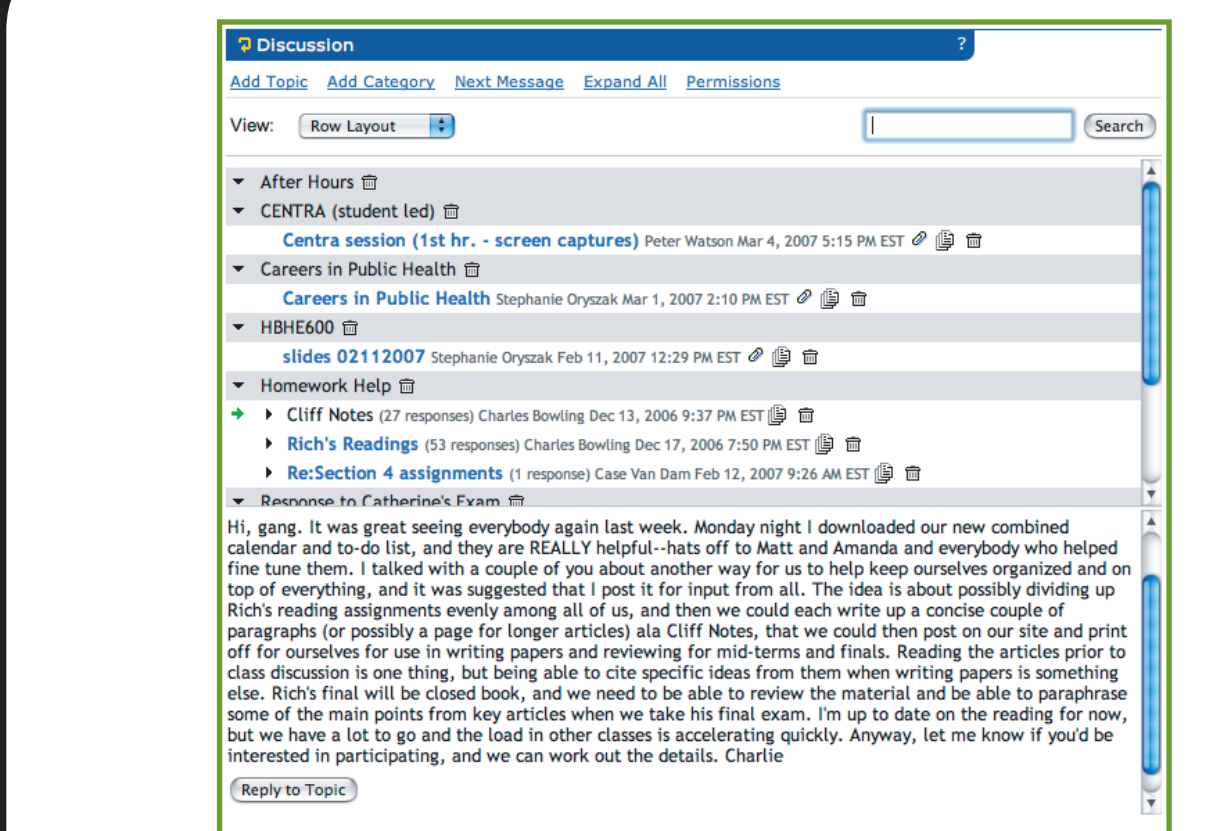
DISCUSSION

"The Discussion helped because we were not always able to make decisions about certain issues at our weekly meetings, but we could post our opinions on discussion threads so that we could come to a decision before meeting again."
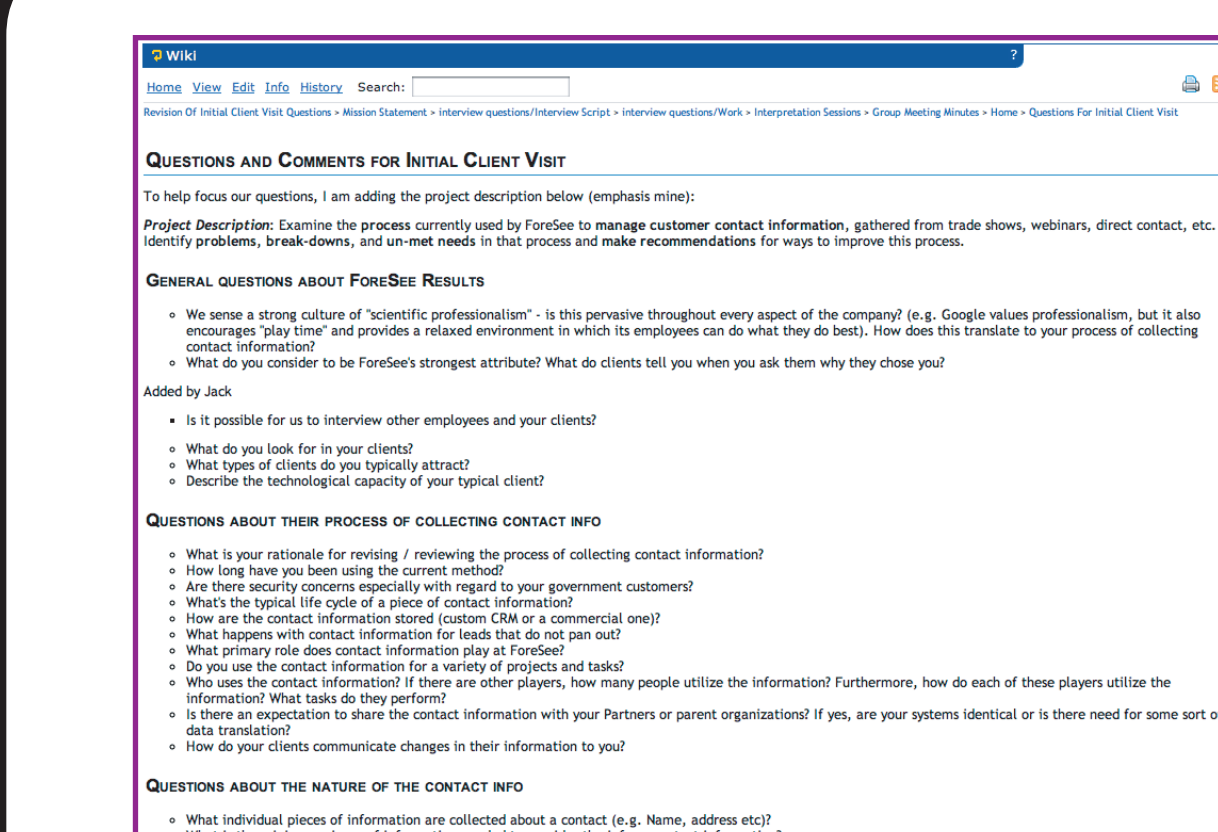
WIKI

"The Wiki feature enables active editing that doesn't result in lost drafts or changes on large co-authored pieces."