

Report looks at schools' success with Moodle

Educators share their experience implementing this free, open-source course management program

By Laura Devaney, Associate Editor, eSchool News



A new report from the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) aims to introduce educators to Moodle, an open-source software program for managing courses online.

"While the Consortium for School Networking is vendor-neutral and tries to help inform technology decision-making in K-12 environments by focusing on the choices available, there are times when examining a specific product can be very helpful," says the

report, called "Moodle: An Open Learning Content Management System for Schools."

"Such, we believe, is the case with Moodle. While this report is technically not vendor-specific (since Moodle is 'open-source' software, it does not require going through a commercial vendor), we believe that the widespread and often enthusiastic response to Moodle by K-12 institutions creates a need to briefly define what Moodle is, to [suggest] what it can do, and to give some specific examples of how it is being implemented."

Moodle enables teachers to develop online curricula and lesson plans, administer assignments and quizzes, and participate in professional development activities from home. It also allows students to engage in lessons off-site if they have internet access, providing a valuable school-to-home connection that can maximize learning.

Moodle can help with basic functions such as classroom management, or more complex tasks such as complete eLearning or "blended instruction"--eLearning that extends into on-site classroom instruction. As of last fall, the report says, Moodle claimed to have more than 14 million users, with more than 35,000 sites in 195 countries. In the appendix, the report describes how Moodle is being implemented in five schools and school districts across the country.

For instance, Michigan's East Grand Rapids Public Schools, which has about 2,800 students in five schools, has found varying uses for Moodle in the classroom.

The district's networking and security manager, Jeff Crawford, started experimenting with Moodle a few years ago, placing it on a middle school server. That prompted a social studies teacher to begin using Moodle in all of her classes, using mobile laptop carts.

Crawford did a small Moodle pilot with eight teachers for two class periods a day and found the response positive. A middle-school science teacher developed a course for use at home, including webquests, quizzes, and other resources that accompanied classroom instruction.

Teachers started to use Moodle for individual problems as well. A speech teacher wanted to show her students how to turn in a series of speech drafts and outlines, and found she could create assignments with student drop boxes in an otherwise empty Moodle course.

Another teacher wanted to use the eBook version of a textbook for the whole class. The publisher required that the resource be made available only to the class that had purchased the book. The teacher used Moodle to "enroll" students in a course that used the eBook as a resource. An art teacher found a way to use Moodle's "forums" feature to build an art gallery for each of the course's 192 students.

"[Moodle] has been successful because we have not set any benchmarks or goals. We kind of view it as a ... multipurpose tool," Crawford wrote. "It has done a lot of cool and creative things and provided solutions for teachers and students" where none might have otherwise been.

He added: "My advice [is], do not push your staff too hard to use Moodle. Let Moodle sell itself."

Crawford recommends considering Moodle for specific uses, too, without necessarily implementing its full eLearning functionality.

"You don't have to focus on Moodle as a classic online learning system. You can use just certain parts of the program," he said.

The Moodle implementation study is the third in a series of reports from CoSN's K-12 Open Technologies Initiative.

"This is an exciting time for schools to be looking at open technologies, especially as open-source software programs are becoming more and more attractive for implementation in schools," said Steve Hargadon, project director.

"CoSN is releasing this report as part of our commitment to inform school chief technology officers about the emerging trends in open technologies, and to help their decision-making. Open-source software for eLearning is transforming how

teachers are able to share interactive content, information, and feedback with students and their peers to enhance learning and maximize student achievement," said Hargadon.

CoSN also has re-engineered its K-12 Open Technologies web site to provide a greater range of services to educational technology decision makers. In addition to the report on Moodle, two previous implementation studies, and other articles on open-source software and open technologies, the site will feature a regular blog on open technologies, along with an RSS feed for updates on trends and news.

Members of the CoSN K-12 Open Technologies advisory panel will contribute to the blog, and there also will be some special guest bloggers who will help kick off the site over the next few weeks, CoSN said.

"We want the K-12 Open Technologies web site to be the most informative and useful site on the web that addresses the use of open technologies in schools. To that end, we'll soon be adding other features, including personal networking capabilities, hoping that we also can provide a significant opportunity for [school chief] technology officers to learn from each other," Hargadon said.

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