

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTED LEARNING PLATFORM: Moodle Integrated Academic Course

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ABSTRACT

It is substantially accepted that constructivism proposes knowledge as “not a fixed object”; constructed by an individual through her own experiences. As a learning theory, constructivism in education emphasizes collaborative learning, such as authentic challenging projects involving in students, teachers and experts in the learning community. Its goal is to create learning communities that are more closely related to the collaborative practice of the real world as strongly reflected in social constructivist idea. The technologies used in the filed of education will support learning through collaborative practices, using learners’ experiences for “meaning making”. The challenge now is to extend the educational networks so that it offers access to learning resources, online storage and tools for communication and management not just within the limitation of school and time. Through learning platforms, such as Moodle, teachers and administrators may bring hardware, software and supporting services together to enable more effective conditions among teachers and students.

In this study, Moodle was used to support the 4th grade pre-service language teachers’ (student teachers) one of the academic courses, named as “Field Experience”. The student teachers were expected to prepare graduation theses in the field of English language teaching. Moodle was integrated as a technological learning aid and used as online support throughout a semester course. So, we will discuss how Moodle was integrated as a learning platform, while discussing, the use of Moodle as a “course supporter” process, steps and the sample activities will be presented as well.

Keywords: Moodle, social/constructivism, learning platform, technology supported language learning

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have shown that students learn more effectively when they work collaboratively with a teacher in a small group/s. That may well be true but also very costly. Due to rapid developments in data transfer systems and communication technology, it is now possible to send greater amount of information easily in a very short time thanks to technological software programs. So, it is now possible for students to work in small groups, publicize their work online, using resources effectively, covering a variety of different tools supporting online elements of learning in a range of ways from learner tracking systems to online assessment.

A huge number of tools have been developed to assist interactive learning process, such as forums, curriculum calendars and module managers in order to create an effective e-learning platform that is placed in the centre of the working practices of the school. They can offer a wide range of benefits to teachers, pupils, parents and at the same time support management and administration as it can be used as a tool in order to increase the level of the teaching standards. Naturally communities will/can be placed in the form of distance learning platforms, which take language learning into a dimension without the matter of time, place or distance. With the help of this platform, students will be able to reach the sources they seek; they can look for new knowledge building via network; teachers can observe the activities of the students. Moreover we can create a real online

classroom environment where the students and the teacher act similarly, like in a school. The platforms installed vary in terms of purpose and practicality. One of the most common one is called Moodle, and it enables language learners to use technological facilities as effectively as they can.

There are specific assumptions on which social constructivism is based on. These assumptions are important in terms of understanding and applying models of instruction in the perspectives of social constructivists. Kim (2001) describes specific assumptions as "reality, knowledge and learning". According to Kim, reality is believed to be constructed through human activity. Reality does not exist before its social invention. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). Knowledge is also believed as a product of human activity by social constructivists. Kim (2001) points out that "Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in".

LITERATURE REVIEW

The need of socially constructed environment for learning process has gained importance in English language teaching. Learning environments can be supported in many ways. The social world of a learner includes people who directly or indirectly affect teachers, students, friends or any other participants. Galloway (2001) states that "the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition" (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) is important. Vygotsky, who laid down the most significant domain of social constructivist theory, believes that "community plays a central role in the process of making meaning" (Galloway, 2001). Social constructivist perspective stresses the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners in the society (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McMahan, 1997). Since learning requires gaining knowledge and practice, interaction among different knowledge levels promoting learning process is inevitable part of education system.

In social constructivist theory, instructors are seen as "guides" who have more knowledge than other learners in the society. Constructivism as a learning philosophy discusses that learning takes place in contexts, while technology refers to the designs and environments that engage learners" (Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). The process of learning is maintained with the help of tools and signs. Learners use tools and signs to apprehend the knowledge in social context.

Knowledge is meaningful only if it is practised in social context. Duffy and Cunningham (1996) explain the relationship between culture and tool as "Culture creates the tool, but the tool changes the culture. Participants in the culture appropriate these tools from their culture to meet their goals, and thereby transform their participation in the culture" (p. 180). Batanov et al., (2002), in their study, consider educational technology both as a tool and a process. They focus on a strategy to develop a software framework with reusable components to support specific teaching-learning model. Furthermore, this model demonstrates how such a software framework can be used for building educational software systems. In turn, these systems can be adapted easily to different levels and subjects of education on top of internet/intranet and web technologies.

Imel (2002) states that "The development of e-learning products and the provision of e-learning opportunities is one of the most rapidly expanding areas of education and industry" (cited in Gilbert, Morton, Rowley, 2007, p.560). Alexander (2001) discusses the importance and the variety of elearning as well as having the potential of improving the quality of learning; accessing to education and training; reducing the cost of education; and improving the cost-effectiveness of education (cited in Gilbert et al., 2007). Janicki and Steinberg (2003), in their paper, discuss an experiment to evaluate the effect on post-test scores of a Web-based authoring tool that prompts the developer to build multiple presentation styles into the learning module. The early results in this paper indicate that the tool is more effective than the traditional HTML-authoring tools and

that the number of exercises affects posttest scores in a positive manner and no effect on post-test scores was observed for the number of examples in the learning module. Gilbert et al (2007), in their study, draws on in depth qualitative comments from student evaluation of an e-learning module on a learning platform in information technologies and management to develop a picture of their perspective on the experience.

The MOODLE

Computers, multimedia, internet, etc. can be powerful tools for enriching learning process. They are also an essential part of preparing students for a world characterized by knowledge, global communications, continuous learning and change. In order for technology to be effective in learning process, it needs to be integrated into a rich, meaning-centered curriculum. Moodle has become one of the most widely used open-source learning management platforms on internet because of the opportunities it offers to the teachers and students.

Considering the fact that Moodle addresses to all educators and students without exception of any age group, the use of Moodle should be at a technical level referring to all its users. When we have a deeper look into the subject from this perspective, we can easily see that anyone who can handle basic computer operations will have no problem using Moodle.

There is almost no difference between registering to an ordinary forum on internet and using Moodle.

Moodle, created by Martin Dougiamas, is commonly used in Europe and North America. There are 45,857 registered sites available using the learning platform Moodle. There are 376 sites with more than 10,000 users.

The site with the most users is "moodle.org" with 53 courses and over 575,000 users. It is flexible and steady to use the platform in many ways like commenting under entries, uploading files, making announcements and even online chat, all of which supports the application of social constructivist approach in education.

By creating online courses within a time line or in free form, as in this study, the educators may follow their lessons with a wide variety of choices. Moodle, one of the most common virtual learning environment tools, gradually sets the idea of distance education in many academic institutions in Turkey.

In the past, technology was used by teachers in limited ways such as recording students' voice and storing visual materials, in the form of video-cassettes or diskettes. However, recently, it has been a greater supporter in education by letting both teachers and students communicate and keep in touch outside of classroom. Such a technology supported education trend has come with its advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages of it are innumerable for both students and teachers, and the disadvantages generally stem from the problem of not knowing how to adapt their teaching and learning style to the new trend and disadvantages seem to be overcome in time. Designed to help teachers and students create an online classroom atmosphere, Moodle has been chosen by a lot of institutions thanks to its non-commercial delivery option and open-source features.

Thanks to the features of the platform, upon registering to a specific course, students can reach sources, quizzes and all types of materials provided by their teacher. The teachers can also collect homework and projects via Moodle.

THE STUDY

This part of the paper will discuss the procedure required to use Moodle with the perspective of a new user. First of all, starting with registering to the system, logging in and enrolling to a course as a student, we will analyze the benefits we can get from Moodle. We will have a deeper look in different areas of the system like resources, users, courses etc.

The main reason for using Moodle in Mersin University was a shift from face to face teaching to online learning environments. When the main page of the site is viewed, it can also be seen the following picture that there are a course block in the middle of the page. It includes five available courses. These are "Prep Grammar, Advanced Reading and Writing, Approaches and Methods in ELT, ELT Methodology and Field Research".

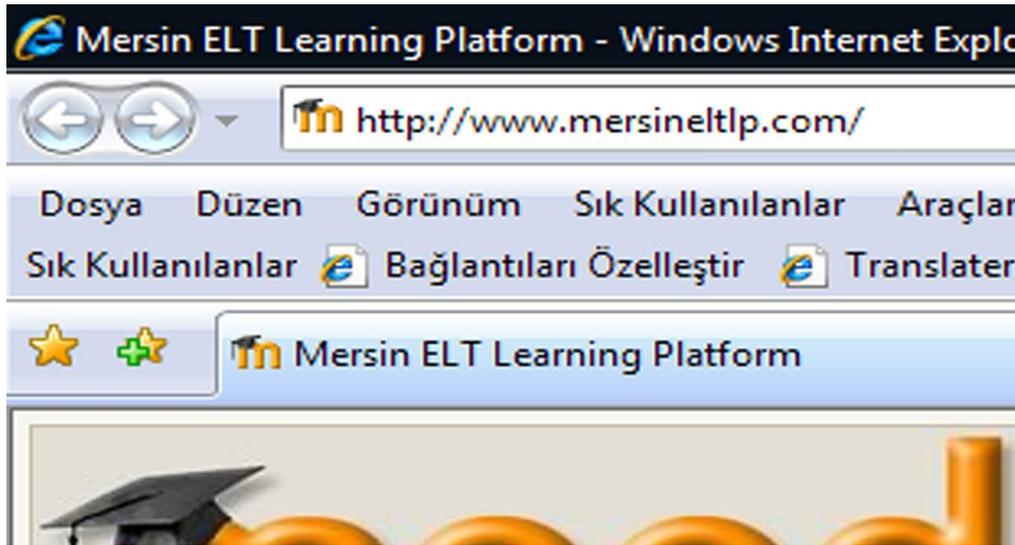


Figure: 1
Typing the address on the address bar of internet browser

To begin with, we should type www.mersineltpl.org (Mersin University, 2008) on the address bar of our web browser and then press "enter" button to navigate to the website.

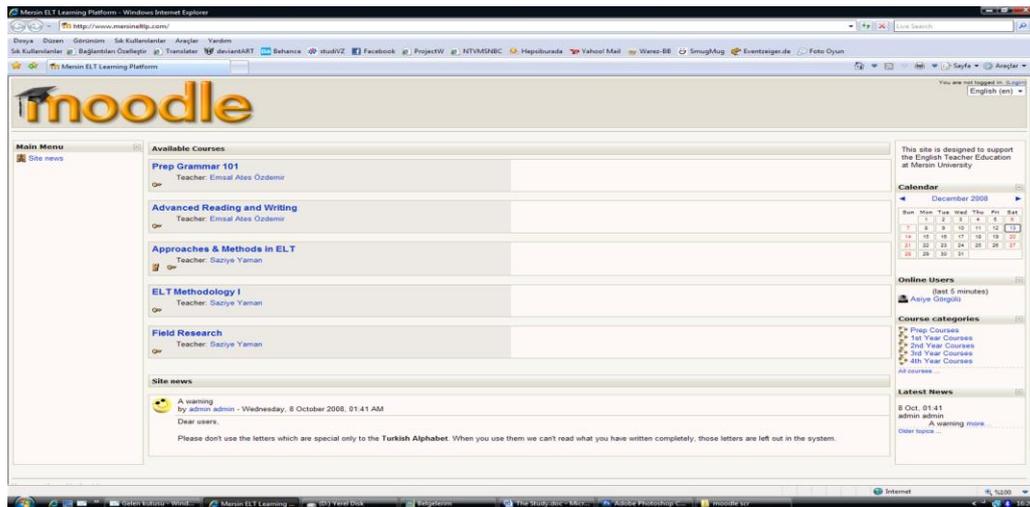


Figure: 2
Main page of www.mersineltpl.com

After some seconds, a screen like in Figure. 2 welcomes us into the website. We should find "login" link on the upper right side of the page as shown in Figure: 3. In order to proceed to the next step, we should click on this link.

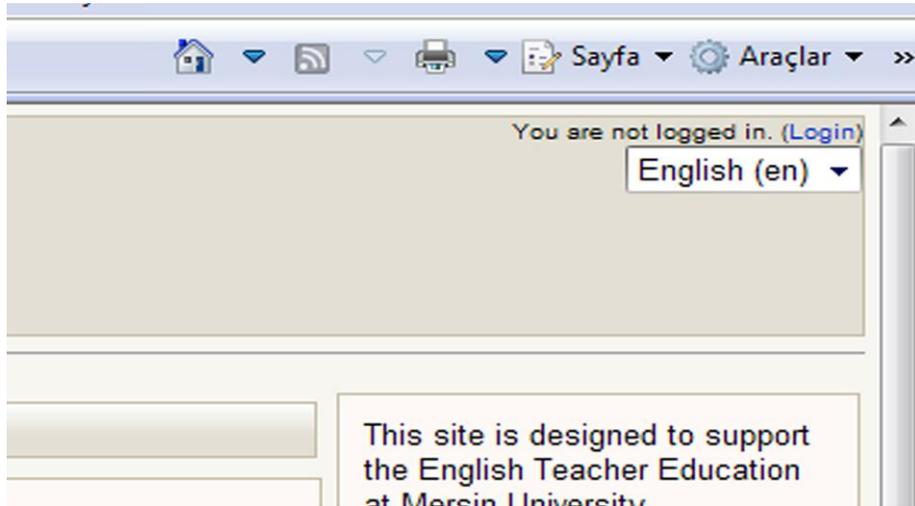


Figure: 3
Magnified login link

We see two parts on the following screen. The left part of the page is for the users who already owns and account on Moodle.

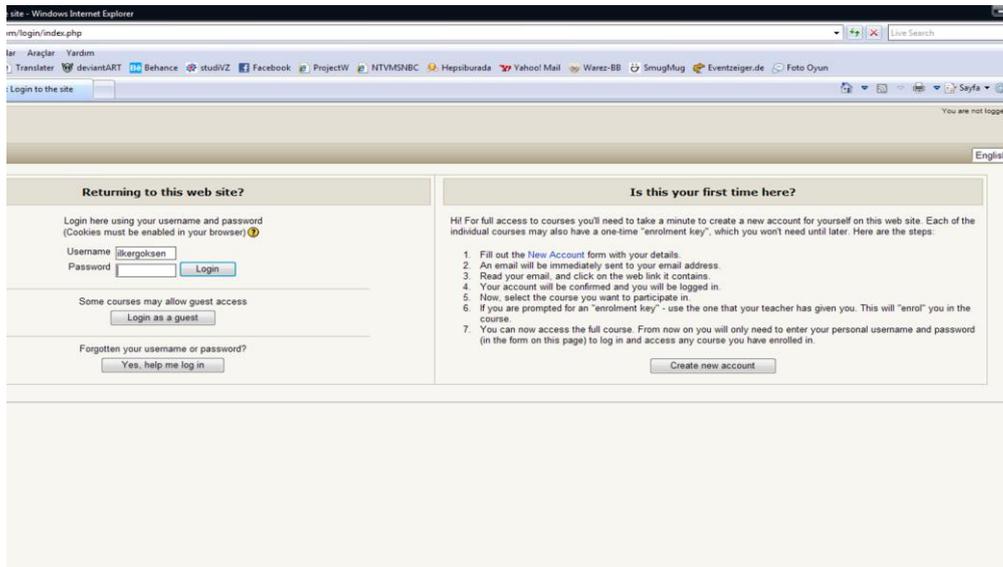


Figure: 4
Opening screen of www.mersineltlp.com

As we are a first time user now, we should click on "Create new account" button on the right part of the page as shown in Figure: 4.

The next screen in Figure: 5 asks us to choose a username, password and to fill in some personal details such as name, surname, e-mail address and country of residence. The username and password we choose to register will be used whenever we would like to access to the website. After filling in all the necessary fields on the screen above in Figure 5, we can proceed by clicking "Create my new account" button.

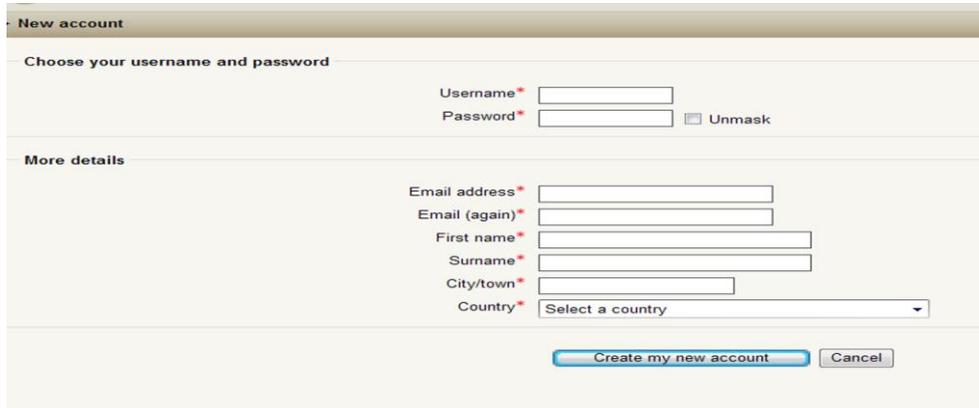


Figure 5
Registration screen of www.mersineltlp.com

We will see a message advising us to check the inbox of our e-mail account. In a short time, we get a confirmation e-mail from Moodle including a link. We can click on this link to complete our application as shown in Figure: 6.

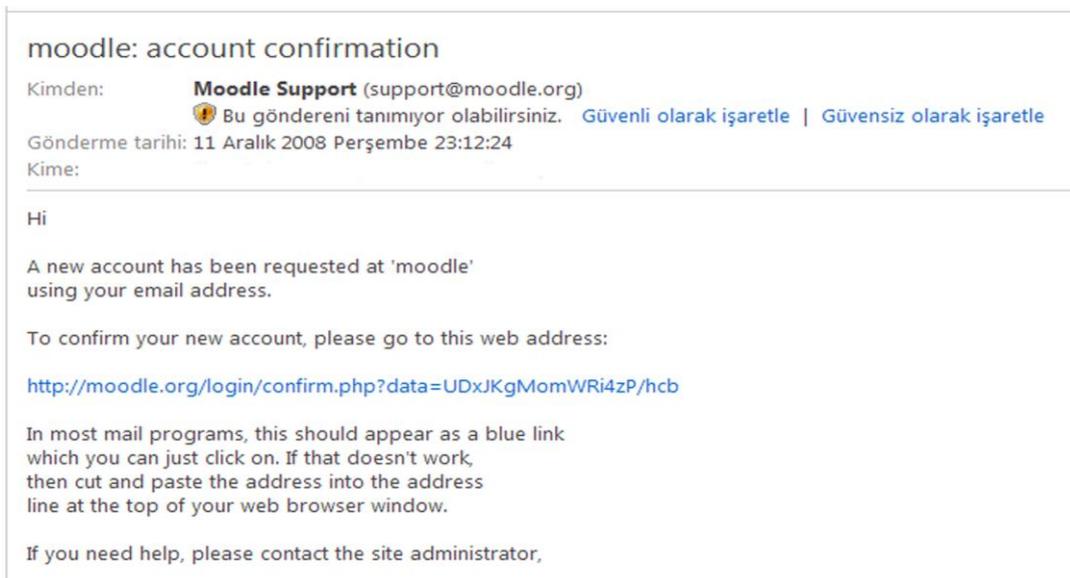


Figure: 6
Confirmation link in e-mail sent by www.mersineltlp.com

After the confirmation of our account is done, the registration procedure into the system is completed. As shown in Figure: 7, what we should do next is to choose a course we would like to follow from "available courses" part and to enroll.

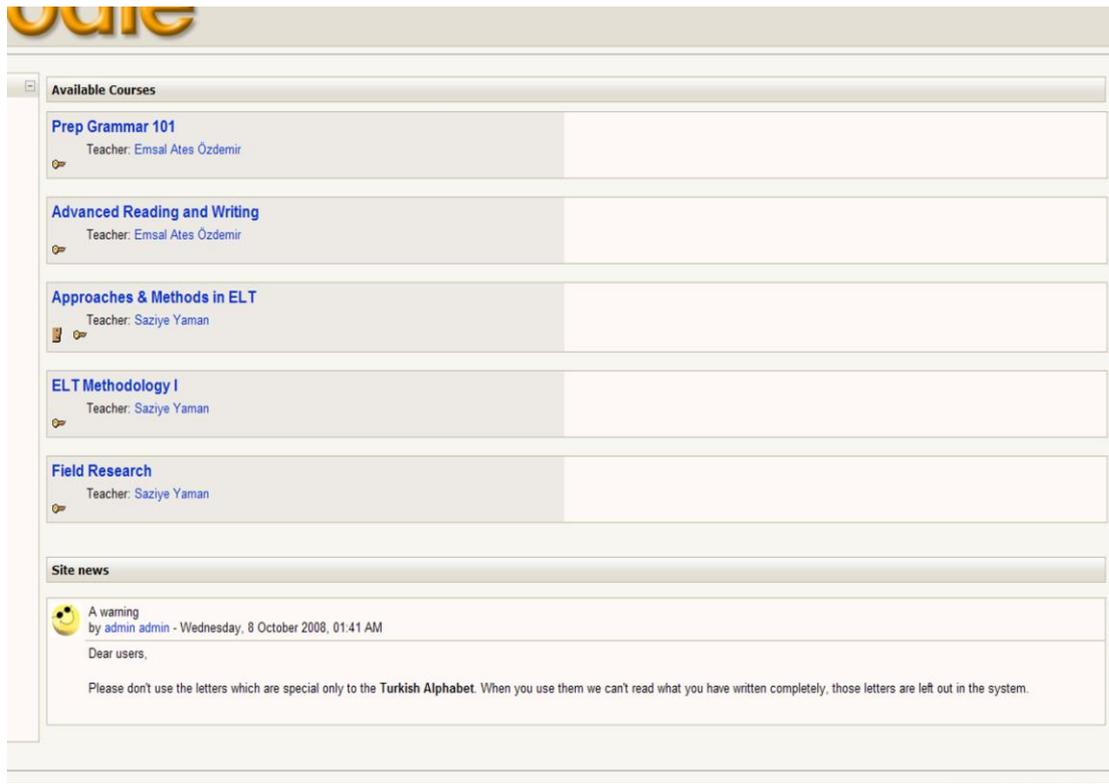


Figure: 7
Courses available on www.mersineltip.com

In this study, we will enroll to “Field Research” course as an example. Each course may require an enrollment key for full access to the desired content. Applicants should consult to their lecturers in order to get the code.

After typing the enrollment key, we can see the content of the course we enrolled for as shown in Figure 8.

One of the first things we realize after we login into a specific course is the variety of the content offered to the users. In every part of the screen, it is possible to find a functional box that serves for a different purpose than others.

Throughout the following parts, we will have a more detailed look into the usage of the course, its materials and how we can contribute to the platform.

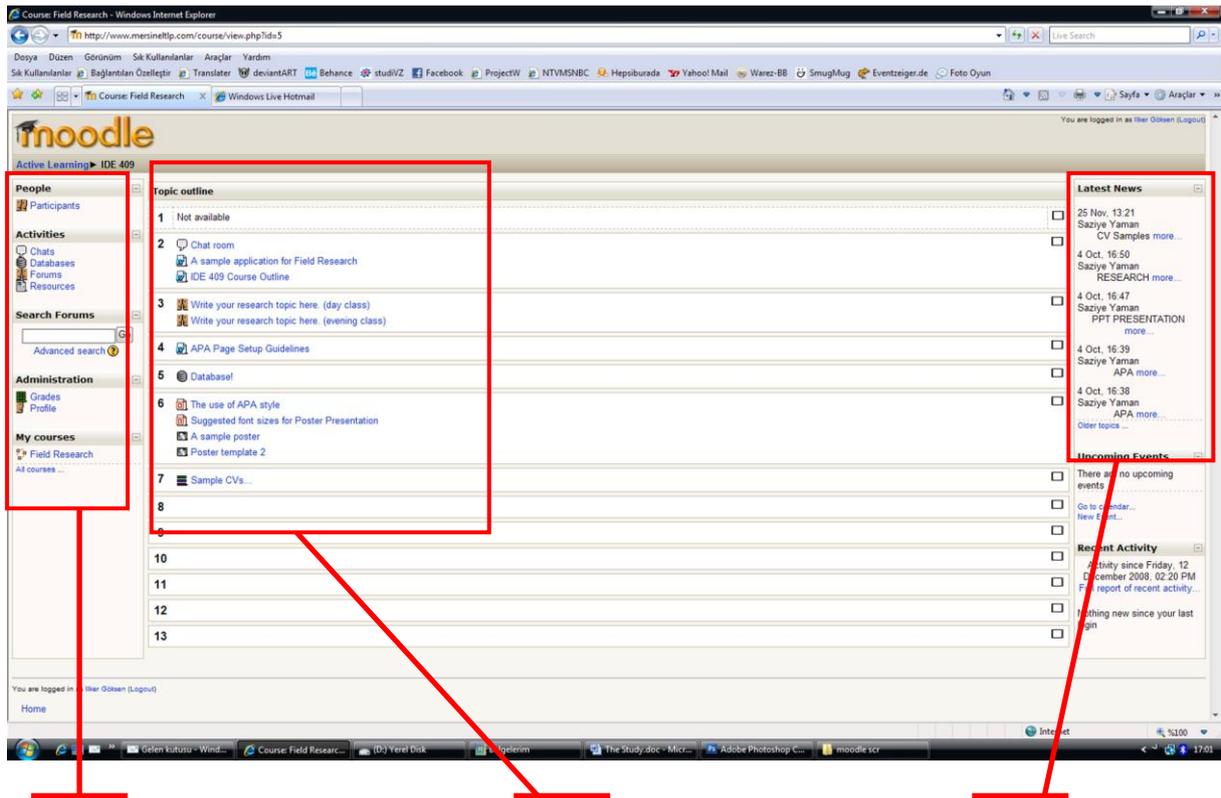


Figure: 8
Main page of "Field research" course

Starting from Figure 9, showing the left part of the webpage, we have several buttons set to make it easier and more functional to use Moodle.



Figure: 9 Left panel

By clicking "Participants" button, we can see a list of the users enrolled for the same course like in this example. Under "Activities" panel, some other links are located such as "chats, database, forums and resources". Each of them has their importance but two of them should be given more attention as they basically form and construct the bases of the reasons that push us to use Moodle. Making learning an active process participated

by the students, a learning platform should give enough opportunities to its members to communicate and exchange knowledge through its facilities. "Forums" section in Moodle, is a great way for the students to discuss and cooperate during their studies and an effective tool for the lecturers to monitor their students' work.



Figure.10
Forum panel



Figure: 11
Right panel

When we click on "forums", a page as shown in Figure 12 appears on the screen of our computer. The users of www.mersineltlp.com have created two main forums and each of these includes some entries.

By clicking, the entry titled "Write your research topic here (day class)", under "Learning Forums", we access to another page where all the entries of the participants can be seen.

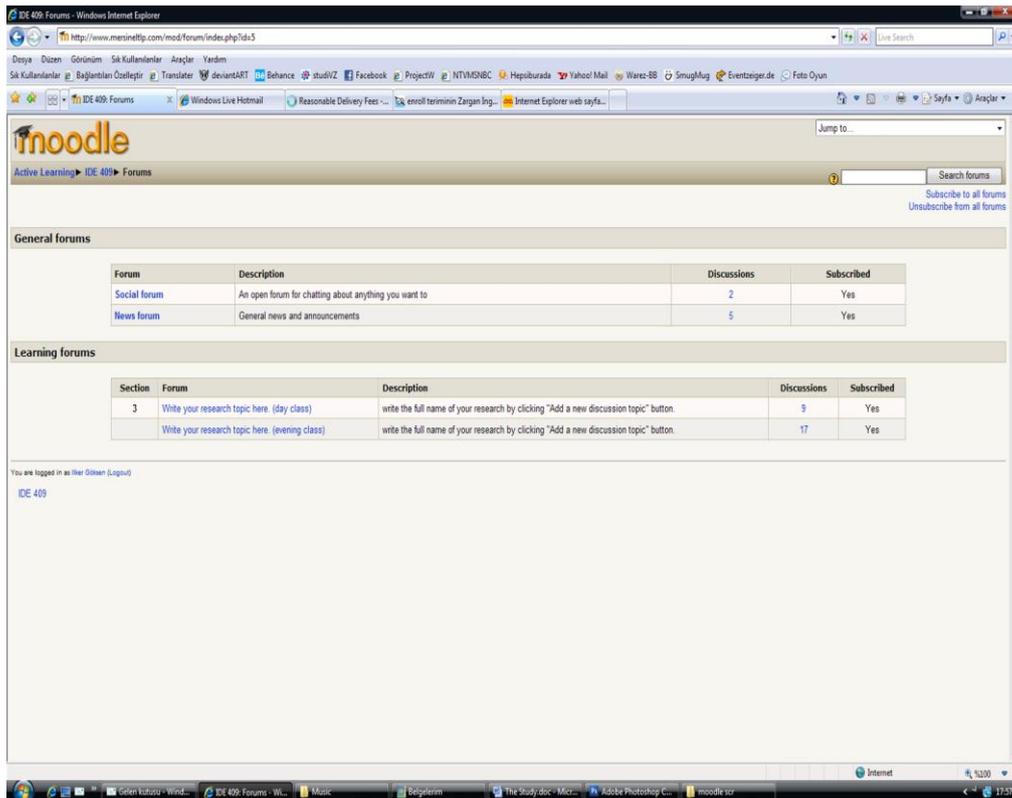


Figure: 12
Forum main screen

By clicking one of the subject lines, it is possible to read the whole discussion and see the way that the students interact with each other on Moodle as shown in Figure: 13. The Figure above illustrates a good example for the purpose of Learning Management Systems.

As we can understand from the interaction and exchange of knowledge and resources among the students, Moodle creates a classroom environment where students are capable of expressing themselves, asking and answering questions, sharing resources and a lot of other useful features.

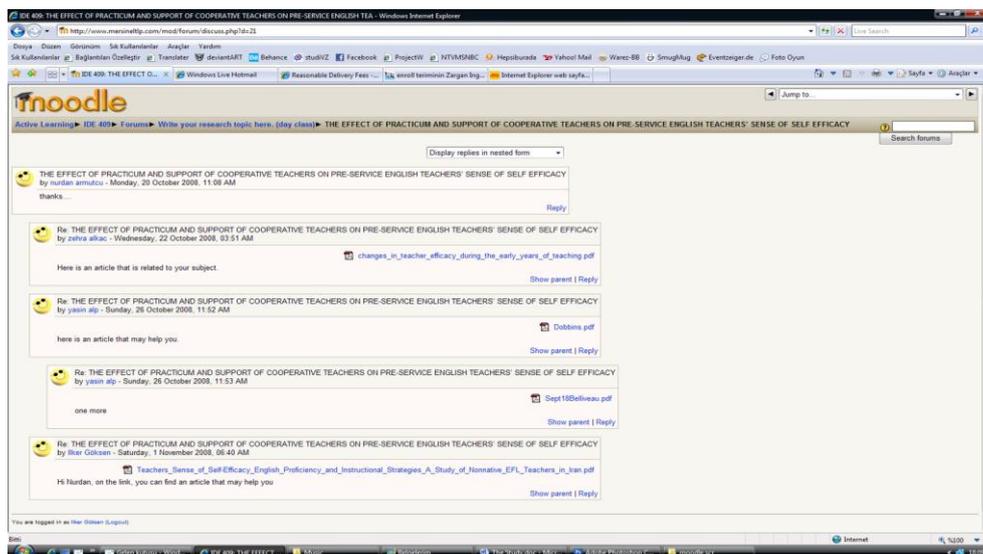


Figure: 13
Detailed look of an entry in the forum of www.mersineltip.com

Sharing resources is the other important role of Moodle. Thanks to its interactive design and layout, members can upload files easily in only a few steps. A student can upload a file for several reasons such as replying to an already posted thread, submitting homework or acknowledging about a recent source he found. However, the steps that should be followed are basically the same. Whatever the reason for uploading is, first of all, the students should find the subject line in the forum. After clicking on the subject, another page will appear possibly including some replies or without any reply.

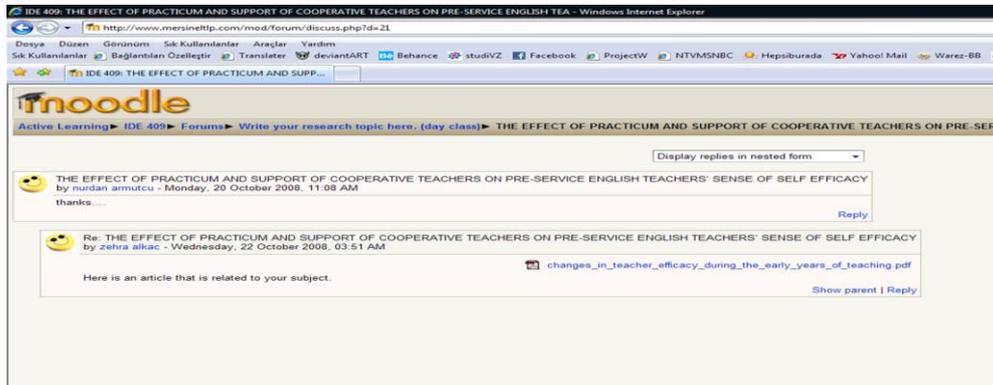


Figure: 14
The placement of "reply" button in a sub-forum

In the next step, the students should click on "reply" button as shown on Figure: 14. They will be directed to another page in a short time.

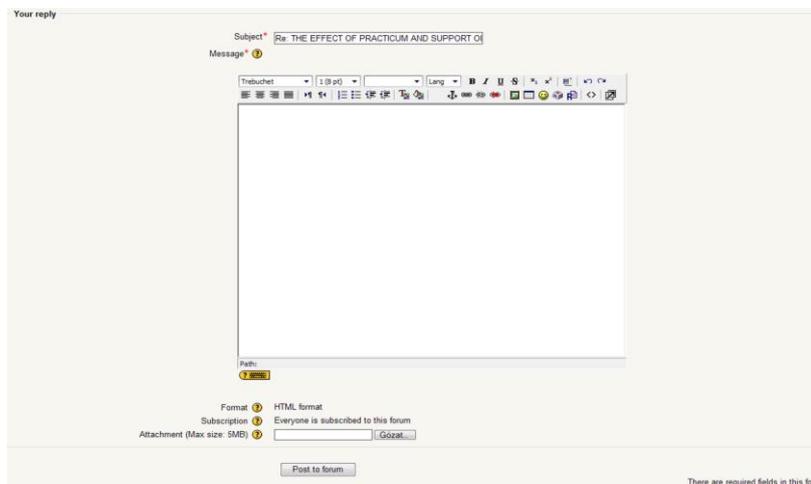


Figure: 15
The screen for writing replies and attaching files

Later on, the student can type the answer and click "browse" button in order to find the file as shown in Figure: 15. After clicking "Post to forum" button, the selected file is uploaded into the system's database and it can be accessed either from the resources section or from the related subject line in the forum.

Topic outline	
1	Not available
2	Chat room A sample application for Field Research IDE 409 Course Outline
3	Write your research topic here. (day class) Write your research topic here. (evening class)
4	APA Page Setup Guidelines
5	Database!
6	The use of APA style Suggested font sizes for Poster Presentation A sample poster Poster template 2
7	Sample CVs...
8	

Figure: 16
Topic outline on the main page

Another important part that the users of Moodle should be aware of is located in the middle of the page and it is shown in Figure: 16. The section titled "Topic Outline" can be considered like the main entrance of a house. Access to almost all areas of Moodle is possible from this point. It can be customized according to the time order or content order. As seen in example in Figure 16 above, the layout chosen by the users shows that it is in content order. For example, in the 3rd section, we can see research topics and in the 6th section, it is possible to find posted resource materials. A lecturer may start a topic titled "Homework" and he may ask the students to hand in their homework by uploading them into this section.

Latest News	
<input type="checkbox"/>	25 Nov, 13:21 Saziye Yaman CV Samples more...
<input type="checkbox"/>	4 Oct, 16:50 Saziye Yaman RESEARCH more...
<input type="checkbox"/>	4 Oct, 16:47 Saziye Yaman PPT PRESENTATION more...
<input type="checkbox"/>	4 Oct, 16:39 Saziye Yaman APA more...
<input type="checkbox"/>	4 Oct, 16:38 Saziye Yaman APA more...
	Older topics ...

Figure: 17
News section of the page

Serving the educators and learners as an interactive platform, another important section of Moodle that we should have a look is located on the right part of the webpage.

As seen in Figure: 17, it is titled "News" and it is like an information board about the recent updates on the platform or about any announcement that the lecturer would like to make.

Posted items in this section are located starting from the most recent one to the oldest one. By clicking "more" link under each news, more information can be accessed.

After all our operations finish on Moodle, we can log out of the system by using "log out" button on the upper right part of the screen.

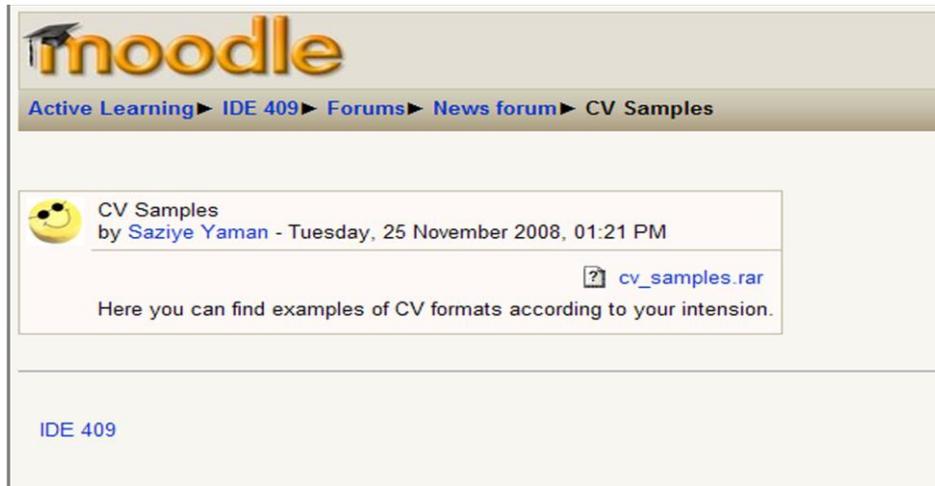


Figure: 18
Detailed appearance of posted news

Serving the educators and learners as an interactive platform, another important section of Moodle that we should have a look is located on the right part of the webpage. As seen in Figure: 17, it is titled "News" and it is like an information board about the recent updates on the platform or about any announcement that the lecturer would like to make. Posted items in this section are located starting from the most recent one to the oldest one. By clicking "more" link under each news, more information can be accessed. After all our operations finish on Moodle, we can log out of the system by using "log out" button on the upper right part of the screen.

As a subscription-based learning platform, Moodle collects lessons, resources and activities on one platform to create a way between school and home. Its wide range of customizable options and user friendly interface is suitable enough for almost all people at different levels of computer knowledge.

As the technology gets involved in nearly all areas of our daily life, Moodle takes a big responsibility to Downloadable File lead us to a different classroom atmosphere, which will possibly be much more common and complicated in the future.

CONCLUSION

This collaborative learning experience supported with Moodle prompted by the means of technology has contributed great help and meaningful learning among the users.

Virtual classroom environments created on the web have helped the student teachers since were actively involved in and sharing each others experiences. Inspired by the latest evolutions of our age, ELT department of Faculty of Education, Mersin University has started a similar project to support language learning with the best content possible.

In the research process that was carried on www.mersineltlp.com, during a semester (fifteen week period of research), one of the tasks that was carried was to upload files and include participants in discussions in forums. But, unfortunately, the limitation of the system such as upload capacity, user authority and lack of participating students in project was a big challenge. Some of the early plans like supporting forums with videos or other interactive materials have failed due to 64mb upload capacity of database. That prevented the teacher and student teachers from broadening the horizons concerning the usage of Moodle. The success of a project lies under the desire of its users to carry it on with the most number of like-minded people participating in.

Under "Field Research" course, 50 students registered to the system and only 27 students were observed participating actively, whereas, the real number in real-life course is around 60. 27 students who took place in the forums were not observed making entries more than twice or three times. One of the reasons for this lack of participation may be different ideas about the computer use in studies. Students might have been informed more about the essence of such platforms for the sake of improving their knowledge on an electronically controlled base. Despite some of the handicaps of using Moodle, it is efficient and strong enough to support a course electronically without spending huge amount of money like one has to do while building a website. Considering that it is still under development process, Moodle will improve much more in the following years thanks to the feedback it gets from its users. Online sources can even be used to connect to someone living on the other side of the world and exchange ideas about a field of his expertise. The only limitation in this area of combining education with technology is the humans' mind.

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