

Motivating students to write more with Moodle

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This paper reports the results of an action research project that incorporated course management software (Moodle) into an academic writing class homepage for English majors. Student participation level was measured by the amount of time the students spent on the class homepage, the number of words they had written in their online journals and class forum discussions, and the number of hits to other web links for self-study. This paper also presents the results of a questionnaire regarding student attitudes towards their perceived usefulness of the class homepage as well as their perceived writing progress.

当論文は、コース・マネジメント・ソフトウェア (Moodle) を英語専攻学生のためのアカデミック・ライティング・クラス・ホームページに組み入れたアクションプログラムプロジェクトの結果を報告している。学生の参加レベルは、学生がクラスホームページに費やした総時間、オンラインジャーナルやクラス・フォーラム・ディスカッションに書き込んだ単語量、そして自己学習のための他ウェブリンクへのヒット数によって計られている。当論文はまた、学生が認識しているクラスホームページの有効性だけでなく筆記能力の進歩に対する学生の態度についての質問表の結果を表示している。

Students need to invest a great deal of time in order to become proficient users of English, especially if they want to develop their academic writing skills. Ninety minutes per week, typical of most English classes in Japanese universities, is insufficient to help students develop the skills which will enable them to write academic essays and research papers. To explore the possibility of encouraging students to spend more time on their own practicing English writing, an action research project was undertaken using a course website as a class supplement. The website for this class was created using the Moodle course management system software (<moodle.org>), developed to support a social constructionist ideology toward education and foster a community of online learners engaged in their own learning processes (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). Using Moodle is simple enough that even the most technically challenged teacher can get it up and running easily (Nagatomo, 2004) and technical support is available from the online Moodle community (Robb, 2004a, 2004b).

This paper reports on how the activities on the class homepage encouraged students to increase their writing output and develop writing fluency. The number of days per week students accessed the homepage and the number of words students wrote in journals and forums were counted. The number of times students accessed links to other websites was also calculated. A questionnaire was distributed at the end of the semester to discover how useful the students perceived the activities on the homepage to be.

Class procedure

This one-semester writing class consisted of 22 second-year students of the English Department majoring in English or American Literature, English Linguistics, or English Education at a Japanese national women's university. Students had already taken one semester of English paragraph writing as first year students and all had obtained at least 8 credits in English. This class, as part of the department's writing curriculum which culminates in students writing a graduation thesis in English at the end of their senior year, focused on paragraph and essay writing.

All online activity was completed as homework. Students were given instructions on how to access the class homepage during the first week of class and were instructed to visit it regularly because assignments and announcements would be posted there. Table 1 shows how some of the Moodle modules were utilized on the web page.

Assessment of assignments and journals focused on grammatical accuracy and rhetorical structure. Five essays were uploaded to the homepage as word attachments, and

feedback was provided to students via e-mail. Students were free to resubmit assignments as many times as necessary until they received a grade with which they felt happy. Students wrote weekly online journals to practice fluency writing and received comments on the content of their journals, but not on grammar or rhetoric.

Other study activities were supplementary and were not evaluated for a grade. The discussion forums, also encouraging the development of writing fluency, followed the same topics as the journal assignments, but students could read what others had written and respond freely. Other modules encouraged students to visit the web page regularly and to use it as a study resource.

Table 1. How Moodle was utilized

Modules	Graded Activity	Supplementary Activity	Academic Focus
Assignment *	Essays, Paragraphs		Accuracy
Journal *	Weekly writing topics		Fluency
Forum		Weekly discussion topics	Fluency
Choice		Something fun for students to do	Fluency
Web link		Links to sites of interest/study	Self Study
Chat		Always available for students	Fluency

* Viewed only by the teacher

Results

Participation

The level of student participation was monitored closely throughout the semester using the participant log, one of the administrative features of Moodle that makes it possible to see at a glance *when* students access the site, *what* they write on the forums and journals, and *how many times* they access the web links.

Most of the students (86.3%) visited the homepage once or twice a week, but a few (13.6%) visited five or six times per week. Table 3 shows the amount of time students said they spent on the web site per week. One student liked the homepage so much that she visited nearly every day, as the following comment shows

I visited here five times a week because I'm looking forward to seeing my friends renew their journal every day. When I arrive at home, I lose no time in opening my personal computer to see this home page. This action became my habit...

Table 2. Amount of time per week students spent in the web page (N=22)

Less than 1 hour	1 to 1.5 hours	2 to 2.5 hours	4 hours	6 hours
13.6%	45.4%	22.7%	13.6%	4.5%

Journals and forums

Twenty students wrote in their journals and participated in the forums. Table 3 shows that more than 80,000 words were

produced. However, this number is misleading since many students simply cut and pasted their journals into the forums because the topics were the same.

Table 3. Total number of words in student writing (N=20)

Forums Postings	Forum Replies	Journals	Total
28,037	4,876	47,971	80,884

More students wrote in their journals than posted to the forums, probably because they received grade points for journals, whereas forum participation was voluntary. Tables 4 and 5, which provide a breakdown of the number of words students posted on forums and in journals, show that the participation level among students varied greatly. The student who posted less than 100 words in the forum only participated once at the beginning of the semester and those that wrote less than 1,000 words in their journals only wrote on a couple of topics. The students who posted between 1,000 to 1,500 in the forums words usually copied and pasted what they had written in their journals into the forums, but did not respond to other postings. Some of these students posted to the forums at the very end of the semester instead of weekly as instructed, again showing that they were probably more concerned about their participation grade rather than using the forums as a tool for communication with their friends. However, those who wrote 2,000 words or more in the forums responded extensively to what other students had written. The student who had written the most (3,242 words) posted 7 replies (452 words) to other students'

postings. The student with the next greatest amount of output posted nearly one third of her total word output as replies to other students' postings (13 postings in total). Students who wrote frequently in the forums also tended to use emoticons and a variety of fonts and colors to add a personal dimension to their postings.

Table 4. Student participation in the forums. (N=20)

More than 3,000 Words	2,000 to 3,000 Words	1,500 to 2,000 Words	1,000 to 1,500 Words	100 to 1,000 Words	Less than 100 Words
3 Students (15%)	3 Students (15%)	3 Students (15%)	7 Students (35%)	4 Students (20%)	1 Student (5%)

**Table 5. Student participation in the journals
(N = 20)**

More than 3,000 Words	2,000 to 3,000 Words	1,500 to 2,000 Words	1,000 to 1,500 Words	100 to 1,000 Words
4 Students (20%)	9 Students (45%)	2 Students (10%)	3 Students (15%)	2 Students (10%)

Hits to Internet links

Student participation in the homepage was also noted by the number of times the students visited links to other Internet websites. Links were provided to style manuals (APA and MLA homepages), to writing websites (Purdue University's OWL Center) and for general interest (such as Christmas and Thanksgiving websites). Table 6 shows how many hits in

total the students made to these links, though it is impossible to determine how much actual time the students spent on the websites.

Table 6. Hits to Internet links

11+ Hits	6 to 10 Hits	1 to 5 Hits	No Hits
5 Students 22.7%	10 Students 45.45%	3 Students 13.6%	4 Students 18.18%

Responses to questionnaires

The 22 students who responded to the questionnaire generally showed a positive response to the class. The majority of the students reported an improvement in their English writing ability (86.36%) and that they had come to like English writing more than before (86.35%). In addition, they felt strongly that using the Internet as a supplement was useful (77.27%), even though many of them felt that it took too much time (72.73%).

Table 7 shows how useful students believed various aspects of the class were for them. Nearly all the students felt that reading teacher comments and getting feedback from the teacher by email were the most useful. Students also generally felt that turning in homework via email was useful, though those without easy access to computers did not. Students seem to prefer reading what others have written on the web page and feel that it is more useful than them writing themselves.

Table 7. Results of the question asking students what activities on the web page they felt were useful for them (N=22)

	Not useful (1)	(2)	(3)	Useful (4)
Writing opinions on Forum	4.55%	13.64%	31.82%	50.00%
Reading friends' messages	0%	4.55%	36.36%	59.09%
Answering friends' messages	0%	18.18%	36.36%	45.45%
Reading teacher's comments	0%	0%	40.91%	59.09%
Reading the Internet links	9.09%	22.73%	50.00%	18.18%
Sending homework by email	4.55%	27.27%	22.73%	45.45%
Getting feedback by email	4.55%	18.18%	27.27%	50.50%
Writing weekly journal	0%	13.64%	36.36%	50.50%

Many students answered that the best parts of the class for them were the journal assignments and the forum discussions. Reasons cited for this were that they enjoyed writing them, they could use the computer to write in English, and they could communicate with their classmates. One student said that the best part of the class for her was “*using Internet for homework—I can access to the web page whenever I want and have enough time. I'm glad to receive a comment about my writings from my group members. We learn English writing together.*” Other students mentioned that they liked submitting their essay assignments by email

and getting feedback right away as the following comment shows; “*Getting feedback from you on my writing by email. You explained in details why the words and collocations I picked out were not appropriate and how I should have written these parts. It was really useful.*” Other positive comments from the students pertained to working in groups during class time, getting handouts, and being taught how to write certain types of essays.

Negative comments mainly came from students who did not have a computer at home. They had to use the school computers during the daytime, which limited the amount of time they could participate. In addition, some students had little confidence in using computers and felt that they had been put at a disadvantage. Others felt pressured by the deadlines assigned to the journals, although students who submitted assignments late were not penalized. In general, negative comments pertained to the amount of homework, the early hour of the class, and assignment deadlines.

Discussion

Using the homepage to supplement the class proved to be an overall success in terms of providing opportunities to study outside of class and increasing student fluency writing output. In addition, the results of the questionnaire show that students perceived the homepage to be useful for them and they liked using it for study. However, through this analysis, it is also clear that some changes should be implemented in future classes. First of all, students need to be made aware of the differences between the journal assignments and the forum discussions. Dougiamas and Taylor (2003) also had their students in a distance course keep journals and post

on forums and they found that their students also tended to cut and paste their journals into the forums, noting that they tended to “engage in serial monologues, rather than in rich dialogue” (p. 5). They suggest that students need to be made more aware of the differences between journaling and online discussion. It might be useful for students to be provided with model forum discussions in advance so they can have a better understanding of their conversational aspects. In addition, further research on student *audience awareness* could provide more insight into student online writing that could lead to more effective use of the student homepage.

Next, students should not be arbitrarily divided into forum groups as they were for this class. The rationale behind dividing the students into groups of four or five was to ease the burden of having to read and respond to the postings of more than twenty students. Some of the forum groups created a writing community that was conducive for repeated postings, but other groups did not. Some students mentioned in the questionnaire that they wished their fellow group members had posted more. They may have wanted to write more than they did, but hesitated to do so because they did not want to be the only ones posting. Some of the students, particularly those that posted lengthy initial messages, might have written more replies to other students if they had not been divided into smaller groups.

Finally, it would be better for students to have several sessions together as a group in the CALL room to guide them through the homepage the first time that they access it. This might give the students with little or no confidence in their computer skills the edge that they need to encourage them to participate on their own.

Conclusion

When students have access to an English learning environment outside of the regular classroom, such as the Moodle class home page described in this paper, they have the opportunity to spend more time improving their writing skills and it seems that they are motivated to do so. The preliminary findings of this action research project are very encouraging and I am looking forward to developing more Moodle classes for my students.

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