Moodle: A teaching resource for digital immigrants

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A summary of the founding principles behind Moodle and some examples of how it can be used successfully as a resource for classroom based teaching in Further Education (FE).

Abstract:

Moodle is a learning environment created in 2002 by Martin Dougiamas, based on the pedagogy of Social Constructionism. Many institutions throughout the world use it to aid learning, however in FE many tutors seem unsure of how to use it. Prensky’s (2001, p2) term ‘digital immigrant’ is useful to explain why many tutors struggle to find practical ways of using resources like Moodle. We will need to adapt to this new culture of the digital world. Moodle is not a Holy Grail, it does however offer a way of increasing the digital wisdom of both our students and tutors. One does not have to be an IT expert to use Moodle. In this article I have described ways in which I have personally used elements of Moodle, which have been perceived as beneficial both by me and my students. I hope this inspires fellow FE tutors to use Moodle and research other applications as a learning resource.

Introduction:

I work for two adult education settings; one is a big FE college and the other the Adult and Higher Education Division of a 6th form college. Both settings have chosen Moodle as their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Ofsted (2009, p8) define a VLE as ‘a computer-based system that helps learning’. Moodle can be used to share digital resources and also be used for interactive activities such as forums, wikis, quizzes etc. It can be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection and could therefore increase learner independence. Moodle can be used in many different ways, including distant learning, however for this article I will look at how it can be used as an additional resource for classroom based learning. In this context we speak about blended learning (Dvorak, 2011 p25).

When I started this research project I wanted to look at ways of using Moodle as it is intended. My idea surged from the experience that Moodle is often used as a “digital storage cabinet”, where files and links are uploaded and “dumped” (Ofsted, 2009 p4). Often it is used to put copies of the resources used in class, such as handouts and powerpoint presentations and maybe some links to useful websites, which are not always updated. I have seen many Moodle sites where teachers have started putting material on and after a while have stopped updating the site because of lack of time or
interest. These finding are confirmed by Ofsted (2009 p4) when they evaluated the use of VLEs. Although their study was about the use of VLEs in general, 14 of the 18 institutions they surveyed were using Moodle as their VLE (Ofsted, 2009 p10). Using Moodle as a digital repository for resources used in the class room does not coincide with any of the 5 founding principles behind Moodle (Moodle, (c)). Through the two colleges I work for I have access to over 260 Moodle courses. Less than 3% of these courses use truly collaborative activities, such as wikis, glossaries and active learning forums.

I started this project by researching the philosophy behind Moodle, based on a literature review. The intention was to create several case studies and evaluate the use of different Moodle activities in order to find examples of “best practice”. The literature however pointed me to the concept of “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”, which seemed to explain some of the issues explained above of teachers and students not knowing how to use a VLE. Therefore the focus changed from encouraging “best practice” to describing some of the advantages of using Moodle as a resource to assist classroom teaching. The case studies described are examples of how I have used Moodle with different groups of students. The first case study describes the use of Moodle as a repository of resources for a group of 11 students and the other two case studies look at the use of a quiz and a wiki for another group of 15 students. As part of the evaluation I have used the anonymous evaluation forms that my students have completed. In my evaluation I have included screenshots to show examples of how Moodle can be used. These screenshots do not include any confidential information. Where there are names included, they are names of authors that are in the public domain, such as John Hattie, Kolb and Marcia Connor.

The philosophy behind Moodle:

On the Moodle (a) website they say that Moodle is an “Open Source Course Management System (CMS)” with a focus on ‘giving educators the best tools to manage and promote learning’.

‘The word Moodle was originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, which is mostly useful to programmers and education theorists. It's also a verb that
describes the process of lazily meandering through something, doing things as it occurs to you to do them, an enjoyable tinkering that often leads to insight and creativity. As such it applies both to the way Moodle was developed, and to the way a student or teacher might approach studying or teaching an online course. Anyone who uses Moodle is a Moodler.’ (Moodle, (b))

The development of Moodle was started by Martin Dougiamas who continues to be the lead developer (Moodle (c)). He strongly believed that the potential of the internet as a learning resource was underused and after his Masters and PhD in Education he released Moodle 1.0 in August 2002 (Moodle (c)). ‘This version was targeted towards smaller, more intimate classes at University level, and was the subject of research case studies that closely analysed the nature of collaboration and reflection that occurred among these small groups of adult participants.’ (Moodle (c)). Dougiamas’ master and PhD research convinced him of the importance of Social Constructionism in learning.

The development of Moodle is based on 5 principles, which are derived from this philosophy:

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.
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, (d))

**Digital natives and digital immigrants:**

While researching the possibilities of Moodle, I encountered the concept of “digital natives” (Büchner, 2008, p7) (Dvorak, 2011, p29), a term coined by Mark Prensky in 2001. He describes the generation gap between what he calls the ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’. The term “digital natives” refers to the generation of students who have grown up with technology. They have come to trust and rely on it. They want immediate results, multi-task and are easily distracted. On the other end are what he
calls the “digital immigrants”. Digital immigrants are new to technology. They have experienced alternatives and therefore are not so reliant on technology. They often mistrust it. Prensky (2001, p2) points out that often the teachers are the “immigrants” and the students the “natives”. He has chosen these terms to indicate the communication problems that might arise, due to the different “cultural” backgrounds of the generations. Prensky (2001, p6) strongly believes that the digital immigrants should learn the “language” of the digital natives and adapt their teaching. His suggestion in 2001 was that learning should be presented in the same way as a computer game. Students should be able to reach different levels and get immediate feedback. Prensky’s theory quickly dominated the discussion about how to engage a new generation of students (Bayne and Ross, 2007 p1), but also encountered criticism (Bennett, 2008) (Bayne and Ross, 2007), as he oversimplified the situation; neither generation is as homogeneous as he suggested. In 2009 Prensky came to the same conclusion and in ‘H. Sapiens Digital: From Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom’ he talks about the importance for both generations of digital wisdom:

“Because of technology, wisdom seekers in the future will benefit from unprecedented, instant access to ongoing worldwide discussions, all of recorded history, everything ever written, massive libraries of case studies and collected data, and highly realistic simulated experiences equivalent to years or even centuries of actual experience. How and how much they make use of these resources, how they filter through them to find what they need, and how technology aids them will certainly play an important role in determining the wisdom of their decisions and judgments.” (Prensky, 2009, p1)

This is where Moodle comes in. On the 28th of February 2013 there were 4,180 Moodle registrations in the UK and 77,252 worldwide (Moodle, (e)). Many learning institutions already run Moodle, so it seems only logical to use an existing resource to increase the digital wisdom of both the digital natives and digital immigrants. Digital communication in its many different forms (e.g. e-mail, social media websites, text messages, smart phones, internet search, blogs, Twitter, etc.) has become part in one form or another in most students’ and teachers’ lives. However, I have found that many tutors, including myself, are unsure of how to use a resource like Moodle, as we have no precedent to follow. It is important to remember that ‘A VLE is just another tool in a good teacher’s repertoire; it is not an end in itself.’ (Ofsted, 2009 p10). In the rest of this article I want to describe some of the ways that Moodle can be used, which my students and I have found useful. They are not radical new ideas, they are just worked examples of how Moodle can be used to aid learning and increase the digital wisdom of all involved.
Moodle as a repository of resources:

Using Moodle to help students find material relevant to their studies can help to increase their digital wisdom. Uploading resources and creating links to resources can have real benefits for students of all generations. For the last 3 years I have been using Moodle for DTLLS year 2 (Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector). On the site I have made several sections where I provide links to documents and websites related to these topics. For example there is a section called “Outstanding teaching”, which contains links to Powerpoint presentations, booklets, websites and videos on this topic. In the section “Study Skills” there are several links to websites that help with Harvard referencing, assignment writing and internet research.

Figure 1: Example of internet links on Moodle

Then there are also sections per unit with material useful for the students, again mainly consisting of websites, but also study guides and some PDF documents. Finally there is a small section per session, with the material used in the session and on occasions a reminder of important information.
At the college where I teach this course, we do a mid-year review, where one of the questions we ask the students is what they found helpful about the course in terms of their learning. This is an open question and among other things, out of 11 students 9 mentioned Moodle:

1. Moodle – a great resource which is kept up to date and well utilised
2. Moodle is great, so easy to use
3. Moodle access
4. Moodle – great, easy to use
5. Moodle excellent
6. Use of internet resources (Moodle)
7. Moodle is helpful
8. I find Moodle helpful with useful readings and references
9. Moodle is great central resource (a place for all)

This reveals that using Moodle as a repository can be experienced as very beneficial by the students. On this particular site I have not used any of the collaborative features of Moodle. In addition to the links I have found myself, I have uploaded websites that students have recommended and uploaded the presentations they have done in class, so all other students can access them. Uploading links to websites and other resources in one central place means I do not have to e-mail them to students and they are easy to locate for me and the students from anywhere with internet access.
In addition to benefits for the students I have found that it has benefits for me as a tutor, as I have one central place to store all my resources related to one particular course. This has also been highlighted by research done by JSIC (2012, p8). Moodle offers the possibility to upload resources that are only seen by the tutor and hidden to the students. This means I can also put my lesson plans and additional resources on Moodle, which makes it easy to access from anywhere with an internet connection and makes it easy to share resources with other tutors. Being able to access the course material from anywhere with internet access is especially beneficial as I work part-time for two different colleges, which means that I do not have one fixed work station.

Quizzes to check learning:

Another feature I have used successfully is a quiz. Quizzes can be easily set up in Moodle. With closed questions, the student can get immediate feedback to aid their learning. Open questions can be marked by the tutor and feedback accessed via Moodle. I used a short quiz about learning styles with two of my groups on an introductory teacher training course. The first question was a multiple choice question clarifying what learning styles are. On this question students got immediate feedback.

The next question asked them to indicate what the result was of the learning styles questionnaire they had taken. This was just an information gathering exercise. In the third question, the students had to match different activities to the learning style it would most benefit. For this activity they would get
feedback after they had decided on all the individual activities. The last question was an open question where the students had to describe how they could accommodate all 4 learning styles in their teaching. When the students had completed the quiz I would get an automated e-mail saying that the quiz was ready to be marked, I could then type out my feedback, which the students could access again through Moodle.

More than 90% of my students said that completing this short quiz with a combination of open and closed questions aided their learning, the main reason given was that it reinforced the previous learning. As a tutor it helped me to assess their learning and give them individual feedback.

Wikis for carousel activities:

‘Wiki-wiki is an Hawaiian word meaning quick … a wiki is a collection of collaboratively authored Web pages that are set up to be easy to add to and edit.’ (Dvorak, 2012 p187) This is one of the activities in Moodle, which is truly in line with the idea of Social Constructionism as it allows for collaboration, the students are creating something for others to see and they can observe what others are doing (Moodle, (c)).

I have found that using a wiki is similar to using any other carousel activity. In my introductory teacher training class we created a wiki on resources. Around the room I had created displays with different examples of one particular resource per “station”. Using the “Wiki” in Moodle, students first wrote a description of the resource, moving around they then had to list advantages and disadvantages of this
resource for learning, moving to the next station again, they had to describe how the resources could be adapted for the 4 different learning styles and finally moving around again, they had to write out tips for using the particular resource. I have done similar activities in the past where the answers were written on paper. All, except for one, students responded that they found creating the wiki aided their learning and gave the following reasons:

- Showed me the advantages and disadvantages of all the resources and how to incorporate all learning styles
- Think for myself.
- New resource to use
- Required reflective thought
- It developed ideas about resources
- A quick way of sharing knowledge, in this case 3 students working together on the clock to compete with others
- Other members within my group contributed ideas that I hadn't thought about
- Good way to approach a new subject/topic
- It helped to collect thoughts and put them in a concise way
- It made me think about resources and how they work best in different situations

For me as a tutor the advantage is that I can easily add comments to what the students have written. On paper this is can be more difficult due to limited space available.

From a quick show of hands it emerged that none of my students had contributed to a wiki before. One of the students pointed out that creating a wiki in class helped to realise how a wiki like Wikipedia works and why we do not accept it as a reliable source for research. This student now realised that a wiki entry could be written by anyone in any circumstance (the example the student gave was “on a Saturday night with a glass of wine”). I believe that the fact that this student became aware of the limitations of wikis and shared this insight with the rest of the class is an additional benefit, which is clearly linked to gaining digital wisdom.
Summary and conclusion

Moodle is a widely available resource, which can be used in many ways. The philosophy behind it is that of Social Constructionism and Moodle offers many features to support this. In practice many teachers are new to technology and have limited time available to research all the options available and find ways of making them part of their teaching. Using Moodle as a repository for resources related to a course is a very easy way to start using Moodle and can be beneficial to students as it gives them a starting place for their research and to tutors to keep all the resources related to a particular course in one place. Other Moodle activities can easily be integrated with classroom teaching. I have found the use of wikis especially useful. In addition to having a digital recording of the students’ findings, it ensures all students experience the technology and it enables them to see the limitations of using wikis as a source for research projects.


Büchner, A. (2008), Moodle Administration, Packt Publishing, Birmingham


Moodle (a) Home > About, available at: https://moodle.org/about/ (accessed 23/02/13)


(accessed 27/02/13)

Moodle (c) Background, accessible via: Home > About Moodle > Background, available at: http://docs.moodle.org/24/en/Background (accessed 23/02/13)


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