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

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.