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Online Course Management Systems: A Viable Option for Language Education?

Malcolm R. Swanson

<Abstract>

Go to any recent conference on computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and one of the most frequent topics will be the use of web-based course management systems (CMS). These systems offer educators powerful tools for creating and maintaining courses, administering any number of classes, and observing or assessing students. They offer students access to large resources of learning material, anywhere, and anytime. This material is often visually appealing and content rich, and can be supplemented or reformatted on the fly. Yet, while the appeals of such systems are obvious, like most technological or multimedia educational tools that are becoming available, there are downsides, some of which will be discussed here. This paper will begin by introducing what a CMS is, and what systems are currently available. Then it will look in depth at what is arguably the most popular system available today; the open-source system Moodle. An example of a course set up at Seinan Jo Gakuin using *Moodle* will be demonstrated, following which the viability of such a system for language education based on actual class usage of the Seinan website will be discussed. Finally, it will be argued that, while there are severe constraints to successfully implementing such a CMS as Moodle within a study programme, the opportunities created for both learners and educators make the effort worthwhile.

Key words: Online education, course management, self access, Moodle

Course Management Systems: What are they?

Course management systems probably have their roots in the many self-access centres that have been developed in recent years, as they all have a similar goal: namely, to encourage a measure of autonomy in the approaches students take to learning a language. "Perhaps the most important contribution a self-access centre can potentially make is in fostering in learners an awareness of the language learning process" (Reinders, 2004). What self-access centres seek to do is to provide learners with a set of tools and materials, hopefully highly motivational ones, which will stimulate in them a desire to learn.

This decision to learn is an important first step to successfully learning another language, and one which learners in more passive situations— such as some classroom programmes—attempt to bypass. Self-access centres put learners in a situation where they either choose to learn or do nothing, with obvious results in either direction. As Cooker and Torpey (2004), in discussing their self-access centre state, "we have found that increased motivation and achievement result from learners' perceptions that they, rather than others, are responsible for their own learning successes and failures."

CMSs share many of the traits of full-blown self-access centres. They provide a central repository for learning material, they offer

Department of English Faculty of Humanities Seinan Jo Gakuin University

learners a measure of autonomy in what they wish to learn, and they allow multiple students, classes, and teachers to operate under the same umbrella. The difference, of course, is that a CMS operates online, and can only be accessed through a web portal. This changes quite drastically the way users interact with the system, and this will be discussed later in this paper.

But, what is a course management system? A CMS is a network- or Internet-based program designed to facilitate online education—so-called *e-learning*. These systems are also known as virtual learning environments (VLE), learning management systems (LMS), or computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems. Cole (2005) offers the following definition:

> CMSs are web applications, meaning they run on a server and are accessed by using a web browser. The server is usually located in your university or department, but it can be anywhere in the world. You and your students can access the system from anywhere with an Internet connection. At their most basic, CMSs give educators tools to create a course web site and provide access control so only enrolled students can view it.

Many of these systems were first developed in universities, particularly those with distance learning courses. These offered an attractive alternative to the paper-and-post systems widely used because they offered content on demand and were cheaper, adaptable, mobile, and more accessible. Most of the systems currently available are built on a database backbone that is accessed and managed using any modern web browser capable of Internet access. Being web-based gives such a system true portability as it can be accessed through any web portal. Moreover, as the coding is generally universal—and thus standards compliant—CMSs are truly cross platform, accessible by computers running Windows, Macintosh, or Linux operating systems.

There are many different CMSs available today, with some being commercially produced, and others being offered as freeware or donationware, often under the open-source umbrella (*open source* describes practices in the production and development of software that promote access to the end product's sources. For more detail, the *Open Source Initiative* website at <http://www.opensource.org/docs/definition.php> is a good place to start). Of the commercial offerings, probably WebCT and Blackboard are the most popular choices, but they are extremely expensive and have restrictive licenses. There are a few institutions using them in Japan, but more educators—particularly those with web skills—are turning to open source software. Among the many open source CMSs available, possibly the most mature offerings would include:

- Moodle <moodle.org>
- LRN <dotlrn.org>
- ATutor <www.atutor.ca>
- Claroline <www.claroline.net>
- Manhattan Virtual Classroom <manhattan.sourceforge.net>

Of these, Moodle is by far the most sophisticated (in the writer's experience), is probably the most widely used, and has the strongest community of developers. "Of all the open-source CMSs, Moodle is by far the most robust as far as features are concerned. In addition, it is also the most user-friendly system for both teachers and students" (Daniels, 2005). As such, it was chosen for use in Seinan Jo Gakuin University's English Department, and will be used as the basis for discussion in this paper. However, many of the issues raised here are applicable to any CMS, as it is the concept rather than the product itself that is being discussed.

Why use a CMS?

Language teachers and administrators have access to a wide array of resources and materials for use in their courses. In addition to the usual

"chalk and talk" or textbook-based materials, in recent years there has been an explosion of multimedia and CALL applications. However, for those departments seeking a system for creating and administering courses, a CMS is a strong choice. There are both administrative and instructional benefits. For a course administrator, these include "controlled access to materials, dynamic class lists and grade books, online management of assignments (e.g., Web delivery, grading, follow-up), and links to the student information system" (van de Pol, 2001). Using a well-designed CMS, student monitoring becomes a simple yet powerful task—in fact, there is often too much information generated (such as what time, for how long, and with what success students studied), though this is easily filtered to produce just the information needed. CMSs generally handle security and privacy very well, with access being highly regulated so that only those with appropriate permissions can access sensitive information. Non-registered visitors have no access to private information, though they can generally view the public pages of a site. Students have access to only their own data, or data which other students have agreed to publish. Teachers have access to personal data of only the students within their courses, while only the site administrator(s) has total access. Even then, very sensitive information such as passwords is encrypted so that only the end-user can utilize it.

Van de Pol goes on to describe the instructional benefits to include "integrated communication tools (e.g., chat rooms, Web pages, email lists) and tools for building online content (e.g., HTML page builder, animations, simulations)." One of the most daunting challenges for teachers who are not web-savvy is to create content for online access. Even with the use of such site-creation software as Adobe GoLive® or IBM HomePage Builder® it is still extremely difficult to create and publish anything beyond the most basic of websites. A good CMS, however, comes with very powerful content creation tools integrated into the system. With minimal training, teachers

are able to make online quizzes, forums, surveys, or projects that work well, are visually appealing, and which automatically track student usage and results.

Versatility is another key feature of CMSs. A quick visit to some of the sites listed at Moodle's website <www.moodle.org> shows the wide range of applications for which they are used. For the language teacher or course administrator, however, these are most likely to include:

- An online learning content for students
- A repository for students to upload materials and assignments
- A journal space for students to keep a diary
- A glossary for compiling a course "dictionary"
- A community space for news, discussions, surveys, and announcements
- A calendar of events
- A means of monitoring and assessing students
- An online "staffroom" for planning and collaborating on courses

In a normal "analog" class situation, any one of these applications requires significant planning and time for execution. They also, in all likelihood, generate an enormous amount of paper. Using a CMS brings all these tasks into one seamless package, with most of the framework already in place. Combine that with the ease of access from any Internet-connected computer and the security of the system, and the advantages are obvious. To summarize, using a CMS:

- enables non-technical faculty, staff, and students to create and update their web content
- provides control over information provided on websites
- provides audit ability for review
- allows changes to be made available in real time
- enables schools or departments to make their websites a true extension of their

classroom programmes
- gives course developers the ability to update web content in minutes, instead of hours or days
- allows capable staff members to update their web content directly and incorporate their own styles
- means staff no longer need to use other web development tools in order to create content
- means there is minimal chance for HTML errors/mistakes when changing websites
- allows multiple staff members to manage content for their website simultaneously
- uses a web-based application, therefore no additional software, cost, or setup is needed in order to use it – only a web browser and internet connection is necessary
- enables non-technical faculty and students to provide timely and relevant content on a regular basis (Adapted from "Instructions on how to do Web Development on Campus Webservers using the Content Management System" at <http://www.umaryland.edu/cits/web/cms_instructions.html>)

Introducing Moodle

"Moodle is a software package for producing internet-based courses and web sites. It's an ongoing development project designed to support a social constructionist framework of education." (Moodle documentation at <http://www.moodle.org>) Social constructivism argues that "the most optimal learning environment is one where a dynamic interaction between instructors, learners, and tasks provides an opportunity for learners to create their own truth due to the interaction with others" (Wikipedia, accessed at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivist_epistemology#A_practical_definition_of_Social_Constructivism> and is exactly the type

of community-based learning environment a university language department should aim to create.

As stated earlier, Moodle was chosen as the CMS for Seinan Jo Gakuin's English Department website <http://english.seinan-jo.com> because of being robust, feature rich, and user friendly. It is also continually being developed and is currently at version 1.7 at the time of writing, with version 2 under development. Moodle is designed for instruction and student monitoring, and comes with some extremely useful features.

Security

All students receive a unique log-in and password which they use for as long as they are in the system. In Seinan's case, most students opt to use the same log-in as for the college mail system for ease of remembering. Students can only access courses they are enrolled in, as each course has a "key." This means that commercial materials that students have purchased can also be used online, as copyright is not infringed upon. Student can access their grades at any time, and also securely submit assignments.

Uniformity

Because students have only one Moodle account, it is easy for them to remember how to gain access to the system. Their courses are automatically visible as soon as they log in. Each course uses the same navigation interface, so once they are accustomed to the system, enrolling in and using new courses creates no problems.

Easy to Create

As all content is created using online forms, it is relatively easy to create material. No programming skills are needed, and material can even be copied or uploaded from other programmes, such as Word® or Excel®.

Communication

The email function of Moodle means students can be contacted individually, or in a group without

needing to use email addresses. Discussion forums allow for news and announcements to be posted for all to see and respond to. Chat rooms are also available for real-time discussions among group members.

Tools

Without going into great detail (please refer to the Documentation section on the Moodle website for more information), some of the tools available in Moodle include:

- Customizable content areas
- Course calendar
- Email and messaging functions
- Course discussion board (forums)
- Wiki pages (a Wiki is "a website that is designed for easy incremental updates; furthermore, these updates can be performed by people other than the site owner" Lavin, 2006)
- Chat rooms, with automatic archiving of discussions
- Student groups
- Assignment uploads and returns
- Individual student homepages or blogs (web logs – a form of online journaling)
- Online quizzes and surveys
- Online grade book
- Course statistics

Case Study: Seinan Jo Gakuin University, English Department Website

In April 2006, Seinan Jo Gakuin University opened its English Department within the Faculty of Humanities. For use by all students, it was decided to set up an all-English website using Moodle as a framework. As the university website lacks both the power and the capability (it has neither PHP scripting, nor My SQL database functionality) to run Moodle, it was decided to host the website externally using its own domain name: <http://english.seinan-jo.com>. The advantage of this has been access to technical

support and seamless upgrading, as well as reliability and automatic back-ups by the hosting company. The disadvantage has been that the students need to remember two website addresses (URLs)—the university's and the department's. However, as both are very similar (with only the final ".ac.jp" and ".com" being different), this has not caused any great problems.

The site opens with a public page that offers news on college events, such as open campuses, the Mallory Cup English Contest, and our English lecture series. From there, the students and faculty can login and access their courses. Currently there are two Oral English courses for First Year students, and two teacher courses. This will expand each year as new courses come online for students in succeeding year groups. The Oral English pages are by far the most populated, with all 63 first-year students enrolled. Currently all students use this for:

- Accessing homework
- Doing supplementary activities
- Getting information on events and assignments
- Communicating with teachers and other students
- Participating in discussions
- Checking on grades and assessment

Almost all the modules available within Moodle have been used for student activities. Following are brief explanations of some of the work the students have been doing.

Forums

One of the most useful modules within Moodle for language teaching is the online forum. The students have been using these forums to discuss topics related to their studies. For example, over the summer vacation they participated in forums discussing what summer means to them and for reviews of events they attended during the summer break. Typically, one student would make a posting on a topic to which other students would respond. This was an excellent way for

getting students to publish their writing, read what others had written, and respond if they so wished.

Journals

Another useful writing tool is the journal module. This functions as an online diary, but is private to the student and the teacher. The most successful way to use this has been for a topic to be proposed to which the students respond. Some students write a lot of (often heartfelt) commentary; others write scant messages. The teacher can then respond privately to the student. In a number of cases, this has opened up dialogues with the quieter students who find it difficult to respond in class situations.

Quizzes

Moodle has powerful tools for creating many types of quizzes, including multiple choice, true/false, and short answer formats. These are useful for doing extension work after classroom sessions, introducing new material, or assessing students. In this installation of Moodle, we have added an extra "Hot Potatoes" module. Hot Potatoes is a suite of six applications, enabling users to easily create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering, and gap-fill exercises for accessing via the Internet. An overview of the software can be found on the English Department website at <http://www.seinan-jo.com/hotpotatoes/>.

Assignments

The assignments module allows teachers to create online tasks for students to complete, but we have found it most useful as a way for students to upload assignments for checking and editing, and then reposting after rewriting. This was useful during the English Department first semester speech contest when students were required to submit drafts of speeches, leading to a final version.

Future uses

There are still many facets of Moodle we have yet to use, but future implementations will hopefully include:

- *Blogs*—weblogs are one of the fastest-growing online activities for ESL students. Similar to a semi-public journal, they allow students to publish writing, pictures, and ideas for others to read and comment on. It is hoped to get students using these actively in the second semester.
- *Wikis*—because of their editable nature, these are powerful tools for collaborative assignments, as all participants can take part in the writing process. There is a short, but steep, learning curve to overcome but they open up huge possibilities. "Using a wiki changes the nature of a course website and the teacher's and students' relationship to it. Its casual editability encourages an improvisational approach, and it is very easy to come up with new activities or material even in the middle of a busy semester or term." (Lavin, 2006). Activities are being planned to take advantage of these with inter-class projects.
- *Glossary*—all students lack vocabulary, particularly when they first encounter the more colloquial styles of native English teachers. A communal glossary is one way of helping students build their vocabulary while engaged in building a resource. Moodle provides just such a tool with a glossary module that allows both teachers and students to add material to a virtual dictionary.

Successes

Although just one semester old, the English Department Moodle site is beginning to mature, and is being used more and more by students—not just to complete assignments, but as a communal space they enjoy visiting. The summer homework programme was as successful as it was because

the students were able to access and complete material online. It is being used more and more as an information repository, and the host-provided mailing list system has enabled us to initiate a student *e-news* service. For staff, it has provided a valuable space for planning, collaborating and archiving material, and full use has been made of its student-tracking features.

However, there are still some issues that need resolving or working around.

Issues
Student-related

As with any group of people, there are some individuals who possess exceptional computer skills and some who have absolutely none, with the majority falling somewhere in between. This has caused problems in getting students to uniformly use the site to its fullest extent. The good students are online often, and devour the material provided there, with the rest doing what they have to do and logging out as soon as they can. As the goal of the site is to encourage greater autonomy on the part of the learners, more work needs to be put into training students in the use of the site, and fostering understanding of the possibilities for language growth it could lead towards. While we, as teachers, cannot force them to use the site, through encouragement and example we can hopefully help them develop a more responsible, student-centered approach to their learning.

Teacher-related

For the teachers involved with the site, their learning curve has possibly been the highest. As with many CALL-related projects, the bulk of the work has fallen on those with the greatest personal investment in its use, with other staff taking on an amused, bystander role. This has meant big commitments of time and resources by a select few. Which is one of the biggest problems with creating online content—the time required is enormous for initial set-up, though once in place, it is fairly easily managed. Hopefully this

will change in the future as other staff members become more aware of the possibilities of this CMS.

Conclusion

This brings us back to the central question posed by the title: Are CMSs a viable alternative for language education? Hauck & Stickler (2006, p.465), in discussing roles and skills, state that a successful online tutor needs to:

1. combine and adapt different roles, including those of teacher, administrator, troubleshooter, and colearner;
2. have recourse to different styles of teaching (e.g., cognitive, social, etc.); and
3. develop new e-teaching skills

However, it needs to be asked whether in the current system of teaching and learning, and within the curricula that are in place in this university, this is the direction we should be heading. All indicators would say no. Our students need and respond to a face-to-face, hands-on style of teaching. There is no way that an online system of learning can—or should—replace the world of the classroom. An effective teacher can do so much more for a student than a static online resource is able to do, and that looks unlikely to change.

A direction we should be encouraging teachers and students to move towards is a *hybrid* approach. Hybrid courses are defined as "…classes in which instruction takes place in a traditional classroom setting augmented by computer-based or online activities which can replace classroom seat time" (Scida & Saury, 2006).

As our students become more and more comfortable with accessing and using material in an online CMS, then we should move to make that work an integral part of the course structure. Student should know from the outset that the online components are part of their course structure, and that not only are they required to do them, but the

work they do will actually benefit them! Classes should be given more flexibility so that students can rotate between online work and class work, both in and out of class times. This would give teachers greater flexibility, and allow them to focus on individuals and small groups, confident in the knowledge that other class members would be actively engaged.

But before this can happen, a few things need to change. One is the attitude of students and staff who view online learning as extension work only, or as a novelty, and not as serious study. The other is the commitment of the administration to putting funding, support, and staffing into place so that development, maintenance, and fostering of this resource doesn't fall on the shoulders of just a few committed individuals, but has the same status as other areas of development within the institution.

So, are CMSs a viable alternative for language education? Absolutely not, but they can, and should be, an integral part of the richness of language instruction that now includes class studies, guest speakers, immersion courses, field trips and camps, speech contests, extended assignments, and informal exchanges between staff and students.

Malcolm Swanson, September 2006

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Resources

Moodle: <http://www.moodle.org> — Information and downloads for the Moodle CMS.

Moodle tutorial: <http://www.siteground.com/tutorials/moodle/index.htm> — Step-by-step instructions on how to use Moodle

Hot Potatoes: <http://hotpot.uvic.ca/> — information on the Hot Potatoes exercise creation suite

Seinan Jo Gakuin English Department: <http://english.seinan-jo.com> — Guest access is available to the demonstration area [login: demo01 / password: guest]

オンライン学習プログラム管理システム
—語学教育にとっての実行可能な選択肢となるか—

マルコム・ロス・スワンソン

＜要　旨＞

　語学教育におけるコンピュータによる学習支援（CALL）に関する学会で最近もっともよく取り上げられる話題のひとつに、ウェブ上での授業管理システム（CMS）の使用についてがある。このシステムは、教師が学習プログラムを作成・維持し、また必要なだけの数の授業を管理できる強力なツールを提供する。また、学生は豊富な学習教材にいつでもどこでもアクセスできる。その学習教材は視覚的にも魅力的でかつ内容豊富であり、容易にアップグレードや再フォーマットすることができる。

　しかしながら、このようなシステムには明らかな魅力がある一方、現在入手可能になりつつあるほとんどの科学技術的なあるいはマルチメディア上の教育ツールと同じく欠点もあり、本論でもこれらのいくつかについて論じる。

　本論では、最初にCMSとは何か、そして現在どのようなシステムが入手可能かを紹介する。次に、その中で今日最も有効で人気のあるシステムとも言われているオープンソースシステムMoodle（ムードル）について詳述する。西南女学院大学におけるムードルを使用した授業のひとつを事例として論述し、次に大学のウエブサイトを使用して実際に行なっている授業にもとづいて、このような語学教育用システムの実効性について考察する。

　最後に、学習者と指導者双方のために構築されたこの環境は、ムードルのようなCMSを学習プログラムにうまく適用するには厳しい制約がある一方で、力を注ぐ価値がある試みであることを検証する。