Using Moodle in a Blended Literacy Classroom

Michele Brannon-Hamilton

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Franc Feng, Stephen Petrina

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Introduction

Students learn best when they participate actively in a community environment. Traditionally, adult literacy learners succeeded in face-to-face, student-centred classrooms. However, with the advent of computers, literacy learners now need to learn literacy, computer and critical thinking skills. My paper suggests that instructors can use the learning management system Moodle in a blended literacy classroom to create a community conducive to learning through interaction, communication and collaboration.

Understanding Community

Communities can be physical or virtual and include establishing relationships, defining roles, creating trust and communicating with others. Instructors can help students build a sense of community in blended literacy classrooms using Moodle's interaction, communication and collaboration tools. In a blended classroom, such a community encourages engagement, active learning, creativity, collaboration and communication.

Brook and Oliver suggest that a "sense of community has been defined as 'a sense that members have a belonging, members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that member's needs will be met through their commitment to be together'" (2003, p.139). Secondly, members will have "regular and meaningful contact" (Brook & Oliver, 2003, p.139). Furthermore, they suggest that learning is social and "the sociocultural perspective emphasises the role of social interactions and cultural organised activities in influencing cognitive development" (Brook & Oliver, 2003, p.139).

In accordance with these beliefs, literacy instructors create a community in the classroom to foster learning. Following is an overview of literacy in Ontario including a description of face-to-face (f2f), online and blended learning communities; a description of current student and instructor roles; and a list of changes in the literacy field.

A Brief Overview of Literacy in Ontario

Literacy affects Canadians across the country and according to the Ontario Literacy Coalition, "low literacy rates in Ontario have remained at approximately 42% for over 10 years" (Ontario Literacy Coalition). Because of the demand for literacy instruction, different types of classes exist: f2f, online and blended.

Adult literacy instructors traditionally teach students who have returned to school to upgrade in the areas of reading, writing and math. Students take literacy courses to learn the skills necessary to find employment or to further their education.

In Ontario, basic literacy classes for adults are provided by school boards and community agencies which are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Students are typically over the age of 16, come from many cultures and have varying literacy skills. Classrooms are comprised of 5-20 students and one instructor. Instructors teach individualized lessons to students based on student assessment and future goals. Classes are structured around a community of trust, respect, interaction, motivation, flexibility and understanding because literacy learners often face barriers to learning. These barriers include a mistrust of education, time constraints, travel difficulties and child care issues. Students often feel marginalized by their lack of academic and employment skills. Therefore, literacy instructors use student centred

teaching to create a community conducive to learning. Teachers, such as myself, act as facilitating tutors who instruct students on a one-to-one basis in a f2f setting. Students are independent learners who work individually with guidance and assistance.

Advantages to f2f learning include teacher motivation, support and guidance. Students become part of a classroom community where they can receive immediate help, feedback and ongoing assessment. Learning is student centred and students benefit from interaction, collaboration and real life experiences. According to Palloff and Pratt, "key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions" (2003, p.5). Furthermore, many instructors use "active learning techniques such as working collaboratively on assignments, participating in small-group discussions and projects, reading and responding to case studies, role playing, and using simulations" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999a, p.5).

Instructors are trained to work one on one with students, developing a personal education plan for each student based on student-teacher determined short and long term goals. This environment benefits students with diverse learning styles and learning disabilities because help is immediate and personal.

However, as a literacy instructor, I saw the challenges of f2f literacy classrooms including a lack of relevant resources, a lack of funding and overcrowding. Therefore, most resources are text based with computers available for internet research, email and word processing. However, today's students need more than basic literacy skills to succeed. Therefore, the definition of literacy has expanded to include computer literacy. With computers in every part of daily life, online social communities have become the

norm. Traditional literacy classes are not in tune with this reality and students now benefit from online learning that is active and engaging.

The Changing Face of Literacy

Recently, the concept of literacy has changed to include computer, critical thinking and problem solving skills. This change has come from MTCU who has moved from the idea of basic literacy to the concept of essential skills. Essential skills include reading, writing, communication, thinking and computer skills (Ontario Literacy Coalition). Essential skills are "skills people need for work, learning and life" (The Learning Hub, p.1).

With this new view of literacy, MTCU has begun offering online literacy courses that cover basic topics like literacy, computer, and job skills. Courses are offered through the learning management system Moodle. Virtual classes are comprised of 5-50 students and one instructor with the possibility of increased class sizes beyond this number. Instructors teach individual and group lessons to students based on assessment and goals using online communication and collaboration tools to create a sense of community among learners.

Online learning benefits students by overcoming transportation, time and child care barriers. Instructors act as facilitators who guide students through lessons in a virtual classroom. Students are independent, self directed learners. Advantages of online learning include flexibility, independence and the ability to work at home at any time. There are also unlimited online resources available for visual, auditory and kinaesthetic

learners. Students become part of an online community where they interact with content, the instructor and each other in an environment of trust.

Disadvantages of online learning include lack of f2f instruction, IT support, internet access and computer skills. Another disadvantage of online learning is the inability to "see the facial expressions and body language that help us gauge responses to what is being discussed. We cannot hear voices or tones of voice to convey emotion" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999a, p.10).

Overall, f2f and online learning benefits students in some ways and disadvantages them in others. Therefore, literacy instructors are now able to offer online courses in f2f classrooms creating a blended learning environment that fosters a sense of community.

Moving to a Blended Learning Classroom

By using a blend of f2f and online teaching, instructors can teach students the skills necessary in today's world while also eliminating common barriers to learning such as the fear of online learning, time constraints and access to technology. Instructors can use technology to reach visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners while creating a sense of community. Students in blended learning classrooms can transition to online learning while situated in a f2f environment, thereby receiving support from instructors.

Courses will include literacy and job related subjects created by f2f instructors or online course designers. Some students will have a f2f and an online instructor if the courses are borrowed from other literacy agencies. The online portion allows students to become part of a community as well as overcome barriers of time, place and transportation. Furthermore, online learning promotes collaboration, creation, and

communication. Students can learn basic computer skills and critical thinking skills while improving their literacy levels. Condie and Livingston suggest that computer literacy is important "and that students will need knowledge and skills in handling the new technologies" (2007, p.338).

Furthermore, Condie and Livingston suggest that teachers and students will have new roles in blended learning classes (p. 339). Classroom instructors can act as facilitators, motivators and supporters to students who access the online courses. Students can work independently knowing support is available when necessary. Students have the advantage of f2f students because individual support is available immediately. They also have the advantages of online learners who can overcome time and distance barriers. Therefore, blended learning encourages independence on a reduced stress level.

Teachers can teach students how to use social media tools like wikis, chats, forums and blogs. Instructors can encourage active learning with real life demonstrations instead of passive reading. Online instructors can "monitor learner progress, provide support and feedback, and assess learners' work online" (The Learning Hub). The literacy instructor's "role is therefore to support the learners to learn for themselves and to provide opportunities to enable them to develop a sense of ownership of the learning process" (Condie & Livingston, p.339). Students can interact with the material in an active way and resources include visual, auditory and kinesthetic material that is available on the internet such as text, photos, videos and interactive exercises. When instructors help "students take a more active role in their own learning [this] means that the teacher has to take on a facilitator, guide and/or mentor role" (Condie & Livingston, p.345).

Overall, students can become part of an online community while safely staying in their f2f classroom environment which can eliminate the fear of online learning and failure. F2F instructors can teach internet safety and netiquette to students are not computer savvy. Students have the benefit of trying online learning and then changing back to f2f.

Blended learning environments combine the advantages of f2f classrooms with the advantages of the online environment. Teachers can choose what is best for the literacy classroom based on the goals of individual students. Therefore, moving to blended learning is the next natural step in a learning environment that uses a student centred approach while teaching functional literacy skills to students.

Currently, literacy instructors are using Moodle as a tool in blended classrooms to create learning communities.

Choosing Moodle

Moodle is a learning management system (lms) that instructors and course designers can use to design courses with a variety of social and communication media. Moodle is free, easy to use and accessible to students anywhere. Instructors can program Moodle modules for selective release and upload a variety of media including photos, documents and links to websites. However, Brook and Oliver suggest that "simply employing the software and hoping that conditions conducive to the formation of community will develop is unlikely to result in community development" (2003, p.140). Therefore, instructors need to choose technology that supports their objectives and suits their audience and purpose.

In order to choose the best technology for the blended literacy classroom, I considered Chickering and Gamson's principle's of good teaching which fit well with the literacy objectives of active learning and engagement (1987). By using educational technology principles and tools, educators are able to create an environment conducive to learning. Good teaching principles include active learning, interaction, immediate feedback and engagement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p.3). Chickering and Gamson's principles are based on "50 years of research" (1987, p.3).

Learning is social and should involve participation, communication and interaction. Moodle fulfills many of the principles including active learning, interaction and immediate feedback. Students can receive assessment and feedback during collaboration, in forums, and on quizzes. Instructors can use real life material and access literacy material from other agencies. Moodle supports communication, collaboration and interaction. Therefore, instructors can use Moodle to create a sense of community among learners.

Developing a Learning Community Using Moodle

Instructors can create an environment conducive to learning using Moodle's interaction, communication and collaboration tools. This new community fosters a sense of trust and communication by establishing relationships between the instructor, the content and the students which in turn promotes learning. Instructors facilitate as students learn independently. Instructors act as facilitators, supporters and guides. Students will develop relationships with f2f instructors, online instructors, and other students.

By using Moodle in a blended classroom, instructors are creating a new type of community with its own values, norms and roles. Students feel safe because they already know the instructor and f2f students in the class; therefore, moving online is less of a threat. Secondly, extroverted and introverted students can feel a sense of belonging in a blended classroom. Extroverts will flourish in the f2f component while introverts can experience a new found sense of community online where they can participate actively yet almost anonymously with Moodle's collaboration and communication tools.

Instructors can us Moodle to develop a learning community through communication, collaboration and interaction. Students can *communicate* with instructors and each other using synchronous and asynchronous communication tools like chats, forums and email. Students can *collaborate* with others to create content using wikis and blogs by gathering knowledge and sharing it in a collaborative manner. Furthermore, students can *interact* with course content using Moodle's visual, auditory and kinaesthetic content capabilities. Overall, students learn in an active environment where instructors encourage them to communicate with others and learn independently. Palloff and Pratt suggest that "attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful" (1999b, p.29).

Brook and Oliver investigate the establishment of online communities through collaboration and how these communities benefit students. They suggest that people in communities have a "sense of … belonging to" which helps them succeed (Brook & Oliver, 2003, p.1). Moodle was designed around the concept of community and its "design is guided by a particular philosophy of learning, known as 'social constructionist

pedagogy'" which suggests learning is social (Moodle, p.2). Anderson suggests that "effective learning is community-centred, knowledge-centred, learner-centred, and assessment-centred" (2004, p.47). Anderson refers to Moodle's community-centred and learner-centred qualities when he suggests that instructors need to "establish a supportive environment such that students feel the necessary degree of comfort and safety to express their ideas in a collaborative context, and to present themselves as real and functional human beings" (2004, p.34).

Overall, research suggests that instructors can use Moodle's tools to fulfill the principles of learning and create a sense of community.

Moodle's Tools

Instructors can use Moodle to create reading, writing and math modules on a variety of topics. Instructions can be text-based, audio or visual. Students can use synchronous and asynchronous communication tools like the chat, forum and email to communicate. Instructors can use forum discussions to "help "personalize and humanize [a] course" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999a, p.11). The course designer can include links to course related sites and use different activities. Condie and Livingston suggest that instructors who use a variety of learning material "may contribute to an increase in confidence and motivation to study, the intensity of the learning and the depth of knowledge and understanding" (2007, p.342).

Bates and Poole suggest interaction and feedback are important aspects of learning (2003, p.75). A LMS like Moodle provides opportunities for students to interact with others through asynchronous and synchronous communication tools and interact

with course content through activities and quizzes that also provide direct feedback. Instructors can develop tests and assignments with immediate feedback and set up social activities. Students can interact with the course content thought activities, with the instructor through forums and email, and with other students through forums, wikis and chats. Overall, instructors can use Moodle to teach literacy, reach different types of students and create a community of learning. However, students and instructors may face challenges when using Moodle in a blended classroom.

Challenges and Issues

Several challenges may arise in a blended classroom using Moodle including the following: instructors may be uncomfortable using Moodle; teachers may be overworked with no time to learn new technology; instructors may have little educational technology training and some literacy classes may not be suited for online learning. Other challenges include large class sizes, teachers who only work part time, and minimal pedagogical training, the cost of computers, IT problems, barriers to learning, and learners who do not want to participate. However, many of these barriers can be overcome with training and support. Teachers can receive professional development and time to use Moodle. IT personal can help with computer access and students can be mentored in Moodle by instructors or other students. Therefore, literacy classes can benefit from Moodle.

Conclusion

Research suggests that technology alone will not create a community conducive to learning but a learning management system like Moodle can help instructors achieve

the principles of good teaching which allow literacy learners to learn. Computers are important in the modern literacy classroom to help students prepare for further education and jobs. Research suggests there are barriers to using Moodle in a literacy classroom including inefficient funding, computer access, student resistance to change, and lack of IT support. However, research also suggests that students learn best in a social environment of trust and support and instructors can use Moodle to achieve these goals. Moodle is free, easy to use and helps create a learning community in a blended classroom. Anderson suggests that "a single environment that responds to all students needs does not exist" (2004, p.52). However, instructors can use Moodle in a variety of ways to teach literacy while helping students adapt to technological and social changes in modern society.

Overall, the research supports my argument that Moodle can be used in a blended literacy classroom to create an effective learning community through communication, interaction and communication.

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