

Intermediate Moodle: Ideas for Language Teachers

Gordon Bateson
Kanazawa Gakuin University, Japan

gordon@kanzawa-gu.ac.jp

This paper introduces nine ideas for language teachers to incorporate into their teaching with the Moodle Learning Management System. The ideas range from small tips, such as improving layout on web-page Resource activities, to more fundamental changes to the way Moodle is used, for example setting up user groups to manage courses efficiently, and using grade categories to motivate students. It is hoped that these ideas will empower teachers who have a basic familiarity with Moodle, and stimulate them to explore new ways to use Moodle in their teaching.

Introduction

Moodle is huge learning management system (LMS). No-one knows everything about all of it, not even Martin Dougiamas, the creator and lead programmer of the software. On the learning curve from novice to expert Moodle user, this article is aimed at “intermediate” users, particularly teachers, and most specifically “language teachers”. These people have used a Moodle system for a year or so and have access to at least one Moodle course page on which they have added resources, and perhaps assignments, for their students to access. They would understand that Moodle has several others types of activity and functionality, but they have not perhaps tried many of them out, even though they would appreciate being shown what the possibilities are. For these “intermediate” Moodle users, this articles offers several ideas which it is hoped will encourage them to further unlock the potential of Moodle to assist their teaching and their students’ learning.

Background

Moodle has now become the most widely used open-source leaning management system (LMS) and has a functionality and user-base to rival similar leading commercial systems. Governments and learning institutions have embraced Moodle because it is not only free to obtain and operate, but it is also relatively simple to install and use, and offers a multitude of add-ons to enhance functionality, while maintaining a consistent and intuitive user interface that teachers, students and administrators can access through any modern web-browser. As a result, many teachers are now using Moodle. Although Moodle can be used satisfactorily with just the course page and the most accessible activity types, notably Resources and Assignments, it is often only the technically curious teachers who venture to experiment with Moodle’s other features, of which there are many. There exist a multitude of online resources and reference books to assist teachers in their exploration. The ideas

outlined below are the outcome of the author's own learning experience with Moodle, and his experience with introducing other teachers to the software.

Nine Ideas

In order to make the most of the ideas described below, it is preferable to have access a Moodle site where you have teacher status on one of the Moodle courses. It will be then be easier to understand what the instructions and screen shots are referring to. The best situation for experimenting with Moodle features is a Moodle course that has been setup especially for such experimentation. It has a fake teacher and several fake students enrolled. If anything goes awry with the settings or grades, then no real person is adversely affected or inconvenienced. Preferably there is a backup of the course, so that the original settings can be quickly restored. Such an area for software experimentation is commonly called a "sandpit".

1. Create bi-lingual resources

Some resources, such as those explaining the course structure or how to perform a technical task, can be made more effective by offering them in the both the teacher's and the students' native language. This can be achieved using the Moodle's Multi-language filter – see http://docs.Moodle.org/en/Multi_language_content

The multi-language filter is enabled by the Moodle site administrator on the Module → Filter → Manage filters page. Once the filter is enabled, teachers create a web-page resource in the normal way, but instead of adding content in just one language, they can add blocks of other content in other languages. When all the content has been added, the HTML editor should be toggled to show the HTML source. Then each block of content is surrounded by `` tags which tell the multi-language filter which blocks are to be displayed in which language.

For example, on a simple web-page resource with two blocks of content, one in English and the other in Japanese, the `` tags would be added as follows:

```
<span lang="en" class="multilang">
... ENGLISH ...
</span>
<span lang="ja" class="multilang">
... 日本語 ...
</span>
```

One limitation of Moodle's standard multi-language filter is that since the blocks of multi-language content are delimited by a `` tag, they cannot themselves contain `` tags. Modern HTML editors, including the online editor included in a standard Moodle site, often use the `` tag instead of font-style elements, e.g. `` and `<i>`, and phrase-elements, e.g. `` and ``. Therefore, care must be taken to replace the `` tags with other tags of a similar function. Alternatively, the multi-language can be modified along the lines suggested by Bateson 2007, so that it can cater for multi-language blocks that are delimited by tags other than the `` tag.

2. Explore new types of Moodle activities

Teachers starting out with Moodle often stick to certain types of Moodle activity – resource, assignment and quiz. However, time invested in exploring new types of online activity can lead to exciting discoveries.

Since every module in Moodle is designed to enhance online learning, then reading through the online documentation on any of the modules will suggest possibilities to the teacher on how that module could be used in a particular learning situation.

Here are some activities that I have used in my Moodle-based classes:

the HotPot module

The Hot Potatoes suite comprises six applications for creating online interactive exercises. Teachers create the Hot Potatoes quizzes on their PC, upload them to Moodle and add them to a Moodle course. The interface for both the teacher making the quiz and the students attempting the quiz is simple and intuitive. In my experience it takes only a few minutes to make a single quiz, and it is relatively easy to add pictures and sounds to the quizzes. The quizzes can be chained together to present the same material in a variety of different situations. Having created the quizzes, the teacher uploads them to Moodle and adds them to the course using the HotPot activity module – see <http://docs.Moodle.org/en/Hotpot>

the Glossary module

Glossaries can be used to allow students and teachers to build up vocabulary lists for the resources available on the course. The glossary entries can be in any language and can include links to pictures, sound files and other websites. The teacher can keep track of how actively students are adding and updating glossary entries, and reward this effort if appropriate. The glossary can be used for revision and testing at the end of the course. Because the glossary is created by the students themselves, they take pride in having created it, and as a result I have found it increases the sense of community and group identity in the class – see <http://docs.Moodle.org/en/Glossary>

the Choice module:

This module provides a quick and simple way to conduct polls on what the students are thinking. I have used it to find out how the students feel about what and how they are studying, and I have also found it an effective way to ask the students what they want to do next as a class. The results of the poll can be made public, or revealed only to the teacher. In one poll I conducted with the Choice module, I discovered that my students prefer to indicate choices via the semi-anonymous channel of the Choice module, than verbally in the open arena of the classroom – see <http://docs.Moodle.org/en/Choice>

the Database module

The setting up of a Database activity requires a certain amount of planning and setting up, but once this has been done, the Database module is an effective way of allow the students to build a collective repository of information. One activity I have done with this module is to have students collect a library of photos from their daily life along with a short English description of the photo. The results is a searchable “album” of photos and comments which students can

access and use for ideas to describe their own daily routines – see http://docs.Moodle.org/en/Database_module

The more information about the above modules, please refer to Moodle's online documentation (<http://docs.Moodle.org/en/>). Examples of the activities can be seen on the Moodle Features Demo Course: <http://Moodle.org/course/view.php?id=34>

3. Link single resources into a cohesive set of Moodle tasks

By extension of the preceding point, as the teacher grows more familiar with the different types of Moodle activities, it becomes increasingly possible to create a sequence of activities which form a cohesive set of learning tasks. This not only gives students exposure to, and opportunities to work with, the target material in different forms, but also allows students to work through the material at their own pace. This can greatly assist the management of mixed ability classes.

4. Use Windows Notepad as a whiteboard

If the teacher's screen is projected onto a screen that the students can all see, then the teacher's explanations during class can be enhanced using a simple text editor such as Windows Notepad. The teacher can type in notes and comments for the students to refer to as the class progresses. The written notes support the verbal explanation at the time, and can also be easily saved later as Moodle resource, thus creating a permanent record for teacher and students of exactly what was discussed during that lesson. I usually give such resources a common title, such as "Classroom notes", so that the students can easily find them later.

5. Use HTML resources instead of MS Office documents

MS Office documents, such as those created by Word, Excel and PowerPoint, can be very large and significantly increase the size and duration of backups. They are also slower to load into the students' computers and can cause problems if the students' machines do not have the same type and version of software that produced the materials.

These difficulties can be avoided if the teacher takes the extra step of converting the external documents to HTML format, and adding them to the Moodle course as HTML documents. In many cases, this is as simple as opening the document on the teacher's computer, and then copying and pasting the contents across to a Moodle web-page resource. Headings, paragraphs and font styles are usually transferred easily, and formatting devices such as lists, tables and indented blocks generally survive intact too. If the document contains images then these will probably have to be saved separately from the document, uploaded to Moodle and then inserted individually into the Moodle resource containing the document text. For a presentation with many slides or a spread-sheet with many worksheets, it may be quicker to choose the Export as HTML or Save As HTML options.

6. Use invisible text to line up conversations

When creating sample dialogs in the Moodle's HTML editor, the conversations can be lined up using invisible text. For example, consider the following sample dialog between speaker A and speaker B, in which one utterance by speaker B spans two lines:

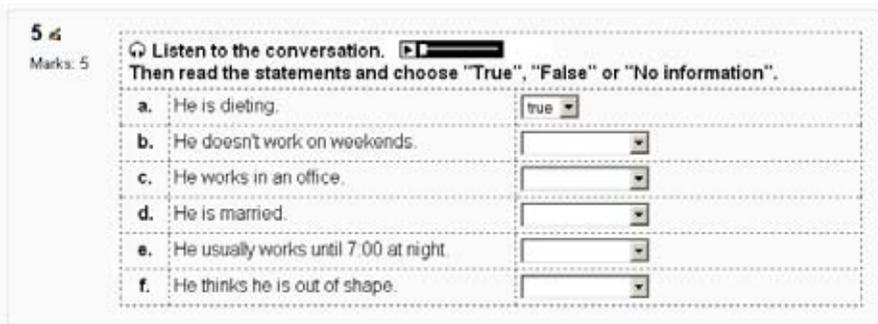
- A: Where's a good place to buy **SHOPPING ITEM** in **CITY NAME**?
- B: Let's see ... **SHOP NAME** is pretty good.
- B: They have [a large selection | some great bargains]

If the second "B:" is simply removed or replaced with spaces, it will not line up with "Let's see" when the dialog is viewed in the browser, and the visual impact will be lessened. However, if the text color of the second "B:" is changed to same as the page background, it will not be visible to the students, but "They" will still be lined up with "Let's see", making it visually obvious that B's utterance continues onto the second line.

7. Use HTML tables to line up page items

While the "invisible text" technique described above is suitable for simple situations, more advanced layout effects such as lining up images or creating columns on an HTML page can be achieved using HTML tables. It is possible to create these in the Moodle HTML editor, but it is often easier to the tables in an external HTML editor (e.g. *DreamWeaver*) and then copy and paste into Moodle.

In the example below the tables grid lines have been exposed to reveal the table that is responsible for the layout of this quiz question:



8. Use grades to motivate students

Moodle's ability to give up the minute reports on student's grades can be very motivating to students, because they can immediately see the effect that their study habits have on their grade. It also increase the objectivity of the grading system and thereby increases each student's accountability and responsibility for their studies.

However, as the number activities in a Moodle course grows, then the layout of the simple grade page becomes unwieldy. At this point, it makes sense to create grade categories and

then assign each activity into one of the categories. The main grade page then displays just the category totals, which is more meaningful to the students.

The screenshot below shows the Grades page from a Moodle 1.7 site.

Student	Attendance Stats (40.00%) weighted % contribution	Participation Stats (10.00%) weighted % contribution	Test 1 Stats (10.00%) weighted % contribution	Test 2 Stats (10.00%) weighted % contribution	Total weighted %(70)	Letter Grade	Student
Fumi FLUKU 福井	35.96%	7.17%	7.04%	7.1%	81.81%	A-	Fumi FLUKU 福井
Isao ISHIKAWA 石川	40%	9.72%	8.04%	7.47%	93.19%	A	Isao ISHIKAWA 石川
Nana NIGATA 新潟	37.58%	8.72%	8.35%	6.89%	87.91%	A	Nana NIGATA 新潟
Taro TOYAMA 富山	38.79%	5.64%	5.82%	4.96%	78.87%	B	Taro TOYAMA 富山

9. Use groups to save duplicating courses

Instead of duplicating courses and materials, it may be more efficient to create a single course and create Groups of users. Members of each group may be aware of each other, but will be unaware of the presence of other groups. The great advantage of this arrangement is that changes to the materials are immediately available to all students. If each group of students had their own course, then the teacher would have to maintain copies of the materials, which is not only time-consuming but also error-prone.

Moodle 1.9 takes this one step further, so that the teacher can define groups of groups, called "groupings". Moodle activities can be made available to all groupings, or limited to certain groupings. One use for this functionality is to offer several groupings basically the same course, but make some custom activities for each grouping. For example, if you use "Classroom Notes" resources described in point 4 above, then you could make different notes for each grouping's class, allowing you to mould the materials to each grouping and to maintain a log of exactly the explanations you gave to each separate grouping.

Future Trends

In the future, Moodle will probably become even bigger and offer even more features. As has been noted on the Moodle forums, this raises the distinct possibility of making the system more difficult to use, especially for novice users. As Tim Hunt says on the aforementioned Moodle thread, it is important for Moodle to have the sophisticated functionalities offered by modules, roles, grades and the myriad configuration settings to which the administrator has access, so that Moodle can respond to the multifarious and exacting needs of the different learning, technical, cultural and legal situations in which it is used. No doubt usability is one area where Moodle will continue to evolve and improve, perhaps building on the notion of Progressive Disclosure that the "advanced options" on Moodle forms already embody to some extent. Even so, it will

always be necessary to find ways to encourage teachers to venture further along their Moodle learning curve, in order to unveil the rewards that lie further along the path. This is a direction to which this article aspires to contribute, but where more resources are still needed.

Conclusion

The author recognizes that this paper comes nowhere near to being an in-depth, detailed document on how to use the Moodle features that it introduces. Readers requiring assistance in this regard should view the Moodle reference books or online documentation. Rather, the intention of this paper has been to open the door to new avenues of possibility and shine the light on unexplored areas of Moodle.

Related Information

1. the Moodle Features Demo Course: <http://Moodle.org/course/view.php?id=34>
2. Hot Potatoes downloads: <http://hotpot.uvic.ca/index.htm#downloads>
3. http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_font_style.asp
4. <http://englishforum.sgu.ac.jp/downloads/jaltcall2007/bateson/3.language-menu.txt>
5. <http://englishforum.sgu.ac.jp/downloads/jaltcall2007/bateson/4.multilang-filter.txt>
6. http://docs.Moodle.org/en/Multi_language_content
7. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/progressive-disclosure.html>