

Trouble with Moodle? Reach Beyond Your School

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Every once in a while I will run into technology specialists and ask if their districts are using Moodle. Quite often they will tell me that they have downloaded Moodle and two or three teachers are using it. I'm really not surprised at the limited activity on their Moodle server, since this really isn't about Moodle at all; it's about using Moodle to go somewhere else. Moodle is simply a tool – *a pathway to somewhere else*. But just where is *somewhere else*? That's what this article is about. It's about a consortium of schools in which local leaders are working with other local leaders to define *somewhere else*.

“Online learning community” is a buzzword these days. When we hear it we tend to think in terms of instant messages, blogs, wikis, Moodle and other Web 2.0 tools. We listen to educators like Alan November and Will Richardson and David Warlick, excellent online learning community builders all. But I would like you to think about a different kind of online learning community, one that is being built closer to home using Moodle. To understand the full impact of Moodle and other online tools for learning, we must think beyond school and classroom walls and even beyond local communities. This is exactly what is happening with a small but growing group of Moodle schools here in Massachusetts.

Nine school districts are currently sharing Moodle services although each has its own Moodle instance on a shared smokin' fast server maintained by a highly skilled team of programmers and engineers. The consortium members are Amesbury, Chatham, Holliston, Hopkinton, Millis, Waltham, Wayland and Westborough. Worcester will be coming aboard in January as the ninth partner, adding an urban district to the consortium. Several other districts have expressed interest and may soon expand our consortium. You can see their Moodle sites by following the links on my Web site at <http://romeomarquis.com>. Hosting and technical support are provided by IMG Software in Framingham, Massachusetts. Professional development and pedagogical support are provided by The Learning Curve. When consortium members call IMG or The Learning Curve, nobody will tell them to complete a service request and nobody will tell them they will “submit a ticket” for support. They get a real person who responds to their needs.



We recently hosted our first local Moodle administrators' group at Hopkinton High School. The enthusiasm was obvious. Around the table were Moodle leaders from most of the districts along with representatives of the hosting company, IMG Software. The discussion ranged from hosting issues and support to online professional development for teachers in the consortium and even online courses for students from the member schools a la virtual high school model. From teacher to technology director to principal, “21st Century skills” became a reality.

Deborah Donohue, technology trainer in the Worcester schools, is the newcomer to the group. Of this first users group meeting she says, “I am excited that my district has joined this consortium and as Moodle administrator for my district I look forward to working with my teachers to build their course sites and even participate in online professional development through the consortium . I am so proud to

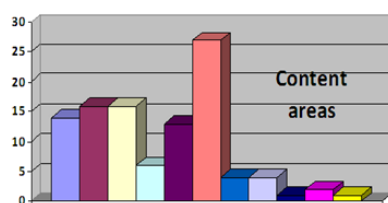
be part of this incredible group of educators.” As Deb explains, we immediately discovered that bringing Moodle people together – technical staff plus educators – creates an atmosphere of collaboration and imagination that can be quite difficult in individual school districts running their own Moodle servers in isolation.

As we spoke of online professional development and even courses for students within the consortium, one of the ideas that emerged focused on “extending the school day without adding hours to it.” Kathy Martin, after thinking about our meeting, wrote, “Moodle extends the school day and supports the home school connection by allowing parents to see directly what their students are working on in class. All resources, student work, assessments, grades and communication tools are available to them. This extended school day includes collaboration with other students in either small group or full class discussion.” John McCarthy, principal of Hopkinton High School, adds, “The increasing use of Moodle to create online and hybrid courses will allow us to totally redefine this high school day. The current 7:30 to 2:00 day is a relic of an agrarian society and should be just that, a relic. We need a new model of high school education today that will allow us to meet 21st Century learning opportunities.”

Right on! That’s what this consortium is all about. This brings us to the concept of a Moodle consortium. Rather than try to turn this vision into reality within the context of a single school, the consortium approach multiplies individual school efforts, making education available to faculty and students alike through the use of shared Moodle instances.

We also spoke of offering high school courses within the consortium through Moodle. Kathy’s response to this idea is, “The potential is there for us to offer courses through Moodle that might not be available to students during their daily face to face classes. 21st Century Skills, technical and collaborative, are put into play from the beginning.” Imagine a high school wanting to offer a course but recognizing only two students who would register for it. Sharing that course among the members of the consortium could result in sufficient enrollment. Our model would be similar to those of several virtual high schools, but undoubtedly much more economically feasible. One of our goals is to launch a course or two during the 2009-2010 school year. Each school in the consortium, if it chooses to do so, will have access to courses offered by other consortium members on a shared Moodle instance.

Anne Morgan, middle school technology specialist in Chatham, takes the consortium model even further. She speaks of “using our noodles to Moodle.” Her Moodle site for her middle school students also includes students from the Netherlands. Moodle enables the example of globalization through a password protected and secure environment. The students introduce themselves and share information using blogs, MP3 files and even videos all within this safe and secure environment. Imagine what will happen when we begin to integrate Ann’s approach into professional development and student courses within the Moodle consortium.



State and local STEM (Science-Technology-Engineering-Math) initiatives are crucial to the well being of this country. Recently we completed a tally of Moodle course sites among the consortium members. The tall bar in this graph represents science course sites.

The bar to the immediate left reflects math course sites and the bar to the immediate right of science reflects technology course sites. Our consortium is presently engaged in preliminary discussions with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to see how we can work with their faculty to further support STEM related courses throughout the consortium. We have also begun communicating with the Massachusetts STEM initiative of the University of Massachusetts President's Office. Keep in mind that this consortium is barely three months old and already we are showing signs of what can happen when we think of Moodle in terms of the 21st Century skills beyond individual schools and classrooms. For a more in-depth view of this topic, please see "Moodle, STEM and 21st Century skills." You can link out to it from my Web site at <http://romeomarquis.com>.

The possibilities for our Moodle consortium are endless. The creativity and energy around the table at our first consortium leaders meeting were obvious. Our goal is to expand our consortium to twenty-five districts by the end of this academic year. That's a very ambitious goal, but we are determined to do our best. Meeting this goal would mean that hundreds of students in the consortium would be more proficient in 21st Century skills and would be better prepared for higher education environments.

Another short term goal is to provide online professional development for consortium educators. The time frame is January – May, 2009. The next goal is to implement online courses for students across the Moodle consortium.

If you would like to take a look at the consortium members' Moodle sites, you can link out to them from my Web site at <http://romeomarquis.com>.

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