A Study Concerning the Use of Moodle at Kanda University of International Studies

A STUDY CONCERNING THE USE OF MOODLE AT KANDA UNIVERSITY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Abstract

A prominent goal of the Internet Research Project (IRP) group at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is peer guidance regarding use of Moodle. IRP manages Moodle course pages, is responsible for the promotion of Moodle, and coordinates output of Moodle educational material for educators who choose to utilize this resource. Moodle is made available, with the support of IRP, to all staff within the English Language Institute (ELI) as well as other KUIS departments and is recommended as both an effective course management system and language learning medium for use within an educator's curriculum. While Moodle is employed by many teachers and learning advisors in a wide range of courses and projects, it was unclear how ELI educators are making use of Moodle as a beneficial educational tool, what individual educators' goals are when using Moodle, and why staff selects and implements specific Moodle associated tools. To investigate these issues, it was first necessary to find background information related to CALL in general to view the history, foundations and various approaches to technology in education that Moodle is a part of. With the work of CALL researchers and our

own questions in mind, a Moodle survey was conducted throughout the ELI to gather information regarding benefits of Moodle usage, rationale concerning utilization of certain Moodle functions as opposed to others, and educator perspectives and choices concerning Moodle software. The results of this survey contributed to discussion that may point towards future approaches with regard to the utilization of Moodle at KUIS.

Introduction

Moodle is a free of charge, open-sourced, internet-based educational Course Management System (CMS) available for educators to use world wide. Moodle software is based upon a constructivist pedagogical framework that aims to enhance a students' learning experience within the Moodle environment (Moodle Docs, 2006). When an educator decides to utilize Moodle in the classroom, they simply access the software via the program's website and create a personalized 'page' for their course(s), along with a log-on and password that gives them future entry. Once created, the personalized webpage may be tailored to the educators needs, for example the educator may post assignments, notify students of the class schedule, create an on-line quiz or glossary, or oversee an asynchronous 'chat' session for students to communicate with each other. While the educator is usually the sole person with the ability to make administrative changes in the template of the personalized Moodle page (through use of a special log-on and password), students also have log-on privileges that make the page easily accessible in order to complete a variety of computer-based tasks organized by the educator.

The Internet Research Project at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), manages Moodle course pages, is responsible for the promotion of Moodle, and coordinates output of Moodle educational material for staff within the KUIS English Language Institute (ELI) who choose to utilize this resource. Moodle is made available to all staff within the ELI as well as other KUIS departments, and is recommended as an effective medium for on-line learning and course management within a staff member's curriculum. While Moodle is employed by many teachers and learning advisors in a wide range of courses and projects, it was unclear how the ELI staff is making use of Moodle as a beneficial educational tool, what individual educators' goals are when using Moodle, and why staff selects and implements specific Moodle associated tools. With this in mind, a Moodle survey was conducted throughout the ELI (from an educator's arrival into the ELI, they may teach in one of four branches; the English department, the International Communication department [IC], the International Language and Culture department [ILC], and the Self Access Learning Centre [SALC]) to gather information regarding benefits of Moodle usage, rationale concerning utilization of certain Moodle functions as opposed to others, and educator perspectives and choices concerning Moodle software. The results of this survey may point towards future approaches with regard to the utilization of Moodle at KUIS.

Background

Computer Assisted Language Learning, or CALL, is a rapidly developing segment of many ESL curricula and may be utilized as yet another tool that potentially enriches a student-centered, communicative

based academic environment. Moodle readily fits within the parameters of Communicative Language Teaching pedagogy and even expands the pedagogy as comprehensible linguistic interaction increases from teacher-student/student-student, to student-technology as well (Brandl, 2005). The use of technology such as Moodle may be a feasible way to advance the utility of computer based communicative tasks in an educator's instructional setting. Furthermore, Moodle is viewed as a valuable resource as it may serve as a compliment to in-class linguistic collaboration amongst students, teacher and technology, or as a stand-alone tool removed from a conventional classroom milieu.

Current innovations within CALL, of which Moodle is a part of, are the product of previous work aimed at refining the field of technology and language learning. Early on in the design of CALL, Chapelle (1997) addressed the need to develop an educational model that would be able to gauge the pedagogical merits of this new educational medium. Questions and methods applied to the investigation of other L2 learning topics were seen as valuable to the investigation of CALL as well. According to Chapelle, relevant questions concerning CALL would have to ask whether computer based educational programs create conditions for ideal input and interactions, what kind of language do learners engage in when they complete CALL tasks, and how good is the CALL language learning experience for L2 learners. With regards to this inquiry, it is the responsibility of designers and educators to create activities that improve target language ability via participation in effective, authentic, and comprehensible linguistic interactions similar to those produced in face to

face exchanges and that adhere to the tenets of CLT.

With concerns and objectives similar to those voiced by Chapelle, one of the most common goals related to the creation of earlier CALL technologies was the promotion of groupwork around computers. Wegerif (1996) notes that elementary schools with an interest in the value of CALL in their academic programs, used software specifically designed to support discussion between students toward the construction of common knowledge and general thinking skills. This computer-aided knowledge and skill base was of value throughout the elementary school curriculum, without regard to specific subjects and of benefit to all subjects. Wegerif, Mercer and Dawes (1998) examined other software in the British primary school system that had similar goals of encouraging student discussion and collaboration directed toward curriculum goals. Teachers who employed CALL in their classrooms justified its use as it did lead to peer learning and the development of communication skills, yet Wegerif, Mercer and Dawes found actual benefits of the software to be of limited educational import. Final thoughts related to this case study reiterated the work of Chapelle (1997) in saying that a framework is needed to evaluate the design and effectiveness of CALL to improve the quality of interaction around computers in the classroom.

Chapelle (1998) later revisited her assessment of CALL and added that SLA processes should be taken into account when constructing educationally relevant software and computer based activities. SLA consensus shows that the series of steps that a learner engages in when

studying language include input, perception, comprehension, intake, integration and output. Consequently the development of CALL may benefit by exploring the ways in which software may exploit this learning sequence. For example, a program that attends to saliency of linguistic features, opportunity to produce the target language, learner reflection upon errors and modification, and emphasis on communicative tasks may serve as a possible starting point for the production of learner centered, SLA conscious software. Additionally, Chapelle (1999) notes that when any educational tool is being developed, new literacies demanded of students by the tool as well as their intersections with a given sociocultural context (race, class, gender, identity, educational institutions or communities) must also be addressed in order to think about the possible approaches and potential for success of the tool.

By the 21st century, the work of Chapelle and others lead to CALL being established as a viable option for use in language learning classrooms, yet some educators had embraced the new technologies while others had not. Meskill, Mossop and DiAngelo (2002) investigated the differences between teachers who used language learning software comfortably and effectively in their classrooms with teachers who did not. Among many reasons found for the effective use of educational technology were perceptions of CALL as a means rather than an ends to learning, a way to add newness and variety to the classroom, and a tool that was interactive and encouraged conversation by giving students opportunities to communicate in an atmosphere free from fear of being called on for the right answer. Conversely, teachers that found utilization of educational technology

difficult often viewed it as a low priority compared to other classroom routines and rituals, a medium that leads to non-reflective appropriation, and an additional teaching burden with little utility. Furthermore, when comparing instructors who thought positively about CALL with those who did not, positive minded teachers were always prepared to move to a contingency plan if technology failed (maintaining agency), and focused on technology as another way to support the learning process of the students as a whole; while their counterparts saw technological problems as a huge derailment for a lesson plan that included CALL (surrendering agency to the computers), and used CALL as a tool that was geared toward creating a product related to the teacher's plans.

Research into effective classroom pedagogy related to the use of CALL was also completed by Kozma (2003), and Beatty and Nunan (2004). Kozma states that technology may lend itself to a constructivist classroom environment via use of CALL activities that engage students in complex, authentic problem solving. The teacher's role in this environment would be the mediation of activities appropriate for autonomous learning whereby students may plan their own learning and knowledge creation. Beatty and Nunan completed a study to evaluate whether a teacher-mediated, student-centered, constructivist CALL activity similar to what Kozma describes, would actually lead to collaboration and autonomous learning. Beatty and Nunan state that collaboration is already inherent in computer based activities that group students around one computer, yet does collaboration continue with respect to interaction with the computer program itself? The authors used two computer programs, one with a constructivist interface

intended to promote broader exploration and independent learning by the student work groups, and the other a behaviorist interface that was teacher controlled and had more 'correct answers' that students were attempting to arrive at. The final assessment in this particular study was that constructivist type CALL programs did not necessarily promote more instances of collaboration than behaviorist ones. Student participants in the study made diverse choices with the interfaces provided, with some students addressing the opportunity to collaborate in the constructivist CALL environment while others ignored problems that would lead to the negotiation of meaning. The authors note that many students did not manifest the learning skills that would enable them to independently choose a direction with open-ended computer tasks, instead they often became distracted with the amount of information available for them to negotiate. Thus Beatty and Nunan remark that an effective CALL environment should offer different combinations of interfaces to accommodate different learning styles and skill levels, as well as scaffolding to provide a foundation for the task presented.

Method, Participants and Procedure

In order to address issues regarding the use of Moodle within the ELI, a survey was created and undertaken with the participation of 11 lecturers and learning advisors from the ELI's IC, ILC, SALC and English Departments (see table 1). The survey respondents vary in age, experience, background, and familiarity with Computer Assisted Language Learning. All staff were aware of the aims of the survey and were notified that the data garnered from their participation would be utilized for research

purposes. Survey questions and prompts (see appendix 1) attempted to produce responses giving insight into behavior related to Moodle use. Generally, this survey sought to clarify concerns related to employment of different Moodle options, individual staff goals when using Moodle and the reasons why staff used Moodle in their curricula and respective educational environments.

ELI lecturers and learning advisors were sent an email requesting that they complete the survey. Within the body of the email a link was provided to Survey Monkey, an on-line site for survey production, administration and analysis. Once the survey was accessed through the Survey Monkey link, participant responses were recorded in a database belonging to the ELI's Internet Research Project Committee. Upon survey completion by all participants, results were evaluated for information relevant to the issues we were seeking to examine regarding the use of Moodle at KUIS. A significant amount of time was spent summarizing, comparing and contrasting individual participant responses, as well as responses by ELI branch affiliation (IC, ILC, SALC, and English Departments).

Table 1A: *Breakdown of Participants by ELI Branch*

IC	ILC	SALC	English
3	1	3	4

Results

Moodle has many a multitude of functions as a CMS that a teacher can incorporate in their curriculum and is ever changing as more activities are

added and current ones modified. Survey participants were asked which of the tools they make use of. Table 2 displays the results across the ELI.

Table 2: *Moodle Activity*

	Response Percent
Assignment	27.3%
Book	0%
Bulletin board	54.5%
Calendar feature	36.4%
Chat	27.3%
Choice	36.4%
Dialogue	27.3%
Exercise	0%
Flash activity	0%
Forums	63.6%
Glossary	18.2%
Hot Potatoes quiz	27.3%
Journal	54.5%
News forums	72.7%
Questionnaires	27.3%
Quizzes	9.1%
Scorm	0%
Scheduler	0%
Wikis	9.1%
Workshop	0%

As can be seen from Table 2, within the ELI, forums and news forums were the most popular tools. A distinction between the two types of forums needs to be made. News forums are a forum specifically designated for the teacher(s) of a course to post a message to those students enrolled in that particular course. Forums are individual discussions, when created by the teacher(s), where students have the ability to start a discussion and reply

to posts. Attention will now be given to an intra-departmental analysis of Moodle usage.

Activities used by teachers in the English department are chat, choice, forums and journals; journals being the most popular. Selections by the English department were based largely upon the teachers' perception that it motivates students and serves students' needs. Teachers from the English department were evenly divided between less than half an hour and from half an hour to an hour of teacher preparation time using Moodle per week. The majority of the English department spent less than half an hour of class time per week using Moodle and set activities or tasks for students to do using Moodle outside of class for less than half an hour per week.

Teachers from the IC department stated that 66.7% of teachers use forums, journals and news forums within their courses. The IC department encourages teachers to promote learner autonomy through its curriculum yet only one respondent from this department answered that Moodle helps their learners become autonomous learners. The same respondent utilizes activities such as journal, forums, and assignment, which would promote learner autonomy as the activities promote flexibility, responsibility and offer time and space freedom (Usuki, 2001, p1). For the IC, ILC, and SALC departments, the main rationale given for specific activity selection was that it served the students' needs. Teacher preparation time for the IC departments equally ranged from less than half an hour to one and a half hours per week. A 2/3 majority stated that they use Moodle less than half an hour per week in class. Student time using Moodle outside of the

class was estimated from less than half an hour to one hour per week. One teacher declared that students from their class use Moodle 1.5 ? 2 hours outside of class per week.

The ILC and SALC departments were very comparable with each other in many aspects. Forums, bulletin board and news forums are the most popular Moodle activities used in a course. Teachers across both departments felt that the activities chosen serve the students needs. Teachers from the SALC department also stated that those activities chosen serve the teachers' needs. Finally, teachers from both departments unanimously answered less than half an hour per week is spent using Moodle in terms of teacher preparation, usage time in class and student usage outside of class.

Next, teachers were surveyed regarding their goals when using Moodle in the classroom which produced a number of results for different goals. The goal of creating a student centered classroom when using Moodle was one of these goals. Throughout the ELI, only 27.3% of teachers felt that a more student centered classroom is created for the students by using Moodle. Among these teachers, the use of forums, chat, journals and hot potatoes quiz were commonly chosen. Correspondingly with the nature of this goal, all teachers who answered positively to the goal of student centeredness also answered that felt using Moodle helps learner autonomy. Similarly, other common goals among these teachers were that Moodle increases interaction and facilitates active learning.

The goal of promoting student collaboration was also surveyed with

varying responses. Across the ELI, 54.5% of teachers stated that student collaboration is a goal when using Moodle and all of those teachers responded that submitting information, reactions or opinions is another goal when using Moodle. In contrast, only half of those respondents stated that there is increased interaction among students for the activities that they choose to use. However, the activities chosen by these teachers may not reflect the goal of student collaboration as only 2 out of the top 5 activities chosen, forums and chat would be considered a collaborative activity involving interaction in a physical context or even using the internet (Moodle) as a medium for interaction (Tudge and Hogan, 1997). When comparing the different departments, all English teachers chose student collaboration as a goal whereas the same goal was not common among other departments.

Turning the focus solely on the teachers' goals for using Moodle produced contrasting results. The number one response, with 90.9%, for a goal when using Moodle is to disseminate information to students. All of the SALC teachers responded that they use Moodle to disseminate information to students and some of these teachers also provided additional comments that they distributed information and resources to other teachers through Moodle. Similarly, teachers of the IC and ILC departments all stated they use Moodle to disseminate information. When asked why they use Moodle, respondents across all departments stated that they are comfortable with technology and hold a desire to use it. Teachers from the English department responded unanimously that they use technology because it motivates students. Oppositely, no teacher from the three other

departments agreed with this.

Taking into consideration that there is no requisite to adopt this technology within a teacher's curriculum at KUIS, the question was posed concerning why teachers choose to use Moodle. Intra-departmentally, only 20% of respondents answered that Moodle is required by their department. Those aforementioned respondents belong to the SALC department. Only half of the respondents commented that they have a level of comfort with technology that flows into Moodle usage and 40% stated that there is a general desire to use this technology within their classroom. Interestingly enough, only 30% of respondents who utilized Moodle across departments stated that Moodle does serve the students' needs. Only teachers of the English department responded positively that the use of Moodle was a motivational factor in their educational environments. All SALC and ILC teachers answered negatively that Moodle did not serve their students' needs.

Further to a teacher's rationale for using this technology is whether or not a teacher values Moodle as a beneficial educational tool and to what effect do they feel Moodle usage has in the classroom. When asked about their use of Moodle, 9/10 respondents answered that they have an average or above value for Moodle as a beneficial tool. Of those teachers who have an above average value for Moodle, all felt the Moodle activities serve the needs of their students. Half of the same teachers prepared for class using Moodle for 30mins to an hour per week and 75% stated they used Moodle for around half an hour in class per week. From this same group

of respondents, 80% felt that Moodle use had a positive effect in their classroom and the remainder thought Moodle use had a neutral effect in the classroom. When comparing these results with those teachers who placed an average or below average value on Moodle as a beneficial educational tool, one can notice that 83.3% felt Moodle use had a neutral effect in the classroom. However, the remaining respondents answered that Moodle has a positive effect. When analyzing results inter-departmentally, the results show that English teachers were evenly divided between a positive and neutral effect of Moodle use and a 2/3 majority of IC teachers felt a positive effect in the classroom. In contrast to these results, all ILC teachers said Moodle had a neutral effect in the classroom and similarly 2/3 of SALC teachers responded with a neutral feeling toward Moodle.

Discussion

There are several positive indications from teachers of the ELI in terms of Moodle usage benefits. There is an average or above average value for Moodle as a beneficial educational tool for 9/10 teachers. The value, however, seems to be more towards Moodle as a course management system rather than as a medium for language learning. The choice of Moodle activities was quite similar throughout the ELI with only a few exceptions in individual departments. News forums, forums and the bulletin board functions were used by all surveyed teachers and a majority of teachers throughout the IC and English used the journal tool. Other functions such as chat, glossary, hot potatoes quiz and wiki, are indicative of activities that could have a social experiential element to them where students build knowledge together but were rarely chosen. Whilst Moodle

is being employed to administer a course, it is not primarily being used as a language learning technology. Whilst 50% of all teachers stated that they were comfortable with Moodle, there are the other half who are perhaps not as comfortable and thus will not venture out of their comfort zone to test and try new Moodle activities.

Moodle has been promoted as a CMS built upon a constructivist approach to language learning. Von Glaserfield (2005, p6) explains that constructivism is the social process of accommodation of words and experiences until the individual constructs meaning. However, only 54.5% of teachers within the ELI selected student collaboration as a goal when using Moodle. Activities chosen for the goal of student collaboration when using Moodle were often mismatched to the goal. This was demonstrated by all English department teachers who selected student collaboration as a goal but their results show only 1 out of the top 4 activities would be deemed as requiring student collaboration. Additionally, it is further evident when the number one response for a goal when using Moodle is to disseminate information to students.

When hypothesizing for this research, departmental philosophies were predicted to influence a teacher's usage of Moodle. One instance was that teachers from the IC department often place an emphasis on learner autonomy. As the results show, only one teacher responded that one of their goals for Moodle is to promote learner autonomy. The same scenario is present for the English and ILC departments where no clear results supported our previous hypothesis.

The SALC is a unique department within the ELI in so much as they do not have a teacher fronted classroom per se. SALC teachers hold modules where students independently work and it was our hypothesis that they would use Moodle as a strict course management system. SALC teachers responded to the questionnaire that their Moodle usage was different due to the fact that they don't teach in classrooms. This is evident through comments by a number of SALC teachers that Moodle serves the teachers' needs; a perspective that should have been considered more in depth presurvey. The difference in goals when using Moodle can also be seen in SALC teachers' response to the question of why they use Moodle. Not a single teacher answered that it serves the students' needs. Results indicating their popular choice in activities such as news forums and bulletin boards complimented the original hypothesis. Additionally, specific comments were given that teachers used Moodle to share resources with colleagues. Whilst these results are somewhat different to the mainstream way of using Moodle in the ELI, they are indicative of the inter-departmental contrastive analysis that is being performed.

Conclusion

The ELI's ongoing belief in the potential that Moodle has to positively enhance language learning has warranted a study being conducted on Moodle usage. There were some limitations with regards to the effectiveness of the survey, for example only those educators who had already implemented Moodle into their courses were selected to participate in the survey. However, overall the survey was able to garner valuable information related to Moodle use in the ELI, for instance the statistic that

more than 90% of survey respondents an average or above value on Moodle as a beneficial educational tool. Many teachers from distinct ELI branches are utilizing Moodle in similar ways, most notably as a course management system, news forums and dissemination of information, although there is also some incorporation of some elements and/or activities that Moodle offers to enhance students' language learning skills. Furthermore, present in survey responses was the opinion that ELI educators are able to select Moodle functions and activities that have an ability to connect to, and meet, classroom goals. On the other hand, an initial hypothesis made before conducting research was that ELI branch affiliation would have an affect on teachers' use of Moodle. However, these affiliations were evidenced to be a non-factor with regards to selection of Moodle tools.

Further Research Implications

Based on survey findings, as well as literature reviewed, the possibility exists to encourage and/or increase student collaboration within the framework of Moodle use in the classroom. As reviewed in Brandl (2005), Moodle software allows for the implementation of activities that support teacher-student, student-student and student-technology based collaboration. Thus, there may be a premise for a longitudinal case study to be conducted over an academic year exploring avenues of approach to maximize the potential of Moodle to support collaboration.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: *'Use of Moodle Survey' Questions/Responses*

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1. Which department are you in?
   - ☐ IC
   - ☐ ILC
   - ☐ SALC
   - ☐ English

2. What are some of your goals when using Moodle?
   - ☐ Student collaboration
   - ☐ Disseminate information (teacher)
   - ☐ Peer editing
   - ☐ Submit information, reactions or opinions
   - ☐ Create a finished product
   - ☐ Learn through technology
   - ☐ Problem solving skills
   - ☐ Learn communication skills
   - ☐ Learn IT skills
   - ☐ Other (please specify)

3. Do you feel your teaching style changes when you use Moodle in your class? If so, how?
   - ☐ I am not sure if my teaching style changes.
   - ☐ My teaching style doesn't change at all.
   - ☐ My teaching style becomes more technology focused.
   - ☐ Other (please specify)

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4. Why do you use Moodle?
- ☐ Required by department/course
- ☐ Comfortable with technology
- ☐ Desire to use this technology
- ☐ Everyone else is
- ☐ Students are interested in it
- ☐ Serves students' needs
- ☐ Motivates students
- ☐ Other (please specify)

5. Which Moodle features do you / have you / will you use within your course(s)?
- ☐ Assignment
- ☐ Book
- ☐ Chat
- ☐ Choice
- ☐ Dialogue
- ☐ Exercise
- ☐ Flash activity
- ☐ Forums
- ☐ Hot potatoes quiz
- ☐ Journal
- ☐ Questionnaires
- ☐ Quizzes
- ☐ Scorm
- ☐ Scheduler
- ☐ Wikis
- ☐ Workshop
- ☐ Calendar feature
- ☐ Bulletin board for uploading files
- ☐ News forums for distributing information
- ☐ Grades
- ☐ Other (please specify)

6. Why do you choose these activities?
- ☐ Students are interested in the activity
- ☐ I like the activity
- ☐ Motivates students

☐   Serves the students' needs
☐   Other (please specify)

7. What do students get out of Moodle?
☐   Fun
☐   Learn how to use technology
☐   Increased motivation
☐   Helps learner autonomy
☐   Student centered class
☐   Technology centered class
☐   Facilitates active learning
☐   Increased interaction
☐   Other (please specify)

8. How much do you value Moodle as a beneficial educational tool?
☐   Not much
☐   Average
☐   Above average
☐   A lot

9. In general, Moodle use has a _____ effect in the classroom.
☐   Positive
☐   Neutral
☐   Negative

10. How much time per week is spent using Moodle in the following contexts:
Teacher preparation (outside of class): Less than half an hour / 30 mins - 1 hour / 1 hour - 1.5 hours /
1.5 hours - 2 hours / More than 2 hours
Class time (students and teacher combined): Less than half an hour / 30 mins - 1 hour / 1 hour - 1.5 hours /
1.5 hours - 2 hours / More than 2 hours
Students (outside of class): Less than half an hour / 30 mins - 1 hour / 1 hour - 1.5 hours / 1.5 hours - 2 hours /
More than 2 hours