

by Deena Cox

Do You Moodle?



"Moodle: [[unknown origin]] the process of lazily meandering through something, doing things as it occurs to you to do them, an enjoyable tinkering that often leads to insight and creativity. As such, it applies both to the way the Moodle system was developed and to the way a student or teacher might approach studying or teaching an online course. Anyone who uses Moodle is a Moodler" (source: moodle.org).

First MUDs. Then MOOs. Now Moodle? The community-based platforms in cyberspace seem to evolve faster than you can say Multi-User Domain, MUD Object Oriented or Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. Just keeping up with this myriad of ever-catchy Internet acronyms can be time consuming, if not a little tedious. In the case of Moodle, however, figuring out the playful abbreviation poses more of a challenge than actually using the open-source course management, e-learning software to which it refers.

On the most basic level, Moodle is a free software package that teachers can use to create or tailor their own online courses. Teachers using Moodle have access to a variety of features and activities – such as wikis, testing capabilities and discussion forums – and by adding these various elements, they are able to build online courses that precisely suit their needs.

With more than four million users accessing nearly 400,000 courses worldwide as of April 2006, Moodle's exponential growth over the past five years is obvious and can be attributed to its intuitive, flexible, modular format. Moodle is free to use and easily modified, making it an attractive e-learning alternative to rigid retail systems such as WebCT and Blackboard. Moodle's open-

source design also means teachers who aren't comfortable creating an online course can simply log on to the system and download an entire course or activities and features that another teacher has posted through Moodle Exchange.

Educators creating courses in Moodle will typically include a list of course participants, a syllabus, a calendar charting assignment dates and deadlines, and message forums in

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their virtual classrooms. Moodle promotes a collaborative, student-centered approach to learning, and it's precisely this underlying constructivist pedagogical philosophy that has educators marveling over Moodle.

Middlesex County Public School District in Virginia is one of many districts in the United States that is using Moodle extensively in its curricula. Introduced to the district by Middlesex technology director Mark

Burnet in September 2004, Moodle was implemented because its open-source, modular format makes it easily customizable, and the simple interface means students and teachers alike have very few navigation problems.

In addition to Moodle's team of dedicated programmers, users around the world contribute to the creation of Moodle modules and activities. On the Moodle.org website, teachers can pick and choose from a plethora of quizzes, surveys, polls and peer assessment activities to add to their particular Moodle course modules. They can also add various plug-ins for colors, fonts, layouts and languages to modify the look and feel of a course. When the online course is ready, students simply use an ID and password to gain access to the materials.

To ensure the district-wide implementation in Middlesex County was as seamless as possible and fulfilled the full potential of Moodle's student-centered approach to learning, Burnet and his team developed staff and student training courses on Moodle. Burnet, who was named Technology Administrator of the Year by a local television station, says adequate training and hands-on experimentation is essential to the successful adoption of Moodle in any school or district.

"I've talked at a couple of conferences, and I tell [administrators] to try

it and experiment with it and to not be afraid to allow teachers to play with it a little bit. Give them the freedom and see where they will go with it. I think that is the first step," he says. "It is a solid system. One of the things that [administrators] often fear is that when something is free, they think it is only worth what you pay for it. [Moodle] is one case where, even if I had to pay for it, it would be worth having."

Mary Swihart, a Middlesex County biology teacher, agrees.

In 2005, her 26th year of teaching, Swihart was honored with a technology integration award from the then state governor, Mark Warner, in recognition of her enthusiastic use and championing of Moodle within the Middlesex Country Public School District.

Swihart says Moodle gives her the freedom to tailor the online component of her biology class to suit the course syllabus. It also allows her students full access to their courses in a hybrid learning environment – where course work is divided between in-class and online from home.

To encourage her students to guide their own learning, Swihart posts PowerPoint files of her in-class presentations, biology-related animations, quizzes and discussion questions in her course module.

Swihart also uses Moodle to conduct pre-tests and post-tests to help better assess her students understanding of the course work. Moodle automatically evaluates which questions students are answering correctly or incorrectly, allowing the teacher to develop future lessons and quizzes around the results.

In addition to the pre- and post-test functions, Swihart finds the Moodle forums add significant value to her class.

"When you have a discussion question – a controversial discussion question, for instance – and you throw it out to your students [in class], you



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY SWIHART

Mary Swihart's students use Moodle for the online component of their biology class.

may get a fourth of them responding, well, maybe not even that many," she says. "The rest will sit back and just listen, and they won't take part. It can be very hard to draw them out, but I can put that question into a Moodle forum where they are required to respond and they respond. I can also set it up where they have to respond to each other, so that way, I can get a lot more thought and participation in a discussion than I can in the classroom."

It is this type of endorsement that Moodle creator Martin Dougiamas hoped for when he created the course management software as part of his Ph.D. dissertation: *The use of Open Source software to support a social constructionist epistemology of teaching and learning within Internet-based communities of reflective inquiry.*

"Moodle is very much against just publishing information and requiring a quiz at the end – which is what we call dump and pump," says Dougiamas, a native of Australia. "Moodle has a number of activities where students have to do things. These can be

complex, like ... wikis for example – individual wikis or group wikis – which are getting people to collaboratively write something. We are always looking for opportunities for students to create something for others to see."

Like Dougiamas, Swihart is excited by the possibilities Moodle is bringing to her teaching and her students' learning, so much so that across her school district and in conference presentations, she actively encourages other educators to give Moodle a try.

"I think it is probably the best thing [teachers] can do for their students. Moodle gives them so much more access, and because it's free, I don't see why most schools aren't using it," she adds. "For me, it is just phenomenal. It has allowed me to do so many more things with my students because I put the more time-consuming activities online and the students access those activities there, so it gives me more time teach in the labs and other lessons."

Related website
www.moodle.org