

## **Moodle, A Free Course Management System**

### **What are Course Management Systems?**

Course Management Systems (CMS) (also referred to as Learning Management Systems-LMS and Virtual Learning Environments -VLE) allow teachers to put their courses online easily. Instead of having to create a web site of their own, teachers can simply transfer documents and messages in an easy to use interface. With a variety of ways to organize documents, share messages and engage in collaboration at a distance, CMSs have grown in popularity over the past few years. While there are dozens of competitors, the major commercial providers are: Blackboard, WebCT and Desire2Learn.

Commercial course management systems have been around for about seven years now. During this time they have evolved in a number of ways that make them more powerful for teachers' record-keeping purposes and more interactive and engaging for students. However, both teachers and students who have used these systems are far from content. With extended use, many have discovered tedious and clumsy interactions that affect the use of these systems. Each generation of software responds to the users feedback; however, they are also prohibitively expensive unless your school happens to already own a system. There have been a number of free alternatives over the years that have provided scaled-down equivalents to these CMSs, but none have been able to truly compete until recently. Finally, we have a free open source system that offers features beyond those of commercial offerings.

### **What is Open source?**

Open source software is free to use, download, modify and distribute. Open source has become more of a movement than simply a category of software. The open source community is often motivated by a desire to create and share software alternatives to expensive and restrictive commercial offerings. What is most important for the language teaching community is that open source allows for extensive collaboration and is accessible to those with limited budgets, characteristics typical of many ESL environments. Further, users who are frustrated with software are not relegated to simply waiting for the next version; they can contribute to the evolution of the software directly. This characteristic seems an inevitable shift as our world becomes more computer-literate.

### **How is Moodle Different?**

There are two primary answers to this question. First, Moodle was created based on the principles of constructivism. Moodle creator Martin Dougiamas divides Constructivism into four categories:

- **Constructivism:** This point of view maintains that people actively construct new knowledge as they interact with their environment.

- **Construcitonism:** Constructionism asserts that learning is particularly effective when constructing something for others to experience.
- **Social constructivism:** This extends the above ideas into a social group constructing things for one another, collaboratively creating a small culture of shared artifacts with shared meanings. When one is immersed within a culture like this, one is learning all the time about how to be a part of that culture, on many levels.
- **Connected and separate behavior:** This idea looks deeper into the motivations of individuals within a discussion. Separate behavior is when someone tries to remain 'objective' and 'factual', and tends to defend their own ideas using logic to find holes in their opponent's ideas. Connected behavior is a more empathic approach that accepts subjectivity, trying to listen and ask questions in an effort to understand the other point of view. Constructed behavior is when a person is sensitive to both of these approaches and is able to choose either of them as appropriate to the current situation.

Second, Moodle users (remember in open source terms users are also developers) have collaborated to create tools, environments and support focused specifically on language teaching. Moodle users are developing audio and video forums, quizzes and exercises that incorporate online audio and video and collections of corpora-like materials to serve as language examples for students. There are a number of language teachers who are willing to help others along the way as they become comfortable with the software. Others have developed the means to integrate the data produced by interactive exercises created with the free and popular tool Hot Potatoes® (see March/April 2003 Column). There are likely to be a number of new developments by the time this article reaches press.

### **What Do I Need to Know?**

Moodle needs to be installed on a server. It can run on Windows, MacIntosh, Linux or Unix. A database also has to be established to store documents. While this installation requires some technical knowledge, it should be manageable by a tech-savvy member of your faculty or a tech-support person. If such a person is not available, Moodle will set the server up for you for a one time fee of \$100. In comparison, this fee is less than the typical cost of a single student per term for the commercial competition. Once this is done, the daily teacher use of Moodle is quite simple. In the next issue of this column we will take a look at some effective ways teachers are using CMS such as Moodle.

### **Where can I learn more?**

To begin participating in the Moodle community, log on to <http://moodle.org>, set up an account, explore and share.

