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Development and Use of Moodle for Online Student Support

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Abstract

In the current educational climate in the world today, there is an increasing use of technology and social media for learning, by both students and language teachers. With this in mind, and to meet the perceived associated need for students to have increasing abilities and skills to study autonomously and independently, a new e-learning platform (Moodle) was introduced to Unitec, a tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand. This paper describes how the Moodle site has been developed since inception and how it is used within the Department of Language Studies to facilitate both English as an Additional Language (EAL) for online support and for the development of autonomy.

Keywords: Moodle, online support, autonomy

Background

As more institutions move towards using mobile devices and other e-learning technology in classroom-based courses and/or in full time on-line courses, the range of support needs to become simpler, more intuitive and easier to access. This paper will describe and discuss the impact of the introduction of a new e-learning platform as part of a range of ongoing initiatives within one educational institute, to improve course content and outcomes for learners. It will also consider student autonomy on-line, the needs of the students in the Language Studies Department of that institute, how these needs for support were addressed, the development of their student identities, and the results of the new platform so far. It is hoped that this paper will inform, not only our own institution as it continues to develop courses appropriate for the student body of today, but also other institutions who are grappling with maintaining a high quality of service for their students within an increasingly technological world, and lastly tech-savvy students who may only have limited access to 'one to one' guidance from learning advisers.

Unitec Institute of Technology is a tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand. The Department of Language Studies in the Faculty of Social and Health Sciences is spread over 3 campuses, and includes just over 1100 language

students studying in four main programmes: Certificate of English (CE), Certificate of Intensive English (CIE), Diploma in English, and an Advanced degree level programme that is split into a variety of courses, ranging from a focus on pure academic studies to practical employment in the workplace.

Since 2009, Unitec has embraced a new institutional strategy called ‘The Living Curriculum’ which has key outcome areas of: being an excellent business, innovating in teaching and learning, enhancing the student experience, and meeting the needs of communities. As part of the second key result area, innovation in teaching and learning, it was expected that by the end of 2012 all programs would have a Living Curriculum. This Curriculum has the aim of contributing to new and exciting ways of delivering content to our target market who not only need flexible learning opportunities but also need courses more tailor-made for the future needs of their respective workplaces and key stakeholders. As students and employers needs and requisite education and training evolves, so too does the training and provision of the education and classroom/workplace teaching profession need to evolve and develop.

It has also been stated that as part of this strategy, Unitec’s provision will be delivered through flexible study pathways and will include excellent academic and pastoral support. Indeed, one of the main commitments of the institute is to being student-centred in all its services and activities. Underlying this, the Dean, Academic Development developed a strategic plan for the future of Unitec which required that all lecturers re-visit their curricula to focus on the accomplishment of several important outcomes, namely:

1. Demonstrate a commitment to open inquiry
2. Adopt a multiplicity of learning
3. Be based on ‘practice-focused’ educational experiences that are:
contextualised and situated in practice, interdisciplinary, founded on and
advancing current practice, theoretically grounded as well as guided, and
both creative and critical
4. Promote collaborative learning
5. Value equitable, socially just and ethical practice
6. Have integrated approaches to academic literacies as a foundation for
learning, innovative assessment, and e-learning content and support.

(Unitec, 2009).

A week-long course of workshops for e-learning coordinators within all departments across the whole campus was run by Te Puna Ako (Department of Teaching and Learning) to help lecturers develop professionally and create Communities of Practice (CoPs). In addition, they also ran a series of regular workshops in which vertical and horizontal guidelines were established to accomplish these aims. Working parties from within the Language Department expanded on these, extending and translating the ideas into practical applications. These were further developed and progressed during team meetings on Teacher and Professional Development days. Underpinning all this development work were the overall teaching aims of the Polytechnic Institute that all lecturers have to work within; that graduates will acquire a balance between specific, current content and lifelong learning capabilities; achieve career-enhancing educational outcomes which are critically conceptualised and practised; have the knowledge, skills and attributes to face the challenges of the future and to live in a multicultural world; and have the capacity to contribute positively to society, manage their own careers and function competently in changing environments. As is self-evident, many of the aims assume an understanding about, and the presence of, a strong sense of personal autonomy for social, educational and professional purposes.

The precepts of this living curriculum allow space for students and other stakeholders to determine what they study, and ensure that the studies are directly applicable to the student and external community. These ideas are supported by Barnett and Coate (2005) who state: “The student has to be given ‘curriculum space’ instead of being ‘boxed in’” (p. 125) and later, “[a] curriculum has to become like so many ultra-modern buildings, full of light and open spaces, different textures, shapes and relationships and arrangements for serendipitous encounters” (p. 129).

In terms of teaching at grass roots level in the Department of Language Studies, the main underlying principles are that the curriculum:

- involves complex conversations
- is curiosity or inquiry-led and stimulating
- is practice-focused
- is socially constructed

- blends face-to-face and web based learning
- is research informed
- has a discipline base
- develops literacies for life-long learning
- includes embedded assessment

Digital literacy is an important component in this new living curriculum for most courses at Unitec, so all departments were required to transfer from Blackboard (an online repository for course materials accessible by teachers and students) to Moodle 1.8 within two years, as a decision had been made that the institute as a whole would move to this platform as a base for its interactive tools. It was considered that Moodle allowed much more interactivity with Web 2.0 tools, such as wikis, Hot Potato activities, and interactive quizzes based on YouTube materials. Blackboard only had asynchronous reading and listening materials for download, with occasional synchronous feedback in forums, thus Moodle allowed considerably more flexibility and creativity.

Self-regulation and Student Identity

Independent learning is one of the academic skills that students are assumed to have at a tertiary institution (Wilson, 2012). At Unitec, as with most other tertiary institutions, autonomy is considered as a valuable attribute that is fostered and considered important for graduates to master, and computer assisted language learning (CALL) can play an important role in this acquisition. Figura & Jarvis (2007) reported in their study that “All the students reported using computers in the SAC. In any one day 62% spent 1–2 hours on the computer” (p. 456). This is encouraging, and it is necessary to remember that, as Alm (2006) explains, in order for students to become autonomous they also:

need to be encouraged to be self-initiating, to solve problems independently and receive feedback that supports autonomy. If learners see no value in an activity, they will pursue it only reluctantly, or not at all....if the activity is of interest....reflects personal interests and it allows them to make choices, they are likely to engage in the activity (p.33)

Previously Warschauer (2000) claimed that when students understand the purpose and socio-cultural relevance of activities, they become more valued, which in turn, can lead to stronger motivation. He also stresses that technology should support the purpose of the activity. Noels (2001) also gives a clear outline of what is necessary to enhance a sense of autonomy:

Individuals in the learner's social world must provide autonomy-supportive feedback. These significant others must encourage learners to be self-initiating, provide them with choices about learning, allow them to solve problems independently, and avoid asserting authority and control over them. The use of threats, deadlines, directives, imposed goals, or even imposed rewards, is likely to lower motivation. (pp. 54-55)

While encompassing these ideas above, the development of the Department of Language Studies e-learning and self-access Student Zones, and the scaffolding it affords students as they need it, also helps learners by giving them the support structure they need in an additional way, as Alm's (2006) states: "It is the careful balance between structure and choice that allows learners to become autonomous" (p. 34).

The benefits of online learning being able to assist autonomy acquisition was also found by Apple and Kikuchi (2007). "PGPs use multimedia sources, are content-based, encourage social interaction and therefore socio-cognitive restructuring of knowledge, allow learner autonomy or agency, and provide authentic discourse to link classroom practice with real-world activities" (Apple & Kikuchi, 2007, p. 112).

The quote above also describes the interactive and autonomous properties of PowerPoint group projects (PGPs), which are perfect examples of 'integrative CALL' (Warschauer, 2004). This success in fostering autonomy within the students should be applicable and transferable to other types of technological learning, such as those being employed at Unitec. It is hoped that it will also accomplish what Apple and Kikuchi (2007) found:

Several students told us that they enjoyed this approach because acquiring skills making use of PowerPoint would help them for their future jobs. Students who were not accustomed to using

computers appreciated the fact that they improved both English language skills and computer skills and found the group project collaboration highly motivating. (p.112)

Enabling students to succeed, especially in their first semester, is critical to their success. At Unitec, a few dedicated teachers developed Moodle Student Zones, which are a series of webpages for off- or on- campus student self-access, with a range of resources, materials, and activities that they can choose from and use for extra learning in their own time and place. An additional aim of these was to help develop capability, purpose, resourcefulness, connectedness, and to help the students create their identity (Lizzio, 2006), all of which should also increase their autonomous capabilities. These interactive resources on the web-based Moodle platform also complied with the 'Living Curriculum' dictates as outlined above. More importantly, it was simple and intuitive with appeal to visual, aural and kinesthetic learners. From a Survey Monkey IT Needs Analysis of all students in 2011, the first step to learning was found to be the need to easily access available support, not only of language, but also of basic IT instruction.

Practical Considerations

On Moodle, all students are enrolled in the Department of Language Studies Student Zone (DoLS SZ). Since mid-2011, students from the CE and CIE programmes have also had their own slightly easier to navigate Student Zone (CE&CIE SZ), which has graphics linking them to various text-based resources. These graphics are designed to aid access to the materials for all students. This second, shared zone has been set up at the request of CE teachers because the students' literacy skills are not as advanced, and the demographics are slightly different. Both zones contain IT and language support (specifically an on-line language learning centre) in an index at the top of each page, but the zones differ in other ways, such as the number of links in the index.

The DoLS SZ has a total of 12 links in the index, six of which are departmental information (About us, Staff, Events, Partner Institutions, Short Courses, Summer School) while the four others are: Links, Feedback, Success Stories and a Facebook page. Students click on the part they need- see Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. DLS Student Zone

Most of the support is in the form of webpages (page icons) with screen casts such as short videos that walk the students through the session, usually involving a screen capture of the teacher actively using the website, while adding a voice-over with instruction. Other support is in the form of direct links to web pages (blue emboldened) – see Figure 2. Screen casts have already been identified as very successful instructional support for interactive writing feedback (Hynson, 2012). Students can close the webpage without leaving Moodle. This is very important, as the log-in process is time consuming and frustrating for new learners of technology.

10 IT Skills and Support

Watching instruction videos
Once you are in the library of videos, you can click at the bottom to look at other videos to help you with your IT skills. They are large so they may stop and start. Look at them in off peak times, early in the morning or late at night **or** watch the same videos on webpages below.

Here are the links:
Introduction to Word 2007
Putting and image into a Word Document
Writing an email
Attaching a document, MP3 or picture (image) to an email and your folders in your email.
 Using Microsoft Word
 Using email

Learn to type with games
There are a lot of typing games on the Internet - they can be a lot of fun! 😊
You'll find 4 great sites on the webpage below that will help you to improve your typing (and have fun at the same time). Enjoy!
 typing games

Learn to record yourself with Audacity software
 Learn to record yourself by watching videos!

Train your brain to think in English
 brain training in English

Free tools to use for your assessments, projects and language learning
Here is a link to a site with >4 pages of free tools for learners to use.
Click here to go to this page to your favourites or bookmark it.
Free ESL video quizzes, dications, presentation help, pronunciation, songs, pronunciation, photography, note taking and more. Lots of ways for you to learn by yourself.
 Learn to resize photos for free
 Make MP3s for your ipod from youtube videos

Free Apps for your iphone:
Compatible with iPhone 3GS, iPhone 4, iPod touch (2nd generation), iPod touch (3rd generation), and iPod touch (4th generation). Requires iOS 4.1 or later.
Click here to go to the game for vocabulary to play on the bus or train?
Click here to go to the podcasts to listen to from the British Council
Click here to go to a really good way to practice vocabulary including exercises and a notebook to record new words.
(Thanks Moira)
 Practice speaking with an app for iphone

Figure 2. Webpage Support

The CE and CIE SZ has a total of 7 links in the index including Language Learning Sites and IT Skills and Support for instance Programme Events, Student Stories, and Local Events and Help, plus extra links to a news forum, and some other websites for language learning– see Figure 3. This zone was created in July 2011, as teachers demanded simplified student support more aligned with their students' needs, for example language support (on-line language learning centre) according to level, rather than skill or grammar.

Welcome to the Certificate of English and Intensive English Student Zone!

Click the buttons to see more.

Programme Events

Language Learning Sites **IT Skills and Support**

Student Stories **Local Events and Help**

News forum
 All of the other websites for language learning (not in language support)

Figure 3. Shared CI and CIE Student Zones

Selected Findings

Using the report function of Moodle 2.0, individual, course and total participation can be tracked, and statistics about which links are being used are also provided. The graphs and tables below in Figure 4 illustrate two aspects of Moodle 2.0 report function.

From anecdotal evidence (from staff meetings) and a show of hands by teachers after direct questioning of the group, it appeared that only a few teachers were taking their students to the various zones and illustrating their support and use. Students were engaging only when those few teachers had actually modeled and illustrated the zones, shown as peaks in Figure 4. The Posts function (green) was not used by most teachers until approximately a year of use and subsequent familiarity by the teachers and students.

Figure 4. Student Engagement in the Zones

From Figure 5 it can be seen that the first two webpages, which include instructions using embedded screen casts, were accessed more than any other activity for IT support. All Elementary students in one class could use Word and write emails, but were previously unable to use them at all successfully before using the site. Grades for writing and vocabulary tests improved after 15 weeks of access, and anecdotal feedback in class further confirmed screen casts' success. The vocabulary results had also improved when compared with previous years, so

this can also be seen as a result of autonomous access to vocab screencasts, as was the writing mentioned above.

Topic 10
Using Microsoft Word	46	Friday, 18 November 2011, 02:34 PM (94 days 21 hours)
Using email	15	Tuesday, 14 February 2012, 01:34 PM (6 days 22 hours)
typing games	55	Wednesday, 15 February 2012, 03:47 PM (5 days 20 hours)
Learn to record yourself by watching videos!	7	Thursday, 16 February 2012, 05:04 PM (4 days 19 hours)
brain training in English	42	Thursday, 16 February 2012, 04:59 PM (4 days 19 hours)
Learn to resize photos for free	1	Friday, 10 February 2012, 01:40 PM (10 days 22 hours)
Make MP3s for your ipod from youtube videos	-
Practice speaking with an app for iphone	1	Monday, 23 January 2012, 02:29 PM (28 days 21 hours)

Figure 5. Use of Web Pages

Other Moodle Report Functions

Similar tables are also available for each student or course, showing the date and time of most recent access and the frequency of viewing of webpages or sites. Blackboard does not show anywhere near as much detail of individual engagement and is highly time-consuming for teachers to learn to use, so previously, only anecdotal evidence was used to monitor the access of Blackboard materials. The preference for Moodle over Blackboard is also supported by Machado and Tao (2007) who conclude that “the Moodle learning management system is the more efficacious and effective learning management system than the Blackboard learning management system” (p. 6). Since this time of course there have been a lot of other developments in the field such as the new and emerging learning management system alternatives, facilitated by further technological advances, for example The Language Cloud, social network substitutes such as Edmodo, Ning, Twitter and Facebook, or web-based approaches using Edublogs or Google sites. Other autonomous vocabulary sites, including Quizlet.com and Socrative.com, have replaced some of the paper-based testing or quizzes on Moodle as well.

Conclusions

Using the index format on Moodle, a “virtual” Language Learning Center (LLC) is incorporated into the zones with a valuable categorised repository of language sites. In addition, autonomous learning at any time is encouraged by providing students with access to support outside of our current Computer Lab sessions or physical LLC times. It is hoped that these indices and models will help

other institutions in the transition from Blackboard to Moodle (or one of the many alternative platforms currently available and being constantly developed).

Future Intentions

To date, current findings continue to support the zones' success. Running alongside this for one semester, a designated teacher has a time allowance to illustrate the zones to every class, in the form of a one-off 15-minute mini-lesson with selected sites tailored for each course. It is hoped that this will further engage all students.

Notes on the Contributors

Moirra Hobbs has worked as an ESOL teacher, and is now Manager of the Unitec Language Learning Centre. She is also Academic Development Lecturer for students from a range of vocational disciplines. Both roles exhibit a continuing interest and commitment to helping students achieve their short and long term learning goals.

Yvonne Hynson is a full time ESOL teacher working with international students at all levels. She continually introduces e-learning activities and teaches colleagues about their use. She is on a team responsible for the maintenance, standardisation and uptake of e-learning in the department as it transitions to NZQA qualifications in 2014.

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