

Online multifunctional gradebook for busy teachers

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Traditional course administration of language classes using paper records and handouts has a number of inherent deficiencies such as the cumbersomeness of giving feedback and a lack of transparency. English teachers can no longer afford to ignore the plethora of online teacher resources as they have become more powerful and accessible. For teachers who do not have access to in-house web-based course management systems and gradebooks such as Blackboard, there are good substitutes readily available on the Web. They offer convenient tools for maintaining records of grades and attendance as well as efficiently disseminating homework assignments. They also encourage students to track their own progress and be more responsible for managing their own learning. This paper will show how EFL teachers with minimal computer knowledge can easily utilize a ready-made free online and secure multifunctional gradebook to more effectively coordinate their courses and keep track of students' development.

従来の言語教育コース運営では、紙上での記録やハンドアウトが使用されており、フィードバックに費やす労力の大きさや評価基準の不透明さなどの問題がある。これらの問題を解決するためには、教師用のオンライン・リソースの使用が必須である。昨今、英語教師が使えるオンライン・リソースは発展し、アクセスも容易となった。そのため、所属教育機関でオンラインのコース運営システムやBlackboardなどのグレードブックを使用できない場合にも、教師はこれらのシステムとほぼ同様の使いやすさを持つシステムをウェブ上で容易に入手することができる。それらを用いることにより、教師は成績や出席の管理、宿題の配布などができる。また学生は自分の成績をいつでも知ることができるため、自分の学習に責任を持つことが促される。本稿の目的は、コンピュータに限られた知識しか持たない教師でもウェブ上に提供されているフリーのグレードブックを容易に利用できるということ、そしてコース運営、学習状況の把握を効果的に行えることを示すことである。

As the use of computers is becoming a more integral part of learning environments, some universities are using systematic and coordinated online course management systems (CMSs) in organizing and delivering their courses. CMSs are software systems based on a database with an online connection which offer a range of course management and delivery tools such as online gradebooks, provision for uploading and downloading course materials, and asynchronous electronic communication between members of a class. Such blended learning environments utilize a combination of traditional teaching materials and cyber resources. Online CMSs with their built-in gradebooks offer a number of inherent benefits such as effective and simple record-keeping, which allows students to better self-monitor their progress (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001). Class materials are readily available online, on-



line gradebooks are eco-friendly with minimal paper handouts, and such systems are portable as they can be accessed anywhere with an Internet connection (Lacina, 2006). An added advantage with using an online gradebook is that the grades are transparent and students can double-check the teacher's records, thus reducing the risk of errors (Fulda, 2005). Moreover, Li (1998, cited in Lacina 2006, p. 252) mentions "the flexibility they allow educators in reporting student progress." With online gradebooks and CMSs, teachers have the ability to display and print class averages and individual student grades; present percentile rankings; make assignments available for download; show individual students' attendance records; communicate with students electronically outside of class time; and put important reminders on an online calendar.

According to Marriot (2009, p. 252), "the use of continuous assessment is recognized as an important and powerful assessment practice which supports high-quality learning and teaching... [and] the provision of effective and timely feedback to enable students to advance their learning." All the teachers involved in this paper use regular formative assessment in their university courses. CMSs would greatly facilitate this form of assessment by providing weekly updates of the students' grades, so they can track their progress. However, most of the institutions where the authors teach do not have *any* form of web-based CMS or online gradebook in place for their lecturers. In addition, some of the authors teach part-time at several universities where they do not have the same access to facilities as full-time teachers. Without a permanent office, or in some cases even a locker to store their original teaching materials and class records, part-time teachers often have to carry everything to the classrooms from their homes every time they teach at their part-time workplaces. Statistics from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2006) reveal that there are 162,393 part-time teachers and 161,690 full-time teachers in universities across Japan. In other words,

roughly half the teaching staff at universities is hired on a part-time basis. It is quite possible that there are many part-time teachers who have limited office space at their place of employment and would appreciate the convenience of having some of their course materials online. Thus began a search for an online course management system that is portable, allowing the teachers' original materials to be placed in cyberspace and students' records to be kept electronically rather than on piles of cumbersome and heavy paper. In addition, the ideal system should meet the teachers' limited educational budget, which for some teachers is quite small.

Benefits of online course management systems

An easily accessible, online gradebook encourages teachers (and by implication course convenors) to plan ahead of time and to remain up-to-date, thereby more wisely implementing curricula and better managing student passage through courses. To elaborate, let us briefly examine the notion of assessment from the standpoint of classroom teachers.

Airasian (1991), Bachman (1990), and Wesche (1992) discuss in detail the importance of evaluation and decision-making processes for teachers. Educators must assess—that is, make decisions when judging students' academic performances, when placing pupils in hierarchies or within groups, when planning for further instruction, and when reviewing material taught. Thus, assessment is an integral part of a) establishing and maintaining social equilibrium within the classroom, b) diagnosing student problems, c) motivating students, d) providing feedback to students, and e) meeting various requirements of curricula (including mandatory nationwide or school-wide examinations).

In utilizing an online CMS, therefore, teachers and school administrators have crucial data immediately at hand with which they can a) more competently evaluate, make decisions,

and manage courses, as well as b) more efficiently communicate with each other and with their classes. At the same time, an online CMS provides students with up-to-the-minute individualized information and feedback regarding course requirements and class progression.

Review of online course management systems

The authors of this article looked at a number of online CMSs before deciding on the use of one particular system which will be discussed in more detail below. Here is a brief review of the systems that were examined and rejected.

Edline (www.edline.com)

This is a community portal used by K-12 teachers in the United States to display students' grades, curriculum information, practice exercises, and other instructional information. Moreover, this system also facilitates three-way (teacher-student-parent(s)) online discussions, submission of homework electronically, and mass email broadcasting to its selected members. This system also offers usage details, allowing the teacher to track all visits to the class webpage and gradebook as well as discussion comments. This looks like a great system, and it is in many respects. However, it is expensive and not affordable for teachers without adequate university funding. In fact, according to Planas (2005), Edline costs \$2,600 at a single high school. Furthermore, Japan-based users would probably not make much use of the three-way discussion capacity of Edline, and especially not in English, due to (the likelihood of) language constraints existing between participants—teachers, students and parents alike.

Schoolfusion (www.schoolfusionl.com)

This system is similar to Edline and competes with Edline for the K-12 market. It was rejected as not suitable for similar reasons as to why Edline was not considered viable in a Japanese university context.

Blackboard (www.blackboard.com)

This is a more comprehensive course management system compared to Edline and Schoolfusion, and it attracts not only K-12 teachers but also higher education and corporate users. The features of Blackboard include webspace for course materials, online tests and quizzes, digital submission of assignments for students, gradebooks, group collaboration within courses, online discussions, and chat and virtual classroom features. Blackboard is used not only in the United States, but also in a number of countries such as Columbia and China (Blackboard, 2010), and at Ritsumeikan University where the authors have worked. This is an excellent system, but it is not being used at all universities in Japan. The logistical and financial considerations in using this system make it impractical for part-time university teachers to adopt it at an institution which does not have Blackboard in place. A report by Rutgers University (2005) found using Blackboard costs the university \$55,000 a year.

Moodle 1.9 (www.moodle.com)

This CMS, unlike the other systems mentioned above, is an open source and free system which can be utilized by any educator. Using Moodle to manage and deliver course materials requires more technical knowledge and skills than the above CMSs. For example, it is preferable if the user has knowledge of programming languages like SQL and PHP, skills in installing and setting up software on a web-server, particularly when one

is hosting the learning environment on one's own server, and simple programming skills. While utilizing Moodle is free, there is a cost with hosting Moodle on a webserver. The more storage space and bandwidth required, the higher the cost.

On balance: Time, affordability and function

It is obvious from the review of the various CMSs, which can cost thousands of dollars each year, that most are beyond the financial means of many teachers even if they have numerous useful features such as an online gradebook, chat functions, and access tracking. Moodle, while inexpensive and within the budget of most educators to operate on their own, has some additional non-financial considerations. It requires a certain level of computer expertise and time allocated for setting up the system. This is a hurdle which some language teachers may not be willing or able to overcome. Taking all these factors into consideration, the authors of this paper discovered one particular online multifunctional gradebook which matched both their needs and financial constraints—Engrade—a ready-to-use online gradebook which teachers with little computer knowledge can have up and running in less than an hour.

Engrade: An overview

Engrade is a completely non-commercial service, provided free of charge to teachers who would like to use an online gradebook. It comprises a collection of web-based tools that have been specifically tailored to educational environments:

- online gradebook
- online attendance book
- instant progress reports
- assignment calendar
- secure messaging

- free teacher homepage and student (and parent) entry portal
- This particular online multifunctional gradebook is secure and, equally importantly, it is simple to set up and maintain—a point which Al-Jarf (2005) notes is critical to the success of any CMS.

Engrade: A teacher's perspective

Simple set-up

It is a very straightforward process for a teacher to set up an account. Explanatory help files are available on the Engrade website itself, as is a video demonstration of the sign-up process (designed with *both* teachers and students in mind). In a nutshell, a teacher simply needs to 1) choose a unique username and password, 2) enter student data, 3) designate assessment criteria, and 4) enter into pre-set online templates any other necessary information such as the names of classes, titles, and due dates of assignments. All information is immediately published online and always modifiable by teachers and administrators. In addition, once unique user accounts are set up, they can be securely accessed by those in possession of the correct combination of user ID and password.

Online gradebook

The key attribute that Engrade offers to its users is a web-enabled, up-to-date gradebook that both teachers and students can access securely and privately at any time from any location with Internet access. Teachers can customize their grading scales to suit their exact requirements, including weighting assessment categories. As with an everyday spreadsheet, teachers can point-and-click to enter scores, and Engrade will automatically calculate all grades—with relevant information being instantly available to respective students. Some of the many convenient

functions of Engrade's gradebook include: a) the ability to remove the lowest assignment score in a category for any student; b) the capacity to either excuse a student from an assigned task or give extra credit; c) the freedom to customize the order in which students and assignments are sorted and displayed; d) the option to print individual student reports; and e) the flexibility to export data to a spreadsheet program which can serve as an additional backup record.

Attendance logbook

In conjunction with the online gradebook itself, Engrade offers a spreadsheet-like attendance register. Teachers can enter custom marks, or codes, based on personal preferences or school-wide conventions (such as "L" for "late" or "E" for "excused" and so on). With a simple click of the mouse the attendance logbook allows teachers to see attendance-related totals for each student. Furthermore, the attendance logbook allows for the printing and exporting of reports—as well as instantaneous, private online access to all recorded information for respective students.

Teacher homepages

As part of the account-creation process, teachers each receive a customizable homepage upon which they may display personal profiles, pictures, and welcome messages. Importantly, the homepage can display a class calendar for each of a teacher's classes—clearly presenting reminders, notices, and due dates as found on a typical calendar. However, in addition to such standard features, the Engrade calendar provides the functionality and convenience for teachers to attach files and worksheets that students can download anywhere and anytime. Thus the calendar provides a suitable location for teachers to post homework, or even examinations. The option also exists for teachers to set up discussion threads on the calendar itself to which students may post comments, questions or

replies. A further feature of the Engrade calendar is that it allows teachers to copy events or tasks to multiple classes, simplifying the class-management process. Therefore, a teacher's Engrade homepage is an extremely suitable location to which to direct students—being a place where students receive critical class-related information or activities—as well as serving as an access point for students to log in to their own accounts.

Shielded messaging

Engrade incorporates email functionality. This is a fitting means for teachers to communicate with students, either as whole-class groups or individually. Messaging allows teachers to answer questions and send notices to students outside of class hours. Engrade's messaging system is very safe as users may message *only* other users with whom a pre-confirmed relationship exists, such as students to their teacher. Consequently, within the Engrade system there is no spam or unsolicited material—problems which frequently inconvenience other email users and systems (Tompkins & Handley, 2003).

Free of charge

Engrade is a service provided for free. The creators of Engrade consist of a team of entrepreneurs who have been fortunate in past businesses. As such, the creators have kindly volunteered their talents, and paid for all expenses themselves, as their philanthropic contribution to the world and the broad field of education. However, it is not explicitly stated on their website as to exactly how long the Engrade team will maintain this project. Furthermore, Engrade currently is not offered as an open source system—a system which could be maintained by others outside of the Engrade team. The bottom line is that there is some risk associated with using a free service hosted on an external server not under the teacher's control.

Engrade: An administrator's perspective

As discussed earlier, Engrade makes available a set of tools for teachers to efficiently manage classes and to connect with students. Interestingly, Engrade also provides for the possibility of school-wide administrative connectivity—providing managers and convenors with the tools needed to better coordinate the teaching team should Engrade be adopted on a school-wide basis. School-related policies and announcements can be posted online, disseminating important details to teachers and students. Administrators are also able to a) securely message any individual teacher or student, b) add, remove or edit class rosters in a teacher's account, and c) view and modify grade or attendance records in any teacher's class. In addition, managers can customize their school's public profile, homepage and image for promotional purposes.

Engrade: A student's perspective

Engrade provides students with the ability to a) examine the calendar containing notifications and key dates for each of their classes, b) view and download upcoming homework and assessment tasks, and c) securely access up-to-the-minute class grades, assignment scores and attendance data. Students are also able to exchange private messages, thus having the means to a) participate in online course-related discussion forums, and b) ask questions or confirm information outside of class hours.

Security

The security of private class data is of paramount importance to teachers, students, and university administrators alike. It ought to be noted that there is always some risk associated with having class data posted on an external server. Therefore, a) nicknames, b) the last few digits of student numbers, c)

initials only of first names (paired with surnames in full), and d) acronyms of course titles can all be used instead of actual names to identify classes and individuals. Moreover, the university's name need not be mentioned on any of the class lists or the curriculum webpages on Engrade. These simple precautions can prevent the misuse of private data so that even if information is somehow procured by a third party, individual and institutional identities are protected. As a prudent measure, teachers should back up the data on their Engrade gradebooks by exporting the data to their personal computers on a weekly basis.

Advantages and disadvantages of using Engrade

As with any educational technology, Engrade has both advantages and drawbacks. Listed below are some of the pros and cons associated with using Engrade.

Advantages

- Engrade handles site creation, design, maintenance, and security.
- Messaging is safe and spam-free as only registered users can post messages.
- Engrade provides free, timesaving tools to help teachers and administrators better connect with one another and with students—thereby heightening efficiency.
- Engrade is web-based, so there is nothing to download or install or maintain.
- Engrade enhances accountability—it encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning (as students track their own progress, grades and attendance).
- Responsibility for monitoring the students' learning is shared more equally between teachers and their students.

- Engrade enhances communication among all members of the learning network—teachers, administrators, and students.
- Engrade provides transparency—students can catch errors.

Disadvantages

As the site is created by a third party, users are unable to customize or modify most (design) aspects of the site.

Precautions must be taken with data posted online. Students and schools may not be comfortable with this process, no matter how secure.

User survey

When using any form of educational technology, it is important to consider the opinions of the primary users: the learners. Keeping this in mind, a simple bilingual (English/Japanese) questionnaire was administered to obtain students' opinions about using Engrade. The survey consisted of a combination of seven easy-to-answer Likert-scale questions combined with a comment section for each item. The comment section was included to elicit additional data that may not have been covered by the specific questionnaire items. Responses were collected from students at four different universities: three in the Kansai region and one in the Kanto region. Overall, 193 usable questionnaires were collected and analysed. A few questionnaires were considered unreliable for analysis and discarded because they were incomplete.

The responses to items 1 and 6 particularly stood out.

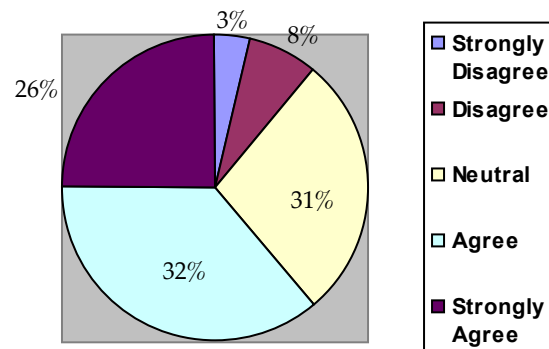


Figure 1. Item 1. *I like to be able to see my grades regularly.*

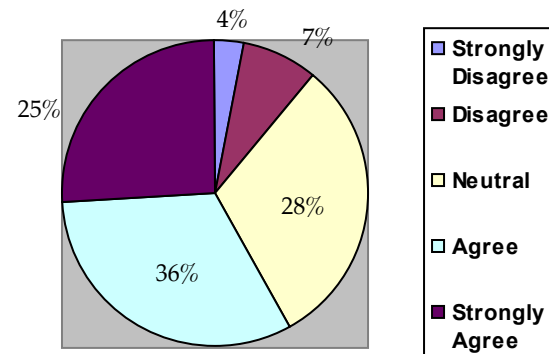


Figure 2. Item 6. *I would like my other instructors to use Engrade or something like it.*

It is obvious from the above results that a small majority, or around 60%, of the students like to be able to regularly monitor their grades. Furthermore, they like this online gradebook and its associated functions enough to want to have a similar system in place for their other classes. As far as the authors of this paper know, their colleagues at the universities where they work do not use such an enhanced online gradebook to manage their courses and display students' progress on a regular basis.

In the bar graphs below, one can see the breakdown of responses for each group of students from the different campuses where Engrade is used. There are some discrepancies between the sets of responses. For example, students at Kansai Gaidai University found Engrade easy to use while students at Otani University did not find it easy to use and students at Kinki University and Saitama University felt that it was neither easy nor hard to use. One possible reason for the variations is that some classes surveyed consisted of more motivated students interested in tracking their progress. For one of the universities, all the students were language majors, so they were naturally more inclined to have a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language and tracking their own performance. Students surveyed in another university also included law major students. In general, these students, after the medical students, are considered the *crème de la crème* at the university. High academic achievers such as students majoring in law are more likely to be concerned about their progress and have a more positive view of using an online gradebook. At another university, however, the data could be skewed negatively because of the inclusion of a sports class where the majority of the students were apathetic towards learning and using English. Students with little interest in learning a foreign language are less inclined to use an online gradebook and may even consider such a self-monitoring facility to be more study-related work. In other words, academically apathetic students may respond more negatively to using Engrade.

The ability to access Engrade from a computer is not a major problem as almost all the students reported having easy access to computers, so they have the means to use Engrade if they choose. However, for a small minority of students having easy computer and Internet access is obviously an issue. A possible way to deal with this problem for a few students is to provide periodic hardcopy records of their continuous assessment, or instruct the students to access Engrade from computers on campus. An examination of responses to an item about the frequency of logging into Engrade and checking progress shows that on average, students access Engrade less than once a month. This is confirmed by using Engrade's analytics which show many students not using or infrequently using Engrade. As none of the students have technical majors, such as science, engineering, or information technology, perhaps a lack of familiarity with computer systems may account for the relatively infrequent usage of Engrade. Moreover, the interface for Engrade is entirely in English, so it is possible some of the students surveyed in Japan are discouraged from using it because of the English-only nature of the website.

Only a few comments were collected in the overall sample. One possible reason for this was the timing of the questionnaire. It was distributed at the end of class in Weeks 12 and 13, near the end of the semester. Students were quite busy at that time, so perhaps they opted to complete the questionnaire with minimal effort in the shortest possible period before getting ready to go to their next class. Comments collected include several which said that they had nothing to add or nothing special to say. One response in the "Other comments" section was a simple "No". This could mean that particular student disliked using an online gradebook, or it could just be "No comment." Another response said that the individual would use Engrade next time. Finally, a student from the language major class wrote: "Seeing my grades regularly is good."

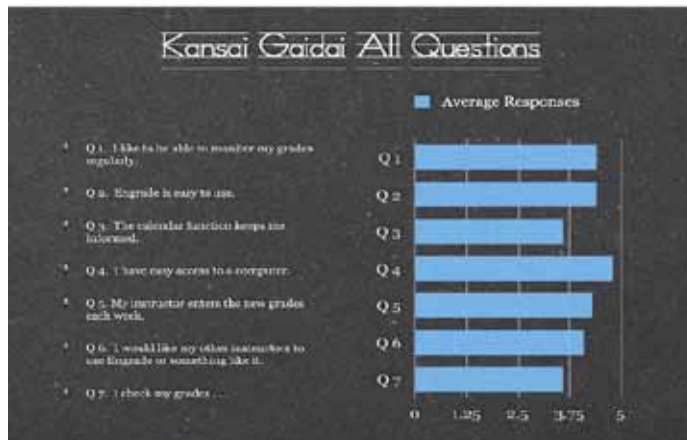


Figure 3. Kansai Gaidai students' responses to the questionnaire

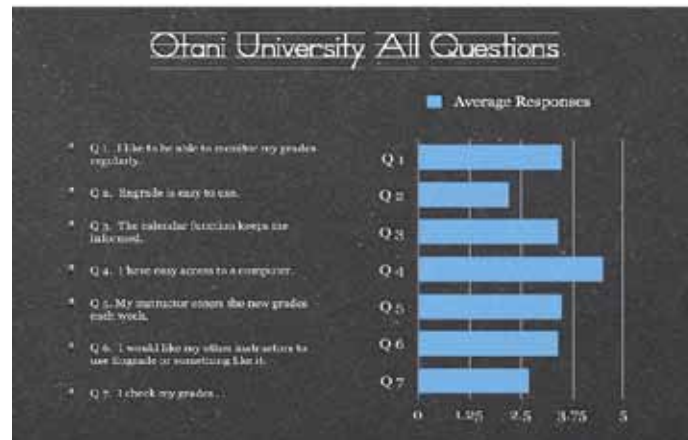


Figure 5. Otani University students' responses to the questionnaire

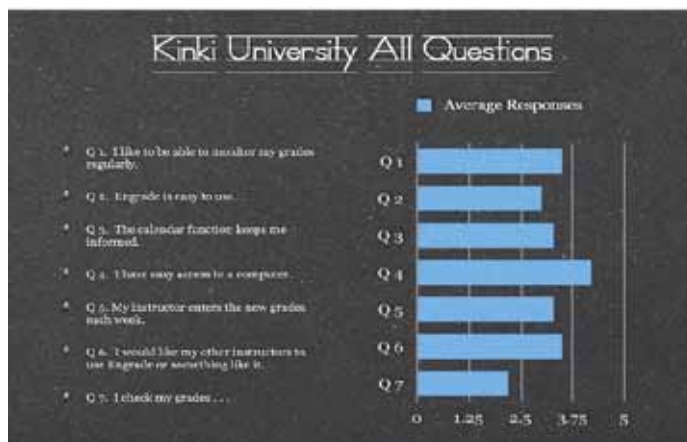


Figure 4. Kinki University students' responses to the questionnaire

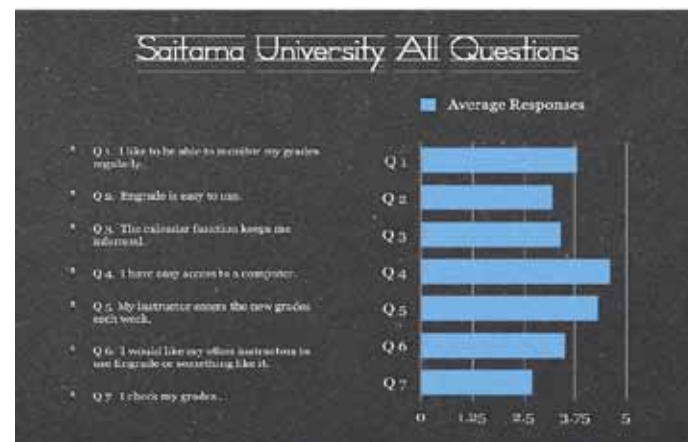


Figure 6. Saitama University students' responses to the questionnaire

Conclusion

Serving as a sound representative example of a basic online class management system, Engrade and its many beneficial features were briefly discussed above. Engrade embodies an easy-to-use and convenient online class management tool for communication, for the maintenance of records, and for the distribution of assessment tasks. Online gradebooks like Engrade are especially pertinent for teachers at institutions where no in-house course management system currently exists. What is more, from the data available to this study, it is clear that that a small majority of students are very accepting of such online CMSs, finding them beneficial to learning.

It is important to remember that decisions made in educational environments each day are based on evidence (Airasian, 1991). With this in mind, Bachman (1990) reminds us that the probability of making the most apt choice in any given situation depends not only upon the ability and experience of the decision maker(s), but also upon the quality and relevance of the information on hand. With regard to learning, an open, online, multifunctional gradebook provides round-the-clock opportunities and incentives for educators, administrators and students alike to make the most knowledgeable, informed choices that are possible.

Bio data

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Nathan Paul Krug is an Assistant Professor at Saitama University. His research interests span the fields of sociolinguistics, learner autonomy, and CALL. With specific reference to CALL, he is interested in the development of tasks and approaches which make the best possible use of the computer-mediated environment, particularly in terms of guiding students to use language productively, to negotiate meaning, and to extend critical reasoning skills.

Patrick Rates is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Ritsumeikan University. He has many different areas of interest, including cross-cultural communication, content-based instruction, learner autonomy, and CALL.

Frank Tucker has been teaching English in Japan since 1996 and is a Part-Time Lecturer at Kansai Gaidai University and Osaka Prefectural University. He is interested in CALL, particularly in integrating cyber resources into class activities and the delivery of homework assignments online.

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Appendix

Survey

Engrade Survey

This survey is designed to get your opinions about Engrade, the online system your instructor uses to inform you of your grades and as a way for you to communicate with your instructor.

Please mark your answers from 1 to 5, 1 meaning that you strongly disagree, 5 meaning that you strongly agree with the statement. You may also write comments to clarify your answer.

<strongly disagree-----strongly agree>

1. I like to be able to monitor my grades regularly. 自分の成績を定期的に把握しておきたい。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Comments: _____

2. Engrade is easy to use. 「Engrade」は使いやすい。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Comments: _____

3. The calendar function keeps me informed. カレンダー機能は授業内容の把握に便利である。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Comments: _____

4. I have easy access to a computer. (自宅、大学などに)自由に使えるパソコンがある。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Comments: _____

5. My instructor enters the new grades each week. 教員は、毎週成績を入力し、更新している。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Comments: _____

6. I would like my other instructors to use Engrade or something like it. 他の教員にも「Engrade」またはそれに類するシステムを使用してほしい。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Comments: _____

<never-----about once a month----at least once a week>

7. I check my grades ... 私は、...の頻度で自分の成績をチェックしている。

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

8. Please write down any other comments you have about Engrade. 「Engrade」に関する意見・要望などがあれば書いてください。

Other comments: _____
