

## An Action Research Project on Moodle: Pedagogical Epistemology and Curricular Scaffolding

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### **Abstract**

*In October 2013, an action research project on distance learning was initiated by three lecturers at the School of Translation, Linguistics and Cultural Studies of the University of Mainz (Germany). The project is being run within the framework of a program sponsored by the University to investigate the feasibility of and modalities for using the Moodle distance-learning platform to enhance the institution's classroom-based educational offerings. Interest in the project on the part of the three lecturers in the School's Division of English Linguistics and Translation Studies the School was piqued partly by the opportunity to finally experiment with this now virtually ubiquitous distance learning platform, but also by the potential synergies with curriculum and instructional development work that had been done in the department specifically based on a social constructivist (SC) pedagogical epistemology. The fact that the School itself had not endorsed any particular pedagogical epistemology raised the question as to whether teachers who have not thought about learning in terms of a SC process would be able to use the platform effectively – or, on the other hand, if the platform might help them see learning from social constructivist perspective. In addition, another ongoing research project in the Division has yielded a tentative model of translator competence development. The Moodle project participants hoped that this Moodle project would offer an excellent opportunity to test the viability of the model, particularly with respect to the scaffolding of learning over the course of the program of studies.*

*The action research project was initiated to experiment with Moodle on the basis of a total of three courses, one taught by each of the three different teachers. In accordance with the cyclical principle of action research, each course would be run twice in succession over the course of two semesters. In this way, initial findings during the first iteration would be used to modify and improve our use of the platform during the second iteration.*

*Each of the three teachers involved in the project offered one of the courses that he or she would have offered in a conventional classroom-based format and adapted it to incorporate Moodle, and each teacher wound up using the platform in a different way. Over the course of the semester, the team of three teachers and three respective student assistants met a number of times to share experiences and discuss problems they had encountered while using Moodle. The author interviewed the other two teachers at the end of the semester to gather qualitative information from them on the success of the initial courses and on changes that they expected to implement during the second iteration. (This text is being written at the end of the first project semester). Tentative results suggest that Moodle can be well-suited for use in different ways depending on the level of complexity of the learning to be done and on teachers' respective pedagogical epistemologies, and that it may in fact be useful for helping teacher's move towards an educational approach that is in line with an interactive, humanistic and holistic SC epistemology.*

### **1. The genesis of a Moodle project in a Translation Studies program**

Over the past twelve years since its inception, Moodle has become a ubiquitous open-source distance-learning platform, with tens of thousands of verified sites serving over 70 million users participating in over 7 million courses worldwide. [1] When the University of Mainz (Germany) offered a program of support for projects involving the implementation and testing of online courses to be run on the Moodle platform, the author of this paper and two other lecturers in the Division of English Linguistics and Translation Studies (DELTS), part of the University's School of Translation, Linguistics and Translation Studies, were eager to participate. We proposed taking an action research approach to develop, teach and reflect on a set of two iterations of three different translation-related courses,

representing three different levels of learning in order to assess the viability of using this technology to supplement conventional classes at the School – one of the largest of its kind in the world, but where distance learning has played a negligible role until now.

This article introduces the resulting action research project, which has three main focal points:

- the suitability of Moodle as an instructional tool in our translation studies program,
- possible links between epistemologies and the use of Moodle in our curriculum, and
- potential synergies between the use of Moodle and a curriculum model under development at the DELTS.

The project began in October 2013 and will conclude in October 2014, which means that, at the time of this writing, the project is only partially complete. In accordance with the cyclical principle of action research, the now emerging results of the first iteration of the set of courses will be used to undertake modifications in the second iteration of courses, which will take place in the second semester of the project (April-July 2014). Due to space constraints, this article presents only a brief overview of the genesis of the project and tentative findings after the first iteration of courses. [2]

## 2. Three Moodle teachers with three epistemological perspectives

In addition to our all being staff members in the same division of the translator education school, my two colleagues (Mr. M and Ms. L) and I all began the project with considerable experience as professional translators (German to English or English to German), and we were all interested in determining whether and to what extent we could use distance learning in general and Moodle in particular to enhance students' learning – and of course our own teaching. There, were however, major differences between us in terms of our educational background, professional experience and pedagogical epistemology. I am a self-taught translator but had completed an MA and a PhD in Education, had been teaching at university level for 36 years and had been publishing results of my research on translation teaching for some 30 years. Mr. M and Ms L were both graduates of the translator education program in which we were all teaching. While they both had significant experience as professional translators, neither of them had any significant pedagogical training. For her part, Ms L had read the book on project-based translation teaching from a social constructivist (SC) perspective that I had published in 2000 [4] and she had given considerable thought to her own personal theory of learning and teaching; but she too considered herself to be an essentially autodidactic translation teacher. By the time the project began, my own pedagogical epistemology had moved beyond social constructivism into the post-positivist realm of complexity thinking and an *emergent* understanding of knowledge and learning.

The question of the importance of educational epistemology in the use of Moodle arose at the very beginning of the project proposal process due to the explicit acknowledgement by Dr. Martin Dougiamas, the platform's creator, to the effect that he had designed it specifically on the basis of a SC epistemology. It seemed appropriate to consider whether teachers who use the platform must share an overtly formulated social constructivist pedagogical epistemology in order to implement it effectively.

The innovative curriculum development model that has been created in the DELTS Division of the FTSK is depicted in Figure 1. This model purports to hypothetically illustrate the development of translator competence over the course of a student's program of studies and beyond as a holistic, dynamic and systemic process involving the gradual merging of institutionally operationalized translator sub-competences into a super-competence. The model was inspired partly by complexity thinking as well as Jerome Bruner's spiral curriculum concept and the Dreyfus model of competence acquisition. [5]

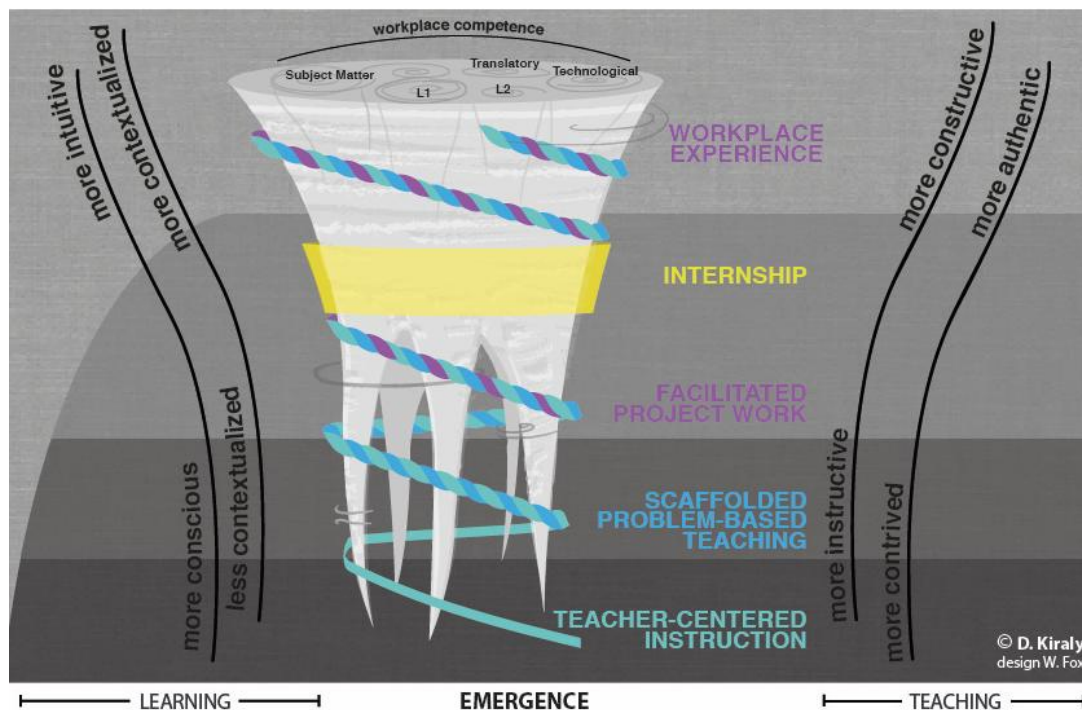


Fig. 1 A non-linear, emergent model of a translation studies curriculum

In this non-linear model, progression through the curriculum is portrayed not in a conventionally reductionist building-block fashion, but instead in terms of a gradual emergent evolution from the *simple* to the *complicated* and finally the *complex*. According to the model, teacher-centred instruction would ideally be employed most extensively at the earliest stages of the programme of studies where students need to acquire or strengthen a large set of basic, relatively simple skills – largely through lectures and contrived practice. Once they have acquired standard basic skills and knowledge, the students will be increasingly exposed to scaffolded problem-solving activities (simulated work) where they can practice the application of the basic skills to realistic problems. The final stage of the curriculum involves facilitated project work, where students can tackle authentic projects under the overall supervision of their teachers functioning largely as project managers – and in authentic work placements. Course design moves from more to less contrived; learning proceeds from more conscious to more intuitive; learning activities proceed from *less contextualized* to *more contextualized*; and didactic style shifts from being *more instructive* to *more constructive*.

### 3. The three project courses: from simple to complicated to complex

While the three teachers participating in the project did not discuss the model presented in Figure 1 before beginning the project, it was decided that it would make sense to try out Moodle on three courses that differed in terms of the complexity of the skills and knowledge that students could be expected to acquire during those courses. Within the scope of the Moodle project, Mr M chose to offer a course for lower-level BA students on the translator's computer-based tools; Ms L would offer a course on English-German financial translation for more advanced BA students (who, however, had never had a course in the area of commercial & financial translation before); and I chose to offer an authentic-project based course for MA students.

#### 3.1 An introduction to computer-based tools for translators (BA)

From the beginning, Mr M essentially saw the Moodle project as an opportunity to port the basic course on translation management tools he had already offered in a conventional manner to a virtual classroom format. The course he had taught a number of times in an essentially transmissionist, teacher-centered manner was moved completely online, with the same topics introduced largely in the

same order. While Mr M was actually tempted to videotape himself lecturing on the various topics to be covered in the course, the late notification of the approval of the project forced him to proceed differently. For reasons of expediency only, he instead decided to have the students seek out and acquire basic knowledge autonomously from external resources. In so doing, he radically changed the dynamics of the classroom. The students would have no choice but to assume responsibility for finding and acquiring their own knowledge. In terms of the model presented in Figure 1, the course content (skills and knowledge) that students would be acquiring or constructing during the course were largely of the *simple* variety. But while they were all expected to acquire the same basic knowledge and skills during the course, they were allowed a great deal of flexibility in determine how they would acquire that knowledge and those skills. The students would have to become familiar with the use of a popular translation memory program and basic procedures for working with files and various file formats which Mr M had determined would be useful to them later both in simulated classroom projects as well as authentic translation work. It is interesting to note that Mr M placed very little emphasis on group or teamwork. In fact, only one activity specifically required students to work together as a team. The success of this activity, however, led Mr M to consider including more team-based activities into the second iteration of his course.

### **3.2 A specialized translation practice class (advanced BA)**

Ms L's course was a specialized practice class in the area of financial market translation for BA students who had already completed several courses in non-specialized translation. The students were assumed to have already acquired a basic knowledge of translation resources, tools, strategies and norms. In this course, they would be expected to tackle translation exercises prepared by the teacher that would simulate professional translation work. The teacher decided to meet with the students for regular class sessions almost every week during the semester, and to augment those sessions with Moodle activities that had to be completed every week. Attendance at the regular class sessions was not required, but approximately two-thirds of the enrolled students attended class every week anyway. The regular on-site class sessions were designed to offer an opportunity to discuss their ongoing individual work at home. In this course, as in Mr M's course, only one activity was designed specifically to be handled by teams of students. All of the other activities involved the students translating on their own. A strong SC component was included in the course, however, by setting up the optional on-site sessions where the students could discuss their individual homework. The fact that such a large number of students decided to attend these sessions on a regular basis and the fact that the students participated very actively and interactively in these sessions. led Ms L to decide to seek additional opportunities for teamwork and social learning during the second iteration of her Moodle course.

### **3.3 An authentic translation project (advanced MA)**

In this course, run by the author of this text, the students assumed the task of translating two online brochures (comprising a total of 98 pages) on sustainable economics from German into English. All of the students were enrolled in an MA in translation studies, and all but one had done her BA degree in the same field. It was assumed that students would have had considerable instruction in basic translation skills and knowledge and that they would have had a great deal of practice with the simulated translation of general and specialized texts into English, the second language for all of the participants. The course met in a classroom three times: once at the beginning of the semester (to agree on deadlines and procedures), once in the middle (to finalize the first translation project, to discuss working with Moodle and to initiate the second project for the semester), and a third time at the very end of the semester (to finalize the second translation project and to discuss the students' impressions of working with Moodle at the end of the first iteration of the course). In this course, there were no exercises or other contrived activities of any kind. The only assignment given to the students at the beginning of the semester was for them as a team to complete the first translation over the course of the first seven weeks of the semester, and to complete the second translation over the course of the second half of the semester. During our initial meeting, the students were introduced to

our Moodle installation and also helped establish a working schedule for the semester. Together we decided that students would divide up into teams of two or three and that they would each be responsible for translating about eight pages of text in each of the projects. They accepted my suggestion of having each student proofread another's rough draft. Each student would then recuperate her text marked with her peer's suggested corrections and would make the changes she deemed necessary. It was further agreed that each student would then exchange texts with yet another peer before making final corrections and submitting the final versions to me for final editing and submission to the client.

A selection of passages that were modified over the course of each project was extracted from the various student drafts and great improvement is clear in all of the texts over the course of the semester. Unfortunately, retrospective data was not collected on why proposed modifications were incorporated into the texts, so the data collected reveals only that improvements in the texts improved over time, but not why. To find out more about whether and if so when learning took place, students participating in the second iteration will complete a pre- and post-test in hopes of identifying increased translator competence over the course of the semester, and they will also be asked to reflect on the reasons behind modifications they make to their initial rough drafts of the actual assigned project texts.

### 3. Conclusion

Judging from the feedback collected through interviews and blog entries, there was a very high level of satisfaction with the various courses on the part of the students as well as teachers who took part in this first iteration. This is encouraging for the continuation of the project and for the subsequent use of Moodle in courses at different stages of the curriculum at the FTSK. Virtually all of the students involved demonstrated that they were prepared to assume considerable responsibility for their own learning and that they understood the importance of learning as an interpersonal phenomenon, which appeared to be a characteristic that emerged as a natural feature of all three courses. The differences in the teachers' academic and professional backgrounds as well as in their educational epistemologies appeared to have no negative effect on their use of platform. But rather than being 'pedagogically neutral', the use of Moodle by these three teachers appeared to actually promote a shift in the teachers' respective educational epistemologies away from transmissionist instruction towards (more) interactive and transformational didactic practices. Relatively minor modifications need to be made to the three courses for the second iteration, as they were adjusted in an ongoing manner over the course of the first semester. Measures will be taken during the second semester to collect additional qualitative data that can be analyzed to better understand changes in students' translator competence and teachers' teaching competence and attitudes towards learning and teaching as the result of the use of Moodle as an educational tool.

### References

- [1] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moodle>
- [2] The project's findings will be covered in more detail in an upcoming publication: Kiraly, Don (forthcoming). "Promoting the Emergence of Translator Competence through Authentically Situated Project Work: A Multiple Case Study in Learning by Doing", ITT – Special Issue on Situated Learning in Translator and Interpreter Training: Bridging Research and Good Practice.
- [3] Kiraly, D. 2000. A Social Constructivist Approach to Translator Education. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- [4] Dreyfus, Stuart, and Hubert Dreyfus. 1980. "A Five-Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Directed Skill Acquisition." <http://handle.dtic.mil/100.2/ADA084551>. Copyright: Approved for public release. Accessed on 14 September 2013.