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Introduction. What is Moodle?

As detailed in the preface to "Using Moodle. Teaching with the Popular Open Source Course Management System" (Cole, J. 2005), Moodle is a CMS (Course Management System) used by teachers in a variety of educational settings and institutions for delivering online courses. It is free and downloadable from the internet at http://www. moodle.org.

Moodle has two meanings. First, it's an acronym for Modular Object Oriented Developmental Learning Environment. It is also a verb which means "to let the mind wander and do something creative but without particular purpose". Similarly, musicians use NOODLE as a term to describe a sort of random playing that they do when they are sitting down waiting for the next rehearsal piece to start.

Although CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) is not new, Moodle offers something extra and special on two counts. First, it is interactive and can provide feedback to the students in the form of quiz scores or forum exchange. Second, there is no need for administrators, teachers, and students to gather in a traditional CALL lab with rows of desktop computers. A decade ago, many schools and colleges invested huge sums in equipment for these CALL rooms. Now it

seems they are no longer necessary since students can simply bring their own wireless laptop PCs to any classroom which has wireless Internet access and communicate with each other by inputting text from their keyboards. In fact, learners can even interact with online course materials, course members, and teachers from outside the classroom.

This type of learning environment has recently been termed "blended" learning since language courses —— or "hybrid" courses- can now blend, or combine traditional oral communication activities, even lock step instruction with teacher as center, with more autonomous, self-paced learning. For example, teachers can display their "blackboards" on students' monitors in a classroom, or at home, but also allow learners to freely access, complete, and repeat grammar and vocabulary exercises, listening, reading or video-viewing activities by clicking on menus. Information gap activities for oral practice can also be created by allowing Student A and B access to different information to complete tasks.

What is a CMS and why should you use one? (p.1-4)

Course management systems are web applications which allow teachers to create course web sites and enable access control. They can be used to fulfill the following functions (p.2): uploading and sharing materials, forums and chats, quizzes and surveys, gathering and reviewing assignments, recording grades and analyzing scores. The message is not that we *can* use it, but that we *should*. Several reasons are given, and the first is surprising: time. Since content can be delivered online, there is no need for chalk and boardwork, and class time can be

devoted to discussion, questions from students, and troubleshooting related to more difficult tasks. Second, reticent or shy students who are reluctant to speak can express themselves in writing without fear of making mistakes in the public, pressure-filled, oral arena of the classroom. Third, students' growing preference for accessing web-based text and communicating through instant messaging means they are more likely to be attracted to CMS-based courses than to traditional ones. Flexibility of CMS for busy, working students is also mentioned as an advantage. The final reason given is in fact a re-statement of the first. Since lectures can be delivered online, class time can be devoted to answering questions from students about things which they had not understood or which they interested them especially.

Feature Comparison (p.6)

Moodle is not the only CMS available. O'Reilly contrasts the features of Moodle with two competing CMS: Blackboard and WebCT.

Table 1:1 Feature Comparison (p.6)

Feature	Blackboard	WebCT	Moodle
Upload and share documents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Create content online with HTML	No	Yes	Yes
Online discussions	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grade discussions/participation	No	Yes	Yes
Online chat	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student peer review	No	No	Yes
Online quizzes/surveys	Yes	Yes	Yes
Online gradebook	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student submission of documents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Self-assessment of submission	No	No	Yes
Student workgroups	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lessons with paths	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student journals	No	No	Yes
Embedded glossary	No	No	Yes

My first reaction to the table is likely to be the one intended by the author: Moodle is much better than Blackboard and WebCT. However, a quick search of the Blackboard website (http://www.blackboard.com/us/index.aspx) produces the following text:

"Instructors may use Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML) to customize many areas of a course Web site, including the appearance of Announcements, Calendar Events and Content Areas throughout a course. The following are some examples that demonstrate how HTML content may be incorporated into the *Blackboard Learning System*."

Retrieved from:

http://library.blackboard.com/docs/r6/6_1/instructor/bbls_r6_1_instructor/html_content_examples.htm#_Overview_177

However, it's possible that an expert could argue that creating HTML for online courses is more difficult with Blackboard than with Moodle. It is also strange that the table indicates that submission of documents with Blackboard is possible, while submission of student journals is not. One also wonders why "Self-assessment of submission" is not possible with Blackboard. I am not yet functional in Moodle, but it seems there is nothing to stop a student submitting assignments by email complete with self-assessment.

On the subject of comparative data of a course delivered through both Moodle and Blackboard one forum contributor writes. "Student satisfaction and performance are fairly similar between the two environments, with a slight preference for Moodle, and the real differences seem to come out when the instructor/developer satisfaction is taken into account too. While Blackboard is hailed for the strength of its gradebook, it's built-in survey tool and for seeming easier off the mark

to beginners, [there are] a whole host of advantages and satisfactions that emerged over time with Moodle. —— SWL"

From: Humboldt College Comparison of Satisfaction of Moodle and Blackboard http://www.humboldt.edu/~jdv1/moodle/all.htm

If you are an individual teacher, without institutional backing, Moodle is recommended, not only because it would save you somewhere in the region of $200,000 dollars- the asking price for institutional Blackboard services-but also because it is free.

Reasons for writing the book (Who is this guy?)

Using Moodle has been written as a guide for users in the global community, who number around 75,000 in 138 countries in 70 languages, according to the latest count on Moodle website http://moodle.org/. Number of users on one course number a staggering 40,000. The reasons for creating this CMS are crystal clear. Moodle founder Martin Dougiamas had become frustrated with existing CMS which had been designed by engineers, not teachers, and wished to create a practitioner-friendly system. Music to the ear of technophobes. The author, Jason Cole, works on the Open University in the UK, and is part of a large team of product developers in the Moodle Community.

However, since most of the information and instructions required for running the program is either on the website help, support, and knowledge base, and is also provided in the program itself, the question of why we need a book in addition is worth asking. The latest versions of the program are updated on a daily basis, and this is also a fair

description of the manner and rate at which the book is becoming outdated, even since July, 2005.

Reasons for choosing to review this book

My purpose in reviewing the book is simply to rate its value in assisting me with my efforts to learn to use the program as a Moodle beginner. More specifically, I shall assess its contribution to my achievement of pre-determined goals, namely to deliver two tests for my first experiment in my PhD research. One is a grammar-monitoring test, a TOEIC style multiple choice error recognition test, and the other a cloze test. This aim is narrower than it should be since the Quiz feature which I hope to master is only one of 16 activity types included in the program.

Getting started. (Nasty shocks and steep learning curves).

Chapter 2 of the book, Moodle Basics, begins with a section entitled "Getting started" (p.7). A summary of the 10 lines dedicated to the set up process is as follows:

i) Create a URL on a server running Moodle.

ii) Access the Moodle main screen through your browser.

Only this recommendation is given: "Use your institution's server, or set up your own by following the instructions on the Moodle website".

Indeed, installing Moodle is a relatively simple exercise, but the information I really needed was not actually in the book. A prospective user has a number of considerations and options to weigh, and I feel

they should have been discussed at this stage. The following is what I have learned from Moodle workshops and informal discussions with colleagues. Peter Ruthven-Stuart (2006) lists eight different set-up options, each with cost, difficulty, and reliability factors to consider. These options include setting up Moodle on your own server, using a friend's Moodle space, and using a private hosting company.

The latter option was the one I eventually chose but the book provides neither a list of recommended companies, nor any information regarding how to find such a hosting service. Initial speculation as to the reason why this information was not provided led me to the conclusion that information regarding private enterprises had no place in such a book. However, the website itself includes advertisements for several companies which provide Moodle hosting and support services at prohibitive prices. In any event, since my institution's server did not host Moodle, I was destined never to get started until I was recommended two hosting services by colleagues at a workshop. One is named http://netmondo.com/ and the other http://www. bluehost.com/. The former advertises recently changed ownership on the homepage of its website; (02/01/05) "Netmondo is under new ownership. Support and customer satisfaction is very important to NetMondo". It transpires that the previous owner had absconded with funds received from hundreds of subscribers who found themselves having to pay for services no longer available, including my colleague. This type of situation is in fact a very good reason why recommended hosting service companies are not listed.

Although another colleague is satisfied with Netmondo under a new ownership, I decided to sign up through Bluehost at a price of $166

for 24 months of service. I had a simple website, or URL, in operation and viewable to the general public within an hour of submitting credit card details. The site is presently named: www.technopeasant.net. but shall be renamed after I acquire a certain level of competence.

The next step is also simple, but also not described in the book as it should be. Moodle can be installed in only five minutes by a feature on the Bluehost control panel named Fantastico onto your main index page (home page) or on a sub.html. In fact, whether or not a hosting service provider has this feature should be a key factor in choosing one.

However, the present version of Moodle installed by Fantastico is 1. 5. 2, which is not by a long way the most recent version. Besides not including the most recent features of Moodle, it can also be more easily hacked into and emptied of content. On the other hand, more recent versions are easily downloaded onto a desktop but difficult to install, or upload onto a URL without professional IT expertise, apparently even for experienced users who conduct workshops on Moodle.

Editing your user profile

Following installation, you will have to create a Moodle account through accessing the Moodle website, a simple operation described on page 10. In contrast, to the scant "Getting Started" section, the business of "Editing Your User Profile" five pages (p.10-15) are remarkably and patiently detailed, as is most of the book.

Creating a course

Once a new user has a website with Moodle installed, and an

account opened, the next step is to create a course, and the necessary steps are explained in a section entitled: "A First Look at a Course" p.15-31. Even if the user's purpose is only to deliver and collect data from a set or pair of tests, the tests themselves can only be hosted as part of a course, and the configuration of course settings took me about 60 minutes as a first time user. Evidently the process could be accomplished by an experienced user in just a few minutes, but certainly having more than a dozen screen shots of configurations and settings displayed in as many pages makes the task much easier. My only recommendation for improvement would be for the inclusion of the following tip: users should take a screen shoot of their settings, print it out, and pencil in reasons why they selected each option to keep as future reference.

Creating and managing content

Chapter 3 deals with adding content to Moodle. As in earlier sections, the process can be followed by clicking on the question marks on your Moodle site, but the *tips* and *warnings* included in italics on many pages are a good reason to buy the book, and could save a lot of time and trouble for new users. For example, "Tip: Remember that you need to turn Editing Mode on to see the "Add a resource" or "Add an activity" menus" (p.35). How did the author know I would forget and throw my arms up in despair?

Having reached this stage, problems with different browsers may begin to appear, and these again pertain to commercial issues. Among the most popular are Safari, Internet Explorer, Netscape, and Firefox. Safari works excellently for web-surfing with Macs, and IE works well

with Windows for the same purpose. However, when designing quizzes, some forum members have complained that Safari can't be easily adapted for editing HTML, and others have encountered problems adding images with it. It appears that they either don't possess the book or haven't read the following warning on page 35:

"Warning: The Moodle HTML editor doesn't work in all browsers. Currently, it works in Netscape 7, Internet Explorer 5.5 or later, Mozilla 1.7 and Firefox. It doesn't work in Safari, Camino, and Firefox".

The general consensus on the forum appears to be that Mozilla Firefox is the preferred browsing tool for HTML editing work. It can be downloaded for free from http://www.mozilla.com/.

Testing, teaching and community

Since I had a predetermined goal in using Moodle as a testing and data collecting device, I jumped straight to Chapter 5 on quizzes. The importance of testing is neatly stressed, with emphasis on the value of rapid feedback, which Moodle is able to provide, and also on the value of giving frequent small quizzes to establish a grade. However, readers are warned that it is "one of the most complex pieces of the system". Although I was pleased to see that a number of testing formats were available (9 are listed on page 76), including multiple choice, I was disappointed to find that there is no format, or graphical interface for making a cloze test. Most practitioners seem to prefer the excellent cloze-creating feature in Hot Potatoes (http://hotpot.uvic. ca/). Unfortunately, this software has a "give hint" (first letter) and

even an answer-checking feature which cannot be deactivated rendering Hot Potatoes unsuitable for testing purposes.

The multiple choice test writing function is also quite a challenge, and it is at this point that I realize that there are at least three good reasons why a first time user should not dive in with data-gathering motivation. First, as is clear, newcomers should not miss Chapter 4 Using Forums, Chats, and Dialogs which is a simpler format to master. The second reason is that it introduces the user to Moodle as a powerful communication tool and community builder. The third reason is that although Moodle has the capability to draw raw scores from students, it is primarily a teaching and learning tool, not a testing tool. This is not clearly stated but the underlying spirit and philosophy of this CMS surfaces in various places throughout the text. One tip in the Quizzes section is a good example: "It may be a bit more work, but it's good practice to tell the students why each answer is right or wrong using the feedback area. If students know why an answer is right or wrong, they can analyze their own thinking and begin to understand why an answer is correct" (p.75). Further advice includes: "Tie each question to a course goal" (p.90) and "Moodle has a lot of nifty capabilities, but they are only useful if they are applied in the service of effective course design" (p.193).

Goals and feedback

In the same vein, goals and feedback are listed as the two key ingredients of both a good CMS and a successful instructional environment. The word *feedback* appears no less than ten times on page 194.

I am eventually overcome by the feeling that I am entering the community as a testing/data-gathering impostor, perhaps guilty of using education technology for non-peaceful means.

With a vow to allow my subjects to view answers and explanations to my grammar monitoring and cloze quizzes after taking the test, if I ever master the techniques involved in creating them, I set down to studying details of creating a forum for my writing class.

In sum, Moodle is about the most exciting educational tool I have ever seen, and the book is quite brilliant in allowing the philosophy of the system to sink into the prospective user.

References

Cole, J. 2005 "Using Moodle. Teaching with the Popular Open Source Course Management System". O' Reilly Community Press.

Ruthven-Stuart, P. (2006). Presentation notes. Moodle Training Workshop. Sapporo Gakuin University.