

Engaging Learners Online: Picking the Lock on the Classroom Door (Part 1)

~ BY MIGUEL GUHLIN

The predominant technology determines the predominant learning task in the classroom.

—Dr. Alan Kay

Note: *This is the first in a three-part series on Engaging Learners Online.*

Approximately four years ago, I began sharing my learning with others in ways that were tremendously different than before. Prior to becoming a blogger writing about the intersection of education and technology, I had written and published my work through traditional means. That is, in education journals and other print publications. The advent of the Read/Write Web, enabling people to subscribe to a web page, changed all of that. More importantly, the ability of people with a computer and internet access to publish their ideas at will, and other's ability to access those ideas – often in spite of network technicians' best efforts to stop them – is changing how we work. Yet, access to these technologies in many districts remains a dream. School districts have worked to block our access to these technologies out of fear. Many educators are left trying to pick the "school district" lock that forces them to use only

what has been approved by the "curriculum illuminati" in K-12 schools. In stark contrast to these restrictions, Moodle exists as a compromise, a Trojan horse of Read/Write Web technologies, a tool to develop engaging professional learning opportunities for adult and K-12 learners.

For veteran Web 2.0 users who "power down" when they come into K-12 schools, Moodle comes replete with blogs, forums, RSS feeds, wikis and more that enable it to be seen as an "absolute good" that opens the door, that enables powerful ideas to slay the fears (IMHO) that leaders hold. In many schools, Moodle is the technology that ensures communication, collaboration, and global learning and becomes the predominant learning task, without losing that academic focus. Many districts are also starting to craft plans that include activities and goals such as the following:

- Implement curriculum for virtual and distance learning (i.e., technology tools).
- Implement virtual and distant (online) learning us-

ing flexible scheduling for each high school.

In light of goals like these, some districts are choosing to use free, open source solutions like Moodle.

WHAT IS MOODLE?

Moodle enables educators to create online learning environments, back up their courses for the future, and take advantage of many tools to make things, to SOLVE PROBLEMS, and to tap into a fantastic community of people. As cited in this Education World article (<http://tinyurl.com/c86aek>), *Moodle is a Course Management System (CMS), also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is a free Web application that educators can use to create effective online learning sites.* Some of the ways Moodle is employed in my K-12 school district include the following:

1. **Facilitating Online Learning Environments for K-12 Students** — Teachers and students can experience the fun of literature circles online, communicating and col-

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laborating with literature groups around the world. This is but one of the many uses Moodle can be put to in a K-12 classroom. Tomaz Lasic, an Australian, Moodle-using educator, shares several possibilities, such as 1) Quizzes (great for literacy, can include pictures and videos in quizzes not just text) for their instant feedback and possibility of scaffolding to mastery (probably ungraded); 2) Lessons that take students from one stage to another exploring things; 3) Wikis where students can build things together as a group; 4) Keeping a Journal (e.g., My Family); 5) Enable students to use a chatroom or forum to generate their own writing, creating the possibility of discussing responsible use of these tools; 6) Online display of class work, projects, video clips of ‘making cardboard city’ for their parents to see by using Webpage; and 7) Record their work or play on video camera and post it on Moodle (great for active kids! they do the funniest and sometimes best things when the camera is on).

2. **Facilitating District Communications** — District leaders use Moodle to facilitate book studies with staff, build virtual spaces that enable communication that is restrict-

ed to district participants, as well as engage the community in dialogue about proposed changes to schools.

3. **Creating Virtual Spaces for Support of Initiatives** — Often, initiatives are launched in a school district, and the only support you see is what you get through an impersonal web site and a monthly meeting. In contrast, Moodle’s discussion forums and feedback tools (e.g., modules like feedback and questionnaire) allow you to always keep in touch with those responsible for the launch of a program. Questions are asked when they arise, and responded to, rather than a month later. One of my experiences was using the DimDim Module (<http://tinyurl.com/cbr4fy>) to present to over 80 participants – it looks a little like Elluminate, the commercial tool that is popularly used in K-12 Online Conference and Classroom 2.0 LIVE venues – about campus technology representative meeting content.
4. **Facilitate Online Professional Learning Opportunities for District Educators** — At a time when time to travel from one campus to another for training is becoming more of, let’s be honest, an inconvenience and an

expense, Moodle can be employed for professional learning. In my district, we have an *Introduction to Online Learning* course that we are offering to teachers, as well as a host of other courses that are just now under development for in-house use. Instead of facilitating 30-hour courses (e.g. such as those we’ve purchased from PBS TeacherLine), our in-house courses are much shorter.

LEARNING ONLINE DOES NOT MEAN LOSING CONTROL

“*Sharing is THE threat,*” shared Mark Pesce at a recent conference. One of the key points of his talk was that in his “*honest and human act of sharing, any of the pretensions to control, the limitations, or power are revealed as completely collapsed and impotent.*” As school district leaders struggle to lead, it is clear that though children have gained access to powerful, disruptive technologies, they have not. While students share ideas and information about everything under the sun, leaders are unable to have real conversations about critical issues.

Yet, learning online can mean sharing control. Moodle is one way to democratize what happens in the classroom although it is not the only approach.

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In your district, which digital tools are being used to enhance your ability to communicate and build an online community of learners? How is that online community that you are creating modeling an education-focused, rather than social, approach for your students? There must be more to differentiate learning in school and learning with your friends online than one environment is more restrictive than the other.

While students have had experiences in social networking and communication, it would be foolish to think that such usage would translate into academic applications. How do we model academic learning in virtual environments, as well as introduce Read/Write Web tools into traditional academic environments? Again, Moodle is a viable response for schools.

LIVE LEARNING ONLINE

At a recent Classroom 2.0 LIVE (<http://live.classroom20.com>) event, I had the opportunity to chat (<http://tinyurl.com/akbdvt>) with about 150 people from all over the world about Moodle. When I began working with Moodle, my focus was here:

How can school districts provide and manage consistent professional learning opportunities that are scalable, platform-independent (web-based), and that allow for interface with their district's data warehouse and other systems?

When considering how to manage your district's precious learning opportunities, you need to give thought to several questions:

- Knowing that everyone needs to participate in professional learning, how do you currently man-

age that?

- How are you going to help people understand the benefits of managing your district's learning opportunities?
- How will the course management system you select help your end-users build a learning community that nurtures them after the course is over?
- What online content can you find, or develop, that will meet the needs of your learning community?
- How do you get started?

As you can see from my uses of Moodle now, I am still very much in the midst of coming to an understanding of how Moodle fits into K-12, not because Moodle is single-use specific, but because it is so flexible. Here are some of the questions that arose from that conversation in Classroom 2.0; the questions and answers demonstrate the power Moodle offers educators:

1. ***Is Moodle a district subscription type site or can one teacher subscribe?***

Response: Moodle isn't a district subscription type site, although you can certainly go through a 3rd party hosting provider that will set up the Moodle for you and then help you get going. You can find some of them online at <http://tinyurl.com/d75lpv>. Please be aware that there are usually costs for doing this. I would encourage you to work through channels in your district and set up a server and get it installed. It's definitely worthwhile to have your own server. In my situation, we have active Moodle running on servers that do other things. The servers we buy are

about \$6-7K each.

2. ***Are there blogs within Moodle?***

Response: Yes, there are blogs within Moodle. They don't work as well as some would like, so I would encourage you to add the OUBlog Module to Moodle. Modules expand the functionality of Moodle, enabling it to work more as we would like it to. I've written about the OUBlog Module (<http://www.mguhlin.org/2009/01/blogs-in-moodle.html>) It's a starting point for you, I hope.

3. ***Can students read each other's blogs?***

Response: Not in the standard Moodle blog, but with OUBlog Module installed, yes. You are even able to have group blogs.

4. ***Is anyone using the wiki inside Moodle? What are your impressions?***

Response: My first impression of the Moodle wiki was negative, but it's gotten better with each subsequent version. I wish there were an easy-to-follow tutorial on using wikis in Moodle written from MY perspective (experienced with wikis). I may write it to match my teaching style. In the meantime, watch this 2 minute video (<http://tinyurl.com/cbu386>) from the Tomaz Lasic (<http://human.edublogs.org/>).

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5. *I'm interested in the Google/Moodle connection with one login for Moodle and Google Apps next year.*

Response: While others have done more work on this than I, here is what I can offer to the conversation (<http://tinyurl.com/bkm9vv>). Note the comments on the blog post.

6. *There are many mentions that Moodle is free - a distinction: it is OPEN SOURCE, that means that you can download and use the program but there are costs involved in keeping the program running, support and servers to host it*

Response: The word "free" does not mean "no cost" but refers to the ethic of free software (<http://tinyurl.com/4zrk3>). The distinction to keep in mind is that while this is Free, Open Source Software (FOSS), there are costs in implementing the solution as measured by capital outlay (e.g., server(s) to host it), technical support personnel, etc.

7. *Is there a good Moodle course out there for a district to introduce Moodle to a staff? I don't want to reinvent the wheel.*

Response: Yes, actually there are several courses out there, as well as tons of printable documentation (just google "Moodle tutorials"). From personal experience, I would start small with

a few key items and use videos (<http://moodletutorials.org> is a great place to start) to introduce the concepts and possibilities.

8. *Could you share your favorite place for getting that free curriculum you mentioned?*

Response: One of the daunting tasks of using Moodle is course development. Whether you are designing for educators or students, knowing how to start and where to start is important. Yes



and here are a few of those:

- 1) SOS-SIG's Collaborative Moodle - <http://sos.tcea.org/coloodle/>;
- 2) K-12 Open Source Ning - <http://community.k12open-source.com/forum/topics/moodle-courses>;
- 3) Learning ISD - <http://moodle.learningisd.com/moodle/course/index.php>; and,
- 4) Moodle Commons - <http://moodlecommons.org/>

9. *How can Moodle be used to prevent FERPA issues and ensure overall security problems are taken care of?*

Response: While Moodle can be used to teach teachers about FERPA — we do it by hosting a video that shares key FERPA information and then have people register for the course, view the video, and complete a quiz that is graded. If they do well enough, they pass. If they don't, back to the video — minimize the risk of security problems. Frequent updates to Moodle are shared and discussed online.

10. *I'm using Moodle with my 5th graders, but the page looks so plain. Is there any way I can brighten it up, make it look more interesting?*

Response: You bet! While you'll have to learn how to code Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) . . . wait, not that excited about that? Consider these free themes online at <http://tinyurl.com/dxbgse>.

CONCLUSION

Moodle can be used in a variety of ways to enhance teaching, learning, and leading environments in K-16 education. I encourage you to explore this solution and embrace Moodle as a one-stop shopping way to introduce yourself, colleagues, and your students to engaging learning in a safe online learning environment. ▲▼