# Moodle or Facebook? An Experience with Moodle UFRGS LMS in the Teaching of Art History, Theory and Criticism at Graduate Level

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## 1. Introduction

The discussion on teaching methodologies for higher education in the field of art history, theory and criticism is still rare in Brazil. The reasons are varied, and a controversial one is presented by Ana Mae Barbosa, retired professor from USP, the leading theorist on art education in Brazil today: "The worst is that this aversion for education still attacks very often the Art teachers in colleges and universities. Is not uncommon in Brazil that artists that are also university professors, when engaged in discussions on university teaching or in Art Education conferences, in general begin or end by stating emphatically that they do not understand about education. It is a disguised way of saying that they do not are interested in education because they are smart and talented" [1]. If the research about general teaching methodologies in this particular area is rare, partially perhaps due to the reason pointed out by Mae, that is to say the indifference showed by many teachers of Art History, Theory and Criticism with respect to the study of pedagogy, the research focused on the use of new teaching technologies in art theory at graduate level is almost nonexistent.

Aiming to contribute with the advancement of debate in this field, in 2011 we have created the project *The teaching of Art History, Theory and Criticism and the LMS: proposals for the utilization of resources and activities of the UFRGS Institutional Moodle*, coordinated by Prof. Dr. Daniela Kern, professor from the Graduate Program of Visual Arts (UFRGS). This project was approved under the Edital 15 SEAD/UFRGS, part of a larger initiative to promote the use of LMS both at graduate and postgraduate level. The research time, besides the coordinator, is comprised of doctoral students (Fernanda Gassen, Juliana Gisi e Marina Polidoro) and undergraduate students (Ana Laura Benachio and Marielen Baldissera, the latter also project's grant recipient). This project was tied to the course Special Topic III – Pluralism in Modern and Contemporary Art, offered for the first time by Prof. Daniela Kern in the Graduate Program of Visual Arts/UFRGS in the second half of 2011. It proposes a survey of the resources and activities available in UFRGS Institutional Moodle, a LMS (Learning Management System) adapted by the team of CPD/UFRGS, and of how they could be used specifically with the visual arts graduate public in Art History, Theory and Criticism (HTC) courses, an area yet with little experience in the use of LMS – until that moment LMS was not been used in our Graduate Program, and we wanted to search interesting and motivating ways of evolving with this environment the students, almost all of them visual artists well adapted to the new technologies. This research also involved the creation, implementation and analysis of the results of two questionnaires, the first applied to all the PPGAV students, both of Visual Poetics (PV) as well as of HTC, and the second to the students of Special Topic III. The research team was responsible for formulating and analyzing the environment, and for the discussion and processing of data obtained from the questionnaires, aiming to formulate new proposals for the use of resources and activities of the UFRGS Institutional Moodle for the PPGAV/UFRGS public in particular, and for higher education students in general.

## 2. Using UFRGS Institutional Moodle in Special Topic III

The preparation of the Moodle environment for Special Topic III, in August, from the beginning was a challenge because we were very conscious about the particular needs of our target audience. The description of the contemporary student made by Donahue-Wallace et al. certainly applies to our students: "Students, on the other hand, are increasingly technologically-savvy: they judge electronic tools used in class as they would commercially marketed Teaching Art History with New Technologies products and they expect courses to engage them in ways that art history's traditional 'art in the dark' lecture format cannot. With their laptop computers open to take notes, many of these multi-tasking students now simultaneously use the university's wireless connection to surf the Internet, chat with their friends, and otherwise disengage from the learning environment, in traditional-style lecture classes".[2] The degree of contact with the Information Technology can be measured by the first online questionnaire that we developed, based on fourth questions. In an universe of about 60 PPGAV graduate students, 16 completed the questionnaire. Multiple answers were allowed, and the results show a consistent use of ICTs: 100% use computers for study and entertainment, 94% for work, 88% use Facebook and 81% YouTube; 100% use text editors (Word, etc.), 94% presentation programs (PowerPoint, etc.), 75% image editors (Photoshop, etc.). With respect to LMS, 88% had already used Moodle, 19% ROODA – a LMS developed by UFRGS, as can be read in Kern and Benachio [3] – and only 12% had never used any LMS. One must also consider that many visual arts graduate students are artists and art critics, all accustomed to the development of independent projects, which led us to desire the planning of an environment that favors their autonomy.

Thus, the first step was to set up UFRGS Institutional Moodle, which offers few possibilities to customize the layout. This limiting aspect of Institutional Moodles was, in fact, highlighted by Dutra and Maio: "In this regard, it should be remembered that the Moodle Platform constitutes a finished program, used by different institutions, and that the contents provided must conform to the best possible way to its standard "[4]. We

try to tailor the layout to our needs using icons and incorporating original videos on the initial topic. Besides the routine use of Moodle as a repository, with the availability of course texts, optional readings and tutorials on research bases and on the incorporation of digital video in the topics [Fig 1], we have some created forums: English Forum to discuss doubts on English language, since the main course's readings are in English; Moodle Forum, to answer questions regarding the use of Moodle; Pluralistic Forum (rated), to discuss questions about the pluralist theory also discussed in class, and the Wailing Forum, a playful environment for the expression of any difficulties that students find in the course.

Our experimental proposal, however, was to register students as assistant tutors in Moodle, so they had the same edition power that the course professor. Each student was responsible for a topic on the environment and was learned in class about how to edit, being able, therefore, whenever he wanted, to share ideas and materials with other colleagues [Fig.3]. The results of our experience as well as of the second questionnaire administered by the research coordinator to the Special Topic III students will be described next.



Fig. 1. Initial course topic in UFRGS Moodle
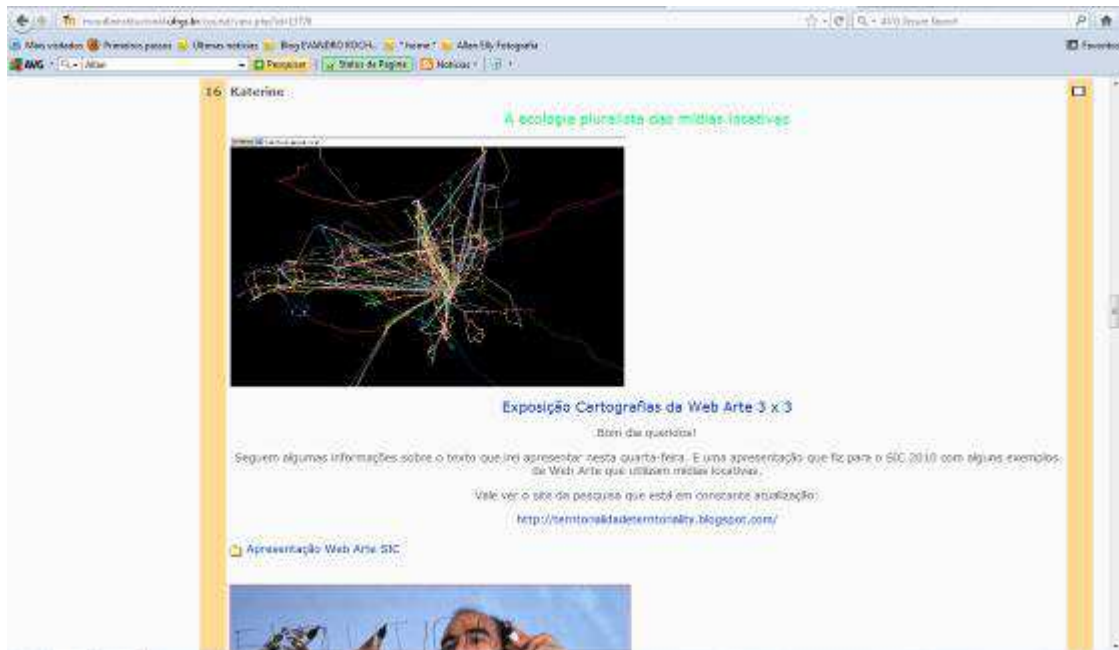


Fig. 2. Forums in UFRGS Moodle

Fig. 3. An example of topic elaborated by a course student

## 3. Final considerations: some preliminary results

In our research we conclude, also based on others experiences, that there is a consensus between graduate and undergraduate students: Moodle platform is not always attractive. The encouragement for the use of Moodle in presential courses by the University occurs at a time when there are many other technologies, even more sophisticated, competing for the attention of the student. As Pimentel reminds us: "The use of new technologies in schools is done traditionally with some lag in relation to their appearance" [5]. Although the vast majority of students have already had contact with Moodle, probably during the undergraduate course, it was not enough to guarantee that the site would be used with greater advantage by them.

The participation of students was more pronounced in the forums. Still, the comments were posted, but did not generate debates, resulting in several topics with only one post – the post of the person who created it. The most used forum, with 32 entries, was the Pluralistic Forum. Of the 20 students enrolled in the course, 13 have posted some content in the forums. That was easier for those more participatory, a group of four students, with four or five posts each. The other students had an average of two posts, and some have posted only the required presentation of a paper in pdf format.

As we find out through the application of the second questionnaire, this time restricted to the components of the Special Topic III, most students endorsed the use of the forums to complement the discussions made in class, but some suggested the exchange for a community in Facebook. Facebook is much more attractive than Moodle, considering design, functionality and ease of access. Being out of an academic environment makes people feel more free to provide feedback and so the discussions happen more naturally. Facebook was also mentioned for being a social network used by most students: in the first questionnaire, as we have seen, answered by 16 people, 14 said they use Facebook.

The initial proposal of designate a topic in the course Moodle page for each student to personalize it has not been very successful. A few students set out to do it: in a group of 20 students, only five customized their topics. This resulted in some topics with many lost information and others totally blank. In practice, the forums were much more used, a nonsense observation if compared with the outcome of the second questionnaire, in which most students said to prefer the topics for information sharing. They answered like that perhaps because they the topics of the discipline well prepared and organized, considering that all the course material was made available to students there. We believe that to answer this specific question, the students made the assessment of the topics created by the professor, and not of their own topics.

Perceived by our graduate students as an extra feature, it is needed much effort to ensure that they will keep the interest in participate and transform the Institutional Moodle in an useful learning resource. The informal and nonacademic Facebook seems to exert a greater attraction with our public. Moodle was considered, in this first experience, more effective as a material repository (texts, videos, presentations) than as an environment for interaction and exchanging of ideas. Finally, Callegaro's assertion continues to be an inspiration for future experiments in which we will try to more effectively engage graduate students with the academic discussions of the area, in a digital environment: "It is therefore important to pay attention to the site's interactive

structure and proposal and know what we want with these activities [...]. The local group should to determine how to work and interfere so that a real interaction occurs at the global level; Brazilian Art teachers have a lot to research and invent in the Internet environment "[6].

## References

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