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Using Moodle in ESOL Writing Classes

Title	Moodle version 1.9.7
Publisher	Moodle Pty Ltd
Author	Martin Dougiamas
Contact Information	http://moodle.com Address: 1/160 Edward Street, Perth 6000, Western Australia
Type of product	Open-source e-learning software (course management system)
Platform	Windows, Mac OS X, Unix, Linux, or any system that supports PHP and a database
Minimum hardware requirements	Varies depending on the number of users and courses. Minimum 160MB of free disk space, minimum 250MB of RAM (1GB recommended)
Supplementary requirements	Web server with Apache, PHP, and a database system such as MySQL
Price	Free

General Description

Moodle is free, open-source e-learning software, also known as a Course Management System (CMS), a Learning Management System (LMS), or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Based on the concepts of social constructivism, this system was developed by Martin Dougiamas to provide educators and students with an opportunity for online interaction and collaboration (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). Moodle is widely used for teaching courses at many educational institutions around the world. As of May 2010, there were over 48,000 active sites, 3.5 million courses, and 35 million people from 211 countries that use this system (Moodle Statistics, 2010).

Although this system is not designed specifically for language teaching, it provides a number of useful learning tools that can be used in ESOL writing classes. Available in over 80 other languages, this system can be used for teaching writing in other languages too.

A typical Moodle course consists of a set of tools that allow for the integration of a wide range of assignments, activities, and multimedia resources (both internal and external), electronic delivery of teaching materials (such as documents, presentations, audio and video files), synchronous and asynchronous teacher-student and student-student communication (for example, chats and forums), and testing and assessment of students' work.

Technological Features

Being a web-based system, Moodle can be installed on any web server with Apache, PHP, and a database system such as MySQL. For those who do not have a ready-to-use server, the system developers offer all-in-one packages that make it easy to install Moodle on any personal computer running Mac OS X or Windows.

The version of Moodle reviewed here was 1.9.7. It was hosted on the Mac OS X Server 10.5.6 and running on the ISUComm Moodle site (ISUComm Moodle, 2010) that manages courses taught in the ISUComm program and Department of English at Iowa State University. The system was evaluated using a MacBook Pro with three browsers: Internet Explorer version 7, Mozilla Firefox version 3.5.9, and Safari version 4.0.5. Overall the system worked smoothly in all browsers except that Safari did not display the HTML editor toolbar in Moodle.

By default, a Moodle course has a three-column layout with the side columns consisting of blocks with course settings and information, and the center column containing the course content (see Figure 1). Moodle has a good built-in help system available for most of the settings. Any element within a Moodle course can be edited, thus making the system highly customizable.



Figure 1. Sample Moodle course

The Moodle interface is very user-friendly. All resources and activities are accessible through hyperlinks. A remarkable feature of Moodle that makes this CMS easy to use and navigate is that all course elements are presented on a single page, thus obviating any need for sub-menus or multi-level, folder-based organization.

Being an open-source system, Moodle allows for integration of third-party modules, filters, and plug-ins that are freely available online (Moodle Modules and Plugins, 2010). However, the quality of some of these third-party products is questionable, so adding them to Moodle can subvert the system security and performance.

Finally, Moodle facilitates monitoring of students' work through individual automatic log reports that contain information about the type of work completed and the amount of time spent on each assignment by each student. Moreover, the system allows the instructor to specify timeframes for completing activities and set restrictions on submitting assignments or completing online tasks if the deadline has passed. Such extensive monitoring enables the language instructor to better understand students' progress and assess the extent to which they engage in learning.

Activities

Even though all activities in Moodle must be set up by an instructor, students can be allowed to add resources and learning content to many of them. To access activities in a Moodle course, students first need to create a Moodle account and, if the course is password-protected, use an enrollment key, which is a one-time password.

While there is a plethora of different activity types in Moodle that can be used in ESOL writing classes, the following section provides a brief description and evaluation of some of the most common ones.

Assignment

This is one of the most widely used activities in Moodle with four different types of assignments. The first two types —“Upload a single file” and “Advanced uploading of files”—allow students to upload their work in any digital format (for instance, text files, spreadsheets, or PowerPoint presentations) to Moodle. ESOL students, however, can compose directly in Moodle using the “Online text” assignment, a remarkable feature of which is an HTML editor that can be used to add and edit text, tables, images, links, and multimedia (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Sample online text assignment in Moodle (student view)

Forum

Moodle offers different types of forums to provide versatile opportunities for online discussions in ESOL writing classes. In the “Single simple discussion” forum, students’ responses to the instructor’s initial post are displayed on a single page, as shown in Figure 3. The “Standard forum for general use” allows students not only to reply to the instructor’s questions, but also to initiate their own discussions. The “Q and A forum” can be used to promote individual thinking and creativity as it requires students to post before they can view and respond to other students’ postings. Finally, the “Each person posts one discussion” forum allows students to make only one post.



Figure 3. Sample single simple discussion forum in Moodle

Chat

A chat room in Moodle can be used for synchronous communication among ESOL students and their instructor. As can be seen in Figure 4, Moodle chat doesn't have voice or video options, thus limiting interactions only to text. Although this is generally a disadvantage, the lack of voice and video can actually benefit students in ESOL writing classes by making them exclusively employ their writing skills.



Figure 4. *Sample chat room in Moodle*

Glossary

The Glossary activity enables students to create a set of text entries and is particularly useful for developing ESOL students' vocabulary (see Figure 5). The entries can be searched and browsed in various ways, grouped into categories, and linked to other resources in Moodle. Students can also leave comments on each other's contributions to the glossary.



Figure 5. Sample glossary in Moodle

Database

This powerful tool can be used to build a database of entries in virtually any format, including different types of files, text, numbers or URLs. Students can be required to submit a certain number of entries before viewing other entries in the database. They can also rate and leave feedback on other entries. Figure 6 provides an example of a database of students' PowerPoint presentations.



Figure 6. Sample database in Moodle

Wiki

A wiki activity provides space in Moodle for collaborative work. It allows students to create web pages inside of Moodle, do peer reviews of each other's work, and collaborate on group assignments (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Sample wiki in Moodle

Workshop

Moodle Workshop serves as a platform for peer response sessions. Students can upload their work to the workshop and provide peer feedback and evaluation using rubrics and criteria available within this activity. One of the most complex activities in Moodle from a pedagogical viewpoint, the Workshop is also technologically complex and, unfortunately, suffers from technical glitches and bugs. This module is being completely rewritten for Moodle version 2.0.

Depending on activity types, the work that students submit in Moodle can be graded either automatically by the system or manually by the instructor. All grades and feedback are stored in the Moodle gradebook, which students can access by clicking on the "Grades" link located on the main course page.

Teacher Fit (Approach)

To determine the usefulness of Moodle and its tools for ESOL writing, it is important to examine the theoretical underpinnings of this system. According to the founder of Moodle, this CMS was built on the basis of socio-constructivist pedagogy (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). Social constructivism allows for "a student-centered environment where learners are able to work independently, reflecting on their own work and on the work of other students, while at the same time being connected to a group of learners who can share ideas and reflect on each other's work" (Mougalian & Salazar, 2006, p. 3). Such student-centered

environments, which according to Bransford (2000) include “a sensitivity to the cultural practices of students” and respect their “language practices,” are especially beneficial for ESOL learners who usually come from different cultural and language backgrounds (p. 135).

The analysis of activities available in Moodle indicates that many of them indeed are based on social constructivism. The modules such as Glossary and Database enable students to construct both their own knowledge and community knowledge through contributions of entries. These learner-centered activities alter power relations in the Moodle environment by shifting the emphasis from teacher-structured to student-directed learning.

Learner centeredness, in turn, promotes collaboration and interaction among students, and between students and their instructor. Most of the described Moodle activities (e.g., Forum, Chat, Glossary, Database, Wiki, and Workshop) are collaborative in nature and encourage active participation and interaction. These collaborative activities allow students to co-construct writing, which according to Murray (1992), is “not a solitary enterprise” but “a social act” and is “the result of the interaction among people, contexts and texts” (p. 100). Additionally, the “Group” feature in Moodle provides opportunities for collaborative writing by dividing students into different groups, both on the level of an individual activity and on a course level. Thus, through learner-centeredness, collaboration, and interaction—which, according to Brown (1994), is “the heart of communication” (p. 159)—Moodle activities conform to the principles of communicative language teaching. However, unlike other environments (for example, blogs) which are publicly open and allow for a wide audience, Moodle is an access-restricted system, in which communication and interaction is limited to course users.

Another major theoretical underpinning of using this CMS for writing courses is the process approach to writing that emphasizes prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, and regards writing as “a thinking process” (Brown, 1994, p. 321). Many activities in Moodle focus on the process of writing and help students better understand their own composing process. For example, Forums encourage students to engage in pre-writing and drafting, Wikis and Workshops place importance on revision and feedback, and the Assignment activity allows students to submit their final written products.

However, with a reduced emphasis on rhetorical structure, vocabulary, and grammar, the process-centered methodology presupposes that language learners will acquire English proficiency naturally and, therefore, grammar and vocabulary issues should be addressed only as needed in the context of writing. According to Hinkel (2004), exclusive reliance on the process-centered paradigm in ESOL classes overlooks students’ lack of advanced L2 skills that are necessary “to take advantage of the benefits of writing process instruction” (p. 9). Consequently, Hinkel (2004) advocates “extensive, thorough, and focused instruction in L2 academic vocabulary, grammar, and discourse” which is indispensable for improvement of the overall quality of ESOL students’ writing (p. 7). Thus, the process-centered nature of many of the Moodle activities described in this review and their lack of linguistic focus (except for the Glossary activity) could be a noticeable limitation of this CMS for teaching L2 writing unless the instructor takes initiative to address vocabulary, grammar, and discourse issues.

Learner Fit (Design)

Due to its great flexibility and customizability, Moodle can be used for teaching writing to all levels of language learners in a face-to-face, hybrid, or online format. Although this CMS encourages process writing, it can be adapted for product-oriented writing too. Students can have significant control of their learning as the system provides them with opportunities to create their own knowledge and learning content. Although Moodle is very intuitive and user-friendly, its use requires at least basic computer skills on the part of the students. Thus, learner training in terms of content management and the use of the system features is highly recommended, especially for students who lack computer literacy.

Moodle can appeal to students with different learning styles as it allows for various types of activities and multimodal input such as video, audio, and text. Additionally, the activities can be designed for both individual and group work. Furthermore, modules such as Quiz and Lesson provide different assessment options and the Moodle gradebook (see Figure 8) allows students to receive feedback on their work and keep track of their progress in class.



The screenshot displays the Moodle gradebook interface for Iowa State University ISUComm Courses. The page title is 'Greater report' for the course 'ENL Writing'. The interface includes navigation tabs for 'View', 'Compare and items', 'Scores', 'Outcomes', 'Letters', 'Import', 'Export', 'Settings', and 'My preferences'. Below these are sub-tabs for 'Greater report', 'Outcomes report', 'Overview report', and 'User report'. The main content area shows a table with columns for 'User name / Summary', 'Final report', 'Research', 'Spoken', 'Spoken', 'Spoken', 'Category total', 'Research project', 'Category total', and 'Final project'. The table lists three students: 'Bill Brown', 'John Brown', and 'Jane Brown', with their respective scores in each category. A 'Show/Hide for this page' button is visible at the bottom of the table.

User name / Summary	Final report	Research	Spoken	Spoken	Spoken	Category total	Research project	Category total	Final project	
Bill Brown	20.00	20.00	20.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	7.00	75.00	10.00	20.00
John Brown	18.00	18.00	18.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	5.00	60.00	10.00	10.00
Jane Brown	15.00	15.00	15.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	3.00	60.00	10.00	20.00

Figure 8. Sample Moodle gradebook (version 1.9.7)

Finally, this CMS can be adapted to the particular writing needs of L2 students. For example, linking ESOL writing courses with discipline-specific courses hosted in the Moodle environment allows for integrated content-based instruction. Also, the integration of the Corpus module with a concordancer and creation of learner corpora in Moodle can allow for corpus-based teaching and learning.

Summary

Moodle is a versatile course management system that has great potential for language teaching in various formats. It allows for interactive learning, collaborative work, and student-led construction of learning content. The system can be customized and adapted to meet the specific needs of writing classes and individual learners. However, as mentioned by Brandl (2005), Moodle “is not a panacea for language learning” (p. 22) and it is not designed

specifically for teaching foreign languages. Hence, language instructors must exercise caution when using this system and base the design of learning tasks and activities on theoretical principles of second language acquisition and classroom pedagogy.

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About the Reviewer

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