The application of *Moodle* on an EFL collegiate writing environment

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Abstract

*Moodle* is a free, open-source, e-learning, cross-platform course management system (CMS). This article is mainly focused on how *Moodle* can be effectively used in a college writing classroom. First of all, the basic installation and major functions of *Moodle* will be introduced. Then, social constructionist view of *Moodle* will also be specified. Next, the vital features related to writing instruction will be detailed. After that, the reasons to choose *Moodle* at Chung Hua University will be briefly talked about. Finally, the article will conclude with the possible technical difficulties and pedagogical challenges that teachers of English writing may face if they would like to use *Moodle* in the collegiate writing classes.

Keywords: Moodle, CMS, English writing
Moodle 在英語爲外國語的大學寫作環境下的應用

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摘要

Moodle 是一個免費、可用於遠距學習、跨平台的「課程管理系統 (CMS)」自由軟體。這篇文章主要探討如何有效在大學英文寫作課程使用 Moodle 平台。首先將先介紹 Moodle 的基本安裝和主要功能。其次，Moodle 的社會建構主義者 (constructionist)的觀點也會稍做說明。然後會詳述 Moodle 和寫作教學相關的特色，並且說明爲何在中華大學現有遠距教學平台 e-campus 之外，另外使用 Moodle 平台。最後，此篇文章將總結大學英文寫作老師如果想應用 Moodle 在他們的寫作課程上，將可能面臨的技術問題和教學挑戰。

關鍵詞: Moodle, 課程管理系統, 英文寫作
**Introduction**

It has been a trendy feature, in the past ten years, for higher education institutes in Taiwan to integrate IT technology and Internet techniques into classroom language teaching. It is also true that in recent years the delivery of curricula has shifted from local desktops to online-based platforms. In fact, almost every tertiary education in Taiwan has by now adopted either Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Course Management System (CMS) as a teaching aid to its traditional course, which is often called a ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ course system (Robb, 2004). Two giants which have dominated the CMS market are *Blackboard* and *WebCT*, while *Moodle*, a free and open-source system, is emerging as a more and more popular option to teachers without a computer background.

What is the difference between web design tools and *Moodle*? First of all, with the help of authoring systems such as Macromedia *Director, Authorware, Dreamweaver*, and Microsoft *SharePoint Designer* (formally known as *FrontPage*), some teachers can build a website with rich content that they can display to their students. However, without the help of database software, the web site that we design can only offer one-way delivery instead of interactive communication with the users of our websites. Now that the Internet has come to a new era of Web 2.0, users can own the data on a Web 2.0 site and exercise control over that data. These sites may have an ‘architecture of participation’ that encourages users to add value to the application as they use it. Second, unlike those web-designing tools which can be run alone in a server, *Moodle* can’t run on a server without the installation of database software, which explains why *Moodle* can have rich interaction with its users.

**Background**

The word *Moodle* is originally an acronym for *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*. However, among its many users, *Moodle* has already become a term of its own synonymous with a software package designed to help educators create quality online courses with opportunities for dynamic interaction. *Moodle* was created by Martin Dougimas, a former *WebCT* administrator at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia, who has graduate degrees in Computer Science and Education. One of the reasons that *Moodle* is better than *WebCT* and *Blackboard* is that it has been developed as an Open Source software project, which means that *Moodle* is available free of charge under the terms of the GNU General Public License (GPL) and has no licensing cost attached (Brandl, 2005).
Deployment of Moodle

Moodle runs without modification on Unix, Linux, FreeBSD, Windows, Mac OS X, NetWare and any other systems that support PHP computer scripting language, including most web host providers. Data is stored in a single database: MySQL and PostgreSQL were the only feasible options in Moodle 1.6. Released in November 2006, Moodle 1.7 makes full use of database abstraction so that other databases such as Oracle, IBM DB2, and Microsoft SQL Server can be used just as easily. The current version of Moodle (1.8.4), released in January 2008, contains a number of improvements that make Moodle more flexible and stable.

Moodle and pedagogical approach of language learning

Even though the rapid growth of educational technologies creates a broad spectrum of methods in which technology can be integrated into classroom instruction, the development of communicative skills in language learning has its unique characteristic – it requires social interaction between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves. Therefore, the application of computers has for a long time been regarded only as an aiding tool with regard to certain skill areas such as speaking and writing. Nevertheless, recent advances in technology (e.g., fast Internet connections, ample storage capacities, increase in bandwidth, and the emergence of Web 2.0), more affordable and powerful computers, and more web-based, cross-platform applications make the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous learning tasks, even in oral and written modes, pedagogically feasible (Brandle, 2005, p.16). The stated philosophy of Moodle includes a constructivist and social constructionist approach to education, emphasizing that learners (and not just teachers) can contribute to the educational experience in many ways. Moodle’s features reflect this social constructionist approach in various design aspects, such as making it possible for students to comment on entries in a database (or even to contribute entries themselves), or to work collaboratively in a Wiki. From Moodle documentation archive, one web page titled ‘Pedagogy’ tells readers how Moodle supports a social constructionist view:

1. All of us are potential teachers as well as learners - in a true collaborative environment we are both.
2. We learn particularly well from the act of creating or expressing something for others to see.
3. We learn a lot by just observing the activity of our peers.
4. By understanding the contexts of others, we can teach in a more transformational way (constructivism).
5. A learning environment needs to be flexible and adaptable, so that it can quickly
respond to the needs of the participants within it.

Moodle does have great potential for justifying the statement of social constructionist view. While Moodle can’t replace the brick-and-mortar classroom, it is definitely a powerful teaching aid to conventional classroom instruction and a supporting companion for blended (or hybrid) course formats.

**Major features of Moodle**

Moodle is a template-based CMS to which content must be added by teachers or students. Moodle’s navigating interface is user-friendly and intuitive, which makes language instructors, who usually do not have much computer literacy, feel comfortable using Moodle in their classes. Some of Moodle’s major features related to language learning and teaching will be introduced in the following sections.

**Layout**

A typical Moodle course looks somewhat like Figure 1 below. All the elements on the page are templates that administrators can add, modify, reposition, or delete, while student users only have options to temporarily turn on or off the ‘blocks’ on both sides. The layout of blocks on either side, containing special functions, is decided by administrators.

![Figure 1. A main course page with ‘turning edit on’](Image)

Moodle is flexibly displayed in a module-based fashion. New functions can be created and activated by choosing the module from the ‘blocks’ pull-down menu and be moved to the location that you decide.
Course Management

*Moodle* is a powerful and eclectic CMS, in which administrators can fully manipulate its functions. Some of the key features of course management are introduced below:

1. Students’ activities are kept in logs so that teachers can check later what students have done on the *Moodle* platform. The activity report can be shown in many different formats such as ‘outline report’, ‘complete report’, ‘all logs’, and ‘grade’, etc. From these automatic log reports, teachers know not only when students have completed or uploaded an assignment, but also how much time they spent on an assigned task or quiz. Of course, no matter how good a CMS is, we will never know whether students sitting in front of a computer learn effectively from course materials we put online.

![Figure 2. Sample of students’ activity reports: ‘All logs’ format](image)

2. Teachers can fully control the deadline and timeframes for assignments, quizzes, forums, chats, etc. For example, teachers can set deadlines or timeframes when assignments must be completed, whether students can re-submit their assignments, and also restrict access to learning tasks once the deadline has
passed.
3. The flexible and powerful function of course management makes it pretty easy for teachers to offer a new course, hide an existing course, copy and modify existing course materials, and transfer currently enrolled students to another new class, etc.
4. For each course, teachers can upload files to folders that teachers can create, re-name, move, modify, or delete. Teachers can easily access those files even if they don’t use their own computers.

Quizzes

Moodle allows for a wide range of assessment strategies. The quiz module includes the following response types: fill-ins, multiple-choice (more than one answer can be chosen), true-false, matching, short-answer (exact matching). The workshop module, another wonderful evaluation strategy of Moodle, is designed on the basis of peer assessment. All of these assessment types can be made time and password restricted, and can be set to allow for limited or multiple re-submission (Brandle, 2005).

Cooperative Learning

Moodle, designed with the social constructivism of learning, offers a lot of useful tools such as Wikis, forums, chats, blogs, and workshop so that teachers can apply different formats of social interaction and collaboration to their teaching. Students can be divided into subgroups (either visible or separate), interact with each other synchronously in chat activities, or engage in asynchronous discussions in Wikis and forums. All the written ‘dialogues’ in chat rooms can be kept for later reference.

**The use of Moodle in an EFL collegiate writing environment**

The application of Moodle to an EFL learning environment is not new; it has been conducted by many language practitioners and linguistic researchers (see Al-Jarf, 2005, Brandle, 2005, and Tsai, & Liou, 2006 for details). Some specialists also apply Moodle to ESP teaching practices (Baskerville, & Robb, 2005).

Chung Hua University has adopted a proprietary CMS called ‘e-campus’ which has been in use for quite a few years. The new version of e-campus indeed is much better and more powerful than its previous version. However, teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature have faced a major drawback of using e-campus for oral- and writing-related courses. Take English Writing for example. While this class is divided into three small groups taught by three teachers at the same time block, the course number is in fact the same, which has caused great inconvenience for teachers and has also created utter confusion for students.
Therefore, this user-friendly CMS platform has become a viable alternative to those classes which are divided into small groups.

Once Moodle is correctly installed, it becomes a powerful CMS platform on which both synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) among learners and learners or learners and teacher can be easily developed. Being an effective online communication model, computer-mediated communication has become popular these days. Warschauer (1997) points out that CMC stands out from other communication media because of the following features: “(1) text-based and computer-mediated interaction, (2) many-to-many communication, (3) time- and place- independence, (4) long distance exchanges, and (5) hypermedia links” (p. 470). In fact, these five features of CMC may also meet the specific communication needs for those teachers who use Moodle as a writing aid tool.

1. **text-based and computer-mediated interaction**

   Unlike oral communication, all text-based interaction on Moodle, even synchronous online chat, can be recorded. Writing teaches can refer to these written records of online chat or discussion board when they forget the details of their interaction with students. If you divide students into a couple of groups, the written records will also be kept in different groups.

2. **many-to-many communication**

   If the SMTP and POP3 of the networking function of Moodle platform are properly configured, teachers can easily send messages to a group of recipients. In addition, students and also chat online with other students in the same group.

3. **time- and place- independence**

   This feature allows teachers to write and receive messages at any time from any computer with Internet access, which is especially useful to these part-time English writing teachers. Furthermore, all the written assignments and teacher’s comments will be kept with date and time stamps so that they can be conveniently retrieved.

4. **long distance exchanges**

   Moodle definitely makes long distance exchanges less painful and less expensive, especially those one-to-many distance exchanges through announcement, emails, and discussion board.

5. **hypermedia links**

   Moodle allows teachers to distribute and retrieve multimedia documents including images, photos, sound, or video clips through the creation of hyperlink.
Challenges of using Moodle in a collegiate writing environment

Without doubt, Moodle is a powerful and user-friendly CMS, and it can effectively help English writing teachers organize their teaching materials, improve their means of communication, and retrieve their records of interaction with students when necessary. However, when the Moodle system is used in the writing class, some technical difficulties and pedagogical challenges can not be ignored. Major obstacles that English writing teachers have to overcome include technical issues, computer facilities, and treatment of error.

Technical Issues

Even though the Moodle website offers step-by-step instruction on how to set up Moodle for your class, teachers who would like to use Moodle in their class should still be computer literate. They should have a high-level computer as a server and know how to install database software, such as MySQL or Microsoft SQL, on the same server, which is quite a formidable challenge for most English teachers without the help of technical support. Even if IT professionals help English teachers install Moodle and database software, English teachers may also feel frustrated debugging computer- or Internet-related problems that teachers of the web-based English writing classes may face.

In the middle of a semester, English teachers often feel conservative and will not want to make major changes to the Moodle system for fear that the server will crash and all the assignments and teaching materials will be gone. For example, one of the main disadvantages of Moodle is that teachers can not read their own comments once the grade is given and the feedback is sent to students (see Figure 3 below). While I believe that this software malfunction was caused by unknown reasons during the installation, I couldn’t find an easy solution. Neither could I receive any response from the Moodle Taiwan mailing list, a discussion forum for Moodle users in Taiwan.

Another issue of using Moodle in classroom teaching is that English teachers should form a habit of backing up database from the server on which Moodle is installed to another computer, preferably located in different office, just in case some unexpected technical glitches occur.
Computer Facilities

If English writing teachers would like to make the best use of Moodle in their writing courses, they should teach English writing in a computer lab. However, most universities probably can’t offer enough networked computer classrooms for all the English writing teachers. In addition, even if English teachers are provided with enough wired computers, they may still worry that they have to act as ‘computer experts’ to help students solve computer problems, which is usually beyond the capability of English professionals.

Treatment of error

Treatment of EFL writers’ errors is always a challenge for English writing teachers no matter if the course is held in an ordinary face-to-face classroom or a network-based computer lab. Many researchers of EFL writing warn against attempting to mark all student errors because it is a formidable task for teachers and an exhausting burden for learners (Ferris, 2002). If selective error correction is better than comprehensive error correction, the next issue is what types of errors should be marked and how explicit should the error feedback be. However, it seems that there is no quick and easy answer to this question.

Software systems with sophisticated artificial intelligence that can generate immediate evaluative feedback on student writing are readily available (Ware & Warschauer, 2006). For example, Criterion© and My Access© are two major intelligent instructional writing and tutoring programs. Nevertheless, they are not
satisfactory product. Similarly, *Moodle* is just a powerful course management system; writing teachers still have to carry the burden of correcting students’ grammatical errors.

**Conclusion**

*Moodle* is a free and user-friendly CMS, which can greatly help English writing teachers flexibly manage and edit their teaching materials, access students’ assignments easily, and significantly promote synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers. It also offers a practical alternative to ‘e-campus’ that the author is using at Chung Hua University. However, *Moodle* is not designed specifically for English courses, not to mention English writing courses. To English writing teachers at tertiary institutes, *Moodle* would be a perfect teaching tool if some editable ‘comment bank’ modules could be added by instructors so that teachers could easily use the drop-down menu to give ‘canned comments’. Nevertheless, there is no easy solution if English teachers install *Moodle* and use it in their classes without the help of technical support from a team of IT professionals. However, even if *Moodle* is useful as it is, English teachers should effectively integrate it into their writing classrooms. In fact, instructors, teaching materials, and curricula still play more important roles in technology-enhanced classrooms.

**Acknowledgment**

This research was funded by a faculty research grant (CHU-95-H-17, November 1, 2006 – October 31, 2007) from Chung Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan.

**Note:**

1. The definition of Web 2.0 varies a lot. The best definition that I can find comes from Wikipedia: An IBM social-networking analyst, Dario de Judicibus, has proposed a different definition which focuses more on social interactions and on architectural implementation:
   “Web 2.0 is a knowledge-oriented environment where human interactions generate content that is published, managed and used through network applications in a service-oriented architecture.” (from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2))
2. URL of this website is [http://docs.moodle.org/en/Pedagogy#How_Moodle_tries_to_support_a_Social_Constructionist_view](http://docs.moodle.org/en/Pedagogy#How_Moodle_tries_to_support_a_Social_Constructionist_view)
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