Students Perceptions of Using Moodle

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Abstract

Integrating virtual learning environments provides the students opportunities to learn communicative speech-writing in both their first and second language. The purpose of this article is to present the views, attitudes, and perspectives of tertiary students using Moodle along with traditional face-to-face learning at a professional higher education institution. The results of the study show that students faced language and technology obstacles, were wary of using social networking tools within Moodle, but found the platform useful for organizational purposes more than for collaborative activities. Based on these results the authors conclude with implications and recommendations.

Keywords: Moodle, perception, e-learning, English for Specific Purposes, learning

1. Introduction

In today’s global environment intellectual capital has increased in importance and more emphasis is placed on knowledge that edges out and increases ones competitive edge. As such, many have turned to various options in providing flexible learning that is easily distributed with a global reach, cuts administrative overhead costs, is manageable, utilizes time more efficiently, and provides for more individualized learning outcomes than traditional forms. One such form of learning has been electronic or e-learning. However, e-learning in its own traditional form, with one person sitting in front of a computer terminal, turned out to be less advantageous than other forms. However, despite having its ups and downs, nowadays, e-learning has come to the forefront by modifying and blending its capabilities with more traditional methods as well as new technology tools. Blended learning or integrating the best features of online and face-to-face learning has been shown to have more positive learning outcomes and provide the most optimal type of learning within collegiate education and workplace learning than their respective stand alone components.

Integrating technology for the sole purposes of using technology should not be the goal of any educational or training program that strives to provide substantial learning outcomes. Integrating or using technology should be used as a tool and provide a platform for achieving
objectives and standards (Reigluth, 1999). Using technology should enhance learning and the objectives and goals of any training or educational program should be organized systematically and efficiently. Technology integration can provide the users or learners more in-depth information, facilitate higher thinking skills and knowledge construction, differentiated based on one’s needs and wants as well as provide authentic materials and interactions with other individuals from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

There are various courseware tools available that provides educational and training programs to organize and disseminate information in a systematic and interactive matter either synchronously or asynchronously. Virtual learning environments, open learning systems, or course-based management systems may be used in conjunction with traditional classes (i.e., blended, hybrid, or web-enhanced courses) or as a standalone platform for distance learning usage.

As providers and disseminators of knowledge concerning communication or foreign languages via courseware, we have to be conscious in using appropriate tools (Warshauer & Grimes, 2007). It is important to create and develop appropriate tasks, learning content material that consists of interactive components that encourage discussions, questions within the context of authentic environments. First, when selecting an appropriate courseware tool, we have to consider the audience. Does our audience consist of pre-work students or students with some work experiences? Next, we have to consider the goals of the class. Is the class communicatively oriented such as a public speaking or foreign language course or less communicative? Should emphasis be placed on oral communication or written? How much interactivity is required and what are the types of tasks that need to be included to match the objectives of the course? Then it should focus on efficiency. What is the cost of the tools, training, simplicity of design, return on investment, and so forth?

After answering the afore-mentioned questions, the next step is to determine the most appropriate courseware tool. The most common and most often referred to virtual learning environments are WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle, Sakai, and Nicenet (NB. More on usability issues of open source learning management systems see Martin et al, 2008). The most popular commercial platforms Blackboard and WebCT (the latter acquired by Blackboard in 2006 and now is being phased out) offer a wide range of functionalities and add-ons; however, among other limitations they both are license based and quite expensive (see Table 1). These tools are not intended as learning methodologies but more for delivering courses or developing learning modules. Nicenet is a free web-enhanced internet classroom with limited additional features that may be added into the platform itself. Moodle is an open source program available to download on a server. Knowledge is required on installing and downloading the program as well as administering the program. However, once implemented Moodle offers a wide array of various tools/widgets that may be added onto the virtual learning environment, utilizing various pedagogical approaches based on socio-constructive principles towards creating more interactive and appropriate content for the users in the course.

According to the questions noted above, Moodle was chosen to be the primary virtual learning environment for use in an English for Specific Purpose collegiate classroom. This choice also was informed by the outcomes of a research project that aimed to compare Blackboard and Moodle (Munoz & Duzer, 2005). These outcomes showed that the two courseware packets are comparable in a number of criteria such as student satisfaction of communication tools and of web-resources as learning tools, but Moodle outperformed Blackboard on criteria such
as convenient navigation, easiness of incorporating multimedia components, and student satisfaction with tools for peer interaction. Furthermore, comparison conducted (see Table 1) by Bri, Coll, Garcia, and Lloret (2008) revealed that Moodle had all of the features required to promote effective online learning.

Table 1: Comparison of Major LMS adapted and modified from Bri et al. (2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Blackboard</th>
<th>Moodle</th>
<th>Sakai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open Source (Free)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upload and share documents</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create content online in HTML</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Discussions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade discussions / participation</td>
<td>No / Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Chat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Peer Review</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Quizzes / Surveys</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Gradebook</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Submission of Documents</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Assessment of Submission</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Workgroups</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Journals</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embedded Glossary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

Specific strategies were chosen to be included in the virtual learning environment to enhance the objectives of the curriculum and to facilitate in student’s learning of new workplace and communicative genres. More specifically, an online learning environment was mainly chosen so that students have the opportunity to learn and understand electronic communication, understand the subtleties, specifics, and cultural innuendos by using electronic communication, as well as navigating through an electronic environment to gain experiences and knowledge of e-learning in English - their foreign language. As such, Moodle was further chosen, due to its socio-constructivist nature emulating that learning is about interaction and constructing knowledge (Moodle, 2010) and platform features such as providing the opportunity to password protect access, create and modify own classes, and inclusion of social learning activities. Characteristics and types of tasks were considered according to the criteria noted above as well as taking into account student’s willingness, personal characteristics, and topics covered within class. Strategies used within Moodle were forums for debates and forums sharing for written communications (i.e., emails, writing professional letters, correspondence) and reacting/reflecting on their reading assignments; using wikis for group/pair final seminar paper and activities; utilizing the chat room for asynchronous communication; weekly topic outline, lecture notes, activities, and assignments; posting class management and content announcements; uploading grades for attendance, quiz results, and final exam scores (continuous assessment); using quizzes for continuous assessment; and glossary with highlighted text for incidental vocabulary learning. It is important to note that
the aforementioned strategies used within Moodle were blended (i.e., in-addition to the weekly face-to-face classes).

2. Methods

In order to gain a better understanding regarding issues and hurdles of e-learning a questionnaire had been distributed to all the participants in the English for Specific Purpose classes attending either full-time or part-time at the tertiary level. These questionnaires consisted of open-ended and Likert scale questions and solicited information regarding computer ability and attitude towards the computer, experiences with using technology for learning English, their use of English outside of the classroom, assessment of in-class and out-of-class material and their overall opinion, suggestions, and comments. All completed questionnaires were imported into Microsoft Excel. In addition, quantitized data were input and descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated using SAS 9.0.

Out of the 248 students, 198 students were enrolled as full-time students and 50 were attending part-time. The mean age of full-time students was 21 and mean age of the part-time students was 36.2. Of the 248 students, 88% of the students were female and 12% were male. Students were attending three different programs (i.e., nursing, business and management, and information technology in business) where Business English or Nursing English was a compulsory course for all students in their first year of studies. The students language proficiencies ranged from A1-C1 on the European Common Reference Framework and as such, were diverse in both their communicative and written knowledge as well as their academic (CALP) and basic interpersonal skills (BICS).

The hypothesis outlined for this portion of the study was that a learner’s believed usefulness of a courseware tools is expected to have a significant impact on ones attitude towards using it. Therefore, the following research questions were created:

1. What is the relationship between learner’s attitudes toward the ease of use of Moodle?
2. What is the relationship between learner’s attitude and functionality of Moodle?
3. What are the differences in the attitude towards Moodle by full-time and part-time students?

3. Results

The following analysis seeks to establish students overall perception of using an electronic platform to enhance their language learning and study experiences.

All of the 248 participants stated that they had experience with computers. More specifically, when the participants were asked for what purposes they use a computer, they replied that they most often used the computer for emails (96.88%), followed by word-processing activities (86.12%), for browsing the internet (82.85%), online translating programs (54.38%)and less frequently for gaming (16.18%), on electronic bulletin boards (12.32%), and using the computer for programming (5.11%). With regard to chat usage, 187 students (75.41%) stated that they used chat for personal communication.

Before proceeding with inferential statistics, assumptions were reviewed for randomness, independence, and normality. Descriptive statistics were computed to assess the normality
assumption. To be normally distributed variables, skewness and/or kurtosis coefficients (divided by their standard errors) should be within the $\pm 3$ range (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2002). The skewness and kurtosis coefficients were reviewed for each of the variables.

Cronbach’s alpha was used to test reliability. An alpha level of 0.50 or higher indicates sufficient internal reliability. Prompts on writing emails, using forums, and general unfamiliarity of Moodle did not reach a 0.50 alpha level and therefore were not used as factors for further analysis.

To statistically test whether there is a relationship between the explanatory variables ‘ease of use’ and ‘functionality’ and the response variable ‘attitudes’, a regression analysis was conducted. The regression showed that the hypothesized relationships are statistically significant ($F = 39.72, p < .01$). Adjusted R-squared was .69 indicated a 69% variation in attitude.

A chi-square analysis was used to determine whether the attitude of students towards Moodle differed across the two independent variables of learner type. The independent variable was the learner type (full-time or part-time students) and the dependent variable was their attitude. The results revealed no statistically significant relationship between the learner type and students attitude, ($\chi^2 = 3.7654, p > .05$). Cramer’s $V$ was used to measure the effect size, which reflects a low relationship, with $V = .16$.

Themes were developed from the questionnaire and were as following: (a) computer and internet availability, (b) student’s technology proficiency, (c) students views and beliefs about courseware activities, and (d) language hurdles and technology. Almost 65% of the respondents did not have daily and unlimited usage of internet access, only during school hours where the library provides computer and internet access. However, limited number of computers and their class schedules prevent them from accessing the platform more frequently. Only 56% of the students note their proficiency of using the computer as being satisfactory or adequate. Participants also stated that using wikis to collaborate on their seminar paper and forum postings made them uncomfortable. They shared the opinion that they did not want everyone to be able to view their postings albeit because of their errors or because they believed that others would copy their original work. Finally, because Moodle was entirely in the target language, students who were identified as being less proficient (receiving a satisfactory grade as their final grade) responded on the questionnaire that their largest hurdle was both the technology and not understanding what was being required of them because the instructions were not in their native language.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Integrating technology for the mere purpose of using technology should not be the goal of any foreign language program. However, integrating technology can empower foreign language teachers to enhance language learning and provide a platform for achieving standards.

Overall, students had a positive attitude while working on the task and using the medium. The results showed that student’s perceptions are statistically significant predictors of student’s attitudes towards the virtual learning environment. These results are supported by learners’ comments that the Moodle platform was helpful, useful, time-saving, and above all that it had a positive influence on their language learning. The results also showed that the learner type, i.e. full-time or part-time student did not influence on a student’s perceived usefulness of the virtual learning environment. Upon further examination of Moodle, the researcher noticed that
all participants in the study participated actively in Moodle, namely focusing on downloading lecture notes and homework activities; therefore activities that required less interactivity and limited production of language.

The results coincided with the pilot study (Gorenc Zoran, Sarieva & Starc, 2009) in that the responses from the surveys provided a valuable input that would support faculty in designing the curriculum and choosing the most appropriate strategies for using courseware in their classes. In addition, this information is important for future decision making related to providing access to computers including but not limited to scheduling the working hours of the available computer labs as well as planning for providing other means of access to computer and Internet for students.

This study suggested that for these participants the current structure of ESP within Moodle had positive effects on students. The analysis showed that students, albeit part-time or full-time students found Moodle to be easy to use, had a high degree of functionality and found using Moodle as a positive experience. However, further studies should be conducted to target the specific strategies that enhance ones language learning, examine discourse techniques, usability for fully functioning distance learning courses. Based on the results of the survey and teachers use of Moodle, the following items were lacking in the environment itself: (1) the messaging system being archivable or have the function to save on a computer/hard drive; (2) the built in wiki tool did not provide useful and was reported by students as not being student-friendly and provided for many technical problems; (3) an anonymous survey integrated within Moodle linking to students completion or non-completion of the survey with a checkmark; (4) an updated version of the asynchronous forum discussion tool similar to Blackboard which is more user-friendly and requires less clicks and provides grading of forums from both teacher or students – basically offering more control on asynchronous and synchronous communication; (5) a serious lack from the teachers point of view is not being able to copy documents uploaded to one course into another, (6) not having the ability to upload Blackboard content material that is provided by publishing houses and are accompanied by textbooks, and finally (7) an option of integrating a plagiarism detection tool, such as SafeAssignment® that is included in Blackboard.

There are various courseware tools available that give the educational and training provider as well as the user to organize information, share ideas, exchange information, and enhance communication both synchronously and asynchronously. Yet, it is important to consider that such tools are just a platform and are to be integrated within the classroom to achieve the objectives and goals. If consumers of training and education do not see its usefulness or ease of use than such factors will influence the outcomes. The responsibility is on the provider and developer of education and training to prepare users to and use and apply the intellectual capital gained in being more efficient and competitive in today’s global environment. Finally, and most importantly it is the responsibility of the instructor of the course to create interactive material that is at the appropriate level and suitable for the open learning environment in order to exploit all of its functionalities and usefulness. Understanding Moodle as a learning tool may enhance better management of classes, production of ideas, interactive activities to promote a higher level of communicative negotiations, and provide the opportunity for learning outcomes to be enhanced.
References


