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Using Moodle for *sairishu*

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Abstract: The Moodle system for e-learning has some formidable strengths and is generally promoted as an all encompassing tool for CALL interaction related to coursework, but those come hand in hand with some high entry barriers. In this presentation, we will discuss utilizing Moodle as an adjunct to a course in order to deal with the growing problem in Japanese tertiary education of *sairishu* (students who are taking a course for a second time) in order to promote regular study and participation in class goals. The specific module used was the Moodlereader module and the course was a 2nd year writing class, but the more general lessons suggest a path to introducing moodle as a course component.

1. Introduction

It is useful to step back for a moment and consider how the utilization of computers often 'raises the bar' for classroom requirements. This paper arose through work with a required writing course for 2nd year students taught in a department of British and American studies at a small private university taught in a blended CALL environment. When the course was initiated, regular posting to a blog was required and initially set at a minimum of 2500 words per term. As entry barriers have decreased and various aspects of the the course have become more efficient, that word total has increased, so that currently students now are asked to write 10,000 words in the first term and 15,000 words in the second term or ten times that figure, an increase that has taken place over the course of approximately 5 years. (For a summary of the course, please see [1] and [2]) These numbers are not ceilings and students in the course occasionally greatly exceed these totals. This has been accomplished not only by better and earlier teaching and acquisition of basic procedures and better classroom management, but also thru improvements in the software utilized and improved integration between various software programs.

But even as those expectations have increased, university education in Japan continues to face a number of challenges. While there is insufficient space to detail all of these challenges, it is obvious that a larger and larger minority of students are unwilling or perhaps unable to complete this amount of coursework. This presents the problem of how to deal with these students in the framework of the university curriculum and in this paper, we will suggest that this offers an opportunity to utilize some of the unique strengths of Moodle, either as a class adjunct or with an eye to using it as a full course requirement.

2. Course Specifics

At this point, it is necessary to give some specifics of the course in question. The 2nd year writing curriculum is required for all students,

who are streamed on the basis of an initial essay, also taking into account the opinion of 1st year teachers, and are required to make use of the Google suite of apps, which includes Blogger, the Google owned blogging portal. These blogs are the location to collect the student's writing so that it can be evaluated by class teacher. Staffing restrictions have 4 of the sections taught by 2 part time teachers who are full time teachers at another local university, while a full time teacher teaches two of the sections. The full time teacher teaches two of the sections, and in principal, students who have failed the course the first time are assigned to the full time teacher. However, as the requirements of the class expand, the number of students who fail the class increases, despite the fact that other students are able to go over and above the course requirements. This presents a dilemma, in that by maintaining the requirements with no added support may eventually overwhelm the system, making it impossible to teach the class because the number of so called 'sairishu' becomes unmanageable, but reducing the requirements for upper class students creates a situation where students may be encouraged to game the system, and choose to fail in 2nd year in the hope of reduced requirements in the 3rd or 4th year. While this may not be a conscious decision on the part of the student, an unconscious choice on the part of a even a larger minority than usual can overwhelm the system.

The writing course depends on a 'small things loosely joined' philosophy[3], relying on publically available software platforms that have no administrative management

requirements. (an overview of the use of blogs in this manner can be found in [4]) The course does this for a number of reasons, some of which include reducing the management load on teachers conducting the class, increasing student computer literacy and responsibility, allowing off campus access to assignments without security concerns, encouraging students to deal with concerns over e-etiquette and privacy and to allow student work to be accessible after graduation. However, in the case of repeating students, it is often the case that they need more support and monitoring in order to complete course requirements. With that in mind, we have adopted moodle to act as a class portal for these repeating students, (*sairishu*).

2. Incorporating Moodle

While this program has been progressing in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, a separate approach to CALL was initiated in the Economics Department 10 years previously to create a distribution and materials management system, and this effort led to the use of a Moodle installation (currently version 1.9.4) in 2007. Both of these efforts are not department wide, but only among interested teachers, which led to this project.

While it would have been option to move the entire class to the moodle, this would have entailed not only a reworking of all the supplementary support materials for class, but would have increased the administrator load. In addition, moving to a new software platform entails a potentially steep learning curve, so it is preferable to phase in such a move. While it is

not planned to move completely to a moodle environment, this process allows teachers with less familiarity to moodle to become acquainted with the software, which was the case for one of the two authors.

Joining the moodle was made a requirement for all students repeating the writing course. In this way, the moodle course page could function as a bulletin board to pass messages on to students without embarrassing them on a public bulletin board. In order to make sure that students checked the board, a requirement to take one quiz per week using the MoodleReader module[5] (more details about the module available at moodlereader.org). The MoodleReader module is designed to support an extensive reading component in the curriculum (see [6] and [7] for an introduction to Extensive reading) and is an effort to "offer teachers or entire school systems a practical way to test whether students have actually done the reading they claim to have done."

While the system is geared to provide a way to test students, in this case, the testing was incidental to the primary function, which was to require students to make a weekly check of the Moodle page associated with the class in case they had failed to complete assignments or had fallen behind. In this sense, using Moodle in this way is delegated subversion[8], where the software is used of a purpose outside of what it was originally designed for in order to better fill needs that arise within the group.

One of the great virtues of a Moodle set up is that it is a closed system, and this point makes it so the message board, as can be seen below, is

only seen by sairishu students.
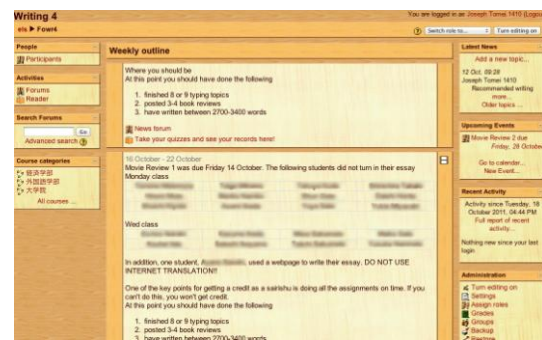
In order to have students view the message board weekly, the Moodlereader module was installed. These students are required to complete one quiz each week, though, as mentioned earlier, the purpose of the quiz module is being subverted, because no level or minimum score is required.
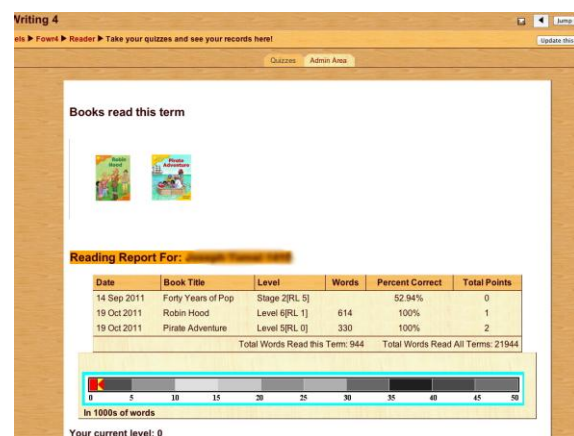
3. Conclusion

While this is the first term for this, use of Moodle in this way provides a framework to aid students who may require additional support and encouragement. Keeping this use in mind, further work might be to create Moodle modules that provide graphic representations of student access to all teachers and students, or provide scaffolding support for class material, or give students access to other students who are also in a similar situation.

Equally important, introduction in this way

provides an adoption path for faculty members who may not want to move their course completely to Moodle, but want to work with the system. In this sense, this adoption path for Moodle could be the stone that takes care of two birds.

References

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