

# Strategies to “Moodle” Your Academic Institution

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Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have risen in prominence in educational institutions over the last 20 years. Whilst there are many commercial packages available for purchase or lease by institutions, their costs can lead to hesitancy of those in control of educational budgeting. In contrast to the often costly commercial packages, Moodle, an open-source LMS, has become the ideal system for academic institutions that wish to have such a system in place, but may have restricted finances or are reluctant to make a monetary commitment to an LMS. However, a major stumbling block for those who wish to implement Moodle can be its acceptance and adoption by those with whom the Moodle advocate must cooperate: the administration, technical support staff, coworkers, and students. This paper addresses a number of practical strategies and approaches that can be (and have been) employed in putting Moodle to use in an academic institution.

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**W**HEN AN educational institution develops an interest in offering an online platform for the delivery of its courses, a number of crucial factors come into play. What is often believed to be a straightforward, easy to implement system in fact requires far more expertise, effort, and collaboration than many institutions initially expect.

## The Lure of Learning Management Systems

While there are commercial learning packages that offer preprogrammed material, they often involve little room for innovation. For example, there is a range of programs with material to assist students with test preparation or vocabulary building exercises. Such packages, however, rarely allow for the institution that has purchased them to customize material for their students. With such systems, the staff and students must work with what is available to them, and these limitations may become quickly apparent after the courses have been purchased by the institution.



## **The Dawn of Computer Assisted Language Learning**

What has been of interest to the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) community since the availability of inexpensive free-standing personal computers in the mid-1980s are programs that permit instructors to design and author exercises to teach, practice, and test the abilities of the specific students with whom they are working. This flexibility allows customization to fit the needs of the teachers, the students, and the courses and material with which they are engaged (Underwood, 1984).

Vast changes since the 1980s have opened up the potential of CALL. For instance, computers have become more sophisticated and powerful and the availability of local area networks (LANs) within institutions has increased. In particular, ease of access to the Internet in the 1990s has broadened the computer-based learning possibilities dramatically, offering far greater potential to teachers and students alike than were available in the early days of CALL (Chapelle, 2001; Dudeney, 2000; Teeler, D. 2000; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000; Windeatt, Hardisty, & Eastment, 2000).

## **The Rise of Learning Management Systems**

Learning Management Systems (LMSs) saw a dramatic increase in the 1990s, and its potential and presence in English language teaching (ELT) in the 2000s provided institutions with enormous possibilities for those willing to invest in such products (e.g., WebCT, Blackboard). These packages offered cohesiveness that was lacking in previous teacher-authored CALL programs. These new platforms could centralize students' engagement in a course, integrating multiple activities into a unified system and allowing teachers to log the progress of students. These programs remain in constant development to expand their potential and flexibility. Although intended initially to be LAN-based,

they became accessible beyond the campus when the Internet became a primary tool of communication for the wider public.

Such commercial LMSs were also accompanied by robust support systems. These packages have technical and human resource networks that ensure smooth implementation and maintenance of the product, and technical complications are taken care of by the companies that provided the LMSs. However, the staff at different institutions are still able to create user-specific content to run on the systems, with the assurance that support can be sought if and when issues arise.

Members of open source communities started to develop their own versions of these platforms, designed for shared distribution without a financial cost. This resulted in the emergence of Content Management Systems (CMSs) such as Mambo, Joomla!, and Drupal, along with the LMSs, most specifically, Moodle (Moodle, n.d.). These programs offered institutions the opportunity to run LMSs of quality, equaling their commercial counterparts without the substantial licensing costs such for-profit platforms incur. These open source platforms, due to their sophistication plus the absence of substantial financial demands, have seen a dramatic rise in their use across many spectrums. This can be seen especially in educational institutions and very frequently in the field of language teaching and learning. Most particularly, Moodle is one of the favored LMSs for this area of education (Stanford, 2009; Hillar, 2010).

## **Moodle: An Attractive Choice of LMS**

The qualities of Moodle have been recognized by a rising number of educational institutions since its introduction in the early 2000s. Along with this interest, Moodle has developed over the years, and its educational applications have widened. For example, recent versions have incorporated blogging and forum components into the core package, as well as free-of-charge

modules, such as the Scheduler, which allows students to arrange appointments with their teachers. Whilst it is undeniably a program that offers teachers and students great possibilities for teaching and learning, one that is in constant development, the platform has remained available without licensing costs (Standard Moodle Packages, n.d.) and that has made it such a popular LMS. However, the absence of a dedicated professional support network and technical infrastructure is still a concern for those institution administrators who wish to adopt it.

Although there are fee-based support services available for Moodle (an extensive list of such companies can be found at <http://moodle.com/partners/>), there also exists a vibrant professional user base in the support forums at the main Moodle site, users who can be consulted on a range of issues for no charge. In fact, I have used this user base extensively in the process of implementing and maintaining Moodle over the years. I have consulted the community rather than referring to Moodle-related texts, as the answers and information provided by people currently employing and developing the LMS itself are usually more up-to-date and relevant than those found in the texts. Therefore, referring an administrator who is considering the introduction of Moodle to this user base would assist in allaying concerns about the adoption of the platform.

### **Moodle Stumbling Blocks and How to Address Them**

As noted above, even though Moodle has been adopted by a wide range of institutions, a major stumbling block in its adoption can be its acceptance of and adoption by the individuals with whom the Moodle advocate must cooperate within the institution. These individuals can range from those within an institution's administration, to the technical support staff, to coworkers, to students. Their resistance can come in a variety of

areas, some of which include set-up and operational costs, complexity of installation and management, and teacher instruction in the software, as well as student uptake of Moodle itself as an educational tool.

Whilst teachers can bypass these individuals and employ Moodle as their own project, changes need to be made on a wider scale to see it adopted across an institution. There are ways and means to co-opt a range of these individuals to assist them in seeing the value of putting Moodle into place for all concerned. Thus, I will address a number of strategies and approaches that can be (and have been successfully) employed in introducing Moodle to an institution.

### ***Those Who May Attempt to Block the Adoption of Moodle and How to Counter Them***

Within any academic institution, there are a variety of individuals or groups who may need to be convinced of the value of Moodle in their teaching and learning environment.

### ***The Institution's Administration***

The first potential location for resistance may occur at the macro level: with an institution's administration. The first question that may be asked at such a level is simply the need for such a platform within the institution. This can be countered by introducing the administration to the potential of the LMS for an academic institution by exhibiting other successful implementations around the world, data about which are kept updated by those at Moodle. At the moodle.org website (Moodle, n.d.), examples of institutions putting Moodle to effective use can be displayed to those concerned. Those hesitant about its implementation can be provided with examples of Moodle in operation, with which they can interact online. Evidence of Moodle's

successful implementation in a variety of locations, along with its ease of use, can be potentially persuasive for reluctant adopters.

Although it can be relatively easy to persuade such individuals based on cost factors (given that the source code for Moodle can be obtained without payment), the administration may need further persuasion regarding the allocation of the existing server space within the institution that is needed to run Moodle onsite (i.e., within the campus). Arguments can be made with an institution's administration that the server space needed by Moodle is minimal, and Moodle can be run on an older, small-scale server if necessary. Another point to make is that the platform can be used on a relatively small scale. This can be done within the language teaching faculty, and evidence can be later produced using Moodle usage statistics relative to the potential drain on the institution's IT system. Such evidence could provide information to shift Moodle's use to the wider community of the institution rather than just the language learning sector. This may also serve to illustrate to the administration that Moodle has applications that go beyond those of a language education platform.

Another administrative hesitancy may be the need to delegate a technical officer to Moodle installation, implementation, maintenance, and platform updates. Moodle is a programming system based on PHP (hypertext preprocessor), a server-based language familiar to and easily understandable by the vast majority of those in the Information Technology (IT) field. Because of this, its introduction can be seen as a simple process, and the maintenance (e.g., backup of data) can be automated, both factors requiring a relatively small amount of an IT staff member's time. The IT staff can also be taught how to subscribe to emailed news updates regarding developments and changes in the programs, and how to interact with the Moodle open source community online, who are available to answer any potential

questions. Textbooks on Moodle administration are available (Buchner, 2011), but the most up-to-date reference exists either within the program itself, or online (moodle.org). Finally, the individual pushing for the introduction of the platform—the Moodle advocate—is also a potential source of support, given that such advocates keep up-to-date with innovations and changes with the LMS.

One other potential concern that may be voiced by an institution's administration could concern privacy matters. Moodle, like most other software, is open to online attacks. However, by subscribing to the moodle.org email alert service, a subscribed user will be kept informed regarding Moodle security issues, and the subscriber will have access to Moodle patches that will avert attacks. The vibrant Moodle community plays an invaluable contribution in this respect, raising security concerns and dealing with them immediately after such concerns become apparent.

A final appeal for the use of Moodle can be to the institution's standing in the academic world. As the presence and use of LMSs at institutions across the world are currently the rule rather than the exception, a hesitant administration could be persuaded that Moodle can play an important role in raising the technological level of the institution. The introduction of Moodle could be presented as a way for the institution to enhance its reputation, possible benefits being increases in enrollment due to this embracing of technology by the institution.

### *The Institution's Technical Support Staff*

Those within the IT section of an academic institution may also express concerns of their own. As discussed earlier, the potential introduction of Moodle places a heavier workload not only on certain staff but also on the computer servers. Notwithstanding this resistance, when the ease of implementation is explained to these individuals, there is a strong likelihood that their accept-

ance of Moodle can be achieved. It could also be argued that the implementation of Moodle would be that of a world-standard platform about which they could learn and become familiarized, expanding their knowledge and skill base. Yet again, the Moodle advocate could play a role in assisting the IT staff in its implementation and introducing them to the online Moodle community. For those IT staff members concerned about their proficiency in English, it can be stressed that the Moodle community operates in a number of languages other than English, with Japanese-language Moodle adopters being a substantial sector of the overall community. Multilingual documentation appears at the moodle.org website, and there have been a range of books published in Japanese on the platform (e.g., Rice, 2011a). In short, the IT staff, who may be a substantial point of resistance, could be persuaded that the addition of Moodle to their IT expertise would be of benefit to them.

### *Coworkers at the Institution*

Whilst the administration and IT staff are extremely important players in the adoption of Moodle, if coworkers are convinced of its value and put it into regular use, major battles in introducing Moodle to an institution will be overcome.

There is little use in approaching the groups listed in previous sections to implement Moodle in an institution unless teaching colleagues adopt it. If, after institutional adoption and installation, the Moodle advocate is the sole person employing the platform, the low use of Moodle will undoubtedly become apparent to the IT staff. This low use of the platform may be seen as a liability in the eyes of the IT staff or administration. As is the case with many educational innovations, if the staff do not employ a system that has required effort by others to establish, it is highly likely to fall by the wayside and may simply be abandoned due to its lack of use. So how does the Moodle advocate encourage colleagues in the use of Moodle?

Firstly, the teaching and learning potential of Moodle must be outlined to colleagues in a clear and coherent way. Demonstrated success of its uptake in other educational institutions, especially of the success dealing with language-learning matters, must be offered to the staff. They must be able to see its value as a learning tool, one that will assist the students in their development of a range of language skills. Sample sites can be accessed to demonstrate Moodle in use, and papers on Moodle's use can be provided to illustrate success stories.

The successful use of Moodle outside one's institution can be used to demonstrate its potential uses, but Moodle's range of features also need to be outlined in detail for colleagues. This may include an informative outline of Moodle's various functions and the benefits these tools will bring to both students and teachers. Once again, examples of common exercises in which language teachers engage their students (e.g., a forum discussion thread in the target language amongst students or a blogging project engaged in by students) can be offered as evidence of its value. Another option would be to expose colleagues to the plugin called Poodle (MAF-Learning Technologies, 2012; Thibault, 2010), which provides teachers with the flexibility of hosting Moodle from their own desktop computer. In short, showing teachers practical examples that have worked well with students can establish an understanding among staff that Moodle can be a useful tool for their learners' educational advancement.

In my own experience, it has often proved successful to also ask colleagues what they would like Moodle to do, and then respond to their query by showing colleagues ways of achieving the tasks they want their students to complete. Such questions also often reveal potential uses for Moodle that the advocate may not have even envisioned.

Another viable strategy is to show colleagues the back end of Moodle through Administrative privileges. Letting colleagues know how they can monitor their students' use of Moodle and,

more specifically, how students have progressed in their learning can convince fellow staff of the validity of the use of Moodle. For example, student engagement with Moodle and learning progress can be seen by examining the number of students' visits to the site or their attempts at set exercises and quizzes. When colleagues are shown that their students' interaction with the system can be seen by examining Moodle's participant logs or the results of students' attempts at exercises and quizzes, it can play a role in colleagues' uptake of the platform.

Understanding the Administrative features of Moodle also allows for an introduction to staff of their own abilities to create activities and tests. The website is an authoring tool; teachers who wish to create exercises need to have suitable knowledge. For this, they will require an understanding of the methods to access and build such activities. With such knowledge, the staff will be able to utilize Moodle for the best learning outcomes for their students. As opposed to the set, prewritten activities in systems that have dominated CALL for many years, staff would be well served if they have a successful grasp of how to use Moodle to customize activities for their learners.

However, the teacher as instructional designer is only one of the roles that can be played in Moodle. Moodle does not necessarily have to be an environment where creation is required of colleagues, but it can play a role as a support tool for teachers. In addition, it can be used as a location for the sharing of materials in its question bank. Products that can work alongside Moodle include Equella (Pearson Education, 2012) as well as similar DAMS (digital asset management systems). These can be utilized as resource banks for those who lack the time or skill to develop and design their own material or who wish to simply draw inspiration from the creations of others for the development of their own activities.

Training in the use of Moodle and other modules and utilities can be achieved through detailed handouts for the staff to en-

able them to engage with the platform in the initial stages. Materials featuring screenshots of step-by-step processes to achieve their goals can be provided to assist the staff. I have found that such documents are crucial for the adoption of a LMS platform such as Moodle.

Along with documentation, workshops for colleagues on Moodle are also highly recommended. Many of the graphic interface elements (e.g., menus and toolbars) in Moodle are the same as those of other Windows programs, but there are also areas of significant difference that will need to be explored with colleagues; workshops provide the ideal venue in which to examine these differences. These sessions can also be used to explain some of the perils and pitfalls of the platform and also provide an opportunity to alert colleagues about how to overcome such issues. In addition, these workshops can reveal methods and approaches that may not have been conducted before, with those new to Moodle potentially offering new insights in learning opportunities within the platform.

It is also suggested that, with the Administrative privileges Moodle offers, teachers' use of Moodle can be checked. Teachers not employing Moodle can be approached and given further suggestions and encouragement about how to get the most out of the platform. These interactions can also prove fruitful in discovering why a colleague has not taken up Moodle as an educational tool, and becoming aware of the reasons behind their resistance may provide insight into ways in which greater adoption of Moodle can be achieved. In addition, holding regular meetings on Moodle in which staff can share their opinions and views, ask questions, or introduce new approaches that they have developed for a language teacher database can assist in building an ongoing community of practice at your institution.

For those hesitant about using Moodle, gentle encouragement to engage in simple tasks can ease in new users to the platform.

One approach can involve the teacher using Moodle to record details of what went on in their class and provide instructions and due dates for upcoming classes and homework for their students. New users can approach Moodle initially as a notice-board or a place for links to sites that may be of interest to learners. Nonetheless, colleagues also should be encouraged to go beyond these initial approaches so that the potential of Moodle can be explored by the staff. This is more likely to occur if they are given a solid grounding in both its technical aspects and its pedagogical applications.

The Moodle advocate can also enable colleagues' use of the platform by being an important resource for those new to the platform. This requires that the advocate be well informed as to the current development status of Moodle. With this information, the advocate can be confident when approached by colleagues with their questions about the platform, and can offer the most appropriate answers and guidance. Hopefully, by serving such a role, the Moodle advocate will learn more about the platform through interactions with others. Just like the online Moodle community (which will also be of value to colleagues), a local, institution-based community needs to be built.

When Moodle has become familiar to the language teaching community, similar information and training can be extended to a wider audience within the specific institution. An increased adoption across the institution will solidify the role of Moodle in the institution that, in turn, will be of value to the administration who will then be able to see a whole-campus (and not just language sector) utilization of the platform.

### *The Institution's Students*

The end users of Moodle, the institution's students, will also need substantial training with the system. The degree of training will depend on their degree of experience with LMSs or

other online tools. Moodle does come with a range of language options so students can choose to have core Moodle tools and information (e.g., menus and help files) appear in their first language. Configuring Moodle to allow students to determine the language in which they interact with the platform will enhance their experience with Moodle's basic interface. Still, if it is the teacher's goal for students to work within an English-only environment, that option can be set within Moodle. Just as with teaching colleagues, it is highly advisable that students be given step-by-step instructions (printed handouts with screenshots of specific Moodle screens) to enable them to either register or (if preregistered by the teacher or the institution) login to Moodle.

For a first session with Moodle, the use of a computer room is ideal to step students through the process. This can be especially successful if the computer room has a system by which all students' screens can be directed to display the teacher's screen, or if the teacher's screen can be projected onto an overhead screen.

Some teachers choose to preregister the students with their given names or names they have chosen to be used in the class, their institutional email addresses, and their student ID as their password. This process saves confusion on first login, but students can then choose to change their password to ensure privacy. In my experience, it is *always* a good idea, however, to direct students to the link on how to reset their password. If they forget their password, using this link will allow them to reset their password.

Once the students have logged in, they can be shown the various elements of Moodle. They can also be shown how to locate information and links to different sections of the platform and any links you have added to core class pages for access to certain files or data (e.g., Word documents, PDF files, or links to websites). Once the core elements of their class screen have been identified, the students should have little trouble accessing the Moodle site and obtaining whatever information or materials they need.

For activities that are new to them, it is suggested that either students be given detailed instructions on the Moodle site regarding what to do or that they be instructed in class. By doing this, they can be informed about how to access the activity or exercise and how to complete the Moodle-based tasks successfully. As has been emphasized earlier, in utilizing Moodle with students, all processes should be detailed or stepped through to ensure maximum success.

### Leading by Example

Most of the guidance listed here is based on my personal practice. This was done in the fashion noted earlier, by using Moodle as a private project in an earlier academic workplace. By obtaining private server space and setting up and running Moodle from that location, firsthand knowledge was gained of the practices involved. As a novice in the field, I gained experience through trial and error, by consulting the online Moodle community, and by referring to either online material or that which had been purchased commercially (Buchner, 2011; Rice, 2007, 2011b). This experience allowed me to understand the core nature of the platform and also raised flags about potential problems and difficulties associated with running the platform with students. Installing and then implementing my own Moodle site with a variety of students has enabled me to gain a deeper knowledge of the platform's workings. These skills and knowledge have proved invaluable when it comes to being a Moodle advocate at an institution and understanding the complexities of convincing others of its power and value as an educational tool.

### Conclusion

The process of introducing an LMS such as Moodle into an academic institution is not particularly straightforward or easy,

regardless of the illusions that seem to be found chiefly in the upper levels of academic institutions. However, by using the appropriate tactics with the correct people, the goal of introducing Moodle can be accomplished. As has been the case in my own experience, becoming something of an advocate for Moodle in an institution involves not simply promoting its merits to others, but actually leading by example in its use and demonstrating it to others, especially teaching colleagues. Doing this allows such colleagues to see its ease of use and the educational benefits that can be brought to their students. Such practical, localized evidence, backed up with research from the field, can assist the installation and adoption of Moodle within one's academic workplace.

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