The move to Moodle: Perspective of academics in a College of Business

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This paper describes the results of a survey among academics in the College of Business at an Australiasian university in the aftermath of a move to Moodle. The survey aimed to gather evidence of the relationships between university lecturers and the online environment, from which future practice could be informed. The findings were largely positive. A strong majority of respondents reported some degree of integration of Moodle with their teaching, along with a long-term commitment to Moodle utilization and improvement over time. However, only a limited number of respondents agreed that Moodle had helped them improve their teaching, indicative that academics were still in a period of transition from shallow systems compliance to deep pedagogical change. Overall, the experience showed that the move to Moodle needs careful planning and communication and must be part of a wider strategy to integrate e-learning solutions throughout course design and institutional culture.

Focus terms: Moodle; e-learning; evidence based practice

Introduction

The development of e-learning has become an important aspect of teaching and learning (Stein, 2011). In 2009, one Australasian university embarked on an ambitious three-year digitalization and curriculum renewal project. The key initiative was replacement of WebCT with Moodle. Importantly, the implementation of Moodle was not a technical migration from an old system to a new one but rather an opportunity for the University to transform the incumbent model of teaching. Against this backdrop, a directive was given from the Head of the College of Business that all teachers of the Bachelor of Business Studies should blend e-learning into traditional, on campus delivery as a way of enhancing teaching and learning during 2010.

According to Salmon (2005) ‘teaching online has almost nothing to do with computers and everything to do

with time, motivation knowledge and the new agency of cyber-experience, as well as good appropriate teaching'(pp. 214–215). To investigate this further, the aim of the present study was to gather evidence of the relationships between university lecturers and the online environment using the College of Business as a case study. The intention was to use results of the study to inform future practice. Specific objectives were to:

- determine the level of use and effectiveness of Moodle;
- understand staff perceptions of the online learning environment;
- assess the types of supports needed for the effective digital delivery of learning resources.

Research design

This research involved an online email survey that collected responses from participants through a web-based questionnaire. The study took place in June 2010 in the aftermath of a move to Moodle, which had been instigated by the Head of the College of Business at the beginning of Semester 1, 2010. The sample included all academics in the College of Business, of which 86% responded (n=54). The survey included 50 questions that required responses against a Likert-scale.

Findings

Results revealed that almost all respondents (98%) had a basic knowledge of Moodle and most respondents (77%) had made an effort to fully integrate it into their teaching or paper. In doing so, the majority (62%) expressed confidence in their ability to use Moodle. In terms of long-term adoption, the majority of respondents (88%) intended to make further use of Moodle, perhaps unsurprising given that the College of Business management had clearly stated it commitment to widespread adoption of an online component in all papers and programmes. In hindsight, the survey did not measure the motivation behind respondent's sustained utilization of Moodle, although several comments alluded to a perception of mandatory adoption.

Table 1: Staff responses to questions relating to their adoption of Moodle

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I have a basic knowledge of tools and features available on Moodle.	98%	2%	0%
I have made an effort to fully integrate some of the different tools and features available in Moodle in my teaching/paper.	77%	13%	9%
I am confident in my ability to use Moodle.	62%	21%	2%
I have the intention of using Moodle again next semester.	88%	9%	3%

Functionality

When talking about the different 'tools and features' available in Moodle, the online environment can be divided in to two groups: (a) passive features that facilitate aspects of course administration; and (b) interactive features that encourage and support communication between learners / between learners and teachers.

Passive features:
Results indicated that the facilities to post lecture notes online were well utilized, either as 'PowerPoint Files' (67%), or 'Written Notes' (47%). In terms of sharing other sources of information, 57% of respondents indicated that Moodle was a convenient mechanism for sharing 'Website Links'. Additional comments reported that links had also been provided to blogs, HTML pages and document files. However, other features were less popular, including: 'Glossary' (18%); 'Video Presentation' (18%); 'Audio File / Podcast' (12%).

When it came to submitting assignments, fewer than half respondents (47%) reported that they required students

/ gave student the option to do so via Moodle. Respondents' comments provided further insight in to this result by describing a variety of functionality limitations with the assignment tool and the grading component.

Interactive features:
The 'Discussion Forum' was used by a high proportion of respondents (82%) and was the most utilized of features surveyed. Respondents of both the Student Survey and the Staff Survey indicated some frustration with the 'Discussion Forum' saying that it's difficult to know which forum messages are new and unread. This limitation was particularly noted in comparison to WebCT, which would indicate how many messages had not been read.

The 'Quiz/Questionnaire Survey' was leveraged by less than half of respondents (45%). However, the Student Survey indicated that this feature was utilized by 86% of students, of whom 94% agreed that it assisted their learning. Of the other interactive tools, very few respondents used the 'Chat' feature (14%) and 'Wiki' feature (8%). Although these usage figures are low, they should be viewed in the context provided by one respondent's comment:

> In my first year on Moodle, I am happy to just be in control of being able to post material, generate discussions, power points in pdf, post study guides etc, and to be able to hide material from student eyes. I am sure I will grow into a more skilful operator later!

Effect on teaching

A limited number of respondents (35%) agreed that Moodle had helped them improve their teaching; while a similar number (31%) agreed that implementing Moodle had helped them think more deeply about teaching. In hindsight, the latter item did not allow respondents to qualify whether they are not thinking 'more deeply' because (a) they consciously decided not to take the implementation of Moodle as an opportunity to reflect; (b) they would have liked to have reflected more but experienced constraints; or (c) they consider themselves to be reflective thinkers on a continuous basis.

Table 2: Staff responses to questions relating to their teaching practice

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The implementation of Moodle has helped me to think more deeply about my teaching and course design.	31%	38%	31%
The use of Moodle has helped me improve the quality of my teaching.	35%	40%	25%

Effect on interactions

Responses relating to Moodle's effect on teacher-student interactions were as divided as respondents' perceptions about Moodle's effect on teaching. Comparing affirmative responses for level of interaction (36%) against quality of interaction (21%), there is some indication that where frequency of interaction has increased, it has not necessarily resulted in better outcomes. However, when asked about 'connectedness' with students (which could be seen as a sign of quality interaction), of the respondents who answered the question relating to distance students, 70% agreed that Moodle had helped. In contrast, 25% agreed that Moodle had helped feelings of connectedness with internal students.

Table 3: Staff responses to questions relating to interactions

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I believe the use of Moodle has enhanced the level of staff-student and student interaction in my paper(s)	36%	35%	29%

I believe the use of Moodle has enhanced the quality of staff-student and student interaction in my paper(s)	21%	44%	35%
Moodle has helped me to feel more connected with my internal students	25%	19%	56%
Moodle has helped me to feel more connected with my distance students	57%	24%	1%

Benefits

Respondents were posed a series of possible 'benefits' of Moodle. The five items which gained the highest number of positive votes were: Makes content available for study and revision (67%); Reduces the cost of producing student handouts (63%); Offers more variety of content (60%); Helps to keep my course up-to-date (52%); Offers students more flexibility over their learning (50%). These are aligned with Moodle's 'passive' features and primarily the ability to post lecture notes online.

Moodle's 'interactive' benefits gained positive votes by less than half of respondents: Increases staff-student interaction (44%) and increases student-student interaction (42%). Notably, these results are more positive than those reported under 'interactions'. It is possible that respondents perceived the potential benefit of Moodle's interactive functions as being more positive than its current interactive value. Either way, a number of respondents commented on the importance of immediacy when interacting with students today. In this context, Moodle was described in a positive light by one respondent as, "a 'now' interface with all the social tools expected from 'now' students".

The item relating to teaching practice was considered among the weakest benefits: Increases the effectiveness of my teaching (18% positive; 46% neutral; 36% negative). This result is aligned with results discussed in section 2.3, which also indicate that the majority of respondents feel reasonably neutral about the pedagogical benefits of Moodle. One possible explanation is related to respondents' responses to the item: "Helps to save the teacher time". While only 23% of respondents voted positively, it was the only item to generate a negative response by more than 50% of respondents. The time required to maximize the potential of Moodle was consistently reported to be a barrier, in the opinion of respondents. This was particularly said to be in the context of a research-centric environment, in which time spent on Moodle, "eats in to what the university really values – research".

The lowest ranking benefit related to learning: Helps to keep students motivated and on track (16%); which was closely accompanied by 'Promotes more active learning' (27%) and 'Increases student interaction with content' (35%). It is unknown whether these results represent respondents' perceptions of Moodle's potential benefits for learning or whether responses were given in the context of current limitations facing effective teaching via Moodle. However, one respondent's perception was that Moodle has been seen to promote passive learning:

> Students are given more and more material, given greater access to academic staff and this can lead to passive learning. I have had students asking me to put articles on Moodle. Accessing databases and finding articles is part of the learning process for academia.

Supports

More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) knew about the support available for implementing Moodle. Almost as many respondents provided positive feedback about the support at a College-level (73%) and a university-level (71%). The majority of comments provided by respondents were also very complementary, with College-level support being seen as particularly valuable. In addition, respondents acknowledged their colleagues who, having already implemented Moodle themselves, were approachable and readily available.

However, some respondents provided comments that described support arriving too little, too late, in their opinion. Reporting that the support people did not answer their questions (either due to lack of detailed knowledge or being unavailable), some respondents resented the time that they were obliged to invest in to

teaching themselves. Moving forward, the consensus among respondents was that top quality consultants (e.g. Moodle Site Developers) would need to be available in a 'hands-on' capacity, on a permanent basis during the foreseeable future.

In other avenues of support, more than half had attended some form of Moodle-related professional development in the preceding 12 months. Some of these respondents made requests for further training related to online learning environments. However, other respondents expressed saturation, saying for example, "I've done enough (Moodle) courses to last a lifetime". Instead, these respondents reinforced the need for ongoing and available support services.

Table 4: Staff responses to questions relating to support

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I was well informed of the different types of support available in my efforts to implement Moodle	77%	8%	14%
I was well supported by central university services.	71%	14%	14%
I was well supported by my academic unit or college.	73%	14%	12%

Conclusion

The findings describe a successful implementation of an online learning environment at a system's compliance level, which was considered an outstanding achievement considering that implementation was above and beyond the existing pressure of teaching and research in Semester 1, and there was relatively short notice of the required innovation. Given this context, the majority of respondents acknowledged that their success could be largely attributed to some outstanding College-level support networks. With this support, respondents had been able to master some primary functions, such as uploading lecture notes / PowerPoint presentations. With these advances, it was widely appreciated that Moodle had begun to offer students more flexibility over their learning.

However, the current survey revealed greater scope for Moodle to influence teaching and curriculum design at a deep level. This would involve a shift in attitudes away from seeing Moodle as a 'pump and dump repository', towards becoming the frontier of innovation in teaching. However, consistent with the literature surrounding the uptake of e-learning (Salmon, 2005; Stein, 2011), respondents of the current survey reported that their dedication to Moodle was seriously limited by their lack of time. Respondents expressed that they were under pressure not only to teach but to publish prolifically and, as long as this was the case, their capacity for Moodle as a transformational teaching tool would remain limited. This tension suggests both academics and traditional distance education providers are in a transition period as they grapple to find the most appropriate blend of conventional and digital learning resources. And there is unlikely to be a one-size fits all model to digitalization, as Laurillard writes:

> I think blended learning will never go away... and for some courses, some contexts, a blend which is 90 per cent conventional and 10 per cent digital is probably right and you'd get the reverse for other kinds of course. So it's entirely up to the particular context what kind of blend you have and we've just got to get practised at being able to find the right blend for the right course and context" (cited in Joint Information Systems Committee, 2009, p.46).

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