1. BASIC CONCEPTS

Moodle is a web-based system used in the Faculty of Education to support student learning. It forms a major component of courses which are designated as 'flexible' (extramural) but is also used for many “face-to-face” courses.

This type of software is sometimes known as a “Course Management System” (CMS), a “Virtual Learning Environment” (VLE) or a “Learning Management System” (LMS). We prefer the second term because our intention is not to manage student learning – that is their task – but to provide an online environment within which we can facilitate their learning.

In many ways Moodle provides an online equivalent of the classroom – a place where students can meet each other and their lecturers, share ideas and carry out activities individually or in groups. They can use a wide range of resources – print and audio-visual.

For the lecturer this can be the place where much, or all, of their teaching takes place but it does require some additional skills to those exercised in physical learning environments, and these will develop with experience over time and through support from colleagues and study. This guide is intended to provide some of that support, but it is best used in conjunction with other forms of guidance that you find helpful – from CreATE and your other colleagues.

1.1. ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Flexible courses within the Faculty are organised in a range of ways intended to suit the needs of different groups of students. Most flexible courses will have a Moodle web site. Face-to-face, on-campus courses may also have a Moodle component, or a CECIL web site.

The purpose of the web site will vary for different courses; for example:

- **Web-based**
  The web site may be the prime, or only, source of guidance, interaction and resources – use of the Moodle site is essential;

- **Web-supported**
  The web site may contain important resources or activities to support a course where the main teaching or interaction occurs in another way (e.g. through face-to-face teaching, block courses or correspondence) – use of the Moodle site is highly recommended but students could get through without it;

- **Web-enhanced**
  The web site may contain additional information or resources which are helpful but not essential.

It is important that students are informed of the importance of the web site before they enroll in the course, and that course demands don’t go beyond their legitimate expectations of the role of the web site.
MODELS OF ONLINE LEARNING

There are a number of models of online learning which have proved useful in guiding practice and two are described here.

Salmon’s 5-stage model

Gilly Salmon’s (2000) 5-stage model of teaching and learning online describes the lecturer’s role in courses which place an emphasis on the use of CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication).

The stages are illustrated in the diagram below.

Briefly, the stages through which courses move are:

1. **Access & Motivation.**
   Exploring the technology and motivation building are key issues. The e-moderator helps people meet and learn about the environment and expectations.

2. **Socialisation**
   Building on the first stage, this stage focuses on social processes and ‘community building’. The moderator does bridge building.

Diagram from the website “All things in moderation”, http://www.atimod.com/e-moderating/5stage.shtml
3. **Information Exchange.**
   Information is exchanged and co-operative tasks can be achieved. Interaction happens with contents, other participants and the e-moderator, that assists exploration activities.

4. **Knowledge Construction.**
   Knowledge development and discussion activities become important. Participants start recognizing the value of text-based asynchronous interaction and take control of knowledge construction.

5. **Development.**
   Participants become responsible for their own learning and that of their group. Ideas are applied to individual contexts. This stage is characterised by reflection and assessment.

This summary of stages is based on Edutech Wiki (http://edutechwiki.unige.ch/en/E-moderation_five-stage-model)

At each stage the students may require both technical support to develop the skills shown in the diagram, and the learning support which Salmon calls e-moderating. As the course moves from Stage 1 to Stage 5 the degree of interactivity increases for the learner. Although previous experience will affect students’ technical and cognitive skills, this model provides guidance in structuring activities for any course that is based on constructivist pedagogy.

We can use this model to help us in planning the sequence of online activities, particularly discussions, and for conceptualising the kinds of support that we should be offering students as they move through the course.

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### Community of Inquiry Framework

This framework was originally developed by Garrison et al (2000) and is illustrated in their diagram below. The framework has provided a useful basis for much subsequent research into effective online education.

Diagram from the website "Communities of Inquiry", http://communitiesofinquiry.com/
This model is based on the idea that an online course provides students with the ability to participate in a learning community through which their learning is facilitated.

The model describes three “presences” within a community of inquiry: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. These presences are overlapping and are exhibited by the participants in the community, which in a course includes both students and teachers.

**Social presence** is the ability of students to participate personally and authentically in the community of inquiry. It plays a part in establishing a sense of community in the course and can influence the degree of interaction.

**Cognitive presence** is the degree to which participants are able to construct meaning through sustained communication. "Cognitive presence consists of four levels: triggering events, in which you identify problems or opportunities for discourse; exploration, in which you discover areas of agreement or disagreement, and define the problem further; integration, when you negotiate meaning; and the point of resolution, where you reach consensus." (Nichol, 2009, p.21)

**Teaching presence** is related to the design of the teaching, the facilitation and the direction of the teaching. Anderson et al (2001) identified three components of teaching presence: instructional design and course organisation, facilitating discourse and direct teaching. These activities on the part of the teacher are crucial to the success of a course, but they do not mean that all discourse should be dominated by the teacher.

Viewing a course as a Community of Inquiry is a valuable approach to conceptualising the collaborative approach to learning which may be developed through the use of a virtual learning environment. If we attempt to create such a community we will need to recognise, and plan for, the three presences described in this framework.

### 1.2. THE FUNCTION OF MOODLE

Within the Faculty we aim for a degree of consistency in the design of Moodle course sites, to assist students, but individual courses will differ in many ways. You need to talk with CreATE design staff to work out what is best for your course (see the guide to Course Design and Production).

**For Flexible courses** (though not necessarily for face-to-face courses) the Moodle site will probably contain most or all of the following;

- **Course information** – Course booklet or outline, including timetable, lecturer details, assignment details and deadlines
- **Important announcements** from the lecturer/s, which will also be forwarded by e-mail to the students (“News” form).
- **Discussion forums** related to the course content
- **Links to online course readings**
- **Audio-visual materials** (e.g. podcasts, music or videos)
- **Links to other useful web sites**
- **“Drop-boxes”** for students to submit written assignments online
- **Other interactive activities and communication tools**.
The Moodle site is a place where students can go to...

- get the important information about the course
- find up-to-date guidance about their learning
- communicate with each other and their lecturer/s about their learning
- engage in activities designed to assist their learning

Socio-cultural views of learning emphasise the value of developing communities of practice, and increasingly electronic communication is found to be valuable in enabling such communities. For distance or "flexible" courses this is often the only feasible way to achieve this, but in a face-to-face course an online community can strengthen and extend the contact begun in class.

From a practical viewpoint an online community can provide an efficient and engaging tool, which can ensure efficient and timely communications and references available at any time.

The content area of the Moodle site is usually divided into blocks which either correspond to the weeks of the semester, or to major themes and topics of the course. Within each block students should find the items which relate to that week or topic.

1.3. THE STUDENT’S EXPERIENCE

Students in a flexible or distance course should receive information before the start of the semester to tell them where to access their course website.

The start of a flexible course – Student expectations

Students will be told to log in to the Moodle site at the start of the course and expect to find...

- an announcement from their lecturer giving guidance about how to begin studying
- crucial information about the course timetable including details of any on-campus courses and assessment requirements
- information about an introductory discussion designed to get them involved in the course content and probably introducing themselves to the other course participants.

Face-to-face courses

Students will usually be introduced to the role of the online course site during class sessions. Often there will be specific activities (e.g. discussions, or wiki creation) that will be the focus of their online activities. If you do not initially feel competent to demonstrate these, then do seek assistance from more experienced colleagues.
1.4. THE LECTURER’S ROLE

For most flexible courses the Moodle site is the major teaching medium and the place where the course expectations, ethos and procedures are communicated. This is the responsibility of the Lecturer, just as it is in the classroom.

PRE-COURSE

At least one week before the course “goes live” you need to...

- Check any content on the Moodle site for accuracy and completeness
- Set up any initial discussion/s

In general we recommend that you set up as much of the course activities and content as you can before the course starts – time becomes very tight as the semester unfolds! Online items can always be hidden until they are required.

AS SOON AS YOUR STUDENTS ARE ENROLLED IN THE COURSE

Once student names are listed under ‘Users’ you should post the first News forum message, welcoming your students and giving initial instructions to set the scene and clarify how students should begin working. This message will then be emailed to the students to alert them to activity starting on the site.

WEEK ONE

In the first week or two you will need to...

- Monitor students accessing the site
- Follow up those students who don’t log in by using e-mail, telephone or post; if you would like suggestions, discuss the situation with colleagues in your School
- Respond to discussion postings by students to guide and encourage them

In the early stages of the course it is important to develop your social presence and your teaching presence. Just as in the classroom, it is necessary to model the standards expected and what the procedures are, to give guidance on how to communicate effectively and start exploring the basic principles of the field of study.

ONGOING

As the course progresses you will need to...

- Continue to engage in the discussion forums
- Use the announcements to guide students through the course activities and reading - to implement your course design
- Continue to monitor student engagement and take action if problems appear to develop
- Seek formative feedback from the students to help you manage the learning
- Mark assessment tasks and post grades and feedback on the Moodle site

FINAL WEEKS

Before the end of the course you may need to...

- Set up online Lecturer evaluations that you need and any required Course evaluations
- Make links to these evaluations in your Moodle site and give instructions to students
- If you have been using Moodle to inform students of assignment grades you can download these for producing your final course grades to be uploaded to the University student records system through CECIL
Time commitment required for teaching online

Teaching online is NOT necessarily less time-consuming than teaching face-to-face. We recommend that you plan to allocate the same time to it as you would to your more traditional teaching, but often the distribution of time may be different. For example, rather than two 2-hour sessions with students each week, those four hours may be better spread over several days; time that might have been spent on preparing lectures may be better spent in online communication.

Here are a few points to consider:

- Dealing with online discussion forums is often a crucial part of teaching online. This is the way that you can “keep a finger on the pulse” of the course, check on student understanding and avert catastrophes by responding to needs as they arise; your active presence in the course gives the students reassurance and promotes their sense of engagement.

- Some people recommend logging in twice a week to the course; we recommend, where possible, that you log in more frequently for shorter periods of time.

- Do manage students’ expectations by telling them what your timetable for the course is; try to set yourself a regular schedule.

- Much of the development work is “up-front” in the preparation of the course before students actually log-in. Good preparation and planning can make a significant difference to the regular workload of teaching online.

1.5. MAKING DESIGN DECISIONS

This section has described, in outline, the role of Moodle in your flexible course.

The detailed design of how that course should proceed obviously has to happen well before the semester starts, and that is a process in which the CreATE team will play an important part. If you are stepping into an existing flexible course, this design may have been done already by another lecturer, though you may wish to modify aspects of the design. Otherwise you will need to begin working with CreATE several months beforehand.

1.6. REFERENCES


