Language Teaching With Moodle
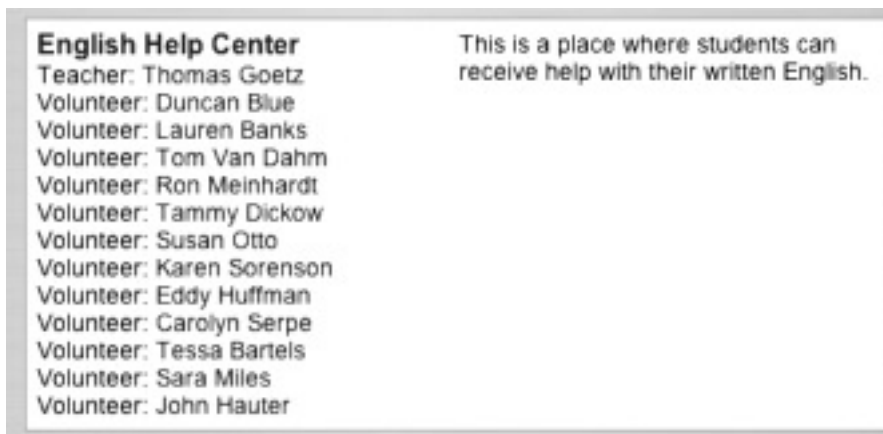
Thomas H. GOETZ

Introduction

Whether one teaches an L1 or an L2, classroom options are changing. Normally administrators and many teachers presuppose the traditional classroom arrangement of a podium, chalkboard, and desks. However, due to advancements in Internet Technology and the increasingly availability of computers both in schools, internet cafés, and the home, educators are presently finding themselves at the edge of a new frontier when it comes to the application of Classroom Management Systems. Moodle is one such CMS. It is a free open source software package designed around sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities. Moodle can be scaled from a single-teacher site to a large university. This presentation will show how a professor of English has appropriated the use of Moodle for the benefit of learners at various levels of second language acquisition with respect to Moodle's pedagogical principles and the author's online adaptation of a Writing Lab and EFL Task Based Learning activities.

The Writing Center

Referred to as "The English Help Center," this Moodle "course" is an open door writing laboratory for students who wish to have their submissions proofread and commented by a native speaker of English. Japanese students studying English who are current students are invited, not required, to make use of the Help Center.

English Help Center
Teacher: Thomas Goetz
Volunteer: Duncan Blue
Volunteer: Lauren Banks
Volunteer: Tom Van Dahm
Volunteer: Ron Meinhardt
Volunteer: Tammy Dickow
Volunteer: Susan Otto
Volunteer: Karen Sorenson
Volunteer: Eddy Huffman
Volunteer: Carolyn Serpe
Volunteer: Tessa Bartels
Volunteer: Sara Miles
Volunteer: John Hauter

This is a place where students can receive help with their written English.

Screenshot 1: The English Help Center gateway.

Proofreaders are all volunteers living in the United States who are either retired or professionals with extra time.　What makes it work is that students find their classes listed within a Topic heading and then post to the Topic Forum therein.　When a submission is made by a student within a forum, a volunteer can read it and then make comments.　Later, the student can benefit from the proof reading and carry on with the assignment in her or his main class.
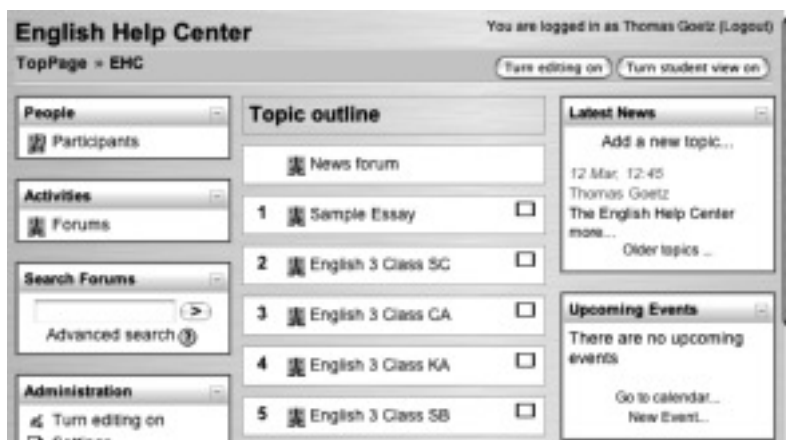
Screenshot 2: Inside the English Help Center.

The volunteers are mostly retired people who need help adjusting to Moodle.　They have been oriented to the struggles that Japanese learners of English face through a trial essay. They have been told not to rewrite the submissions but to identify politely areas that need attention.　Email, while easy, does not satisfy the need for transparency and accountability in today's cyber world.　With email, the host teacher really has no idea what is going on between volunteer and student.

Screenshot 3: A Typical Forum.

With a CMS such as Moodle, the host teacher does have access to all communication between student and volunteer. Japanese students have a host of grammatical and syntactical problems and when a volunteer goes through a submission, usually everything gets attention. This can be overwhelming for the student, but, if improving English is the goal of the student, then it is more of a realized opportunity than a string of negative criticisms.

Observations

Some volunteers simply could not figure out Moodle without a lot of help. Most others quickly figured it out and began checking submissions as they were posted. With periodic emails to the volunteers informing them of fresh postings, volunteers soon got into the habit of checking for new submissions.

Advantages

Students felt that there was a place for them to go where someone was truly interested in reading their writing. People who have never been to Japan began learning about Japanese culture, small towns, and life as a young Japanese. Students saw that through their use of the English language, they were informing people about themselves and their culture. For the host teacher, the hours and hours of pouring over student generated material had been dramatically reduced.

Disadvantages

Students did not always post revised essays showing evidence of suggestions made by the volunteers. Some volunteers wondered if their work was getting back to the students'
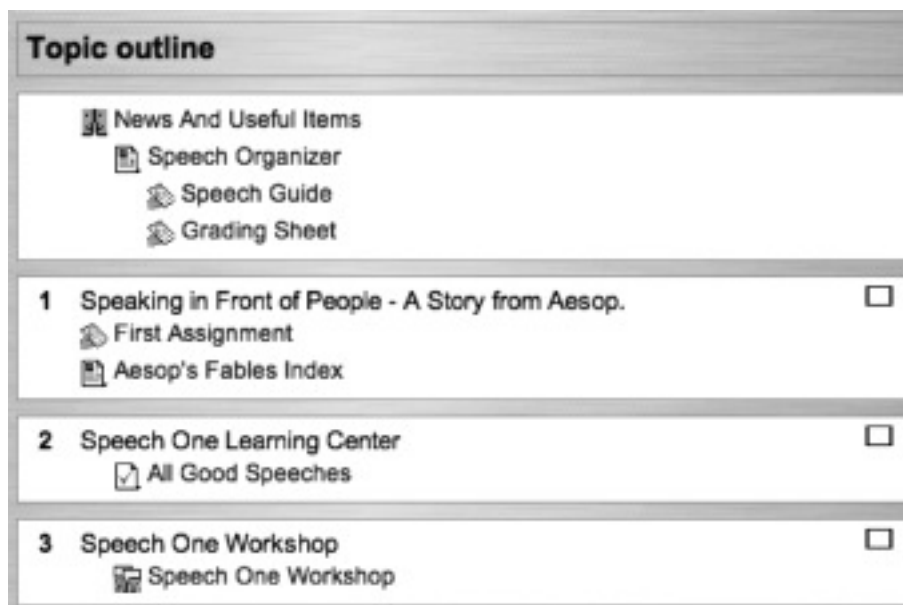
thinking and learning.　Some lower level students reported being afraid of having their English read by a native speaker.　Additionally, volunteers did not know the starting and closing dates for semesters in the Japanese university calendar and in the future will be told.

Synthesis

In light of the creation of The English Help Center, there are some areas where improvement is needed both with teacher expectation of students and volunteers being better informed the Japanese university calendar.　The potential for an EFL learner, however, being in contact with a native speaker for language improvement within a monitored environment via the internet is a reality, thanks to Moodle.

Task Based Learning
The Moodle Only Class

The use of Moodle for task-based learning was used at all levels of instruction, both in class and for homework.　The students met in a computer room where lessons were conducted in a both student centered and teacher fronted ways.　The class was a speech making class. Here is the Topic Outline for the First Speech.

Topic outline

- News And Useful Items
  - Speech Organizer
    - Speech Guide
    - Grading Sheet

1　Speaking in Front of People - A Story from Aesop.　☐
　First Assignment
　Aesop's Fables Index

2　Speech One Learning Center　☐
　All Good Speeches

3　Speech One Workshop　☐
　Speech One Workshop

Screenshot 4: The First Assignment

Observations

The advantage overall was that Moodle made everything seem to flow faster.　No student

could say that he forgot his notebook. Everything was online. If a student was not prepared, it was because he did not budget his time. The assignment was to make a speech around a recitation of at least one of Aesop's Fables. The students were to introduce themselves, tell what they will recite, give a brief summary in Japanese, recite the story, and conclude with at least five sentences.

The time they had was between five and eight minutes. They were encouraged to practise several times until they were on time and comfortable. On speech day, students performed in front of a video camera while others blogged according to the grading sheet. The grading sheet asked about speech basics, such as voicing, eye contact, and overall delivery. Later, the Moodle Workshop Module was used to facilitate self and peer review of the videotaped speeches.

Advantages

The Workshop Module, a highly sophisticated feedback center where students can get teacher and peer feedback, and Moodle Quiz worked giving the class a well rounded shaped that pulled together the "why" aspects of making speeches. It took a little longer for everyone to understand how to operate the Workshop Module, but it was a real time saver for the teacher in that student generated material can get organized and presented again for further review and consideration by way of peer assessments. In the end, students felt they had something meaningful to do after their speech that also benefited their friends.

Disadvantages

The teacher view with the Moodle Workshop Module and the student view is very different. When students start to use it, it can be very confusing and frustrating if they do not follow the first time only steps. If the students were not online watching on a center screen how it is done, it is doubtful if any of the non-computer science majors could have negotiated it. To address this, three students were called at random and were walked through the Workshop set up process while other students could view on their center screens. That was repeated three or four times until the last of the last figured it out.

Once the students were properly set up with the Workshop Module, another non-Moodle problem, which was frustrating, was encountered. Once in the Workshop Module, the students were to upload the text of their first speech which also contained a hyperlink to their video. From there, they could view and assess their speech and three peer speeches as well. Here is where the non-Moodle problem developed. The router serving the computer rooms has its limits. When an entire class suddenly decides to watch videos, the router became jammed with data. The router was not big enough to handle the traffic. Also, video
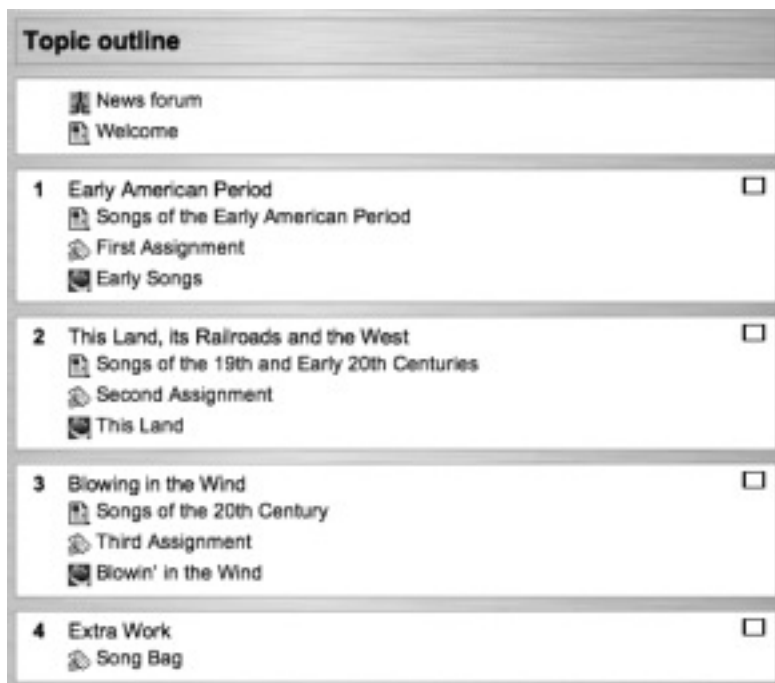
delivery may have had a hand it the difficulty.   The movies were all in Quicktime, formatted for posting on the web.   Had a streaming format and a PHP sever been used, then it is likely that the delivery problems associated with the videos would have been alleviated and the overall experience with the Workshop Module more rewarding.

Synthesis

Moodle does provide a great potential for data organizing and sharing at the textual, audio, and video level.   To realize that potential, the teacher and students must endure an at times frustrating and painful learning curve to get all aspects of the process working.

Observations in a Traditional Classroom Setting

In a traditional educational setting for a class about English and Culture, students were lectured at and then given assignments to do using the Hot Potatoes JQuiz plug-in for Moodle.

Topic outline

- News forum
- Welcome

1 Early American Period
- Songs of the Early American Period
- First Assignment
- Early Songs

2 This Land, its Railroads and the West
- Songs of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries
- Second Assignment
- This Land

3 Blowing in the Wind
- Songs of the 20th Century
- Third Assignment
- Blowin' in the Wind

4 Extra Work
- Song Bag

Screenshot 5: English and Culture Set Up

Advantages

No paper, just data entry.   Lots of questions were generated to make up the quizzes, but only ten were randomly selected.   Distractors were programmed to shuffle too.   The quizzes

were really forced reviews of which students could do up to three times with their highest attempt being saved. The writing assignments were all online tasks that could easily be graded. The text pages were teacher prepared lecture notes, fully available to the students.

Disadvantages

One or two students managed to un-enroll themselves from the class each time they logged out. In other words, one or two students may not function at skill level at first. With a writing deadline, the deadline was set to some odd hour, like 4:34 in the morning. If a writing deadline were to be set at the end of a class time, those students who had not finished at the cut off time would risk the complete and total lose their work.

Synthesis

To use Moodle among students in a traditional class meant that they mainly saw it for homework and take-home tests. If the students were not already conditioned to know and respect the use of a CMS such as Moodle, they would likely ignore it and therefore remain in need of additional help. It is important to consider, within such a setting, a final exam where students have the chance to complete all assignments in a computer lab.

Concluding Synthesis

In light of a year with Moodle, the students functioned better than expected within the various Moodle environments. They were functioning within a "Can Do" environment. In other words, the more Moodle is integrated into how a class envisioned, of how a class is presupposed, what a class is and what it is not, then, with respect to what Moodle can do, and what it cannot do, teachers can benefit from the many menu-like options - from a "Moodle ala carte" where students occasionally use it to the full thick and heavy duty multi-course menu where students must do everything online with Moodle.

It was also noticed that the various levels of language proficiency had no bearing on how well or poorly Moodle worked with the students.

Moodle worked excellently for a self paced class with a Task-Based Syllabus. It also worked excellently in a more traditional format. The more the students worked within the task based environment, it was noticed that their learning became more efficient with their learning. Their memory circulation was greater and they began to look forward to what was going to happen next.

The next step in research is to construct a gains score study that examines two environments,

the CMS - Moodle environment and the traditional classroom environment. Such research is needed especially in light of school budget considerations.

Final Comments

With the gaining popularity of classroom management systems among language educators, computer equipped classrooms could likely fall in short supply. In light of this reality, classroom management systems, such as Moodle, are set to meet learner needs as either as a primary platform for instruction or as an adjunct for instruction when creatively applied in various ways. More research is needed, however, in order to establish the Classroom Management Systems such as Moodle as a superior set up in contrast to the traditional classroom.

At present, all that can be said is that the CMS Moodle works very well.

Bibliography

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[Abstract]

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