Learners' perceptions of using Moodle Books
in online ESP courses

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Abstract. This paper examines learners' perceptions of using Moodle books in the online course module *Contemporary society: conflicts and consensus* at Casa Grande University, Ecuador. It describes how learners perceived the use of Moodle books in 48-hour English content based courses. Courses were designed for final year students with a B2 English proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Foreign languages (CEFR). The learners used Moodle books to access content organized and programmed in six thematic units according to the course learning objectives. Learners used content to access reading material and complete tasks planned synchronously and asynchronously. Learners responded to a post course survey in courses that ran from 2020 to 2021. The purpose of the survey was to know how learners perceived the organization, functionality, and effectiveness of Moodle books when accessing hyper-texted content, multimedia resources, and digital tools for content management, communication, and interaction in online courses for English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Keywords: Moodle VLE/CMS, online courses, learning platform.

1.   Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the use of online learning platforms such as *Moodle*, *it's learning* and *blackboard* has become commonplace in universities all over the world. It is possible to see these platforms as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) where students engage in learning activities relating to their course module and as purely administrative tools to communicate with course participants, update grades, or track progress (Course Management Systems – CMSs), or as a mixture

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of both conceptualizations. An early introduction to VLE/CMSs and a discussion of the institutional choices involved in the adoption of online learning platforms can be found in Weller (2007). With the recent pandemic increasingly forcing higher education institutions to adopt online or blended solutions, the place of online learning platforms at university level seems assured, at least for the time being.

The rise of the VLE/CMS phenomenon has put increasing pressure on teaching staff to become 'learning designers' who need to carefully consider the structure, clarity, and ease of navigation of the materials they put on the platforms. An additional requirement is that learners should be able to access VLE/CMSs through the interfaces of mobile phones and devices as well as stationary computers.

One consequence of these concerns is that many Moodle sites may not be adequately designed, with long sequences of incoherent and haphazardly arranged materials, forums, and assignment holders. At this point it seems fair to say that technology is not fully serving its purpose when/if content is not properly categorized and organized. In this respect, Egbert (2005) points out that "technology accomplishes learning goals with less time and work for teachers and learners" (p. 12) in guidelines for using educational technology in language classrooms. This is obviously not the case when/if Moodle activities are time consuming and disconnected.

Another consequence is that Moodle sites may not be intuitive enough. In other words learners may not access and interact easily if content is not arranged and presented properly. Learners are Moodle independent site users and make their own choices in the VLE. Richards and Lockhart (1996) describe some characteristics of language learners when he states that "learners, too, bring to learning their own beliefs, goals, attitudes, and decisions, which in turn influence how they approach learning" (p. 52). They need a clear path to manage content and navigate. Therefore, content design and presentation play an important role in facilitating content navigation and interaction.

In Moodle, platform developers have attempted to counteract these problems through the use of so-called 'books' which enable teaching staff to compress and structure large amounts of text and graphics in the form of numbered chapters and subchapters. Referring to the scientific basis of learning published in the volume *How people learn*, Bransford, Brown, and Cooking (2003) state that "[l]earning and understanding can be facilitated in learners by emphasizing organized, coherent bodies of knowledge" (p. 239). This volume reports on scientific research on the new science of learning, providing information about:

- memory and structure of knowledge;
- problem solving and reasoning;
- the early foundations of learning; and
- regulatory processes that govern learning, including metacognition (Bransford et al., 2003, p. 14).

The purpose of this study is to describe learners' perceptions of the use of Moodle books in ESP courses. The study is within the context of higher education in South America[3], a continent which in some quarters have been seen to be lagging in terms of digitalization. It looks at how 49 learners accessed Moodle books through the course menu. The menu was structured in six units and unit tasks. It additionally included menu options such as a general bulletin board used to coordinate activities, tests, and events, a 'coffee lounge' for social interaction, and a wiki to maximize research among participants. Learners used a Moodle book in every unit to access topics and subtopics organized in chapters and subchapters. They read hyperlinked material and used digital resources to complete tasks sequenced numerically through the main menu. Moodle books included visual aids, videos, and presentations to support and develop content. Students' perceptions were collected in a Google survey form at the end of the course.

2.   Method

The students, aged 20 to 22, took the course in the third year of studies. The students were all Spanish native speakers but they used English in ESP classes to communicate, interact, and complete their tasks. All of them had a B2 English proficiency level which is an academic requirement to take advanced English content subjects.

The data source was a post-class survey. Forty-nine students answered the survey in Google Forms at the end of the courses from 2020 to 2021.The aim of the survey was to gather information about students' perceptions and feedback of the organization, functionality, and effectiveness of Moodle books. Students responded to seven questions. All questions focused on students' opinions about the use of Moodle books in their courses. The first six questions included different items of choices related to the use of Moodle books in online courses. Items were ranked on a Likert grading scale according to students' individual choices. Question 7 was an open question requiring students' additional comments.

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3. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/14bb093f-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/14bb093f-en

3. Results and discussion

The results from the survey are presented below in the form of a fairly self-explanatory histogram of the responses from the students (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Learner responses to the survey questions, rated a Likert scale of one (no agreement) to seven (complete agreement)
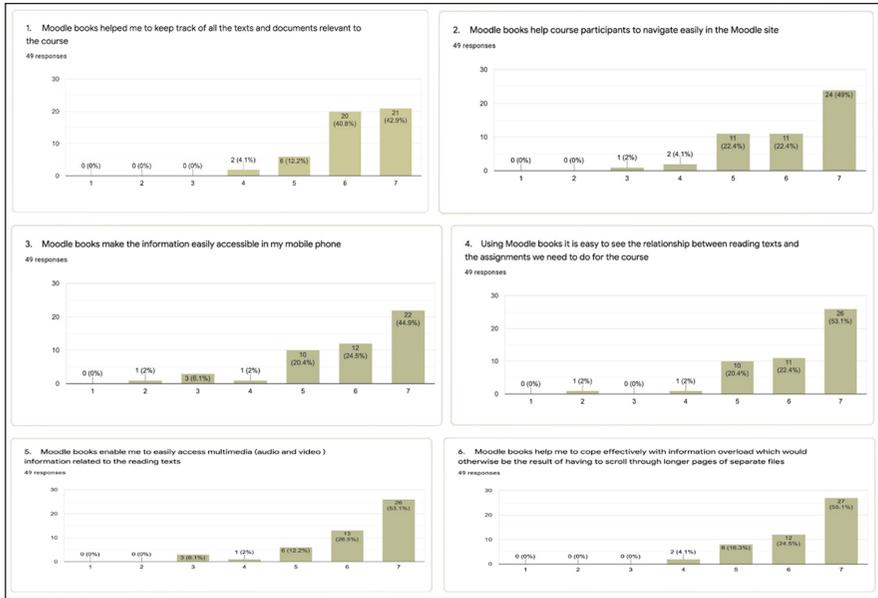
As can be seen from the above histogram plots, responses from the students were in general very positive to the use of Moodle books in the structuring and presentation of information on the Moodle course site pages. This positive perception related to the ease of navigation on the site both from stationary computers and mobile devices such as cellphones and tablets as well as establishing a clear link from the course reading comprehension texts and the assignments required for the assessment of the course. The responses also pointed toward easing work loads and increasing learning effectiveness which are important factors for this target group of students, many of whom are studying alongside full- and part-time employment.

Twenty seven out of 49 students posted survey comments that mostly highlighted aspects of Moodle books as shown in a representative selection of students' answers.

"The Moodle books are of great use and make work easier".

"They are great for an introduction, it helps keep track of what we've seen".

"The information in the books were more than enough to understand and complete the assignments, they were a great addition".

"I consider Moodle books to be a summary of a specific topic. Being that they guide me on a topic".

4.   Conclusions

The results are perhaps not particularly surprising in the sense that Moodle books are seen to bring a number of positive outcomes in this wholly online context. The main findings seem to indicate at least for this small sample that course participants are very much aware of appearance and structuring of information on the course pages and that these design aspects may be important factors in their successful completion of the course alongside employment responsibilities.

There is a clear message to university academics designing courses either wholly online or in blended mode that the packaging and structuring of information and the graphic appearance of page content are very important to ensure learning progress and course completion. University teachers are of course content experts in the subjects they are teaching, but they are unlikely to possess the skills of a graphic designer to aid them in the process of course design. Moodle books however offer teaching staff the possibility to produce simple and easily navigable course sites where information is packaged in an readily accessible format. This is certainly one area in which institutional educational technologists can assist academic teachers in developing their course design and graphic presentation skills.

Students perceive positive effects in content access, management, and interaction when they use Moodle books. This research has shown the importance of incorporating students' views in the design and development of ESP courses where Moodle books' organization, effectiveness, and functionality can maximize students' learning results.

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