

Would you like to Moodle?

Using Moodle to engage and motivate reluctant learners

Students in my Grade 8 class are excited about learning more than ever before—especially the boys!

Over the past few years, I have been looking for ways to engage and motivate my reluctant male readers and have turned to technology for support.

Technology is growing at an unprecedented rate. Today's students think and learn in technological terms. They have developed (both actively and passively) a sophisticated skill set—a “technological intelligence,” if you will—which we never knew or could have imagined when we were growing up.

What are the implications? As educators, we need to tap into this skill set and use it to our advantage; we need to prepare our students for the information age that they live in and to meet the challenges of an ever increasing and evolving technological world. A comprehensive literacy/learning environment must incorporate the use of technology to create rich-context learning experiences that in turn promote a collaborative, student-centred approach to learning.

Most of my students have computers at home with Internet access. One of their favourite pastimes is chatting with one another online. I figured that since they were already experts at using a keyboard and screen to communicate with one another, why not bring the power (and allure) of online communication into the classroom?

Earlier this year, with the help of York Region District School Board's ICT team, I piloted and launched my first Moodle platform. What is Moodle? In short, Moodle can be described as free, open-source, course management e-learning software which can be used to create and tailor an online learning environment. But as far as my students were concerned, Moodle represented a great deal more. For them, Moodle was an acknowledgment of their need to learn within a modern, dynamic, and responsive learning environment; an environment that encompassed comprehensive literacy skills (including those from technological sources); an environment which taught them how to use tool software to construct and display their learning in multiple modalities, and where they could view, listen to, and evaluate products created by others.

In all my years of teaching, no one tool has empowered my students as much as Moodle has. When inserted into my classroom practice, it became a catalyst for change. It motivated and engaged my reluctant readers—especially the boys—who were drawn to the instant gratification that only technology could provide. Their self-esteem was boosted beyond measure as Moodle allowed them to work within their comfort zone and showcase their technological prowess.

Within Moodle's simple interface, I had a variety of tools at my disposal to easily create topics of study. One of my most satisfying initiatives to date was using Moodle to set up

secure student blogs which I used to enhance my independent reading program. I had my students post their reading response journals to their personal blogs for their peers to read and respond to. Not only were my students immersed in reading and in writing about the books that they personally read, but they were also busy reading about what their peers were reading and sharing their metacognitive insights on how to use the reading comprehension strategies learned in class to improve their peers' reading response journals. Can you imagine a 13-year-old skateboarder making recommendations, reading, and discussing comprehension strategies with his peers—and enjoying it to boot? Because of Moodle, my students were motivated to work harder. They knew that their peers could read and respond to their work. These were the same students who, prior to Moodle, had difficulty stringing related thoughts together—and here they were writing well-constructed persuasive arguments.

But the fun didn't stop there. The tools within Moodle allowed for so much more. For example, I was able to set literal comprehension quizzes which Moodle would mark automatically; wiki spaces allowed for groups of students to collaborate on web page research and design assignments, and chat rooms allowed for synchronous discussions. One of my personal favourites was the discussion forum tool, which allowed me to present front-loading questioning prior to shared and guided reading sessions; unlike regular classroom discussions, Moodle's discussion forums promoted a comfortable and "safe" learning environment for students to reflect and respond, which encouraged 100% participation.

Moodle serves as a terrific organization and communication tool for teachers, students, and parents alike. For starters, everything is laid out for students to see. Communication is ongoing, clear, and meaningful. Links to just about any resource (e.g., readings, databases, video clips, assignments) can easily be disseminated. No more messy binders or lost papers. From an environmental point of view, it is completely paperless. Moodle also tracks all submissions—students can't claim they handed something in when they didn't. Moodle automatically marks quizzes, sends reports to students, and generates assessment records for teachers. Teachers can view student activity logs and see how often their students access the platform and how much time they devote to their learning. Furthermore, it's a great way to communicate with parents and to increase their understanding of instructional strategies and expectations. Parents can be invited to go online with their children to see what students have been working on and to conference with them.

Critics of technology for enhancing student learning may point to equity issues, such as access to computers, as one of Moodle's drawbacks—not every child has a computer with internet access at home. This is true even in my class. When considering equity issues, we educators must be sensitive, but we also need to be careful not to confine our focus to access issues alone. Failing to preparing our students to communicate effectively in a global community that is shrinking by the second is, in my opinion, a more important equity issue. With careful school-based decision making, school computer resources can be maximized to allow every student access to Moodle platforms.

I would even argue that Moodle tears down equity barriers. Recently, a student of mine was withdrawn from class to go to Pakistan with his family. Instead of putting together a package of "busy work" which he could complete while on his trip, I asked him whether he would have Internet access while he was away. He did, and he continued to be part of the regular classroom even when he was on the other side of the world.

In the York Region District School Board, more and more teachers have been experimenting with Moodle. Because of its open-source nature, topics (or modules) of study can be swapped between teachers. The opportunities for both capacity- and community building are tremendous. My hope is to eventually build a network of professional Moodlers where partnerships can be made and ideas exchanged. Imagine the potential of teaching partners in different schools coming together and having their classes participate in a multitude of joint e-learning initiatives. Better yet, imagine the motivational “cool factor” of being able to set your students loose on a collaborative task with students they have never met before, in an e-learning classroom in another school—or even another country.

Moodle is a powerful tool. Where it goes is anyone’s guess. But one thing is clear: platforms such as Moodle will be a major part of education in the future.

For more information about Moodle, please visit http://docs.moodle.org/en/Main_Page

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