"MAKING OUR LIVES EASIER": USING FREE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN THE ESL ENVIRONMENT

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Global E-mails, document downloading, electronic submission: welcome to the ESL classroom of the 21st century. For better or worse, learning management systems are becoming core technologies for instructors and institutions (Fuchs, 2005). Students who already digitally manage their lives with cell phones and instant messaging also try to manage education digitally. Instructors also see advantages to electronically managing class communication, content management, and testing.

In education, the most common tool for information management is the learning management system (LMS). Proprietary LMSs, such as Blackboard and WebCT, offer a suite of features and a range of support. Yet, for a single teacher or for a small institution, proprietary systems are cost prohibitive. So, how do individual language instructors or small language schools access this new media?

One option is using free learning management systems. These tools -- particularly Moodles, Yahoo Groups, and Nicenet -- offer many of the features of propriety LMSs yet require no subscription fees. Instructors can set up electronic communities, distribute documents, and create assignments. Yet, online education – be it free or propriety – involves more than housing documents and sending emails. Students need to be engaged, and motivated; instructors need to design and facilitate instruction.

This paper investigates the use of free LSM tools in language learning, particularly for EFL and content-based classrooms. The study is based on the use of free LMSs in two schools: UNICA, a bilingual university in Bogotá, Colombia and Round Table, an English language school in Shanghai, China. This paper investigates not only the tools offered in Moodles, Yahoo Groups, and Nicenet, but also how these tools create value for the teaching and learning of English.

Literature Review and Background

Learning management systems act in two primary ways: as an online access point where students and instructors can access an online space dedicated to their classes; as tools to integrate communities. As such, LMSs should be seen as robust online tools, which have the potential to provide learning, organizational, and social benefit.

DiBaise (2000) took a broad view of online education and LMSs by looking at the total value they create. Relying on the Sloan Consortium's Five Pillars of Quality Education (Lorenzo and Moore, 2002), DiBaise sketched out five criteria that might be helpful in accessing the use of LMS:

- Learning effectiveness
- Student satisfaction
- Instructor satisfaction
- Cost satisfaction
- Access

It is no coincidence that learning effectiveness leads the list of criteria. Improving learning should be the goal of any educational system. Yet, DiBaise's was cognizant that bringing digital learning into educational environments affects many of the dynamics: student-instructor relationships, budgets, access to education and overall satisfaction.

Kearsley (2000) also sketched out a collection of features that create effective online learning, and by extension, effective LMSs. The author suggested that in online education the primary form of communication is computer-mediated instruction between student and teacher. This communication exists in environments that are, among other things, connected, collaborative, exploratory, multi-sensory and community-based.

Jonassen is equally cognizant of the need for community. As he notes, "the most valuable activity for learners is the ability to work and interact together in a community," (Jonassen et al, 1995). Within such communities, learners can experiment, explore and deal with learning by working through problems. The communities can provide a supportive environment in which a learner can interact in a simulated way to better understand reality (Jonassen, 1994). These problems should have socio-cultural and organizational contexts making them accessible, interesting, and motivating. Solving these problems becomes "intrinsically motivating," while technology serves as tools for representing and manipulating these problems (Jonassen, 1999).

While not speaking directly about LMS, the ideas of Jonassen and Kearsley certainly could be helpful in evaluating them. For example, community building, important for both authors, can be seen as improving student satisfaction and faculty satisfaction. Collectively, DiBaise, Jonassen and Kearsley speak not to a single degree of quality, but a collective view of value which LMS can add to teaching and learning. Which brings us to the key issue: how do free learning management systems provide value?

Free LMS in Use - description

At Round Table and UNICA, instructors adopted free LMSs to better communicate with and offer community tools to students. At Round Table, interest was student-driven. Tech-savvy students wanted vocabulary seen in discussion sessions and "Fashion Clubs" to be available online. At UNICA, interest was instructor-driven, as instructors wanted to improve student-teacher communication and improve the processes of class collaboration and reflection. However, in both institutions, there was an underlying belief among instructors that using free LMSs would "make their lives easier."

In these schools, three free LMSs were used: Yahoo! Groups, Moodles and Nicenet, all stand-alone Web-based systems not relying on external hosting or software. Each system was used for blended learning environments where the online component supported a face-to-face class or learning event. The classes and seminars all utilized different tools and different LMSs

Yahoo! Groups – a service offered by Yahoo! – hosts online communities. As such, Yahoo! Groups is a community portal that can mimic many of the features of an LMS. These including:

- E-mails (to the whole group or individuals)
- Calendar
- Document Sharing
- Link Sharing
- Chat
- Polls
- Database

Creating basic content – emails, links, and uploading documents - proved trouble-free in large part because the interfaces in Yahoo! Groups mimicked the interfaces of Yahoo! Mail, which instructors and students were familiar with. Open access registration allowed students to immediately enroll access content and begin learning. English language interfaces forced students to work directly with real English, whether that English be navigation buttons or instructions. Thus, the greatest upside to Yahoo! Groups was the speed with which instructors and students could begin the online experience. Yet, as we shall see below, intuitive understanding proved deceptive.

Moodles - an acronym for Multi Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environments - are more robust than Yahoo! Groups. Moodles can house entire school or university programs. Institutions can serve their own Moodles but need expertise in complicated programs such as PHP and Apache to do so. Yet, some websites, including http://www.ourwebclass.com , allow instructors to create and operate Moodle sites free. Also, hosting services, like http://www.alphaone-tech.com, allow users to create Moodles for as little as seven dollars a month. Moodles are tools which can allow users to create a classroom or an entire school, yet in this study Moodles were created for seminars and learning events. Thus, these Moodle environments used basic resources such as:

- Conferencing
- Document Sharing
- Personal messaging

- Link Sharing
- Calendar
- Forums
- Journals
- Quizzes
- Surveys
- User Logging and Tracking
- Assignments

Moodle easily has more tools than Yahoo! Groups. The tools are also more complex and allow for greater interaction. Forums, for example, allow students to discuss individual topics. They can be threaded discussions where both the picture of the user and the comments are visible. User logging and tracking creates activity reports for each student, which allows instructors to monitor when students accessed the Moodle and how many times students read number individual activities. The teacher can electronically assign papers and projects, students can upload them to the Moodle, and instructors can grade the work - all online. Documents or presentations used in one class can be used in another. Obviously, Moodles are robust, and this robustness is not only Moodle's greatest strength; for many, it is the greatest curse.

Nicenet – found at www.nicenet.org -- calls itself an Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA), meaning that it is an online tool meant to support to single class. The Nicenet environment combines:

- Conferencing
- Scheduling
- Document Sharing
- Personal messaging
- Link Sharing

While nowhere nearly as complex or expansive as Moodle, Nicenet is an efficient learning system. Like Yahoo! Groups, Nicenet provides trouble-free English language interfaces and allows simple navigation. Uploading content and building classes is intuitive. Yet, like Moodle, Nicenet is designed specifically as a learning instrument. Nicenet forums support collaborative work in that students can post writing, edit them after posting them, collaborate with peers and

comment on others work. These tools allow Nicenet to be a focused, yet at the same time limiting, LMS.

Creating and running classes

Creating the initial class site in any of these systems was a cinch. Instructors uploaded documents, sent emails, and quickly felt like they were "online." Getting students online was more complicated. Yahoo! Groups allows student to enter a course without a long registration process, so students quickly enrolled. However, Moodle and Nicenet require students to complete a registration process. This simple registration processes proved a hurdle for some. It seemed if the processes was more than three steps, many students felt lost. Thus, instructors had to train students how to get in and out of the system.

When files and activities were available, students began learning on their own. And some did – exploring readings and online quizzes – while others waited to be lead by instructors. Nonetheless, this highlights one great opportunity of these free LMSs: online learning provides learners with a great deal of autonomy, i.e., the choice of when, where, and how to learn (Kearsley, 2000).

But how do these free LMSs foster autonomous learning? All the LMSs have English language interfaces. While students are exploring the LMS, they are also exploring English. For example, when Yahoo! Groups was used for an advanced English class at UNICA, students were also asked find their class assignments in the database section. To do this, they had to negotiate three interfaces and read the assignments - all written in English. Thus, LMSs become a gateway for guided exploration. On the other hand, at Round Table, Moodle was used for a seminar on pop music. Students asked the instructor to post the vocabulary in the Moodle, after which the instructor listed the word, the definition, and an image of an audio speaker. A hyperlink connected the image to link from Merriman Webster's Dictionary, www.m-w.com, and to previously recorded MP3´s. Additionally, students used the forums to trade for and comment on English language links for pop stars. Students were even able to create links to download complete songs. As a result, the forum became a place where students created, accessed, and modified information in English. They felt empowered by "using real English." ´So, the process proved intrinsically motivating, as Jonassen suggested it would.

Instructors must be conscious to train students to be autonomous. Students in China and Colombia who were using Yahoo! Groups needed instruction on what was the purpose of "Databases" and "Polls." Instructors must remind students that they can access course documents in the LMS, guiding to where those documents can be found. One instructor who was using Nicenet said, "Students get confused about what goes where files or links are." Links or documents can be uploaded to many placed in the Nicenet site. This leads to the inevitable question ‘So which one of the three folders is the link in?" Students need to see that this is part of the process of learning the LMS, which also can be part of learning English. In the same way that students have come to know the Internet is a giant library, they also need to see online forums as workspaces where they can write notes, draft papers, or collaborate on ideas.

Content needs to be created. Instructors need to be aware of the fact that they need to create a significant amount of content, which can be time-consuming. So, much of the initial exuberance from some instructors and administrators about using LMSs is that they will "make out lives of easier." They can, by dramatically increasing student and teacher workload (Kearsley, 2000), because for learning to be in an LMS, there must also be appropriate content and facilitating learning. To do that, instructors must invest significant time developing content, designing instruction (DiBaise, 2004), and monitoring student progress. Proprietary LMSs try to alleviate this process by collaborating with publishers to provide content. However, this is not available for users of free systems. Thus, instructors must find material, prepare them for the Web, and design instruction so that will provide effective learning in a web environment, all the time remembering to adhere to the copyright restrictions. This may be too much to ask for novice instructors who have little background in building online content. Also, when many instructors become aware of how much time needs to be invested, the "free" LMS seems to cost much more. This leads to dissatisfaction, instructors abandoning projects or building less content.

How does the content appear on the web page? This is greatly influenced by which LMS is used. Nicenet, for example, is flat, text-based, and lacking a multi-sensory experience. HTML-skilled instructors can use HTML in Nicenet forums to add more interactive elements. However, but English instructors are not programmers, few being experts at adding MP3 audio tracks, images, or self-assessment quizzes into HTML to create interesting webpages. For the most part, Nicenet is designed to distribute text. These facts combined to make an uninspiring online community. Shanghai students, who were used to colorful computer cell phone and computer screens, hated it. "Why would you go to the Internet to look at a boring website?" one student asked. Their questions were well founded as poor interfaces "discourage motivation" and can distract students (Howard, 2005).

Yahoo! Groups allows for more multi-sensory verve, mostly in colorful interfaces but lacks true project areas. While Nicenet offers forums where students can comment on a certain topic area, Yahoo! Groups does not have the same functionality. One teacher tried to mimic this activity using the email tool. In one activity at Round Table, student commented on the movie *Troy* entering comments and posting them with this email tool. Yet, the comments failed to create any shared project areas of collaborative ideas as they looked like a random shopping list. Few students commented more than once and interest quickly waned. Multimedia is one method to increase interest in an ESL class using Yahoo! Groups. In Round Table, MP3 audio was uploaded to the files section of Yahoo! Groups. Students downloaded the audio, read scripts of the recordings that were stored in the same folders, and had personal listening session whenever they chose to. Adding links to blogs (a type of online journal) and online quiz tools, like those offered at http://school.discovery.com, are a quick and easy solution to help give students space to work on problems and reflect on ideas. Yahoo! groups does have an online chat area, but only for synchronous conversation, which is not so suitable for blended learning. Students rejected the chat board. They already used instant messenger as naturally as they use their cell phone, and saw no need to use chat. So, in itself, this lack of a space for problem manipulation is a significant deficiency in Yahoo! Groups.

Moodles offer more options. The interface is colorful, changeable, and interactive. Instructors can create online quizzes, set up discussion forums, or create journals between students and

instructors. The difficulty tends to be in choosing which tool works best. When should and instructor use a journal tool, which is only between students and teacher, and when a forum, which can be used for the entire community? Another difficulty is the number and sequence of forums. For example, during a seminar on the novel "A Passage to India," an instructor set up several Moodle forums: one forum for each of the four modules of the seminar. Students commented on the first forum, but no one commented on the latter ones. One reason could have been it was just too much work to comment to a number of forums rather than just one. Another reason could have been that the material was uninspiring.

Creating vigorous, inspiring material is vital to successfully implementing an LMS in an ESL environment. Just as audio, interactivity, pair work and problems add life and learning to the classroom, so do they inspire learning inside a free LMS. One difficulty is that instructors are not technicians. With HTML, one can add interactivity like quizzing, matching games and audio to Nicenet and Moodles. Yet, many instructors focus on the teaching and learning, while learning HTML would be helpful. Moreover, even if one can create HTML pages, these pale in comparison to the interaction students can find on, for example, their cell phone. Therefore, instructors need to focus on creating engaging intellectual activities that can motivate students. For example, an instructor using Nicenet created forums where students reviewed the writing notes of other students as part of writing essays about communication. Students learned to collaborate and to critically assess the writing of their peers. Gradually, they became comfortable enough in the process that some started their own forums. All these factors lead to better understanding about communication and, in the end, better essays. This confirms Howard's observations that students who collaborate in discussion boards develop confidence and gain a deeper understanding (Howard, 2005).

This leads us to the conclusion that one of the most important roles of the instructor is the one of a facilitator. Instructors need to ensure that there is a high degree of interactivity and participation (Kearsley, 2000). This involves creating assignments with engaging subject matter, well-suited to the LMS. Writing assignments are one example. In one assignment, Chinese students wrote post cards about their most recent vacation. They sent these post cards to each other via Yahoo! Groups. The student who received the digital postcard was supposed to review the writing, correct it, and send it back to the author. After a week, a few had completed the assignment, but more had not. In conversations with students, the instructor learned that many students feared correcting other students, afraid that their corrections would be wrong. After talking, students agreed to read the corrections and modify the correction before they were returned to the original author. In following weeks, the project continued with increased participation. Students risked making corrections on their own. Eventually, students commented that it was a good project, and they learned a lot. "A cardinal rule of good online teaching is that the instructor must participate a lot to get students to do likewise" (Kearsley, 2000).

Conclusion

All this probably means more effort for instructors rather than less. Building content, facilitating instruction, motivating students, creating a multi-sensory environment: all meant significant time and effort. Instructors can decide to use a free LMS as a communication tool: send messages, assignments assign tasks, answer questions. But, how would this differ from electronic version of

"chalk and talk?" Why would this not lead to the same uninspiring situation that exists in an English class dominated by teacher talking time?

If used properly, free learning management systems can significantly contribute to the quality of teaching and learning. In some examples at UNICA and Round Table, the free LMS became a "convenient adjunct" to face-to-face instruction (Lakshear, 2005). By organizing communication, they forced students to employ English and facilitated collaborative activity. Activities engaged students, facilitated open access, and encouraged autonomous learning. And, if we look at the free LMS in terms of its own value, they do offer instructors and institutions an inexpensive path to provide online instruction. Students can be served, instructors can be satisfied, participants can collaborate, and English teaching and learning can occur. Yet this comes only with a significant investment of effort and education. With that, students might learn more. And in the end, maybe the free LMS will "make our lives easier."

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