

In the mood for Moodle

Jeff Stanford looks at what Moodle is, how you can use it and how to go about setting it up.

What is Moodle?

Maybe you have heard of Moodle by now. But just what is it?

Think of a school staffroom: teaching materials in one corner, registers with names and student scores, in-trays, noticeboard, rogue's gallery, supplementary materials shelf, library, audio cassettes, videos, worksheets, etc. Now add a classroom where students can try out those materials and keep detailed records of their activities. Moodle gives you an electronic version of all this (and much more) in one website. It is an e-learning tool that can offer simple and safe solutions to any institution, no matter how large or small, be it an individual teacher or a huge university. Moodle facilitates online collaborations, which can be teacher-to-student, teacher-to-teacher or student-to-student.

How can you use Moodle?

With Moodle, you can create learning spaces called 'courses'. Each course has its own set of resources and activities, called 'modules' in Moodle, and can be customised in terms of organisation and appearance. You can password-protect courses so that only enrolled students or

teachers have access. You can also time-limit access to courses.

Once you've set up a course, you can fill it with activities and texts, including audio and video. Imagine being able to reduce the number of photocopies or CD copies that you make! Students are also free to access those texts when it suits them.

Moodle works particularly well when combined with face-to-face learning – also known as blended learning. Here are some examples of what you can do:

- Enhance your teaching with online supplementary activities, both remedial and extension.
- Provide students with links to websites relevant to a course.
- Upload a series of learning activities created in some authoring software, such as *Hot Potatoes*.
- Ask students to reflect on their learning through a blog or a journal.
- Work in teams to co-author a document using a wiki.
- Set up a list of things for students to do before coming to a lesson.

Moodle offers hundreds of optional modules. Let's look in more detail at some of the core ones used in most Moodle set-ups:

Key Moodle features

- Assignments
- Chatroom
- Choice/Questionnaire
- Database
- Forum
- Glossary
- Lesson
- Journal
- Quiz
- Webquests
- Wiki

Students can upload **Assignments** for teachers to mark. Teachers get an automatic alert when a new assignment arrives. All marks can be stored in the Moodle gradebook. You no longer have to worry about losing scoresheets!

The built-in **Chat** module is a handy teaching tool for groups of students working with or without the teacher to

discuss an issue, or answering questions set by the teacher. The chats are saved and can be reviewed by the teacher at any time.

The **Choice** module provides a simple poll, which you could use to find out students' opinions: for example, what topics they want to study or what they think of a course. There is also a more elaborate **Questionnaire** module, which allows you to use a variety of question types to conduct full surveys.

The **Database** module is good for building searchable repositories. A common use of this module is for storing past exam papers, activities for students to do or print out, or collections of students' work.

The **Forum** module enables students to have virtual seminars. The teacher provides a text or audiovisual file, which the students respond to, one after another. And in so doing, they are not only reacting to the stimulus file, they are also responding to each other. Of course, Moodle is not the only tool to offer this, but it is one of many modules which all come in one package. This module can also be used for displaying student work.

The **Glossary** is like the database, except you can allow users to rate each other's contributions. Words can be hyperlinked to texts on the site. So students can click on a difficult word in a text and they will automatically be taken to the explanation you provide in the glossary. Glossary entries can be categorised to make searching easier. Typical uses are an A-Z of difficult words and collections of useful websites.

The **Lesson** module allows a teacher to write a series of lesson pages, each one ending with a question. If the students answer it successfully, they may continue. Otherwise, they can be sent back to review the lesson or directed to a remedial page. This allows students to spend as much time as they want or need on tricky questions.

The **Journal** module is an online diary – useful for keeping notes and writing reflections on activities.

The **Quiz** module offers a wide range of quizzes and tests with which teachers can create revision activities. Moodle stores questions for use in other quizzes, even with other courses. The Moodle gradebook records students' results, and provides a detailed breakdown of responses to different questions. The



quiz module also allows you to shuffle questions within quizzes and to shuffle distractors within test items.

Moodle is a useful tool for running **Webquests**. It allows you to group your students, create a webpage for the main task, set up the links and provide chat and forum spaces where the groups can discuss their projects. Students can then use the assignment tool to upload the results of their work, or they can use the forum module to display their work.

Moodle has its own simple **Wiki**, which can be used for collaborative writing, such as planning projects together or group writing exercises. The simple procedure of editing and saving means that groupwork can develop quickly without students needing to be in the same place at the same time.

What does Moodle look like?

The best way to get to grips with Moodle is to play with it yourself. As an adjunct to this article, I have set up a site at <http://moodleflair.com>. You can enter as a student or as a tutor to get a feel for what is possible. The site includes a video with step-by-step instructions.

Above is a typical Moodle homepage. There is a header and login box across the top. The rest of the page is a collection of **blocks** and **activities** (modules). You met the most common

activities in the previous sections. Blocks, which are spaced around the first and third columns, are typically used to provide key information or to point users to useful pages or links. They often contain menus, message alerts, administrative control panel and 'who's online' information. To help grasp the difference, blocks can be thought of as static, while activities are interactive.

Why choose Moodle?

Moodle has been around since 1999. It is used by tens of thousands of institutions for online learning worldwide. Recently the UK Open University adopted it as a platform for its courses. Moodle's biggest draw is that it allows you to organise a wide variety of resources and activities in one place along with learner tracking and individual learning pathways.

Moodle is similar to its commercial equivalents such as *Blackboard*, *Angel*, *First Class* and *Apex Learning*. One key difference is that Moodle is open-source. This means that the code is freely available. As a result, it is free to download, there is global support for it from enthusiasts and professionals and it is customisable. That means you can brand it the way you want it by choosing your own banners, organisation, layout, content and modules. The open-source movement is

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catching on all over the world. Other well-known examples are *Open Office* (for word processing), the *Firefox* browser and *Wikipedia*, the best-known wiki in the world.

Ten reasons for choosing Moodle

- Easy to use! – no programming knowledge is needed
- Access to resources via the web
- Interaction between learners and tutors
- Collaboration between learners
- Independent learning pathways
- Learner tracking
- Feedback on tasks
- Secure environment
- Automatic backup
- Detailed gradebook based on work submitted by students

What else?

Just to whet your appetite a little more, here are some of the other engaging features Moodle has to offer:

- As with other content management systems you can assign **roles** to different users. This gives them more or less power to control different aspects of the site.
- Some people are put off by the amount of work needed to build activities, but if you already have glossaries in XML format, you can **import** them directly into Moodle. There's even a *Word* macro available to help you import quizzes from *Word*.
- The **Language filter** allows you to ban certain words from your site or to change the language of the rubrics to one that suits your users.
- A wide range of **statistics** on site use is available so that you can see who

uses what and when. This is very helpful for monitoring use and improving your site.

- **RSS** provides you with automatic email notification of any changes on a website. Moodle provides RSS feeds for all forum postings so that users can keep up-to-date without having to log on.
- The latest version of Moodle (version 1.9) includes **tags**. In the spirit of social networking sites like Facebook, users will be able to tag users and events and create personalised pages.
- Using **Paypal**, it is even possible to charge for courses, to claw back the cost of inputting all those exercises!

I've touched on some of the most commonly used and appealing features of Moodle, but you can make it as simple or complicated as you want.

And finally, in answer to a question asked by many: Moodle stands for *Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*. If you think of each of the activities I've mentioned as objects (forums, glossaries, etc), you can probably work out the rest.

How to set it up

Moodle is free to download and use. The simplest option is to rent courses from an established site, a service offered by the companies listed at moodle.com, including moodleflair. If you are planning a bigger operation you will want your own site, and you'll need the following:

- a domain name (eg susansmith.com)
- a server to host your Moodle site
- a download of the latest version of Moodle from moodle.org
- an able webmaster who can upload, customise and maintain Moodle for you

How to plan your course

You then need to think carefully about how you will organise your course:

- 1 Do you want a set of resources, or a timetabled programme that complements an existing timetable? Remember, Moodle is an empty shell at first. You will need to fill it with all the content it needs.
- 2 Who will be responsible for running your site?

- 3 Who will be responsible for inputting materials?
- 4 Do you have the necessary copyright for materials you want to use?
- 5 What databases of information do you want to include?
- 6 Which of the modules do you want to include?
- 7 How will you train users to use your site?
- 8 How will you organise pilot tests of your project?

What to do next

- Try out the moodleflair website at <http://moodleflair.com>.
- Look at other Moodle websites (see <http://moodle.org/sites> for a list).
- Buy a book on Moodle.
- Take a Moodle teacher certification course.
- Find out more from <http://moodle.org>.
- Find out more about e-learning from organisations like *alt-c*: www.alt.ac.uk.

Moodle has such potential that it really is worth investigating. So, if you are feeling in the mood to try out something exciting and innovative, why not start now? **ETP**

<http://moodleflair.com/moodle> to try out Moodle as an administrator and general user, to rent courses and for links to books and courses
<http://oedb.org/library/features/how-the-open-source-movement-has-changed-education-10-success-stories> for an overview of the open-source movement
<http://moodle.org> to download Moodle and get a wealth of background information and links to other Moodle sites
<http://moodle.com> for commercial Moodle services
<http://hotpot.uvic.ca/> for half-baked software, including *Hot Potatoes*



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