Developing a Course in Moodle

Moodle is an e-learning software platform developed by Martin Dougiamas that allows educators to create and manage online courses for university students; therefore, the participants or learners can access the modules of those courses as a virtual classroom. As such, Moodle is one of those scenarios where activities to be performed by the Faculty and students take place. According to moodle.org, “Moodle is a software package for producing Internet-based courses and web sites. It is a global development project designed to support a social constructionist framework of education” (“Moodle,” “Definition,” para. 1)1 . Consequently, Moodle is a tool for learning online that allows the professor and the student to interact and collaborate in multiple ways. With respect to Moodle’s basic structure, it can be said that each course homepage generally has a three-column layout, visually organized with blocks on the left and right sides and with a center column containing the course content. Coursecontent will appear in the middle section, usually broken down into Weeks or Topics. Every Week/ Topic might have some content and matching activities (University of Minnesota, 2009-2011). Thus, via the Internet, teachers post their texts and multimedia learning resources for the students. Moreover, the right and left columns of the course homepage will have blocks with additional tools and features, such as calendar block, course administration, my courses, etc. Particular blocks and their location on the Course Homepage may vary from course to course, since blocks may be added, hidden, deleted, and moved up, down and left/right by the instructor (2009). A good picture of how a Moodle course looks like can be found at <http://www1.umn.edu/moodle/images/screenshot.jpg>.

In brief, the common Moodle homepage includes a list of participants, a list of assignments, and glossaries of terms. Additionally, it can contain links to other web resources (blogs and wikis), digital readings rooms, online quizzes, and discussion forums where students comment on content and ask questions through instant messaging. All these tools are used to teach classes completely online, to enhance face-to-face classes, and to support blended learning environments. Additionally, courses can be packaged as a zip file using the Backup function. These can be downloaded to a local computer and restored later on any Moodle server. In that way, copies of forum posts and instructor feedback can be mailed in HTML or plain text. Furthermore, through Moodle, teachers find the following advantages: the flexibility to define their own scales for grading, the possibility to choose the course formats (by week, or by topic) and the easiness of the creation and edition of entries at WebPages. So, the course can be highly customized by teachers. Students, on the other hand, find an online space for collaboration and group participation because the Moodle modules are designed for discussion, reflection and learning. The discussion forums allow students and teachers to engage in discussion on any topic; this ability to discuss is a key component of the social constructionist philosophy. The idea is that when students construct meaning and then share ideas with other students, learning is enhanced. (Moore, 2003, p. 18) As such, Moodle facilitates the process of working by competences due to the motivation it spurs in the students who access the platform to participate in forums, watch videos, write reports on paper and take tests. That means producing, presenting and understanding information and accessing and searching the contents of the course

Inozu, Sahinkarakas and Yumru (2010) have pointed out that “considering the global interest in the use of technology, and the privileged place of computers and Internet in their lives, students’ interest in using these materials is a natural outcome of today’s world” (p. 17). That is why “we need new competences to master a whole new digital world, not only by acquiring technical skills, but also by gaining a deeper understanding of the opportunities, challenges and even ethical questions posed by new technologies.” (Figel, as cited in European Commission, 2007). That is true because through Moodle, the cluster of knowledge, skills and personal attitudes that affects an individual’s ability to perform, encounters a favorable context. Thus, the students show a good attitude to the broad information presented to them and exploit it in a critical and systematic way. More specifically, Moodle encourages the use of new technologies for effective communication in a scenario that is more advanced than the traditional contact teaching Taking into account the focus of this research on the communication of future international negotiators in a foreign language, the potential of using this platform is remarkable, thanks to the interaction among peers via Moodle’s activities and texts (including audio and video). These learning situations are necessary to improve the students’ language skills in English. Thus, it is possible to integrate the Internet for language learning goals (Brandl, 2002, 2005) in the curricula of Colombian faculties as it complements conventional classroom instruction. In fact, since 1988, at King College University –just to mention an example– researchers and educators have suggested that “group training in computer literacy, critical thinking, or writing across the curriculum is necessary for faculty to become responsible for the total education of their students” (Farmer, as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2002 ).

[1] Moodle is a software program for electronic or "elearning," a category of programs that are variously identified as "Course Management Systems" (CMS), "Learning Management Systems" (LMS), or "Virtual Learning Environments" (VLE). Many of the mechanics of classroom operation—such as assignments, scheduling, and quizzes—can be easily set up through simple resource-based “courses.” Moodle also has a broad variety of additional modular features and a relatively quick learning curve, helping educators easily and effectively develop full online classes, either in advance or as the course is being taught. This versatility allows Moodle to be used in a variety of ways depending on the needs and capabilities of the classroom and program of study: from simple classroom management to pure e-learning--or a “blended” combination of the two, with e-learning content and utilities extending on-site classroom learning (Pieri & Diamantini, 2009). The system allows professors to use a course at the same time they are developing it, and then re-use and improve it each year. Often classrooms start using a single feature such as a calendar or assignment drop box and then expand as professors explore additional features. Moodle has also been built to support a ‘social constructivist pedagogy,’ which is based on the active contribution and collaboration of the students. In addition to the traditional lesson, calendaring, assignment, and quiz capabilities associated with online learning, Moodle incorporates a variety of modules that support this approach, including wikis, forums, and chat. The development community continues to add Moodle program features, and as well some Moodle users share courses as open content. [2] Constructivism: The theory of constructivism “acknowledges the learner's active role in the personal creation of knowledge, the importance of experience (both individual and social) in this knowledge creation process, and the realization that the knowledge created will vary in its degree of validity as an accurate representation of reality. These four fundamental tenets provide the foundation for basic principles of the teaching, learning, and knowing process as described by constructivism”(Doolitttle, 1999, p.1). Moreover, these tenets may be emphasized differently, resulting in various "degrees" or "types" of constructivism.