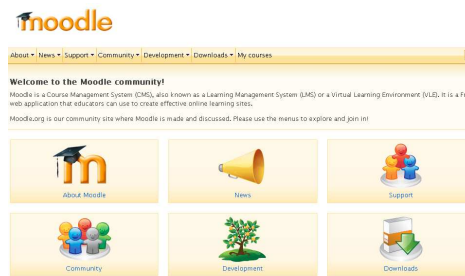


MOODLE- An Evaluation

Basic Features and Operation

Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is basically an Open Source e-learning platform. It is also called a course management system (CMS) or a Learning Management system. Moodle presents an excellent platform for resources and communication tools. It was created by Martin Dougiamas, a computer scientist and educator who deeply believes that a CMS should be created by an educator and not by an engineer.



Its basic features include tools for creating resources and activities. These in turn provide the tutor managing the course various useful options. The **Resources** tab offers the tutor a choice of creating **labels** which are simply headings for each topic or week, creating **text pages** or **web pages** with a combination of text, images and links. Creating **links to files or web sites/pages** which can link to podcasts, videos and other files, creating **directories** which are folders one creates with a multitude of different files to be accessed by students or staff. Another useful and collaborative section is the **Activities** tab which includes: **assignments**, **chat**, **choice** (one question with a choice of answers – answers are logged so statistics can be deducted), **database** which is a table created by the tutor and which is filled in by the students creating a database. **Forum** where everyone can post in response to discussion threads, **glossary** is a type of dictionary created by the tutor with terms used and their meanings. Glossaries can also be an enjoyable, collaborative activity as well as a teaching tool. **Lessons** offer the flexibility of a web page, the interactivity of a quiz and branching capabilities. **Quiz** enables the creation of various types of quizzes, **survey** is a questionnaire which gathers feedback from students, **wiki** is a web page edited collaboratively. **SCORM** is a tool for enabling SCORM packages into the content, that is packaged content which can be used on any Virtual Learning Environment.

For a tutor to configure some basic settings before adding actual content, there is a settings button in the administration block on the course page. Here one can select the format of the course, layout, number of weeks or topics and set the maximum upload size amongst others. Enrolment settings are accessed from here as well as availability and language. Roles can be administered giving different people different types of access.

To run, Moodle must first be installed on a main server; an administrator configures the settings to enable access through user names and passwords. The user accesses Moodle through the Internet as it is web based and does not have to install anything locally. Moodle is written in php with an SQL database. Its interface can be customised to appeal to different learners which range from the very young in primary schools to the highest levels in tertiary education. Moodle has updates installed from time to time and so it is continually being modified and enhanced.

Technical Requirements

Moodle being Open Source is not limited to a particular set of technical requirements but can be installed on most CPU's whether they are old or updated models, making it very dynamic.

- ◆ Hardware platforms: Windows 95, 98, 2000, NT, or ME/ XP/ Vista/ Pentium2-3/ MAC 9/ OS X. This means it can be used by practically anyone.
- ◆ The screen resolution may be set to either 800x 600 or higher to 1024 x 768.
- ◆ Internet connection may be via a simple 56k modem or a high speed ADSL /Cable connection.
- ◆ Internet Browsers can vary from Mozilla Firefox, Internet Explorer. Here the Opera and Safari browsers will not display the built-in HTML editor.
- ◆ Most applications can be opened and used in Moodle eg. Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint. The Excel viewer and PowerPoint viewer work as well as will a simple word processor. Open Office can be used as an alternative.
- ◆ Multimedia Plugins include: Windows Media Player, RealPlayer, Apple Quicktime, Acrobat reader, Flash player, Shockwave player, Java Applets, Java Mac OSx

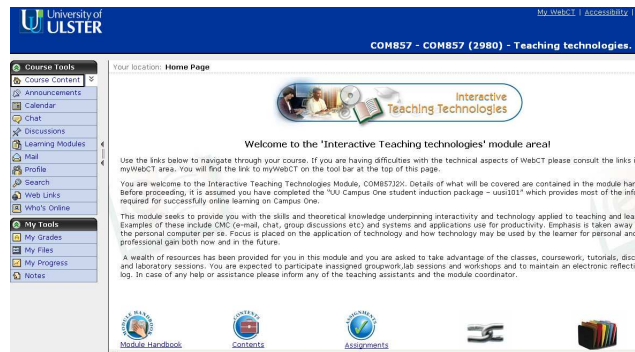
Moodle Platform and Comparison with other VLE's

In order to compare VLE's an accepted bench mark would be: the Constructivist On-Line Learning Environment Survey (COLLES) which was actually designed to do this through 6 scales asking questions about a particular online learning environment:

1. **Relevance** - how relevant is online learning to students' professional practices?
2. **Reflection** - does on-line learning stimulate students' critical reflective thinking?
3. **Interactivity** - to what extent do students engage online in rich educative dialogue?
4. **Tutor Support** - how well do tutors enable students to participate in online learning?
5. **Peer Support** - do fellow students provide sensitive and encouraging support?
6. **Interpretation** - do students and tutors make good sense of each other's communications?

Taking all these factors into consideration I believe Moodle provides the best opportunities possible as it offers an array of interactive tools. These support collaboration, communication, sharing, activities and critical reflection, all enhancing students learning experience.

WebCT (Blackboard) another VLE shares some of these tools yet it may time out if not in use which is one of the main drawbacks, as regards tools it is limited to a whiteboard (not present in Moodle). Web CT is based on a license fee and needs request for any change while Moodle is free and Open Source so change can happen at any time in any way. As regards Discussion Forum WebCT has only one type wherein a student can reply but without creating topics. Moodle has more than one type of forum depending on particular needs.



First Class is a Virtual Learning Environment which is not free and does not have the vast array of interactive tools as Moodle. It features a Bulletin Board System and online conferencing, allows for synchronous and asynchronous communication. Navigation is simple and use is similar to using emails. First Class has a very outdated welcome screen which is not so welcoming as it contains a clutter of folders. Any new content or mail have to be searched for manually in the various folders on the home page. On WebCT one is immediately notified of any announcements and the icons underneath course name indicate what new material is available. First Class is not suitable to use with large groups simultaneously. Unlike Moodle which is designed to take large numbers of students.



Description of Pedagogic Utility

Moodle in its concept has a constructivist approach and its design moves in this direction. Pedagogically, for learning to be effective, it must be experienced. The tools within Moodle allow and support this type of learning. Enabling one to post thoughts, discuss and share ideas and resources within a course creating a community of learners where even the teacher can become a participating learner. Today online environments are increasing in popularity and demand collaborative tools to update teaching approaches. Moodle, as a consequence, allows control to be in the hands of the teacher and students, where it should be.

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