

How to get the Moodle motor started?

Our experiences with Moodle in a learning trajectory on Capacity Development

In the past six months we experimented with Moodle, an online learning- and working environment we used in an action learning trajectory on 'The how and what of capacity development'. And it seems worthwhile to share some of our first experiences with you in this blog. Mainly because we find it wasn't very easy to integrate an online platform in the broader learning process. How to design an environment in which new users can find their way? How to integrate an online environment in the design of a f2f learning trajectory? And how to stimulate participants to actually make use of the online environment? To tempt them to use it for finding useful sources (like articles, working materials, interesting links), as well as collaborate on working documents, provide feedback, join a discussion or have a chat session with other participants. Our reflections, experiences, insights and first suggestions for follow-up...

Why an online environment?

The design of the learning trajectory consists of an action learning process for about 15 to 20 people from diverse organisations, all involved in capacity development. Leading in this process are the organisational questions participants work on. Questions that are important for their own organisation, pressing, and supported by the management. We organised monthly meetings, as moments for reflection, exchange of experiences and input by so-called 'experts'. The experts were invited to make their contribution in an interactive way, in general they spent half a day with the action learning group, at times in the action learning sets, at times using others group formations. The approach to action learning we adopt assumes that the participants remain responsible for their own learning and for developing answers to their own organisational questions in between sessions.

As a lot of work in this learning trajectory needs to be done in between meetings, in their own organisation (doing some research, interview colleagues, explore new insights, apply ideas to own practice), it seems worthwhile to have an online meeting- and working place in addition. Moodle provides participants a place to meet each other, collaborate, give feedback, have a dialogue on common topics, and share experiences. As social learning is an important principle in this learning trajectory (the idea that people learn with and from each other by reflecting on and working with real organisational questions), the combination of f2f meetings and an online environment seems useful. And challenging as well!

What have we learned so far?

For our own reflection we used three perspectives: technical aspects of Moodle, Moodle for supporting social learning, and an online platform as one learning element in a broader learning process. What have we learned so far?

The technical aspects of Moodle

Moodle is an open software system, free available to download from the internet. Not too complicated, there are several very useful instruction videos, examples of Moodle environments, and online communities for help. Primarily designed as a course environment, which you notice by terms as 'course', and 'teacher'. There is a basic lay-out which provides some structure in which you as a designer have a lot of freedom to design your own environment (with functionalities like a wiki, forum, assignment, questionnaire, and overview of articles and links). As facilitators of the

learning trajectory we learned-by-doing. We designed along the way, discovering new options and possibilities, exploring the online system, as the learning trajectory progresses over time. The on-line introduction courses available for Moodle help late-comers to become more familiar with the Moodle.

Introduction of Moodle to the group

From the beginning of the learning trajectory we made it clear that the action learning content on capacity building and learning on how to work with Moodle, as a method would be combined and evolve over time. This is an ambitious set up and potentially makes for a dynamic learning environment. Latecomers to the learning trajectory show the digital divide, younger latecomers are quick to explore the Moodle environment and form opinions on it's use and compare features with other interactive software, such as Skype and Google docs and internal portals such Oxfams' KIC. Older participants, the 40+ age group both in the original participants and the latecomers show that they are reluctant to join the Moodle environment. *'I lost my password and have not been able to access the environment'* .

Gradually building the environment

Intentionally we gradually develop the Moodle environment. For example, we started with information on the first learning encounter and a wiki space to work on your own action learning plan. Later we added other functionalities, such as a forum, library and a chat function. Our aim was to allow the participants to gradually become familiar with the environment. It would possibly be too much of a challenge if the first entry/access to the Moodle would entail a large amount of time and effort to become familiar with the learning environment. By allowing participants and facilitators of learning to gradually add to the environment, there is an element of surprise and discovery involved, that hopefully motivates participants.

Structure in the design

On reflection it would probably be helpful to make our working design of Moodle more explicit. More design in the form of a plan or explicit ambitions, like what sort of processes do we want to stimulate between participants? What is needed to do that? This might have 'forced' us to share the ambitions and the intended approach more explicitly. In hindsight it is obvious that we have tended to let people drift. For instance, although we were upfront about combining the action learning on capacity building with learning on how to work with an on-line learning environment, we have tended to reflect on this as a sort of side show. We would collect feedback on the difficulties, and 'forgot' to celebrate successful experiences in plenary, such as chat forums or reworked action learning plans.

Mixed responses

For participants who are new to an online learning environment, the threshold can fast become too high. *"Halfway, I lost my password and have not yet had time to retrieve it. It takes a while and effort before this is in working order"*. Even though the Moodle has an automatic password replacement button, exploring such easy access options is not automatic for all. Others struggle with trying to arrange a face-to-face meeting. *'As a result I pick up the phone to contact a fellow learner, as that is simpler and faster'*. Such access problems thwart the use of Moodle, the open source origin implies that there are bugs and integration issues with existing computer and network settings within the organisations that participate. The great thing about the open source nature of Moodle is not only that it is free, it continuously improves and that online assistance and queries get a fast and rich response.

Benefit of success experiences

'I joined the learning trajectory half way. The on-line environment was a stimulating way to get an image of the progress and achievements of the learning trajectory. The Moodle gave me an insight in all that and as an information source it was very effective. I tried to upload a document and that was unsuccessful, so after several attempts I gave up and asked one of the facilitators to do this'. Everybody needs easy access and some effective responses from fellow learners to realise the benefits of the online environment. Without those, the Moodle does not become part of routine work and easily gets shelved. For the facilitators working with Moodle appears to offer several advantages, such as publishing information e.g. programmes, questions to learners; sharing documents, chat forum and tracking access and activity for and of all learners. The 'special' rights e.g. publish to all, that can be assigned to facilitators are very powerful. The reflection space for facilitators was used once. Could it be that the technical possibilities appeared to be overwhelming for first time users? Overall we struggled to combine supporting the action learning sets and using Moodle to collect our own observations and reflections. In this sense we, the facilitators, do not appear to be very different from the learners. An important lesson was that half way we removed the barriers between the action learning sets so that all would view the ongoing activities, in the hope that this would be inspiring or motivate actions amongst the observers.

Certain body for mutual inspiration

The participants were divided in three action learning sets, in order to allow participants with similarly focussed questions to be linked. We expected that this would encourage further focus in the learning questions. This division in three sets was continued in Moodle, so there were three separate working spaces within the overall Moodle environment. This approach proved to be effective in the f2f situations and less so in Moodle, possibly because fewer participants were active online. The fact that in the first instance the results (output) of the action learning sets were only visible for the fellow learners in the set, lead to divisions between individual participants and the action learning groups. This was changed as we realised the unexpected outcome of the divisions and the associated lack of synergy and mutual inspiration. We suspect that this was too late in the trajectory to achieve a surge of active contributions and significant change in the use of Moodle.

Peer pressure online

Another important point of attention in an online environment is peer pressure. This social dynamic is more present and obvious in a f2f work setting, online work creates a different setting. Such pressure can be of significant value when working in an action learning environment and with intensive collaboration. The personal encounter, a mutual relationship will make anybody more committed to agreements, people seem to realise that a worthwhile contribution to the learning of others is a serious commitment and then absence will be noticed. We sought to encourage such responsibility between participating learners by working in smaller groups and making such groups responsible for the time in between f2f encounters.

Your limits as a facilitator

We saw the Moodle environment as a place for Information gathering as well as for collaboration: sharing tools and experiences, having joint discussions, working together on concrete products. In the f2f meetings we regularly made agreements on 'assignments' we would be working on in between meetings. The Moodle environment seemed a perfect place for working on these assignment, share ideas, meet, provide each other with feedback (to us). Some participants made use of this option. Especially when you already have some experience with web tools as wiki or googledocs, Moodle is quite similar in use. E-collaboration is more effective when several participants use the online environment to share their materials. As facilitators we were sometimes struggling with our role: as we see participants responsible for their own learning process, how far should we go in stimulating them to work in a particular way? We can support them, provide them

with the right tools, give them access to possibilities, help with problems. What are our limits? And when do you accept that something you would like to be working, is not?

What are ideas and recommendations for follow-up?

- Participants mention their time restrictions to work in between meetings. *'We are so busy, it is not easy to make time for learning in between. It would be helpful if online moments are planned as well.'*
- It is important to constantly ask yourself the question which tool is appropriate for the kind of process you want (dialogue, discussion, sharing, feedback, etc) to stimulate.
- Use of specific functionalities (e.g. chat, wiki, forum) asks for certain skills. For first time users it is helpful to have some concrete tips on 'how to use...', and to realise that having a perfect chat requires some experimenting and practicing.
- Some participants prefer f2f contact above using Moodle. *'In between meetings it was easier for me to grab the phone to contact someone, or even meet f2f. I feel more comfortable with that in stead of using chat or Skype.'* For facilitators to reflect on interaction and progress in between meetings it is important to not only focus on the activity in the online environment; lots of things might happen outside your direct scope ('behind the scene').
- The next time we would pay much more attention to 'getting to know the environment'. By practicing with it in the f2f meeting, having a simple exercise online, providing a short manual on 'how to use..'
- Introducing a kind of rhythm for short and small events to get familiar with Moodle, combined with creating results with respect to the content of the learning trajectory. Just to get the Moodle motor started.
- Make sure you have a certain 'volume' when you want to work collaboratively.
- And as facilitators make use of the Moodle environment in the same way as you ask from the participants. Your own learnings might be of tremendous help for others. And insights you gain from own practice can be translated to actions you ask from others.

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