Using the Moodle Template Tool to Promote Quality in Language Course Design and Learning

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Abstract

In the University of Helsinki Language Centre, the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment is widely used (on ca. 380 courses by ca. 90 teachers). The Moodle Template Tool (later MTT) supports language teachers in creating and teaching their Moodle courses and helps students in their language learning. In addition, the template tool also provides a means for quality assurance for those of our courses that apply Moodle.

Previously, the language teachers at the Helsinki University Language Centre created and carried out their courses independently without a framework as an aid. Most of the courses on offer are blended learning courses, very few exclusively on-line.

The pedagogical background for MTT is constructive alignment. According to this pedagogical framework, learners construct meaning from what they do to learn and the teacher makes a deliberate alignment between the planned learning activities and the learning outcomes. On a constructively aligned course, the student has clearly specified goals, activities that are appropriate to the task, and assessment criteria are well-designed for giving feedback to the learner. [1]

MTT also supports the Helsinki University Language Centre curriculum. The Language Centre curriculum provides the pedagogical guidelines, the course descriptions and practical instructions, as well as descriptions of procedures related to instruction. The pedagogical principles include features such as promoting student-centeredness and active life-long learning. [2] In the Helsinki University Language Centre Target Programme for 2013-2016, one of the objectives is to increase the number of self-access and multimodal courses. This was also the main incentive to launch our MTT project.

An important objective in developing MTT is to provide an e-learning environment accessible to language learners. A virtual learning environment at its best offers a tool that makes the student's learning process more focused and efficient through a consistent framework for all language courses. The Moodle page can of course each time be customized to fit the course's purpose and level. In addition, the MTT also allows each individual teacher to tailor their Moodle page to suit their teaching style and preferred view of learning.

The goal of our presentation is to introduce the MTT in use at Helsinki University Language Centre at present, its development and future prospects and to discuss these from the both the language teachers' and IT-support's perspective. We believe that MTT can also be applicable to the other organizations interested in using virtual learning environments to enhance constructive alignment.

1. The setting

The University of Helsinki is an international academic community of 40,000 students and staff members. Teaching at the University of Helsinki is closely linked with research. A rule of thumb is that every teacher is a researcher, and vice versa. The university provides instruction in about 300 subjects and study programmes total.

The University of Helsinki Language Centre is the largest of the 17 university language centres in Finland. Our Language Centre caters for the language instruction of students from all faculties of the University, the number of course enrolments being around 15,000 annually. Additionally, through its Language Services unit, the Language Centre offers training in more than 30 languages and language testing, translation and language revision to university personnel, public bodies, institutes, companies and individuals.

2. Increase in Moodle use

Moodle (acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a free software e-learning platform. The design of Moodle is guided by the social constructionist pedagogy. Moodle makes it possible

for institutions to create their own (private) website for the courses taught. Among others, Moodle facilitates course authoring through tools for student self-registration and teachers' grading. By 31 August 2014, Moodle had a user-base of 88,070 registered sites with 76,675,352 users in 8,324,096 courses in 241 countries [3]. In June 2014, Moodle was the most popular learning management system software product [4]. The use of virtual learning environments amongst the Helsinki University Language Centre teachers has doubled since 2009. Some typical Moodle activities used at present include assignment submission, discussion forum, chat, file download, quizzes and glossaries.

Simple Moodle Templates already exist at Helsinki University, but one of the e-learning support projects at our Language Centre has been to create MTT for particularly the language teachers' use, in order to fulfil the specific needs for language teaching and learning. Previously, the language teachers at the Helsinki University Language Centre created and carried out their courses independently without a framework as an aid. Now it is possible to provide support through offering them MTT.

The main objective of MTT is to help students in their language learning. According to studies, students often find e-learning environments unclear and disorganized [5]. A student participating in many different Moodle courses can easily be challenged by a cognitive overload. If there is a different Moodle page for each individual course, the study efficiency may suffer as the initiation to a new course can be quite time-consuming. Using an analogous language course template helps students in maximizing their study efficiency with no time consumed on familiarizing themselves with how a new environment is structured.

3. Objective: MTT as support for language teachers and students to use Moodle

We had two starting points at the launch of the Moodle Template Tool (from now on MTT). The first one was constructive alignment, and the second one was our Language Centre curriculum. Our ambition was to create a Moodle Template Tool which would support the core ideas of constructive alignment and the common pedagogical guidelines of our Language Centre.

4. Background

4.1 Constructive Alignment as theoretical foundation

Constructive alignment is the main pedagogical theory applied for teaching at Helsinki University. This was already stated as basis for course design in 2006 in the Helsinki University *Programme for the development of teaching and studies 2007-2009.*[6]
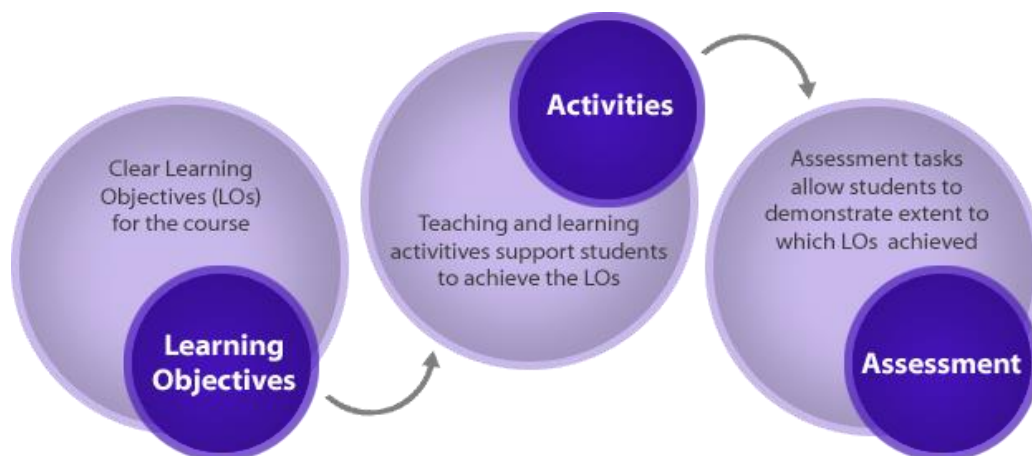

Fig. 1: Constructive Alignment of Assessment.

When building constructive alignment the teacher should ask him/herself the following three questions:
1) What do I want the students to know? (Learning Objectives)
2) How will the students optimally learn this? (Type and Sequence of Teaching and Learning Activities)
3) How will I know the students have learnt this? (Assessment) [1]

The MTT provides a table for the teacher to use for course design. It encourages the teachers to reflect on

these questions while planning the course. When creating the Moodle pages for their courses, the crucial question is what activities a student should pursue via Moodle to reach the objectives.

4.2. The Language Centre curriculum as basis

In the University of Helsinki Language Centre has published *The Language Centre curriculum* since year 2011. The Language Centre curriculum consists of the common pedagogic guidelines, course descriptions for the various languages and practical instructions and descriptions of procedures related to instruction. The curriculum and its starting points are revised every two years. The most recent curriculum was published in August 2014. The first principle of the curriculum is that language and communication studies are an important part of an academic degree. [2] The other five principles are made visible through MTT:

The common pedagogical guideline	Implementations via MTT
Principle 2: Learning based on the student-centred approach.	• Tool for designing a pedagogical script [7] • Discussion forums • Feedback form
Principle 3: Active learning continues after studies.	• Advice on continuing language learning after the course
Principle 4: Research-based development of teaching.	• A page for teacher's development ideas • Feedback form
Principle 5: Continuous development of professional competence.	• Progressive guidance for teachers using Moodle • Page for course improvement ideas • Feedback form
Principle 6: Evaluation and assurance of operational quality.	• Quality assured through using MTT • Feedback form • Page for course improvement ideas

5. Piloting the MTT

The MTT project at our Language Centre stared in August 2013 as part of the University Pedagogy course *Development of teaching and practical training* (5 ECTS). The first version of the MTT was launched during the University Pedagogy course. Its content is based on The Handbook of Online Guidance (transl. by the authors) [8] and on the e-learning support person's practical experience and observations of how language teachers use Moodle. The language teachers also had the opportunity to influence the development of MTT and their opinions and experiences have been taken into consideration.

The template is not obligatory - a teacher may choose not to use the Moodle template. Teachers may also select freely which parts of MTT they want to employ.

Fig. 2 The front page of MTT.

Seven teachers from four language groups have piloted the MTT for planning and teaching their courses during the autumn semester 2014. During the piloting, the teachers have been guided by the Language Centre e-learning support person on how to use the template tool. Joint meetings of the piloting teachers have also been recommended because it provides an opportunity for peer support and an exchange of ideas between the participants of the pilot project.

The e-learning support person is presently collecting feedback from the piloting teachers for feedback to develop MTT. Does MTT provide support for teachers in creating and teaching the Moodle course? Which parts of MTT were helpful for teachers? What would be an optimal template for teachers in creating and teaching Moodle? Did MTT support students' learning in teacher's experience?

The piloting teachers will also collect feedback from the students who have attended courses that use MTT. This will include questions such as if MTT support students in language learning and if the students found Moodle a clear tool. In addition, students are also asked for suggestions for developing the Moodle structure. Feedback is being systematically collected through observation and questionnaires. Based on the feedback, MTT will be improved as an ongoing process. The teachers' might change and Moodle is updated twice a year.

Our goal is to provide teachers with access to upload MTT in the near future. This, together with instructions, will be available through the Helsinki University Guide to Teaching in Moodle.

6. Early results of the MTT project

At the time of writing this article the MTT project is still in process, but we are already able to offer some observations on the piloting teachers' experiences of MTT.

The blocks from MTT are tools which all pilot project participants have used. The blocks include information about practical issues and support for studying. Other popular tools have been the Discussion Forum, the titles of the sections and the copyrights info of a course (see Fig. 2).

At Helsinki University, most teachers use web-based learning environments unsystematically. Unfortunately, simple web-based methods such as distributing materials are largely used instead of pedagogically more focused methods such as group work. [9] MTT is a practical method to encourage teachers to apply existing pedagogical knowledge into using the e-learning environment as a learning tool.

Until now, none of the pilot teachers at the Language Centre have used the course description template for course participants. Instead, teachers have preferred their existing course descriptions, as they felt that the template was too laborious for them. For an e-learning professional, a positive observation has been how MTT challenges teachers to use a firmer theoretical basis for course design, akin to the constructive alignment theory. Issues discussed at the personal counseling sessions have included topics like means for evaluating the assignment and whether course assignments should be shared with the course peers or only be submitted individually for teacher feedback.

The MTT project could be seen as substantiation of an argument made by Rytkönen [9] in her recent study. She claims that support in teaching design through educational technology should be focused more on in-department-level processes and department management support. MTT can be seen as a practical implementation of Rytkönen's claim as it is being developed for the teachers of our Language Centre and created and piloted by the staff of the Language Centre. In conclusion, we believe MTT offers encouraging prospects for promoting a proactive learning environment with constructive alignment at its core.

References

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