Course Management Meets Social Networking in Moodle

Matt Crosslin
University of Texas at Arlington's Center for Distance Education, USA

INTRODUCTION

Moodle is currently one of the more popular open-source course management systems in online education. Some evaluations have also indicated that Moodle is one of the top-rated programs when compared to other open-source course management systems (Graf & List, 2005). The creators of Moodle describe their program as a course management system built on social constructivist pedagogy. Social constructivist pedagogy is a collaborative approach to learning based upon the works of Jerome Bruner, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget. Moodle's unique focus on pedagogy allows online learning to cross over from the traditional educational realm of factual recall and rote memorization into the realm of social networking.

Social networking has recently become one of the more popular uses of the Internet, with sites like MySpace and FaceBook attracting millions of users every month. Social networking Web sites began to appear on the Internet around 2002 (Downes, 2005). Social networks are now seen as an important component of modern society – even in educational contexts (Finin, Ding, Zhou, & Joshi, 2005). Current online social networking sites thrive on social constructivism pedagogy – whether the users or designers know this or not.

The following discusses research conducted on the relationship between social connection and success in online courses and examines how some tools in Moodle – such as blogs, Wikis, and chat rooms – can be used to support learning. Additionally, instructional design issues that can be addressed with these tools are also explored.

BACKGROUND

Generally speaking, most online courses are delivered through a program called a learning management system (LMS), sometimes also referred to as a course management system or virtual learning environment. Learning management systems are used in many fields, including education and business. From a business perspective, Szabo and Flesher (2002) define the LMS as "computer based database and presentation systems which manage the entire instructional program and learning progress of employees with respect to the competencies specified by the goals and objectives of an organization" (p. 2). From an educational perspective, students would be the employees and the school would be the organization. Therefore, learning management systems can be seen as the administrative storage area for online courses as well as the portal for content delivery.

Since some might consider learning as something that can't be managed by a computer program, some LMS designers refer to their programs as course management systems or virtual learning environments. The designers of Moodle have chosen to use the term course management system (CMS). The stated goal of the Moodle CMS is to create online communities – not just deliver course content and store course records. This distinction is important when examining social constructivist pedagogy.

Social constructivism is a theory of knowledge used in many disciplines. Moodle's official online philosophy looks at social constructivism as a "social group constructing things for one another, collaboratively creating a small culture of shared artifacts with shared meanings" (http://docs.moodle.org/en/Philosophy). The creators of Moodle see social constructivism as an extension of constructivism and constructionism – constructivism being the point of view that learners construct new knowledge as they interact with their environment, and constructionism being the belief that learning happens best when you construct knowledge for other people.

Another key concept that Moodle developers find helpful in guiding their philosophy is that of constructed behavior. Learners that exhibit constructed behavior

know when to work as a team (or connected behavior), and when to work as an individual (or separate behavior). Moodle gives instructors tools that allow for learners to learn on their own as well in groups.

THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF MOODLE

One of the more popular activities online today is social networking. Social networking sites such as MySpace, FaceBook, and Friendster have all had their fair share of exposure as well as controversy. The main idea of these sites is that users sign up, connect with people, and share information. Therefore, these sites thrive on social constructivism pedagogy – whether the users or designers know this or not. Social constructivism basically says that learners will learn best when they are constructing shared knowledge as a group.

The question then becomes "how can we harness the social nature of the Internet to increase learning and academic performance?" This is a question that the designers of Moodle have been wrestling with since day one. Moodle's design is based on social constructivist pedagogy. This focus means that instructors using Moodle have access to a wide range of tools that help them increase social activity in their online classes.

In general, online learners need to have a higher level of self-motivation, persistence, and commitment than learners in face-to-face courses (Martinez, 2003). This would seem to indicate that online learners need to be the independent, "work on their own" type. However, as discussed below, some research has indicated that increasing immediacy and social presence in online classes will lead to greater learner satisfaction and academic achievement – even though more research is still needed in this area.

Social Presence is generally seen as a student being aware of the other students in a course and those students' involvement in the course communications (Xu, 2005). Some researchers feel that there is still not an agreed upon method for measuring social presence (Lin, 2004). In spite of this, many studies have explored the impact of social presence in face-to-face classes (Tu & McIssac, 2002). However, these studies examine factors that can not be replicated in online learning, such as posture, dress, and facial expressions. Some research has shown that social presence can affect student satisfaction and learning outcomes in an online course (Richardson & Swan 2003). Other recent literature, such as that by Reio & Crim, has called for more research into the importance of social presence in online learning (2006).

Immediacy generally refers to the perception of distance between two people in a class. Swan (2002) noted that several researchers have found that instructors can increase learning in face-to-face classes by decreasing the perceived distance. Some of the methods for decreasing perceived distance include methods that might not work in online classes – such as verbal clues. Recent studies into the impact of instructional immediacy have called for more research into the impact of immediacy in online courses (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006).

Some researchers feel that imitating face-to-face communication in an online environment is not necessary. Rogers & Lea (2005) believe that a sense of belongingness to a group can be achieved online through other methods. For example, one such method to create belongingness is to create a shared social identity.

Social Tools in Moodle

Some evidence suggests that a course management system can increase interactions between the instructor and the student (Morgan, 2003). Other studies have found that learning management systems are heavily used for social activities such as peer support and collaborative working – sometimes even more so than for other uses such as assignment submission (Jenkins, Browne & Walker, 2005). Moodle is designed to take advantage of these increased interactions by providing several tools that can increase social presence and immediacy, while at the same time creating a shared group identity. Tools that will be examined here are blogs, wikis, discussion boards, groups, profiles, and chat rooms.

Blogs. Recent versions of Moodle have been slowly introducing a site-wide blog feature. Moodle blogs allow users to add personal thoughts on a site wide basis. Bloggers can use a set of site-defined or personally-defined tags to connect their blog entry to all the other entries that have been contributed. This connectivity allows students to construct shared knowledge on a social level. Moodle blogs do not currently allow comments on entries, but designers claim that this feature is coming. Discussion boards can be used for comments.