

Moodle for CELTA: yes it does work!

Following on from Roger Hunt's enthusiastic article 'Online Teacher Training' in the *ih* journal, Spring 2007, this article looks at the experience of five teacher training centres that have used moodle to run a virtual element on their CELTA teacher training courses. It's not all plain-sailing, but most centres agree that using moodle enhanced the experiences of trainers and trainees.

The centres in question are:

- Berlin School of English
- Munich Volkshochschule
- ITI Istanbul
- IH Queensland
- City of Bristol College UK

1. What is moodle?

Moodle is a comprehensive online learner management system. It's like an online school, and offers a wide range of services including forums, interactive activities, presentations, wikis, blogs and gradebooks. Its underlying philosophy is constructivism: helping learners build knowledge and skills through interaction. There's a lot to learn and if you only need one or two activities, it may be that your needs are better catered for by using a dedicated product such as a blogger, wiki, or a stand-alone hot potatoes exercise. However, if you want these products and many more all under one roof, moodle may well enhance your CELTA course!

If you'd like more basic information on moodle, my article in the January 2008 edition of *English Teaching Professional* covers it (see references for a link). You can also go to the moodle site (<http://moodle.org>) for an overview of the product. <http://moodleflair.com> is a demo site allowing you to try out moodle as an administrator.

2 Using moodle on a CELTA course

Most of the eight CELTA trainers I questioned felt that moodle was more suited to part-time courses, though moodle could be useful before and after intensive courses.

Pre-CELTA

Moodle is particularly useful for organising certain pre-course activities. The pre-course assignment and key can be made available as downloads. Some centres even have plans to make online interactive versions available, which will provide automated feedback on trainees' answers.

Uploading useful *documents* for trainees to download is a straightforward task: centres made available timetables, announcements, links to pre-course reading, and even shopping lists (books or materials) to help trainees be prepared.

Moodle *profiles* allow all users to provide photos and background information on themselves. Staff used this space to introduce themselves, indicate specific interests, and give links to skype, msn, and personal websites.

Forums were used on all sites to encourage trainees to 'meet' each other before the course began.

During CELTA

The most common uses of moodle during the CELTA were making assignments available. There is even an electronic submission *assignment* feature in moodle which records when the assignment was submitted and which allows tutors to submit feedback online. The *documents* feature was also widely used to upload lesson planning forms, peer observation tasks, TP timetables, personal observation timetables, and notes on observation etiquette.

The personal *journal* module was used by some centres as a reflection tool for trainees. Their diaries are available to trainers who can comment on them and answer queries. It's also a good place to keep notes for the Lessons from the classroom assignment.

Hot potatoes (see references) can be seamlessly integrated into moodle. Centres used it to make revision quizzes on TEFL terminology and methodology.

The *book* module enables tutors to organise documents in book form, ie into separate sections. One centre used this to create an easy-to-use guide to using the moodle site.

All centres made wide use of *weblinks* to direct trainees to useful online resources, E.g. lesson planning resources, methodology and demo lessons. (See links below for some of the more common links.)

A big vote-winner amongst trainers was the idea of using the *database* feature in moodle as a repository of training materials. Trainers can upload, share, save on photocopying and have easy access to materials. All materials are then in place for future courses.

Two centres used the moodle *glossary* feature to build up glossaries of useful EFL terminology.

The other moodle feature centres found useful is the *calendar*. This can be used to highlight deadlines and other important dates. Trainees can also include personal dates in their calendars, and set moodle to send email alerts before calendar events as well as downloading the calendar to Microsoft Outlook.

Post - CELTA

The obvious use of moodle once the CELTA course has ended is as a means for trainees to keep in touch via the forums, and as a resource via links, glossary and useful

documents. There is a built-in survey tool which some centres use to get trainees to evaluate moodle and/or the CELTA course.

Other possibilities

There are, of course, yet more ways of using moodle on CELTA courses. Here are just a few of them:

- Mobile alerts – CELTA trainees receive mobile phone alerts for important tasks
- Podcasts – mini lectures are made available for downloading
- Amazon Associates – centres include links to the Amazon site and get a 5% commission on books sold via the site
- illuminate desktop conferencing – an online whiteboard for demonstrating and discussing
- webquests – CELTA trainees do guided research on the internet
- Wikis – for collaborative planning and writing projects

4 Moodle's report features

There is a Big Brother feature to moodle which trainers find very useful and which trainees clearly need to know about! In common with other Content Management Software, trainers can monitor every trainee move and contribution to the moodle site, even 'private' messages they send to each other. Trainers find it useful to see who is using their courses and why. Trainees were sometimes surprised when a trainer came up to them and said 'I see you were having problems logging on yesterday...'

5 Feedback from other CELTA moodlers

So, what do moodle practitioners have to say about using moodle for their CELTA courses? Let's start with the pros.

Pros

*** Organising moodle**

Moodle brings online articles together, making them easy to access. This has allowed us, for example, to introduce phonemic script to trainees early on in the course and allow them to familiarise themselves with it. This in turn has resulted in more confident, competent and consistent use of it in the latter stages of the course.

*** Extra support**

Moodle provides additional support to trainees through links to websites, videos, assignments, games, which wouldn't be available to learners normally.

*** Social contact between trainees and trainers**

It is excellent for helping trainees on our part-time course (8 months once a week) to keep in touch with each other, both socially - we have a special 'Coffee break' forum - and for their lesson planning. There are two learning forums, one for each of the two trainee TP groups.

*** Reduces photocopying**

Trainees can read online or print out. Trainers can provide gradual access to trainees so they are not overwhelmed by too much data all at once.

*** Reminders**

It's a good way of reminding trainees to get important things done on the course. E.g. hand in assignments, download observation tasks.

*** Communication between trainers and trainees**

Moodle is particularly useful if trainers are part time. Access to a virtual staff room can be restricted to trainers only. Such a room can include key documents, forums for discussing problems, and administrative announcements.

It also is easier to answer trainees' questions with the moodle. It is not always possible during contact time on the course to do this satisfactorily.

Moodle can facilitate and support the continued sharing and brainstorming that is central to the CELTA philosophy (and noticeably different from the attitude of teachers of any other language than English).

A social network or online community is only as useful as the members make it. Two or three active participants can catalyze a group of shy lurkers with nothing to say into an active support group full of interesting ideas.

*** Repository of materials**

It's a good place to keep handouts, training plans and other documentation relating to the CELTA course. It should make it easier to handover to new administrators and trainers.

*** Double marking**

Scripts are uploaded and stored in one place. So the hassle of passing stuff around physically, which can take weeks, is avoided.

*** Tool for reflection**

It has potential for getting students to reflect on tasks they are doing.

Cons

It's not a totally rosy picture. It's important to be aware of potential pitfalls. Here are some of the key ones, all of which can be avoided or reduced with some forethought:

*** Connection speed**

A slow connection makes using moodle frustrating, as it becomes unbearably slow.

*** Motivation**

It could be intimidating or stressful for people who don't like using the internet or moodle. Convincing trainees that it's a good idea is difficult – the solution may be to make it an integral part of the course. There may be a problem convincing trainers, too. Not everyone is receptive to new ways of doing things. Moodle won't work if you don't nag trainees mercilessly to get on with stuff.

*** Time**

Trainers need time to follow up what trainees are doing. Maybe trainers' time is wasted if trainees don't use the online materials. It could be a distraction (one more thing to take on board).

*** Training**

Tutors need training in how to use the moodle. Trainees, too. This needs to be incorporated into the course. It can be difficult to organise if trainees do not live locally. One solution is to create online guides, screencasts, which demonstrate how to use moodle. It is probably good practice to write 'how-to' guides for all key functions to cater for less experienced or less confident users.

*** Technical support**

You will need a technical support person who can do the training. You also need someone available who can sort out technical problems when and as they occur. It may be difficult to find a suitable person, ideally one who has advanced computer skills, knowledge of how moodle systems work and an understanding of CELTA courses. You are dependent on this person to some extent, so a good working relationship is essential. Some trainers find the moodle support sites hard to work with.

It is excellent to have access to all the assignments and reports from anywhere on line, but the same trainee who was likely to turn out on exam day on past courses to have had one of their lesson plans eaten by their dog is also the one who will not have uploaded it and whose laptop with the original will have crashed.

*** Financial**

A minus (as far as trainees are concerned) is that they get less paperwork given to them but they have to print out stuff themselves (if they have given up some teaching to do the course as is the case with the part-time courses, this is financially a burden). Often, no payment is made for additional hours learning and using moodle. If teachers don't see a pay-off they may be reluctant to get involved.

*** Learning curve**

Moodle is still a bit too hard to learn. It's important to reduce the interface as much as possible and put a big sign saying START HERE so people new to moodle or online learning/learning support aren't offered too many options. The teachers want the information and the community. Ideally, they shouldn't even notice the tool. Renting a

room in an existing course save a lot of the admin hassle of setting up a whole moodle site.

* **Roles and responsibilities**

These need to be clear. It's not good if only one trainer knows how the system operates.

In conclusion...

What transpires from the trainers' experience is that there are all sorts of benefits to be had from using moodle on CELTA courses, especially part-time ones, but its use needs to be planned carefully to avoid irksome problems. If you're interested in the idea of using moodle on training courses yourself, read on!

7 Setting up your own moodle sites/rooms

I offer a full range of moodle services <http://jswebdesign.co.uk>. This includes hosting, set-up, training, customisation and support. Most of the centres featured in this article chose to rent courses within an existing teacher education site:

<http://teachereducation.org.uk> as a way of reducing the administrative burden and their costs. The design and content of these courses is customisable. They also benefit from each other's input in public areas of the site. A lengthy list of alternative hosting sites is available at <http://moodle.com>.

8 References and links

Here are some of the links referred to above:

<http://www.ihlanguages.com>

Ih's series moodle courses, which currently don't include moodle

http://jswebdesign.co.uk/articles/ETp54_Stanford_article.pdf

My article in English Teaching Professional 1/2008 "In the mood for moodle" provides an overview of moodle's modules.

<http://docs.moodle.org/en/Philosophy>

The official moodle site provides overview of moodle

<http://moodleflair.com>

This demo moodle site allows you to play around as an administrator or user. It also has links to useful books and services for setting up moodle sites

<http://www.halfbakedsoftware.com/>

The home of Hot Potatoes with links to helpfiles and a free download area.

Some resources used by the CELTA moodle courses:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtwDhKso2No>
on using games in the classroom

www.btinternet.com/~ted.power/folkchart.htm
link to an online phonemic chart

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>
British Council/BBC site with useful articles on methodology

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/>
Wide range of exercises and articles on TEFL