Moodling in a business school in Slovenia

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Abstract

In the paper we presented the continuous adoption of the Moodle system at the Faculty of management Koper, Slovenia. We presented our experiences in using Moodle to support e-learning, teacher and tutor training, project management and the building of a community of Slovenian Moodle users. In this presentation we focused on presenting the pedagogical approach to using Moodle for e-learning. Finally, we also presented some of the future plans with using Moodle at our faculty.

Key words: Moodle, Blended Learning, Higher Education

1 Introduction

The Faculty of management in Koper was established in 1995 and has joined the youngest Slovenian university, University of Primorska, in 2003, when the university was established. Our faculty has 3 learning centers across Slovenia, and many part-time students with full time jobs. That is why we started thinking about supporting our courses with information communication technologies (ICT), especially through the Internet. As many educational institutions, we started by providing administrative support for students online, and by offering simple web sites with course information and electronic study materials students could download. However, with the growing popularity of e-learning (learning supported with ICT) not only in education but also in the business world, we started thinking about providing e-learning for our students to offer them greater study flexibility and a first hand experience of current Internet tools.

E-learning can be delivered in many ways. In the past years the most popular form of e-learning delivery has become the usage of web-based learning management systems (LMS). When considering the best technology to support our online course, we chose Moodle, an open source freely available LMS, mainly because of its flexibility and its support of modern social constructionist learning theories (Moodle docs 2006) that we also try to include in our traditional courses. The first experimental use of Moodle took place in the academic year 2003/2004, in which we provided online support for just one course. As the results of using Moodle to support the teaching and learning processes were positive, we decided to support even more courses in the following year. In Table 1 we can see how the number of courses and users has been growing ever since.

Table 1: Moodle versions, number of courses and users in Moodle at our faculty throughout the years

Academic year	Moodle version	Undergraduate courses	Postgraduate courses	Other courses	Users
2003/2004	1.4.1	1	0	0	37
2004/2005	1.4.3	1	0	1	120
2005/2006	1.5.2	10	4	2	1782
2006/2007	1.6.3	12	5	7	26281
2007/2008	1.6.5	88	56	12	4923

Apart from providing course support in Moodle, we also deliver tutor and teacher training in Moodle, use Moodle for project management and put a lot of effort in supporting the Slovenian Moodle community. In this paper we would therefore like to present an overview of different uses of Moodle at our faculty, and provide some best practice example of using Moodle in our online courses. Also, we will finish by presenting our future plans related to Moodle usage.

2 Online courses in Moodle

We have one main Moodle site to support different courses at our faculty. The faculty's Center for e-learning is in charge of the Moodle site administration and provides support for teachers and learners. The site is called the "e-classroom" (in Slovenian "e-učilnica" - http://www.eucilnica.si) and is accessible to all students and teachers of the faculty. At the beginning of each new academic year, all students are automatically transferred from the faculty's information system into Moodle through a script the faculty's IT departments prepared. The teachers are manually included in the e-classroom by the Centre for e-learning, which also manually creates accounts for students that were not automatically transferred from the faculty's information system (usually due to late enrollment).

The Centre for e-learning is also responsible for adding new courses in the e-classroom, but the teachers have the autonomy to choose the course format and other course settings. As Moodle is a flexible LMS that can adjust to different teaching styles, the teachers at our faculty are free to decide how they are going to use Moodle. The teachers that do not feel comfortable with ICT may only decide to use Moodle as an online repository of course materials. On the other hand, some teachers have decided to use Moodle to deliver their courses online. We encourage our teachers to use the blended learning approach, which means that even the online courses are supplemented with face-to-face meetings. The number of face-to-face meetings depends on the type of the course and the characteristics of the students (part-time students usually have less meetings than full-time students). We try to provide at least a minimum of 2 face-to-face meetings for each online course (usually one at the beginning and one at the end of the course).

We also try to support online courses with online tutors, as we have found out that online tutors can make online learning easier for students, and also help to avoid high dropout rates that can often be observed in e-learning courses all over the world (Sulčič and Sulčič 2007).

Online tutors are sometimes former students of the course, but most often online tutoring is done by teachings assistants, who also participate in traditional seminars and practical sessions.

Until now, the following courses were heavily supported by the e-classroom:

- undergraduate elective course E-business (since 2004/2005)
- undergraduate obligatory course Business informatics (2005/2007)
- undergraduate Socrates / Erasmus E-business course (since 2005/2006)
- postgraduate Management of e-business course (since 2005/2006)

In these courses at least half or even more of the teaching and learning takes place in the e-classroom. In the e-classroom the students have to participate in weekly activities, which are supported by an online tutor (we try to have no more than 40 students per tutor). In this way we try to keep students interested in the course and provide them with all the needed technical and study support. This approach has shown good results, as a high majority of students completes the courses with high grades.

The main pedagogical tool we use in Moodle are discussion forums. We provide students some course study materials (and also encourage them to find additional study materials) and then have different discussions on the forums. The students can gain points by being active on the forums, and by completing other assignments, usually in the form of short project works. Students usually upload their projects to the Moodle site through the Assignment module. In the last academic year we've also started using the Wiki and the Database module for various assignments.

Students can monitor their progress at any time through the grading tool in Moodle, as points from different activities (either online or in traditional classrooms) are always collected in Moodle. Also, teachers and tutors can effectively monitor students' progress through different reports. We've found this tool to be useful to check whether students read course materials and weekly instructions. When a tutor or a teacher sees that a student has not read a certain resource, he or she can guide the student to that resource. This method helps tutors/teachers to solve quite some problems.

We also monitor student progress and satisfaction with weekly survey, which we perform with the Moodle Quiz module. With these surveys we can sometimes identify problems and insecurities students might have and respond to them through forums. Students can also contact their tutor/teacher through a private communication channel either using Moodle's private messaging system or e-mail, although we encourage communication through forums, as most of the students' questions and teacher/tutor's answers are relevant and interesting for other students as well.

Our surveys show that most students in online courses agree or strongly agree with the statement that our e-classroom is easy to use. However, they show a slightly lower agreement with the statement that the e-classroom is a user-friendly environment. The average grade (on a 5 point scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) for students of different online courses for each of these questions is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Student opinion about the e-classroom

Course	The e-classroom is easy to use	The e-classroom is user friendly
E-business 2005/2006 (undergraduate)	4,4	4,3
E-business 2006/2007 (undergraduate)	4,4	4,1
E-business management 2006/2007 (postgraduate)	4,4	4,1

These results and the success of students in online courses show that Moodle is mostly well accepted by our students. Perhaps we could improve their opinion about the user friendliness of the e-classroom by doing some research on how students interact with Moodle and whether they are aware of all the different tools and view options, and by offering students some workshops on how to use the e-classroom more efficiently. Although we provide no training on Moodle usage for students at this point, we do provide a written manual (in PDF and wiki format) for students in Slovenian. The e-classroom manual for students also includes some specific information about online courses at our faculty and information about who to contact in case of problems in the e-classroom.

We also performed a survey about e-classroom usage among the teachers of our faculty at the end of the academic year 2005/2006. 70 full-time and 28 part-time employed teachers were invite to participate in the electronic survey, in which they were asked about how they use the e-classroom and how much time they spend on developing online courses and supporting students online. 31,4 % of full-time employed teachers responded to our invitation. The average respondent was 38,3 years old and had 13,8 years of work experience (8,7 years in the educational sector and 3,9 at our faculty). Some of the survey results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Opinion about e-classroom among teachers

Variables	Arithmetic mean
Workload for course development	+22,7 %
Workload for course delivery	+17,7 %
Workload for students' support	+ 32,8 %
Substitution for lectures/seminars	37,1 %
The optimal percentage of face-to-face meetings	35,5 %

According to the teachers, course development for online delivery demanded 22,7 % more time than traditional course development. Also, delivering a course through the e-classroom demanded 17,7 % time more than it usually does in traditional classrooms. More time (32,8 %) was also spent providing student support online than in traditional courses.

As can be seen from the survey results, the teachers substituted on average 37,1 % of traditional lectures/seminars with online activities in the e-classroom in the academic year 2005/2006. The teachers believe that 25,5 % of traditional lectures can be substituted by e-classroom activities, which means that on average they would like to have 5 or 6 face-to-face meetings in one semester for one course. However, our experience with some online courses (mainly the E-business course) shows that there can be even fewer (2 or 3) face-to-face meetings (especially for part-time students). Of course, the number of face-to-face meetings

should depend both on the characteristics of the students and on the characteristics of the course itself.

3 Teacher and tutor training with Moodle

As most of our faculty has little or no experience with learning and teaching online, it was necessary to include them into a training program that would teach them not just the basics of teaching in Moodle, but would also provide them with a first hand experience of how it is like to be an online students. As there are no such training programs for teachers in Slovenia, the Center of e-learning at our faculty developed their own training program in the academic year 2004/2005. The training program usually lasts about 3 or 4 weeks. In the first week or two the teachers and tutors are put in the role of online learners. They learn how to use Moodle's communications tools (especially the Forum module). They receive several study materials about e-learning, about teaching online, and about online communication, on which they reflect through forum discussions. After this initial stage they each get their own course in Moodle, which they have to modify according to their subject and teaching style. They also invite/enroll other participants of the training program as students. Together the participants think about the ways a course can be organized and are encouraged to prepare some online study materials in any format they prefer. At the conclusion of the training program the teachers and tutors' work is evaluated by the training program leader (expert), and the participants are ready to use their skills with their own students.

In Table 4 we have provided an overview of training programs that have been delivered so far for our faculty's teachers and tutors. So far, not all of our faculty's teachers have participated in the training program, so we plan to have more training programs in the next years.

Table 4: Teacher and tutor training programs for e-learning at our faculty

Date	Number of participants	Licensed teachers/tutors
31. 8. – 27. 9. 2005	13	6
22. 11. – 20. 12. 2005	15	12
23. 8. – 18. 9. 2006	23	22

As part of a national target research program, in which e-learning was introduced in the Slovenian army, we also modified the training program for the teachers of the Slovenian army. For this project we developed 3 training courses: Moodle 1, Moodle 2 and From an Idea to its Realization. The first 2 courses focused on learning basic (Moodle 1) and advanced (Moodle 2) Moodle tools and on practicing proper online communication. In the final course (From an Idea to its Realization) the teachers learned more about planning and preparing an online course in Moodle. 34 teachers successfully concluded the Moodle 1 course, 12 the Moodle 2course, and 6 teachers showed sufficient skills and interest to modify their own courses for online delivery.

4 Supporting the Slovenian Moodle users

Because of our experience both with training teachers and delivering online courses with Moodle, we also want to help other educational institutions in Slovenia with Moodle. For this reason we launched a Moodle site for Slovenian users (http://www.moodle.si) in December 2006. With the moodle.si site we wanted to bring together all Moodle users in Slovenia in Slovenian language. We also contributed our own teacher Moodle manual (in Slovenian) to the site in wiki version, so that any Moodle teacher in Slovenia can help to improve the teacher manual.

In May 2007 we also co-organized and hosted the first Slovenian Moodle conference. The conference was national, but we had an international session with speakers from Austria and Italy. We had over 60 participants from all over the county, from different levels and fields of education, who shared their Moodle experience in over 30 presentations and a poster session. We also donated 2 EUR of each conference fee paid to the support of the Moodle project. The feedback from the conference participants was very positive, so we plan to make the Slovenian Moodle conference an annual tradition.

5 Supporting project management

In the last year we also decided to use Moodle to support project management and faculty's group work. Our faculty is involved in different national and international projects with other institutions, which of course requires a lot of online communication and collaboration. In October 2005 we therefore opened another Moodle site dedicated to project work. The most intensive work is currently being done on the ISME (Information System and Multimedia in Education) project, in which partners from Bulgaria, Poland and Slovenia are involved. The Moodle is used as a work environment in which all project documentation and discussions are included. This enables an EACEA (Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency) project inspector to participate and monitor the project development, so the work on the project is transparent to the project co-financer.

We have found out that the Wiki module in Moodle can be a very useful groupware tool for projects. Mostly, we use the Wiki module to prepare project reports, as all group members can add and edit their opinions in reflections, which are then combined in the final project reports.

6 Future plans

Four years of experiences with Moodle have proved to us that Moodle is a flexible online system that can support more than just online courses with students. That is why our faculty has decided to continue using Moodle in many different ways.

In the academic year 2007/2008 we plan to include all our faculty's courses into our main student e-classroom, which will probably end up supporting over 3000 users (students and teachers). We also plan to upgrade our main Moodle site to the most recent stable version of Moodle (1.8). Together with the version upgrade, we will also modify our teacher and student manuals according to the new Moodle version. We also plan to consider improving the student user experience with Moodle by providing some shorter workshops. In the next year or two we hope to be able to offer our teacher and tutor training program to other educational institutions in Slovenia.

In addition to educational efforts, we will also continue to provide support to the wider Slovenian Moodle community. We plan to organize the next Moodle conference in spring/summer 2008, which will most probably be international. Also, we already have some other institutions' Moodle sites installed on our servers. Our Center for e-learning already provides administrative support for these intuitions, and in the future we plan to improve this service and hire more technical staff to provide better technical support.

Despite our good experiences with Moodle, we do not wish to limit ourselves to using Moodle alone. We have already had good experience with using other online tools to compliment Moodle, such as Skype (http://www.skype.com) for voice chat and instant messaging, Google Docs & Spreadsheets (http://docs.google.com) for collaboration on

documents, and Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) to support student and faculty blogging. In the future we also plan to experiment with Moodle integration in other online systems. We are especially interested in experimenting with the Sloodle project (http://www.sloodle.com), which tries to bridge the three-dimensional virtual world of Second Life (http://www.secondlife.com) with Moodle.

7 Conclusion

Since the first experimental use of Moodle at the our faculty in 2003/2004 we have continuously increased the number of courses supported by Moodle, the number of Moodle users at our faculty, and also the number of Moodle sites on our servers. The Center for e-learning at our faculty is currently in charge of three main Moodle site: the e-classroom for students and teachers of the faculty, the moodle.si site for the Slovenian Moodle community, and a project site for research projects on different levels. In the future we plan to continue providing support to existing users and to follow the development of Moodle. We also plan to explore other e-learning tools that can supplement Moodle or integrate Moodle in new ways.

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