Got Moodle?

The free, open source program enjoys great appeal among K-12 teachers, as it allows them to get the upper hand on course management and assessment.

UNTIL RECENTLY, teachers in Bainbridge Island School District on the island of Puget Sound, a mere half-hour ferry ride from Seattle, were handling classroom management tasks the old-fashioned way. Taking attendance, grading, delivering and receiving homework assignments—all were done with paper and pencil. Randy Orwin, the district’s director of technology, figured there had to be a better system for recordkeeping, so he decided to go out and find it.

Back on the mainland, in Modesto, CA, staff and students at Teel and Glick middle schools in the Empire Union School District were pleased with the online testing service they were using, but by the end of each day, the network would be nearly paralyzed. The slowdown severely curtailed internet access for other instructional and administrative activities. Bill Glick, tech lab supervisor for both schools, knew he needed to find an alternative that would support online assessment while allowing teachers and students to get on the web whenever necessary.

What do these two distinct circumstances have in common? In each instance, the school district found a solution with an easy-to-use tool called Moodle (http://moodle.org), a free, open-source course management system.

A Dynamic Learning Environment

Moodle, which stands for “modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment,” enables educators to manage all aspects of course content and delivery using one integrated system. Compatible with Windows, Mac OS X, and open source operating systems including Linux, Moodle is popular with educators for several reasons, besides being free. Basic implementation is easy, and Moodle’s flexible design supports a range of teaching and learning styles.

Beginning users may rely primarily on features that enable them to automate traditional tasks, such as test giving or assigning and collecting work. But that’s just a sample of the capabilities of this robust suite of tools. More experienced users can take advantage of features that enable collaboration and peer assessment. Moodle also offers active forums where users can seek technical support and suggest new program components. The system’s growing number of user-developed modules include podcasting and gradebook options.

It’s important to interject one caveat. Although Moodle software is free, there are some costs associated with its implementation. Moodle is server-based. This means that there must be a local server where the software can be installed, or that storage space must be purchased from a vendor. Users need training and ongoing support, which, whether provided by a staff member or consultant, are not free. Maintenance is minimal, but upgrades are required, and users often decide to install new modules or plugins to enhance Moodle’s capabilities. Again, such services inevitably have related costs. But if the costs can be managed, as you’ll see in the experiences of Bainbridge Island and Empire Union school districts, the benefits of Moodle are well worth the implementation and maintenance efforts.

Discovering a Range of Possibilities

Randy Orwin’s search for an affordable, computer-based course management system brought him to Moodle in March 2005. After testing the software on his home server, Orwin and a few Bainbridge Island teachers decided to launch a Moodie pilot, housing the software on a newly purchased district server.
With Moodle securely installed, Orwin, an admitted “open source junkie,” invited interested teachers to attend trainings in the summer of 2005. “Their teaching assignments vary, but each of them has discovered Moodle features that support instructional and administrative tasks,” he says.

As an example, Bainbridge Island’s math and technology specialist, Paul Sullivan, is using Moodle to help bring some order to a technology class he teaches for homeschoolers in grades 5 to 8. The class presented him with unique obstacles. “I would get 20 or so kids who were all over the map with their technology skills and their attendance,” he says. “I had to organize the class so that kids could work at their own pace, sometimes from a distance.”

With Moodle, Sullivan’s students now complete coursework and assessments by accessing class notes, assignments, and quizzes online. The system automatically notifies Sullivan when student work is completed. He grades and posts scores online, and students are sent e-mail updates.

Orwin also mentions a high school biology teacher who is using Moodle to take a new slant on assessment. His students create and update a database of questions he uses to build class exams through the system’s Quiz module.

Bainbridge Island teachers are now discovering the full extent of Moodle’s capabilities. Adam Rabinowitz, a fifth-grade teacher at Sakai Intermediate School, says he makes frequent use of the Choice, Quiz, Glossary, Journal, and Forum modules for activities such as online poetry writing and book-talk forums. He hopes to launch an online collaborative science project with a high school class in the near future. “I love that Moodle is free, easy, extremely flexible, and powerful,” he says. “And that it is constantly being improved and updated with new modules.”

Orwin continues to provide all training to the district’s teachers, who attend one-day summer workshops for an overview of Moodle and to build Moodle pages they’ll use to provide information to students and parents. During the school year, teachers attend voluntary, 90-minute after-school meetings where specific modules or tasks are addressed. Meetings include hands-on instruction and discussions of K-12 instructional applications. An online forum is used to capture ideas and serves as a resource for later reference.

Implementation of Moodle is optional, according to Orwin, and use ranges from very limited to classrooms where the system plays a significant role in supporting teaching and learning.

**Breaking Up the Bottleneck**

Meanwhile, at Empire Union School District, Bill Click reviewed a variety of commercial, web-based testing solutions, but found that Moodle couldn’t be beaten for features and flexibility. And because the software is housed on a district server, not a remote server, that daily afternoon network bottleneck would no longer impede classroom activity.

Click’s recommendation that Moodle replace his schools’ online testing service received qualified support: The district agreed to a pilot installation at Glick Middle School, launched in September 2004. Approval to launch the tool at Teel Middle School wouldn’t come until a year later.

Time was set aside that first year during every teacher in-service day for Click to work with faculty and staff. “Our immediate challenge was to solve the testing problem,” Click says. “But once we got started, we realized there were many tools we could use with students.”

Carla Cottrell teaches a variety of seventh- and eighth-grade classes at Glick, including Life Skills. With Click’s encouragement, she initially decided to upload her Life Skills vocabulary tests and chapter quizzes into Moodle. “I wanted a way students could go to the lab on their own time to take quizzes,” she says. “Moodle scores the quizzes, which I can enter into my gradebook without having to deal with mounds of paperwork.”

Cottrell has since expanded her use of Moodle in all the courses she teaches. For example, her students now have online access to assignments and tutorials using Moodle’s Assignment module. And students in her Multimedia class, who write and produce a daily school-news broadcast, use the Journal feature to keep daily logs of their work on the show’s development.

In September 2005, Moodle finally became available to teachers at Teel. Using the system to great advantage is Greg Diebold, a seventh-grade history teacher. Click recommended that Diebold explore Moodle’s various features to identify ways his students could become actively engaged in class activities.

Using Moodle’s Assignment and Quiz features, Diebold’s students now access study materials and homework for every chapter in their history textbook, then upload completed work that Diebold downloads and grades. When the time comes, Diebold takes each class to the lab to complete a quiz, which Moodle automatically grades, posting the scores almost instantly.

Diebold’s students also go to the lab on their own time to complete extended activities available through Moodle’s Lesson module. These materials are designed to encourage students to learn more about historic events that cannot be thoroughly covered during class due to time constraints.

“Since implementing these online activities, discipline problems have nearly disappeared,” Diebold says. “My students are engaged and interested in what we’re doing.”

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