If you have taken part in an online course in foreign language learning or in any other subject over the past few years, it's very likely that you accessed your course materials and interacted with your tutor and your classmates using what is known as a "Virtual Learning Environment" (VLE) or a "Course Management System" (CMS). Very simply, this is a tool which allows teachers to create a location on the internet where the group of learners can view course materials as well as interact and collaborate together using online communication tools. These courses can be organized purely through distance learning but they can also be a part of a "blended learning" set-up which involves combining traditional classroom sessions with periods of online learning.

Along with Blackboard and WebCT, Moodle (http://moodle.org) has become one of the most popular examples of these tools in educational institutions around the globe. The developers of this VLE report that there are currently over 24,000 registered institutions using the platform in their classes. These schools and universities are located in 175 countries and are offering courses in 75 different languages. In Spain, the country where I live and work, over 1,300 schools and universities are using Moodle, and many Spanish universities have taken the step of adapting Moodle as the official institutional platform of use.

There are many reasons which account for Moodle's popularity. Firstly, Moodle is "free open source" software which means that the platform can not only be downloaded and installed for free, but administrators can also access the source code and make adaptations to how their version of Moodle operates. This is very significant if you consider that many other platforms can cost tens of thousands of dollars to buy and install and then do not allow administrators to make many changes to how the platform is structured or designed. Another reason for the platform's popularity is the online community of practitioners which can be accessed on the Moodle homepage. A large collection of discussion forums and resources on this homepage provides programmers and educators with a space where they can share their experiences of using the platform and also suggest ideas about how it can be changed and developed so it can be employed more effectively in courses. This online community can be accessed here: http://moodle.org/login/index.php.

Moodle also comes with a wide array of activities and resources which can be adapted to suit the needs of different tutors or educational institutions. Basically, the homepage of a Moodle course is divided into blocks which the teacher can organize according to weeks or themes. Each of these blocks can then be filled with the content and the activities which the teacher chooses to upload. The content may come in the form of text files, website links or "lessons" which contain texts followed by interactive quizzes on the text content. The activities may involve students participating in a forum discussion or a chat, submitting a piece of work in the assignment function, or collaborating with other students in the editing and construction of a document using the Wiki function. Moodle also attributes considerable importance to the social aspect of online learning and when students first join a course they are asked to fill out a personal profile which includes a photo and a short bio statement. Once a student has done this, teachers and classmates can click on the name of the student in order to find out more about who they are or to send them a private message using the instant messaging function.

Moodle also offers the teacher a wealth of administrative options to help with the organization of their classes. For example, teachers can set deadlines for assignments and activities which means that students are obliged to submit pieces of work or to take part in online quizzes by certain dates — afterwards, access to these activities is blocked. The platform can also provide teachers with the scores of students' tests as well as information on when a certain student logged in for the last time, what resources and activities they accessed when they were online and what messages they may have left on the discussion forums. Teachers can leave announcements for the class on a special message board and copies of these messages are sent directly to the emails of all students registered on the course.

One of the aspects of Moodle which makes it different to other VLE's is the emphasis it gives to facilitating student interaction and collaboration. The authors of the platform explain that Moodle has been inspired on the principles of socio-constructionist learning which basically means that learning can be achieved most successfully when learners collaborate together in project work and authentic problem solving with their classmates and others. To support this approach to learning, Moodle offers a great deal of functions which can be used to support student interaction and the construction of documents through team work. The platform offers teachers the possibility of introducing communicative functions such as synchronous chat and asynchronous discussion forums and also includes tools which allow learners to comment on and even edit each other's work such as the wiki and workshop functions.
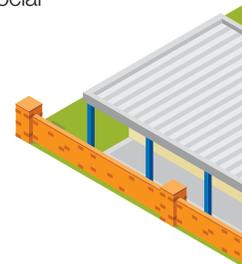
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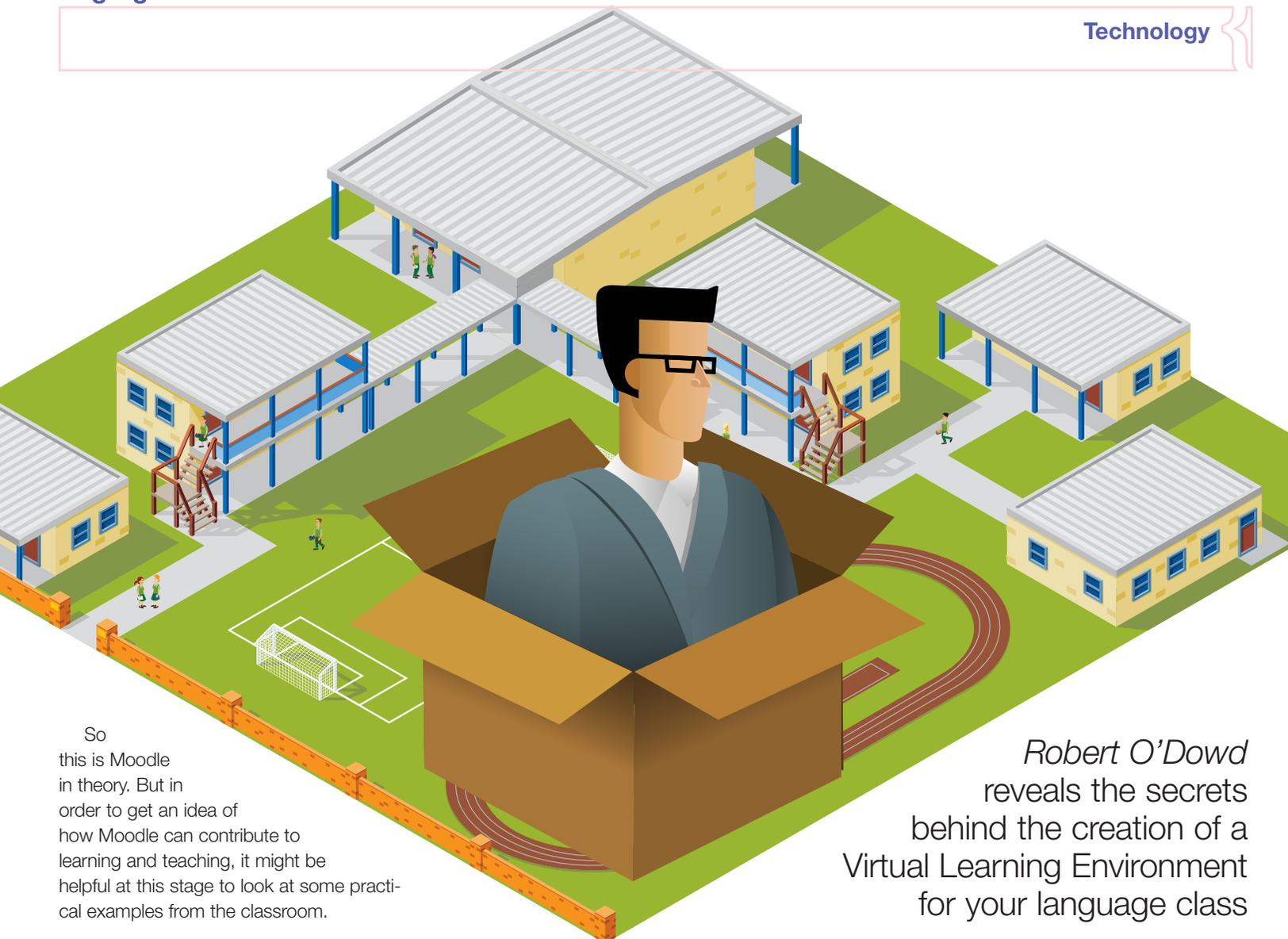
So this is Moodle in theory. But in order to get an idea of how Moodle can contribute to learning and teaching, it might be helpful at this stage to look at some practical examples from the classroom.

Robert O'Dowd
reveals the secrets
behind the creation of a
Virtual Learning Environment
for your language class

How are teachers using Moodle?

Belén is a teacher of Linguistics and English as a Foreign Language in a university in Spain. She has been using Moodle in her classes for three years now and sees it as a vital part of her classes. At the beginning of each new term she asks her students to log onto to her course in the University's Moodle platform and fill out the personal profile section. Each week she uses PowerPoint presentations and work documents in her classes and then, at the end of class, she uploads them onto Moodle so the students can read them again and print them out at home if they prefer. In the past she would have photocopied all these documents for her students but by making the material available in the VLE she saves a great deal of time and paper. Belén has also used the quiz function in Moodle to create interactive tests for her students to help them revise the material they have covered in class. When they have completed these quizzes, the teacher can check the students' scores and keep an eye on their progress. Belén has not had the opportunity yet to engage students in online collaboration together using the discussion forums, but she has used the instant messaging function to communicate with students directly and to find out how they are getting on in their courses. So far she seems to be very satisfied with the VLE: "The platform obviously improves the opportunities for collaboration between teacher and students. I can imagine that it will also increase the

students' level of motivation and their desire to participate more in their learning as they will feel more involved, more 'the centre of attention' because the online work strengthens the level of personalised attention. It's also a more interactive type of learning."

A second example shows an alternative approach to how Moodle can be used for language teaching. Alfred teaches English as a Foreign Language in Spain and has been using Moodle for two years now, although his activities have been quite different to that of Belén. Alfred has very little experience of using online technologies in his classes and he reports being pleasantly surprised at how easy it is to use the VLE in his classes with only the minimum of technical knowledge. Alfred uses the platform as a location for an online intercultural exchange between his students of English as a Foreign Language and students of Spanish as a Foreign Language at an American university. In their Moodle classroom, students find discussion forums where they can write to their partners as well as worksheets with their task descriptions. Alfred also posts "reminders" of deadlines on the teachers' message board so everyone knows when they have to write their messages to their distant partners. In the exchange the students write about their hometowns, compare attitudes to topical issues, and send each other links to webpages of

their favorite pop singers. The discussion boards also allow students to upload images so students often include photos of their families, home towns, and universities. Alfred often brings a laptop into his classes and connects to Moodle during class time. By doing this he can focus on interesting things which students have mentioned in their messages and he can make suggestions as to how students can respond to their part- ners' questions and comments.

Alfred feels that using Moodle and introducing an online exchange into his classes has meant a significant change in the way he teaches: "For a start using the platform adds variety. But it also allows you to move away from the classic situation where the teacher is simply pass- ing on knowledge to the students. It takes the emphasis away from the teacher being the only source of knowledge. It's also a refreshing thing for yourself as a teacher — it keeps you up to date."

These short examples give a general idea of two different ways in which teachers are using Moodle in their classrooms. Every teacher has different ideas about how learning can best be achieved and how tech- nologies should be used in their classrooms and part of the reason for Moodle's success is that it has proven it can be adapted to suit different needs and learning contexts.

However, Moodle does have its drawbacks and any teacher or insti- tution working with the VLE should be aware of these before integrating Moodle into their classes. Some teachers have complained, for example, that Moodle has so many functions and activities that it is often very diffi- cult to know which ones to use and when. Administrators should keep this in mind and remember that teachers unused to using technology in their classes will need training and advice in how to use the platform. This training should involve a focus not only on technical aspects of the VLE but also on the pedagogical issues involved in online education. Another complaint which one often hears about Moodle is its physical organization. Some teachers complain that the process of uploading documents or moving files from one block on a Moodle page to another is a slow process which can require a great deal of clicking on the mouse and patience. This may be something that Moodle's developers could focus on in the future.

While Moodle is far from being the ideal online learning tool, it does have a lot of educators and programmers working on its devel- opment and the list of activities available to users is constantly chang- ing. Some language teachers are reportedly currently working on the option of adding voice-based communication tools to the VLE, while the possibility of introducing blogging and mindmapping tools is also under discussion. ▉

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