

Piloting *Moodle*:
The Experience of Two Kwassui
Teachers and Their Students

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of This Article

The purpose of this article is to document and analyze the experience of two Kwassui teachers and their students with an online Learning Management System called *Moodle* in the second semester of the academic year 2005-2006. The authors hope that such an account may be useful to other educators.

This article is based on data gathered during the period 3 October 2005-30 January 2006. Data for the last ten days of the semester could not be included because of printing deadlines. Nevertheless, the authors felt that the quality and quantity of the information they had collected was sufficient to produce a clear picture of the ongoing effects of the use of *Moodle* in their classes.

1.2 Handling of Personal Information

Japan has strict privacy laws. To comply with such laws and with ethical research principles, at the beginning of the semester students were informed that, if they chose to log in to the college *Moodle* site, all their online activities would be recorded by the system and that the resulting data would be used by their teachers for study purposes. They were promised that no identifiable personal information contained in the system would be disclosed without their consent. The only exception was that each user of the site would be able to see the information contained in the “Profiles” of the other users. A privacy policy explaining this in great detail was also uploaded to the site.

1.3 Characteristics of *Moodle*

Moodle is a piece of software that allows educators to create

learning Web sites. Sites created with *Moodle* are protected by passwords. Besides the obvious benefit of keeping out intruders, this protection makes it possible to identify users and track their progress through the activities offered on the site. Moreover, the Web pages *Moodle* delivers to its users are not static but dynamic, i.e. the elements that appear on them are different depending on who the user is. For example, teachers looking at their course pages see buttons that allow them to modify the courses. Students looking at the same pages see no such buttons. That is because every time a user requests a page *Moodle* creates it on the fly taking into account the information it has on file about that user.

Teachers can use *Moodle* pages to provide students with a great number of learning activities. These can be created by *Moodle* itself or imported from other applications. Activities *Moodle* can create include Chat Rooms, Forums, Glossaries, Lessons, Quizzes, Surveys, Wikis, and Workshops. Sound files recorded in MP 3 format and video clips recorded in Flash format can easily be integrated into these activities.

Moodle also makes it easy to distribute files containing study materials to students. These files can be in any format, provided that the students have the relevant application installed on their local computer to view them. Thus, if a teacher wishes to distribute *Word* files, he or she must make sure that the students have *Word* installed on their computers. Alternatively, *Moodle* provides the tools to create or upload HTML materials that can be viewed directly in the students' browsers.

In *Moodle*, the activities and materials pertaining to a course are not found in different places on the site, as is the case with other Learning Management Systems. Instead, they are all listed on the main page for that course, where they can be organized by week or topic. Whenever activities have deadlines, these are automatically registered in *Moodle's* calendar, which displays reminders to the students on the main course page.

Moodle is particularly suited to promote collaborative learning. Many of the activities it provides transform everyone into a teacher as well as a learner. Forums encourage discussion and, therefore, the negotiation of meaning. Glossaries can be used by students to create their own dictionaries or encyclopedias as a class project. Wikis make it possible for students to author documents collectively. Workshops

allow students to collaborate on finding solutions to assigned problems and peer-assess these solutions. Although any subject can be taught with *Moodle*, the emphasis on collaborative learning makes it an ideal tool for communicative activities that are the heart and soul of modern language teaching.

This emphasis on a student-centered pedagogy derives from the convictions of the creator and lead developer of the software, Martin Dougiamas. Dougiamas believes that people learn best when they engage in collaborative efforts to create something for others to see. An obvious referent for this educational approach would be Seymour Papert, the mathematician and computer scientist whose “constructionist” pedagogy emphasizes learning by making. However, Dougiamas has also been influenced by social constructivism, a school of thought that originated with Vygotsky, who argued that social interaction influences cognitive development. In fact, the documentation found on the official *Moodle* community site, *Moodle.org*, states that *Moodle* is based on “social constructionist pedagogy.”

Moodle is open-source software, which means that everyone has access to its source code and can copy, modify, and redistribute it without having to pay any fee or royalty. Because of this, the software is supported by a community of enthusiastic developers spread all over the world. These developers constantly improve the software, fixing problems as they are discovered and adding new features. *Moodle*'s success as an online learning platform is evident from the fact that—according to *Moodle.org*—on 30 January 2006 there were 8910 registered sites in 144 countries. To date, the largest installation in the world belongs to the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, which reportedly serves 45,000 students, but in the UK the Open University has recently announced that it will use *Moodle* to build a comprehensive online learning environment for its 200,000 students that will be fully operational in February 2007.

1.4 Background of the Project

In the spring of 2005 Kwassui's English Department asked all staff to suggest new ways to improve the quality of teaching. One of the proposals was that it would be useful to install a computerized system that would allow staff to enhance their classes and, in particular, make sure that students put more effort into their homework. It suggested adopting *Moodle* because it had excellent

features, could be downloaded free of charge, and was supported by a wide community of users throughout the world. The department expressed interest in the proposal and approved the establishment of a pilot installation, while requesting funds to expand it the following year. With the cooperation of the IT staff, the software was set up on an old desktop computer, now transformed into a Linux intranet server. Because of the low specifications of this server (Celeron 333 MHz with 192 MB RAM, later upgraded to 384 MB), the number of simultaneous users had to be kept very small. Therefore, it was decided that no one would be allowed to use *Moodle* in class, that two teachers would use it in a somewhat intensive way to manage the homework of one English class each, and that a third teacher would only use it to run a ten-member forum in Japanese.

This article details the experience of the first two teachers, Sergio Mazzearelli and Andrew Gorringe, who decided to use *Moodle* with two classes of the same required course for second-year English majors. This course, called Writing and Speaking II, met twice a week and attempted to integrate spoken and written communication. The teachers believed that, among the courses they taught, this was the one that was likely to benefit most from the use of a Learning Management System. In particular, they felt that use of functions such as the forum may help to stimulate students who were often reluctant to speak out and express their ideas and opinions. Moreover, they hoped it would allow better management of the considerable number of writing assignments required by the course. They also considered the fact that in case of technical failure, this kind of course could proceed in an alternative manner without serious inconvenience for the students. To avoid catastrophic setbacks in case of server failure, the use of tools that would require the classes to be reshaped around them, such as the Workshop module, was ruled out. Finally, the two teachers agreed to conduct their experimentation independently, as this would allow them to tailor the course to the somewhat different ability levels of the two classes and to try out a wider range of features of the software.

Moodle sites require an administrator. In the case of the project described here, the role was performed by Sergio Mazzearelli, who had also been the originator of the proposal to use *Moodle* at Kwassui. However, this article will not cover technical details that would only

be of interest to administrators. Suffice it to say that it would be imprudent to try to install and administer *Moodle* in an institutional context without any understanding of the technical issues involved. In this case, the administrator could count on the support of Kwassui IT staff and was able to dedicate considerable time and effort to studying such issues. On the other hand, teachers who use *Moodle* can certainly get by with just basic computer literacy, as long as the administrator and IT staff provide introductory hands-on workshops and extend support whenever problems arise.

1.5 Setup of Kwassui's Site

The version of *Moodle* installed on the college server was a special RPM package designed to solve the encoding problems that affect sites using both Japanese and English on the same page. Two additional modules were also installed: *Review Assignment*, an alternative assignment module developed at Humboldt State University that allows teachers to return files containing assignments to their students; and the *Book* module, a tool to handle long HTML documents.

All users were registered manually by the system administrator. To avoid confusion, it was decided that students should log in to the college *Moodle* site with the same ID and password they used to log in to the college network.

Moodle is designed so as to keep users informed of what happens on the Web site through e-mail notifications. For example, by default anyone who posts to a forum is "subscribed" to it, i.e. from that time on receives copies of all postings to that forum. Therefore, every user is required to have an e-mail address. Although probably all Kwassui students have mobile phones, the use of mobile-phone addresses was ruled out because students would incur charges and the technology is only suited to short messages. Therefore, Kwassui's internal e-mail addresses were used.

It soon became evident, however, that students did not check their institutional e-mail very often, so if a teacher clicked on the e-mail address in the student's "Profile" to send her a message there was no guarantee that the student would actually read the message within a short time. For the same reason, copies of messages from the *Moodle* forums did not turn out to be very useful, and students checked the forums by logging in to the site. E-mail messages sent by

the system to teachers were, however, useful, keeping them abreast of developments in the forums and notifying them when students submitted assignments. Since the site could not be accessed off-campus, checking the e-mail was the only way a teacher had to monitor the system from a remote location.

For privacy reasons, each student's "Profile" was set so that her e-mail address would be invisible to other students unless she chose to make it visible. Moreover, no personal information other than the name of the student and her e-mail address was recorded in the "Profile," and students were instructed not to add any such information. The "City/town" field was filled with "Nagasaki" for all students.

Making the students' addresses invisible had an unforeseen drawback in that submission notifications for one kind of assignment, the "Online Text" type, became unusable. If enabled, these notifications would be sent to the teacher without the name of the student who submitted the assignment. It is hoped that this minor problem, reported by the administrator to the Moodle developers, will be solved in a future release of the software.

Moodle's buttons and menus can be displayed in many languages, including Japanese. Initially, it was thought that English courses should be entirely in English and that a carefully prepared explanatory handout distributed at the beginning of each course would be sufficient to clear up any doubts. However, this policy proved to be counterproductive, as many students appeared unable to navigate the site. Therefore, settings were changed at the course level to allow students to see menus and buttons in Japanese.

1.6 Instructions Provided to Students

A handout, illustrated with screenshots from the site, was distributed during the first class. This proved insufficient, and another handout had to be provided a few weeks later. For some students, however, teachers had to schedule short hands-on tutorials in their offices.

Although *Moodle* does not require advanced computing skills, basic computer literacy is necessary to use it. While it is often assumed that because students use computers to type and browse the Web they are computer literate, experience proves that this is not the case. Since computer literacy is also useful on the job market, the

little time necessary to impart it is certainly not wasted. Therefore, the best recommendation one can give is that teachers who use *Moodle* take their students to a computer lab at the beginning of the class and make sure that certain fundamental concepts, such as how to locate files on one's local machine and upload them to a remote server, are understood by all. Printed instructions, no matter how detailed, can never replace hands-on instruction. In the case of these classes, the limitations of the server on which *Moodle* was run prevented the teachers from scheduling computer-lab workshops, and a price was paid in terms of a slow start. It must be said, however, that students did finally realize the importance of computer literacy and credited the classes for helping them acquire it.

1.7 Setup of an Additional Site

At the beginning of January 2006, the administrator registered a personal domain name, opened an account with a shared-hosting provider in the United States, and created a personal *Moodle* site accessible from the Internet. One reason for this was that some of his students had lamented the fact that they could not access the site from home, while students staying at the college dormitory were able to do so. However, the administrator was also keen to explore the implications of making a *Moodle* site available on the Web. Shared-hosting providers are entitled to suspend service if a user's software absorbs more than a certain share of the capacity of the server on which it is installed. Therefore, this additional site was made available only to the class taught by the administrator.

Because no server connected to the Internet can be totally secure from hackers, the administrator decided that the site should contain no identifiable personal information. Therefore, all students were registered with pseudonyms and were given new IDs and passwords different from those they used to access the college site. Since *Moodle* does not allow registration without an e-mail address, students were registered with imaginary addresses that were set as "disabled." The "City/Town" field in each student's "Profile" was filled with the word "Undisclosed." Finally, students were reminded that they must not add any information to their "Profile."

1.8 Log Use

Everything students do in *Moodle* is recorded in logs. These proved helpful to identify problems. For example, it was easy to

recognize if a student was clicking the wrong buttons while trying to do something. Certain behavioral patterns were also interesting to watch. For example, students logged in repeatedly just to look at a new forum to see if anyone had started the discussion. This behavior persisted even after the forums for one of the classes had been transferred to the Internet-based site, where the students appeared under pseudonyms. Therefore, in forums where students appear under their real names it would probably be a good idea to assign someone the task of beginning a discussion. In forums where only the teacher knows the identity of the students, extra points could be given to whoever posts the first comment.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF SERGIO MAZZARELLI'S CLASS

2.1 The Class

This class was composed of 20 students whose English skills were comparatively high and who had shown diligence and motivation during the first term. Students were required to write two drafts each of five compositions and complete a weekly journal. Compositions were graded for content, organization, and grammatical/syntactical accuracy. The topics of the compositions were derived from those practiced during class discussions that represented the "speaking" part of the course. The journal grade depended only on the number of words written. There were no final written exams, but formal oral assessments were conducted during the semester. These included both interviews with the teacher and recordings in the language lab.

2.2 Organization of the Online Activities

From the beginning of October to the beginning of January all online activities were conducted on the college intranet Web site. The only required activities were the submission of compositions and the completion of quizzes and exercises. Forums were optional: their word-count would be added to that in the journal.

Beginning from 10 January 2006, the teacher made his personal *Moodle* site available to his students over the Internet. This site was used to host forums, which became required assignments, and to allow the optional submission of journals. Other activities remained on the college site.

2.3 Forums

The forums were probably the most rewarding experience for both teacher and students. The results were encouraging even though for most of the period covered by this article the forums were not accessible from the Internet and participation in them was voluntary. The total length of all students' contributions to the forums, 9,881 words, may not seem particularly impressive. However, intelligent communication that had never been possible before became a daily reality.

Although students were aware that the grade for forum submissions depended solely on the number of words they wrote, a rating scale for postings was created using *Moodle*'s "Scales" function. The ratings on this scale were: Excellent, Very Good, Good, Acceptable, and Try Harder. Each student could only see the ratings of her own postings. The purpose of the scale was mainly to provide encouragement and to signal to a student that her posting had been read.

The first week of the course the teacher assigned a topic for the forum, "Is There a Right Age to Get Married?", and the response over the following month was positive, if somewhat slow. Then the students asked him whether they could decide the topics themselves. Sensing enthusiasm for the new medium and not wanting to quell it, the teacher agreed. Activity on the forums became brisker. There were three discussions, each lasting about two weeks. The topics were "English Education for Children", "What Do You Plan to Do after Graduating?", and "What Are Your Favorite Movies?" The amount of writing produced in each forum was roughly the same.

However, while the topic suggested by the teacher and the first topic suggested by students generated real discussion, the other two topics simply led to each student expressing her opinions without much discussion. Therefore, students were asked to come up with new topics during a brainstorming session in class. Criticism of previous topics was avoided. Students were simply told that from then on the topics had to prompt discussion. This coincided with the move to the new site where they would be anonymous to each other and posting to the forums would become required assignments, so the new topics seemed part of this transition. With little difficulty, students were able to identify suitable topics. These were "Is the Increasing

Popularity of Cosmetic Surgery a Good Thing?”, “How Can Education at Kwassui Be Improved?”, “Many Young People Do Not Pay Their National Pension Premiums. What Do You Think about That?”, “Does Japan Need the Self Defense Forces?”, and “Should Women Be Allowed to Ascend to the Japanese Throne?” To increase motivation, students were told that the topics of in-class discussions and the final oral exam would be drawn from the forums. Although at the time of this writing the discussion in the new forums has not been finished, the results look very positive. This is due to the fact that both the students and the teacher were able to interact more effectively. Students checked the forum more often and the teacher, who has a broadband Internet connection at home, was better able to stimulate constructive discussion.

2.4 Compositions

Compositions were planned and sometimes begun in class, but always completed as homework. Students were required to type them using *Word* and upload them to the *Moodle* site. The compositions were marked and printed by the teacher, who then returned them to the students in class. Students were given a chance to review the corrections and ask for clarifications before writing a second draft, which was also uploaded to the site and returned in class.

The *Moodle* site provides a convenient and efficient way to collect compositions and record grades. However, it provides no tools to mark the compositions. Therefore, different strategies to accomplish this were tested during the semester.

Initially, the teacher decided to take advantage of the “Reviewing Toolbar” in *Word*. Two functions of this toolbar were used: “Insert Comment” and “Track Changes.” “Insert Comment” allows the teacher to add comments to a student’s composition. Comments appear in text boxes positioned on the right margin of the article and, if there is not sufficient space, are continued at the bottom as if they were endnotes. “Track Changes” records any changes the teacher makes to the composition. Each change is described in a box that also appears on the right margin of the article. Dotted lines connect each box containing comments or changes to the point in the text to which they refer.

Unfortunately, this system did not seem completely satisfactory. The “Reviewing Toolbar” was not conceived as a tool for language

teaching. It is really a tool for fluent writers, for example the staff of a company, to author documents collaboratively. If a composition contains many mistakes the teacher's comments, even though expressed in abbreviated form, soon crowd the right margin. Moreover, changes in formatting generate an inordinate amount of automatic annotation. As a result, it soon becomes difficult to tell the dotted lines apart and identify the point to which each comment refers. The most natural way to use the reviewing toolbar is to rewrite parts of a composition suggesting alternatives. However, this would not be an effective pedagogic practice with all but the most advanced learners.

To try to improve the situation, a new marking system was devised. The "Insert Comment" function was used only for suggestions that could not easily be abbreviated, and the "Track Changes" function was not used any more. Instead, abbreviations indicating the kind of mistake a student had made were inserted by the teacher immediately after the word or words they referred to. The teacher used square brackets to distinguish these abbreviations from the student's original text. However, the brackets were often overlooked by students when revising their compositions, so the bracketed comments had to be highlighted in red. This worked quite well for the students. There was a definite improvement in the quality of their revisions, which seemed to be not only superior to what it had been during the previous stage of experimentation, but also to anything they had achieved when compositions were annotated by hand.

However, the teacher's workload increased considerably. Although keyboard shortcuts were created to simplify the task of marking up the compositions, the marking process was often cumbersome and time-consuming. Therefore, this method cannot be recommended to teachers with large classes or heavy workloads. It would, of course, be possible to speed things up by creating a custom marking toolbar for *Word* using macros, but the teacher of this course did not feel he had the time or skills to accomplish this.

Finally, a satisfactory solution was found in the form of a dedicated computer program called *Markin*. This program was designed for language teachers and features a marking toolbar with buttons for each of the common kinds of errors language learners make, such as "Subject-Verb Agreement Error," "Article Error,"

“Capitalization Error,” “Conjunction Error,” and so on. The teacher can insert error codes in the text by simply positioning the cursor where he or she wants the codes to appear and clicking on the relevant button. The twenty-seven standard error buttons can be supplemented by others created by the teacher if the need arises. Apart from the error buttons, there are also five “praise” buttons that insert positive comments such as “Good Choice of Vocabulary!” and “I agree.” All codes appear graphically well distinguished from the student’s original text through the use of such font attributes as superscript, italics, and color. However, the program can make adjustments to maximize impact without using color if the teacher is using a monochrome printer. In addition, the program allows the teacher to insert longer comments, which appear in the form of numbered endnotes. It is also possible to export the marked up text to a Web page which can then be sent to students. In this case, notes are displayed in pop-up text boxes and feedback is accessed through hyperlinks. When this option was used to return the first draft of the final composition, the students’ enthusiasm was palpable. On that occasion, the teacher held the class in a computer lab, and students were able to type their second drafts in *Word* while looking at the marked-up copies of their first drafts in their Web browsers. Because of the limitations of the current server, it was not possible to use *Moodle* to distribute and collect the files, and a network drive was used instead. However, *Moodle* certainly has this capability and the teacher looks forward to taking advantage of it in the future.

Although *Markin* is not free, it is reasonably priced (\$34.20 for a license, with a \$17.10 fee for each additional user), and appears to be an ideal complement to *Moodle* for teachers requiring students to submit long writing assignments. As its existence was discovered towards the end of the experimentation period, there was not enough time for extensive testing, but its qualities of speed and ease of use were evident at first sight. The only major limitations appear to be that there is no Macintosh version and that the RTF/HTML formats it supports do not allow the use of advanced layout features such as running titles. On the other hand, such features are not essential except when writing a thesis. Moreover, RTF and HTML files can be opened by any computer and do not require the user to have a copy of *Word*.

2.5 Quizzes

Moodle's quiz module was used to administer short tests for which there would have been no time in class. This allowed the teacher to make sure that students had, for example, read certain sections of the textbook. As the purpose of these quizzes was not testing but practice, the teacher decided to set no deadlines and to allow students to take them as many times as they liked until they reached a perfect score. However, not all students did so, perhaps because they did not understand that this was possible. Moreover, some students procrastinated taking the quizzes, so deadlines had to be introduced in the end and seemed to prove beneficial. Most of the quizzes were of the multiple-choice type, but the short-answer type was also used. The latter requires the students to type in their answers and therefore, besides insuring that a student is able to recall rather than simply recognize words, allows the practice of grammar, spelling, and capitalization. However, great care must be exercised in designing the questions because the teacher has to be able to foresee all possible correct answers and input them into *Moodle*. In practice, this is feasible if the required answers are short. As *Moodle* records all students' answers, it is also good practice to check them to make sure no correct answers have been marked as wrong. Thus a teacher can create banks of "tested" questions that can be reused in the future.

Although the quiz module was easy to use, it was thought important to experiment with a popular alternative to it, the *Hot Potatoes* software suite. This creates quizzes on a teacher's local machine and therefore the creative process is faster than it would be with *Moodle*. Once composed, *Hot Potatoes* quizzes can easily be uploaded to *Moodle*. The suite creates six kinds of quizzes: multiple choice, jumbled sentence, crossword, matching/ordering, and cloze. The quizzes JavaScript-based interface allows drag-and-drop operations to be performed and is generally appealing. However, there is a drawback in that questions cannot be added to the *Moodle* banks for future use or easily shared between courses. Another issue is security, as the JavaScript code of *Hot Potatoes* exercises contains the correct answers. Thus, a savvy student could discover a way to cheat if these kinds of quizzes were used for unmonitored tests.

The *Hot Potatoes* multiple-choice quiz interface was not felt to be

superior to the one in *Moodle* for the purposes of this writing course, although its main advantage, the fact that it can display a passage alongside the questions that refer to it, may recommend it to teachers wishing to create certain reading comprehension activities. In *Moodle*'s quiz module the passage must be placed above the questions. Therefore, a fair amount of scrolling is necessary if there are many questions and the student wishes to refer back to the passage. Alternatively, questions may be distributed over several short pages, but then the student must use the "Next" and "Previous" buttons to navigate back and forth between the questions and the passage. Instead, *Hot Potatoes* allows the questions to be displayed one by one on the left side of the passage. "Next" and "Previous" buttons only affect the display of questions.

On the other hand, the *Hot Potatoes* cloze-making application was found to be much easier to use than the facility in *Moodle*'s quiz module, which still lacks a graphical user interface. Therefore, a *Hot Potatoes* cloze was created and successfully administered to the students.

On the whole, *Hot Potatoes* can usefully supplement *Moodle* in the creation of clozes and reading exercises, for which the *Moodle* interface is not very satisfactory, and crossword puzzles, which *Moodle* does not create. However, its advantages must always be weighed against the above-mentioned drawbacks. To these, one must add the fact that *Hot Potatoes* is not free if one wishes to use it to create password-protected activities such as the ones in *Moodle* (a single-user license costs \$120, a five-user licence \$420). Teachers must also remember, though it is a minor issue, that *Hot Potatoes* quizzes are not automatically added to the *Moodle* calendar.

2.6 Online Assignments

The online assignment option was used for grammatical and syntactical exercises that required students to write sentences longer than those suitable for automatic correction. Some students typed their sentences directly in *Moodle*'s submission box, but the teacher recommended that they type them in a word-processing application first and then paste them into *Moodle*. This is because if there were a malfunction when a student hits the submit button, she would run the risk of losing everything she wrote. The teacher corrected the exercises using *Moodle*'s inline HTML editor, which allows the use of

features such as colors and strikethrough. The results were satisfactory, but the process is time-consuming because all functions are invoked via the browser. Therefore, this procedure can only be recommended for short exercises and/or small classes.

After the creation of the new Internet site students were given the option to submit their journals through it, but only a few did. This may have been due to the fact that they had got used to writing in their notebooks. For his part, the teacher found reading journals through the Web site very comfortable and enjoyable. Using the HTML editor to type responses presented no problems.

2.7 Resources

Although students received hard copies of all handouts in class, extra copies were uploaded to the main course page to allow them to prepare ahead of time if they so wished, and to review materials even if they did not have the handouts with them. Since all students had *Word* installed on their computers, most handouts were uploaded in that form. Other handouts were converted into HTML so that students could view them within *Moodle*. However, the “Save as Web Page” option in *Word* is not very successful with documents that contain complex formatting features such as text boxes. It is also necessary to make sure that the document to be converted does not contain “smart” quotes as they do not display correctly in HTML. Another option was to create handouts directly in HTML using *Moodle*’s editor or Web page authoring software such as *FrontPage*. The teacher used *Moodle*’s editor to create simple Web pages, but preferred to use *FrontPage* for more complex tasks. *Moodle*’s editor is easier to use, but a dedicated authoring application is faster and offers more controls.

To simplify the handling of long HTML documents, the teacher took advantage of *Moodle*’s *Book* module. This links multiple pages through an index and provides buttons to flip through them as if they were the pages of a book. Thus, instead of one long page that would have required the students to scroll through it, many short pages were created that were much easier to navigate.

2.8 Grades

Moodle provides a very sophisticated grade-book. The teacher made numerous experiments with it and can attest that it works well. For security reasons, grades were only recorded on the college site. For the

teacher, who had always been reluctant to write any grades on written assignments lest they be seen by other students, this was an ideal solution. In addition, previously the only way for students to know their grades for oral activities had been to visit the teacher's office – something they had been very reluctant to do. Indeed, the new system of grade delivery proved to be popular with students, who often checked the site to see how they had done on specific assignments and activities.

2.9 Students' Feedback

On 25 January 2006, an anonymous feedback survey was administered to the class. The survey asked students to evaluate the impact of the *Moodle* Web sites on their learning experience. The response was very encouraging. For example, all twenty students thought that the Web sites had made the class better: eleven said "a little better" and nine "much better." Asked to explain this evaluation, most students referred to the experience they had had in the forums as being particularly significant. Although a few did mention learning new "phrases," increased "opportunity to use English," and "studying by seeing my classmates' English" as benefits they derived from participating in the forums, what was most striking was that the majority chose to highlight the positive effects on their cognitive and social maturation. This suggested that, thanks to the forums, English had become for them a vehicle of authentic communication. Here are some of their comments: "I am interested in many things, for example, politics, history, and so on. I could broaden my horizons. It is fine for me to communicate with a lot of friends on Web sites"; "I think forums are good. I think many people became to think about some difficult topics and we can know some opinions about them"; "I could exchange opinions with other students on the Web sites. There are many interesting topics in the forum, so I considered harder"; "To state own opinion is good."

Those who did not mention the forums as the main merit of the Web sites chose to praise the convenience of electronic submissions, the ease with which electronic documents can be edited, the benefits of *Moodle's* calendar functions, and above all the increased opportunity to hone their computing skills. Here are a few examples: "Deadline became clear, so I could have consciousness for the home works. To use computers, we can learn about systems of computer

more, because we do not have enough time or enough classes using computers”; “Students can submit any homeworks from anywhere”; “I had a chance to learn how to use computer, for example, how to update, and type formal English report.” As for the clarification of deadlines, it must be said that during the first class students had been given printed schedules detailing all course activities. Therefore, what some students appreciated must be the reinforcement provided by the chronological organization of the activities on the main course page and the timely reminders provided by the calendar function. As for the acquisition of better computing skills, it was obviously a motivating factor for a number of students, and not only for those who chose to mention it in the feedback survey. Although teaching computer literacy was not among the goals of the course, it may be considered an added benefit.

Another question asked students whether the Web sites had had any effect on the amount of time they spent on their homework. One student reported that she was studying more than two hours longer every week, seven about two hours longer, and nine about one hour longer. Only two students reported no change in their study habits, and one stated that she was spending one hour less on her homework because she found it easier to type than to write by hand. It also seemed significant that no one complained about having to study harder. The only student who commented on the increased workload wrote, “I took enjoyment in my assignment. Of course it is hard for me to do my homework every week, but I did not feel pain.”

Finally, eighteen students believed that it was necessary to have a *Moodle* site available on the Internet. This suggested that it would be appropriate to explore the possibility of transferring the college *Moodle* site to the Internet.

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF ANDREW GORRINGE’S CLASS

3.1 Planning the Class

The class had fifteen students, whose English skills were comparatively low. Prior to the start of the semester a detailed plan of the type of activities and homework requirements was conceived, and the activities and resources that would be used by the students on *Moodle* were formulated. In this class it was decided that all

classroom handouts would also be made available on the *Moodle* class page, and that a Glossary would be created so that important words and phrases could be easily checked and cross-referenced by the students. Students would also be able to upload written assignments such as compositions and the journal to the page where they could be checked and commented on by the teacher. A forum was created where students could discuss topics freely, and a short practice listening quiz was made. Finally at the end of the course a feedback questionnaire was completed by all students. Since this was the first time that *Moodle* was used at Kwassui other useful features of the software were not used. For example, the Wiki function would certainly have been used, since its collaborative text creation features would complement the class well.

3.2 Handouts

Classroom handouts were the first resource created for the students on the *Moodle* page. In *Moodle* this can be done in several ways. In this class two methods were used. The first way is simply to upload the document as a file into *Moodle*. If this is done, when the student clicks on the file name a separate window opens and the student opens the file through the word processing software She is using (for example *Word*). The advantage of this method is that it is easy for the teacher, and the formatting of the document is in its original state. Another way to post handouts is to create a page on the Web site simply by using the *Moodle* software and make either a Web page or a text page. The advantage of this method is that important words in the page can be automatically hyperlinked to the Glossary (described below). In this class both methods were used and the students often used this feature, especially those handouts that dealt with specific tasks or assignments the students had to complete for homework.

3.3 Glossary

The next resource created for the class was the Glossary. This feature of *Moodle* gives the teacher the option of presenting words or phrases that can be linked with their definitions throughout the whole *Moodle* class page. For example, in this class the word “assignment” was defined as “an assignment in this class is usually a composition or journal you have to do for homework.” Whenever the word “assignment” appeared on the class page, for example, in a

forum discussion, the word was hyperlinked to its definition. In total some thirteen class-specific words were used in the Glossary, and students, especially at the beginning of the semester, used the feature quite often.

3.4 Compositions

As part of the course requirements for the class, students had to write five compositions with two drafts for each composition. The second draft of the composition had to be typed. In this class after typing their second draft, students were asked to upload their compositions (to be corrected and assessed by the teacher) to the *Moodle* class page. This is quite a simple task since all the teacher has to do is create an “assignment” activity in *Moodle* and check the option “Upload a Single File.” The teacher can also set a due by date and allow for (or not) late submissions. Students then click on the assignment activity and upload the file. Once the file is uploaded an e-mail can be sent to the teacher signaling the arrival of the uploaded file. In this class the teacher corrected the assignments using the “Track Changes” feature in *Word*. The corrected assignments were then printed out and handed back to the students in class. Of course, the teacher could have corrected the assignments and returned them electronically through *Moodle*.

After a few “teething” troubles—including a composition sent to a different teacher—this activity in *Moodle* worked well for the students. Students gained in their ability to type English and use computer software. They also seemed to take more care over the presentation of their work—making sure that their compositions were formatted correctly. In the feedback questionnaire about this feature student comments were overwhelmingly positive and included statements such as “It was very good for me, for it is useful and I can learn how to write on the computer” and “It is useful and I can know my mistakes easily”.

3.5 Journal

Another of the course requirements for this class was the journal. In this class the journal was defined in the glossary thus: “In your journal you can write about anything you want. For example, you can write about what you have been doing, where you have been or how you are feeling. Anything is okay!” The journal requirement to pass the class was fifteen pages of double spaced writing in a notebook,

which comes to about 150 words a page. In this class students could use *Moodle* for the journal, a notebook or a combination of both. On submission of the journal, the teacher used the HTML editor to write comments on the students' journal work underneath their original text. To set up the journal activity is again very simple in *Moodle*. The teacher creates an "assignment" activity as with the composition described earlier but instead of checking the option "Upload a Single File" the teacher checks "Online Text." Again the teacher can set a due by date and allow for late submissions if need be.

Again, as with the compositions, the students' response to the activity was positive. For example, "When I write a journal, I can use a lot of face marks. It is cute and fun" and "It is great." However, because the activity could not be done at home on the students' own computers but only at college or in the college dormitory most students used the notebook for their journal.

3.6 Forum

Another activity that was used in this class was the forum and this was used in conjunction with the speaking part of the class and integrated later into the writing part. Each week the teacher would give the students a topic to discuss on the forum. Once all students had submitted their comments on the topic the teacher would then discuss the topic in class and then set it as one of the compositions. For example, the topic "An Important Place in my Life" was used as forum topic and the students given five days to post their thoughts and comments. Students then discussed the topic in the next class, and were then given a "description" composition with the same title to complete as homework. To set up the forum on *Moodle* is easy. The teacher simply selects the forum activity and writes a title and description. All postings to the forum are automatically sent as e-mail to all students who can then reply to and/or comment on their friends' ideas.

This activity worked particularly well in this class since the use of the forum did inspire the students to more effective communication in the classroom. The students also liked this feature of *Moodle* and comments such as these were common in the feedback: "I liked to do it, for I liked to chat with my friends."

3.7 Quiz

The last feature of *Moodle* used in the class was an online

listening quiz. The reason for the use of such a test in this class was not one of finding out the relative merits of the students' English ability but rather to give the students experience of taking online tests. The quiz consisted of 26 listening questions with four-option multiple-choice answers. Creating the quiz was time consuming but quite simple, and once everything was prepared, marking and grading was automatic. There are numerous options in this feature of *Moodle*. For example, the teacher can add a time limit, allow the students to make multiple attempts at the quiz, and also allow the students to review their answers after the quiz has been completed. Once the test has been completed all grades are collated and there are various statistical analyses that can be performed on the items in the quiz.

In this class students were allowed to take the test as many times as they wanted over the course of a week. The students found it easy to use *Moodle* for the test and surprisingly (since it was a quiz!) feedback was positive with comments such as "I can know mistakes, so it is good" and "I can listen again and again, and I can do it in my own good time."

4. CONCLUSION

This article described the experiences of two teachers using *Moodle* at Kwassui during the second semester 2005-2006. The two teachers taught the same course—Writing and Speaking II—to two classes of relatively different ability, and chronicled their and their students' experiences. Although learning how to use *Moodle* appeared rather daunting at first, it was soon apparent that the software was easy to apply and use, and overall the experience of using *Moodle* was positive for both students and teachers. It was found that the features of *Moodle* used during the semester complemented the goals of the course and helped the students to use more English. Furthermore, because of the flexibility of the features in *Moodle* it was easy for the teachers to adapt activities and tasks to the different ability levels of the classes. It was also noted that through using *Moodle* and its features students gained more confidence in both their English and their computing skills, thus making the experience doubly worthwhile.

As mentioned above, the server used for this experiment was not

particularly powerful. However, the department has now obtained funds to deploy a new server that should be operational by April 2006. Therefore, during the next academic year it will be possible for teachers to take advantage of the full array of *Moodle*'s features. Like the current *Moodle* server, the new server was originally supposed to be accessible only from the campus intranet. However, on the basis of the experience described in the present article, both teachers and students felt that it would be beneficial if it could be connected to the Internet, and their wish was finally granted.

Over the course of the next year, the authors of this article will be joined by other English department teachers in using *Moodle* with other classes teaching different skills. Beyond this they are particularly interested in having students, especially those who are training to be teachers, use *Moodle* to create their own activities, tasks, and even tests. They hope that this software will help usher in a new era in the long and distinguished history of education at Kwassui Women's College.

NOTE

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