

Integration of Moodle Course Management System (CMS) into an EFL Writing Class

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The implementation of Course Management System (CMS) technologies can have a beneficial impact on course organization, lesson implementation, coursework distribution, teacher-student communication and assessment; furthermore, CMS technologies tend to help create a more student-centered learning experience. This article outlines the useful implementation of a CMS into an EFL composition classroom. The author examines how CMS technologies can be woven into an established EFL writing curriculum built upon the constructivist notion of the author as communal learner and communicator. The goal of the article is to demonstrate, through specific examples, particular Moodle CMS features that support activities and approaches inherent in the "process approach" writing class.

Introduction

My interest in CALL is largely driven by my interest to become a more effective EFL teacher; however, I am slightly skeptical when it comes to thinking of technology as a "tool of convenience" – especially in the classroom. Like many teachers, I feel that CALL should be a means, not an end, to EFL instruction. Recently, however, I was given a mandate to meaningfully weave CALL technologies, and more specifically, a Course Management System (CMS), into a writing pedagogy (and syllabus) designed to produce project-based assignments which underscore the transactional and social nature of writing. Traditionally, composition courses tend to be teacher-centered. This teacher-centeredness is often amplified if instructors organize their curriculum by means of a "product approach" where instructors teach to and evaluate from sample, "ideal" texts. Of course the instructor is the final arbiter of correctness and quality; however, without a "process approach" to writing (which requires multiple drafting

and revision work to be conducted within a group of readers) students rarely develop a true sense of audience, nor do they acquire the skills required for creating and shaping their work. In contrast to the “product approach,” the underlying principle of the “process approach” to writing is the constructivist view of author as communal learner and communicator – someone who can work through communal, task-based projects in an effort to express himself more successfully (Murray, 1980). The goal of this article is to give practical suggestions of how a CMS can be effectively integrated into a de-centered EFL composition classroom. The following is an outline of CMS technologies and their applicability to tasks which support the notion of composition as a social and recursive activity.

Theory to practice

The “process approach” to composition instruction evolved from constructivist theory and the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), who examined the importance of social interaction on learning. In addition, Piaget’s (1969) cognitive-constructivists view of learners as bound to developmental mental processes has also supported the value of this approach. In the field of composition theory and instruction, Moffett (1992) integrated the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget in his own theory of discourse genre. In brief, Moffett’s model focuses on the act of writing from the perspective of author (and reader) in relationship to experience, measuring the rhetorical distance at which an author describes, reports, generalizes and/or theorizes about a given situation or event. Much like Piaget’s observations of learning development, Moffett’s model marks the sophistication of language development as writers demonstrate their ability to move from *implicit* to more *explicit* use of language. Moffett’s model is particularly useful in the “process approach” composition classroom as it also sheds important light on how certain sentence features (i.e., tense, register, use of modalities, vocabulary, etc.) shift as rhetorical distance between “speaker, subject and listener” changes.

The utilization of CMS technologies that underscore *for students* the importance of composing both within and for communities of readers should be the first priority for the CALL composition instructor. Moreover, encouraging students to socially mediate meaning in L2 (when possible) while working through the composition and revision processes is also critical to this “process approach.”

Instructional philosophy and approach

This paper suggests approaches for the implementation of a CSM in an L2 English composition course at a college or university level, composed of motivated, adult learners. English proficiency levels should range from high-intermediate to advanced, and the goals of the course should emphasize the understanding of rhetorical forms over syntactical concerns, at least initially. More simply put, teachers should resist the urge to teach form, e.g., the five paragraph essay, and should instead encourage their students to investigate “experience.” To this end, instructors should not address sentence-level concerns until students’ drafts have reached the editing stage. “*Process, not product*” should be the key operating principle. Typically, “process approach” composition courses are taught from “spiraled” syllabi, meaning, over the course of the term, students are asked to engage in various activities

that underscore the notion of composing within a community of readers; specifically, these courses include pre-writing, drafting, peer/teacher response, revision, review and editing activities which create the pathway by which students complete their assignments (Calkins, 1994). Also, often "folded" into this type of curricula in the EFL context are discussions of reader-writer responsibilities across cultures (contrastive rhetoric), typology, and western notions of new knowledge, authorship and plagiarism.

Teaching environment and resources

The integration of a CMS into a writing course can be accomplished in several ways; for example, an instructor may choose to utilize a CMS for their own organizational purposes with no access given to students, or they may give limited access to their students at particular times during the term. However, this paper's suggestions are based on a learning environment which utilizes a CMS within a CALL classroom with "on demand" access given to students. In this CALL design, a group of approximately 15-25 students sit at round tables and work in teams of 3 or 5. Each student has her own networked laptop computer equipped with word processing software. The CMS chosen for this class is a popular open-source solution called, *Moodle*. *Moodle* is a powerful and flexible CMS for managing, presenting and distributing course materials; moreover, its modules help support independent learning by allowing students to access course materials "on demand," thus encouraging reflective and recursive thinking to occur --both skills critical to the writing process. In addition, many of *Moodle's* modules help support the social mediation of learning. *(More in detail in the section on *Moodle* CMS Supported Activities) Teachers will need to be able to display various technologies (e.g., web-based applications, podcasts and mobile blogs) onto a large screen visible to all students, and have access to common software programs, e.g., MSWord and PowerPoint. Finally, a printer is necessary for students to print their drafts during the revision process.

Integration of Moodle into the L2 composition classroom

Moodle courseware will be the repository for course content and can eliminate the need for paper learning materials. All information regarding the organization and operation of the class resides here. The course is broken down into class meetings (weekly or bi weekly sessions), then arranged with content (assignments and supplementary materials) under each class meeting and/or unit headings. On the *Moodle* course page, students have access to other classmates and can

- post assignments
- view PowerPoint presentations and blogs
- read text documents
- read and create individual and group journals
- take quizzes
- request additional course resources
- view the course calendar

- view section links
- check attendance records, and
- contact the instructor, via email.

The instructor can also arrange, insert and delete course content and activities from the Moodle course homepage.

CMS-supported activities

Large-group lectures

Lecturing from a PowerPoint presentation is an easy way to introduce each new activity and assignment. Students can follow the instructor's presentation on a large screen or click through presentations on their own. PowerPoint presentations that contain language support and/or more graphic information are also very helpful for EFL students when presenting difficult vocabulary or concepts (Kol & Scholnik, 1999) which typically arise in more advanced writing courses.

Small-group tasks

The hallmark of a "process approach" composition classroom is small-group activities (Atwell, 1998), and the CMS is particularly useful for facilitating the most common type of activity: peer and small-group response work. To group students into separate "communities of readers," Moodle's group mode allows the instructor to choose between three modes:

- No groups—where everyone is part of one community,
- Separate groups—where each group can only see members within their own group and others are invisible, and
- Visible groups—where each group works in their own group, but can also see other groups. By allowing the instructor to create working groups in this fashion, they can tailor the reader response task to each assignment.

Small-group response groups

Generally speaking, peer response groups in the EFL/ESL context tend to have limited benefit for two reasons: first, learners' low-proficiency in L2 affects their ability to respond in a constructive manner to issues of correctness and appropriateness; and second, cultural influences sometimes make commenting on others' work seem inappropriate given that all members of the group are peers. Given this situation, the CMS can play an important role in mitigating some of these limiting factors. First, if students are asked to comment on specific areas of their peers' texts (both rhetorical and syntactical) through the use of the Journal function in Moodle, and where student work may be viewed by the instructor and the author, the instructor can intercede if peer responses are either "off topic" or inappropriate. In either case, the instructor can "filter" comments back to the original author, adding his/her own comments (clearly identified as those of "the teacher") and add credibility to the peer's comments. Thus, through this "added step" in the peer review process,

the quality of the responses are insured by the “filter” of the instructor, and the sometimes difficult position of peer-to-peer critiquing is somewhat lessened. Finally, by “looking over the shoulders” of peer response group members, instructors are able to ascertain the level of comprehension taking place within a particular group, and this insight is often the basis for further dialog between author, instructor and peer reader.

Student blogging

One obvious benefit of blogging is the immediacy of the medium --dynamic, non-linear, and “real time.” Moreover, the benefit of the dialogic underpinning student “conversations” and its connection to the making of meaning underscores the value of the technology supporting blogs. Within a “process approach” writing curriculum, blogs are especially useful in facilitating reader response activities. The purpose of these activities is to help create an awareness of reader/writer responsibilities as authors share their drafts within peer response groups, gather feedback from readers, then choose whether to incorporate peer suggestions into later drafts. In the EFL composition classroom, the blogging function in the *Moodle* CMS can be used in a variety of meaningful ways, for example: Blogs can be used to help stimulate and narrow subjects of discussion into appropriate topics for writing assignments and/or maintained to document the “frustrations” and “successes” of class members. Also, they can be written in L1 or L2, depending on the aims of the instructor. Finally, mobile blogs (or MoBlogs) have proven to be very popular with students as they use their personal mobile phones to upload content directly to the Web, posting photo, video and text files to create personal diaries or lifestyle journals (Thornton & Houser 2002, 2003). As a discourse genre and community, students feel very “at home” with blogs.

Student presentations

As noted by Phinney (1996), L2 composition students can benefit by developing their presentation and collaborative working skills when they incorporate multimedia into their classroom presentations. The Presentation function within *Moodle* CMS can help support this technology. The most common tool in making a simple presentation is with PowerPoint, and students can easily add Flash file video as part of their PowerPoint presentations. All modes of discourse can be explored and/or supported using multimedia; students can use photo or video images to accompany field notes, a memoir, and an informative or persuasive essay. PowerPoint can also display text files which might include graphs. After student presentations are completed, they can be hosted on the CMS for all students to access and respond to.

Sentence-level grammar, punctuation and vocabulary exercises

When students have entered the Editing stage in the writing process, the CMS can help “fine-tune” their sentence-level grammar, punctuation and vocabulary skills. Through *Moodle's* Quiz function, students can first review and then take quizzes that assess their knowledge. In addition, *Moodle* supports *Hot Potatoes*. *Hot Potatoes* quizzes are very self motivating. Finally, if instructors allow their students to take these quizzes multiple times,

students will often do so to improve their final scores. The CMS is able to facilitate these important skill-based activities and allows students to work at their own pace with the idea that students will transfer these skills and vocabulary items back into their final drafts.

Integration of *Moodle* into an L2 composition classroom: Benefits and problems

By implementing *Moodle's* CMS technologies into an L2 composition course, instructors benefit in the areas of organization, implementation, distribution, communication and assessment. First, all coursework and outside recourses can reside in one location and can be easily revised and restructured. Second, by leveraging all of *Moodle's* tools (software, web-based services and technologies), instructors can quickly create interesting and motivating projects and assignments. Third, distributing course materials is as easy as "logging-in" into the course homepage. Fourth, *Moodle* helps manage all communication between instructors, individual students and peer-response groups. Finally, *Moodle* can help maintain and display student assessment records.

From the student perspective, the implementation of a CMS means: no more lost folders, no more dull assignments, no more time wasted asking the instructor for additional resources and no more waiting to talk to the instructor.

Putting technological (hardware and software) and institutional issues aside, most complaints concerning the implementation of CMS technology in the classroom come from instructors. "Chalk and talk" is a media and an approach that is well tested; and as a result, many instructors are skeptical about the return on their investment of time "setting up" the course. Unless these instructors have already included Multimedia as part of their presentations and assignments, building a CMS-based course will take time --as well as imagination. However, the overall benefits, both pedagogical and operational, clearly warrant this investment.

Conclusion

Moodle is useful in a "process approach" EFL composition classroom. In particular, *Moodle's* tools, which support a socially mediated approach to language learning, should remind us of the "great potential for encouraging reading as a social production of meaning" (Murphy-Judy, 1997) as well as the potential to encourage our students to "externalize their private speech exclusively in the L2 in order to mediate and organize their thinking... [when] explaining the content of an expository text." (Lantolf, 2006). Furthermore, Phinney (1996) has noted how "collaborative techniques have a positive effect on social integration and on the negotiation of meaning, which in turn positively affect learning." Given the communicative tasks that students will face in the workplace, teamwork and strong presentation skills are more necessary than ever; and through the integration CMS technologies into L2 composition curricula, we can "turn the classroom into a laboratory in which students can prepare for the real world" (Phinney, 1996).

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