

SOME ASPECTS OF USING MOODLE FOR BLENDED E-LEARNING

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Today we enter a reality where teachers and students have in a greater extent freedom and possibility to get instant access to different methods of IT communication with changed requirements on information quality assurance methods and information storage separation. IT supported distributed learning provides us with enhanced possibilities to create innovative learning technologies which could be suitable for long life learning and supportive for existing courses.

Nowadays, the process of teaching English should reflect current demands for improving existing approaches and outline all available means to reach the best results. It is becoming a common practice to use e-learning as a part of the educational process. As such kind of learning is considered to be an integral part of new information systems it has the advantage to be interconnected with the database of students and gives the possibility for students to get access automatically after signing in for a specific course in a study curriculum. Students in these courses have the opportunity to use blended distance learning as they are proposed to combine online distance learning through video conference with their teachers and asynchronous online learning at their educational establishment or at home with the support of an onsite facilitator. What is developing now is a new form of blended education where teachers implement online content to improve their face-to-face classes enabling the students to experience blended web-enhanced learning.

Moodle is becoming popular all over the world as a free, open source software package designed to use a lot of pedagogical principles and to help in creating effective online learning communities. It is useful and convenient tool to set up with several basic databases on a server and it enables to teach any class as well as provide interactive Web pages. Although Moodle is not designed particularly for language teaching it makes available a number of useful learning tools that can be used in EFL/ESL settings or teacher training projects. A typical Moodle course can be used for writing classes as it comprises a set of tools giving possibility to integrate a wide range of assignments, activities and multimedia recourses, electronic delivery of necessary teaching materials, synchronous and asynchronous communication, testing and assessment of students' work.

Moodle is also a learning management system (LMS) which differs from exclusive course management systems because they allow to present information to students in small units, evaluate what they have learned and provide a supplementary review of teaching material or move to the next level based on the quality of their achievement. In other words, Moodle gives the opportunity to design lessons that can control the learners' way thus monitoring students step-by-step and allow to advance provided that sufficient marks have been received.

A teacher can also set up an online environment on Moodle which is user friendly and gives the possibility to create interactive materials which can be either processed directly in Moodle or outside it. As an example, we can mention Hot

Potatoes which could be used for working out different types of exercises to be then downloaded into Moodle. This tool is very helpful as it encloses a wide range of activities enabling teachers to put such complementary materials as presentations or study texts to be downloaded by students. Teachers can also place various necessary links to be used by students for their practical training and self-study.

Another positive feature of Moodle is that it allows students to submit their assignments straight into the individual course in Moodle and the teacher of the course can assess them in Moodle. Thus, the students can get an immediate feedback on their assignments. This feedback is of great importance not only for full-time students but, in particular, for the students in combined form of studies who lack direct contact with the teacher. Moodle even enables the teacher to monitor students' activity in e-learning by observing what assignments students are working on, evaluating the time spent on individual activities and amount of attempts needed for completing the assignment. This information is very useful for the teacher in the terms of disclosing the tasks which turned to be too complex for the students to be successfully solved. The teacher is also given the possibility to carry out a detailed analysis of the problems as they arise.

The Moodle online environment can also include different types of forums to be used for asynchronous discussions around related questions set either by the teacher or by the students. Students can be divided into subgroups, interact with each other synchronously in chat rooms or engage in asynchronous discussions in Wikis. The Wiki module in Moodle enables students to compose or work together on a text while being online and that is of great help because old versions are never deleted and can be restored. Forums can also be arranged in different ways. For example, they can be set so that only the teacher or any of the students can post content to a forum or start a new discussion topic (thread). As other options are still in existence, the teacher can either restrict or permit for further discussions and replies within a thread.

Numerous supplementary features and modules are able to facilitate course management and the learning process. Moodle has several built-in standardized questionnaires that allow teachers to collect qualitative and quantitative feedback on students' learning experiences. A questionnaire module helps teachers to create their own questionnaires

One of the biggest benefits of using e-learning in English language courses is that students are taught to become more independent and responsible for their studies and they are shown that a great part of work has to be done independently and that any tool provided to help them in their studies is insufficient without their active participation. A Google Calendar can be also embedded in the Moodle environment allowing students to keep up with their task deadlines throughout the year.

But it is important to emphasize that students should be informed about the nature of studying on the Moodle platform. Before each first semester of a foreign language course students should get some practical knowledge during a short training course in LMS Moodle run by a teacher. It is also necessary for students to get clear information about the grading system, credit requirements and ways of contacting the teacher before starting their work on line.