Noodle?
No, Moodle! And yes, it’s a real thing! Moodle is actually an abbreviation for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, and contrary to the sound of its elongated name, it is not rocket science. It’s an online tool for educators who believe in the constructivist philosophy of teaching. Moodle supplies online forums for class discussion and document uploads for either private communication with the teacher or public contemplation for the whole class. A “Class Wiki” is also available as an informal, “idea dump” page where any student can edit or add content, brainstorm, and ask questions. Also notable is that this site can be the middle man for other internet learning tools, as teachers can post links, graphics, YouTube videos and other interactive media to further engage students outside of class lecture and exploration. Moodle, controlled for each class by the respective teacher, can be opened for student uploads of projects, online quizzes, class calendars, grading/grade communication, instant messaging, and announcements. To explore go to www.moodle.com.

A Moodle Case Study
What is Oppression?
In the spring semester of 2012 I used Moodle in the University of Wisconsin-Madison pre-service teaching program to facilitate a unit on the book Guardian by Julius Lester. I collaborated in creating and teaching this online unit with two other pre-service English teachers in the program. Our mission was to teach the essential question “What is oppression?” to two groups of four freshmen students at a local high school. These students were part of a class whose teacher volunteered to collaborate with the Young Adult Literature for Schools course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Students were assigned to our group by selecting the novel we intended to teach. This unit was entirely directed by the three undergraduate students and therefore the grade for the unit was also dictated by us. The classroom teacher oversaw classroom activity in the computer lab but saw engagement, content, and grading as our virtual responsibility. The only face-to-face interaction we had was on the first and last day of the unit. The first day we met up to give them a crash course on using Moodle and an introduction to studying Guardian. After about three and a half weeks we met again to present our final, multi-genre projects. These projects will be further explained in upcoming sections. While all of the students did the lessons online during their class time, we, the teachers, were not available to interact with them in live time during the class period in which they completed each lesson on our Moodle site. All of our communication between the meetings happened through email and discussion posts/notifications on Moodle. Through formal class expectations and informal
email communication we gauged the students’ changing concept of the essential question “What is oppression?” and provided resources for them regarding the inequalities of the past in connection to the inequalities of the present.

Discussion Boards
The students composed Moodle work during their regular English period class time at school. They met in the computer lab instead of in their normal classroom and sat in a group of computers near their group members. Other groups in the class were directed online by other pre-service teachers in the same course teaching different essential questions through different books. Each class period, a different student from the Guardian group would be in charge of posting discussion questions for their group prior to the class period. The requirement was that it would chronicle the reading assignment. Every student in the group was to respond during the period. This allowed each individual to have at least one opportunity per day to control how the content and themes of Guardian were examined, further embracing our constructivist mindset. A discussion question often looked like Mao’s, a student who participated in the unit, detailing “If you were in Bert’s position when he was asked who killed Mary Susan, what would you say? Would you be able to go against society’s unspoken rule and defend an African American man against a white man—not knowing the consequences?” Agreeing with the pedagogical scholar, Peter Smagorinsky (2008), we thought it important to give students the chance to create their own knowledge and understanding of a subject based upon their personal experiences, social context, and cultural backgrounds, especially when using a text with injustices like racism, lynching, rape, suicide, animal cruelty, and violence as Guardian does.

Filtering Eyes
While we did want students to have structure every day, as seen in our use of Moodle’s discussion boards, we also wanted them to have a place with total freedom of expression and exploration; this desire morphed into our “Extended Definition” activity. Moodle has a component that allows the teacher to put different filters on activities throughout the website. The filter setting was high for the “Extended Definition” which means that we filtered whose eyes got to see the writing: only the teacher and each respective individual could view each student’s progress on their definition transformations. We thought this would give them the privacy they needed to be honest with themselves about their thought process, opinions, and research. To start them out, we gave each student a heading for their page with the essential question, “What is oppression?” At the end of every class and throughout their time outside of class, as they mulled over the reading and their life experiences, they were to edit, add to, take away from, contemplate inside their original definition that we had them type out the first day (when we taught them how to work Moodle). The original idea for this came from Teaching English by Design in which the author stresses that extended definitions can assist students in making sense of ambiguous concepts in literature (Smagorinsky, 2008). Students’ confidential work changed as they did other projects in the unit, like answering discussion questions, responding to prompts and doing homework. Some even ended up referencing their peers’ responses, events of racism that were happening in their school, topics that came up at home, and examples of advertent and inadvertent expressions of oppression in the media.

Call Me Maybe
The activities and writing we had them do in between the discussion prompts and “Extended Definition” each day were scaffolded to help them not only further their ideas on oppression, but to further their ideas on solutions to oppression. In one activity we had them synthesize a different piece of art with characters...
from *Guardian*. Options included the painting “The Scream” by Edvard Munch, the pop song “Call Me Maybe” by Carly Rae Jepsen (via YouTube link), and the locker scene from the movie *Napoleon Dynamite* (via YouTube link). The student writing from this activity was my personal favorite to read through because of the evidence of learning that I saw. On the first day many students had to look up “oppression” on an online dictionary, and by this lesson, students were synthesizing the conditions of humanity and specific characters’ circumstances regarding oppression in concrete ways by analyzing the abstract media prompts. This was a victory in our unit and I was surprised how much growth I could see in the students without actually seeing them! We also had students do multiple activities where they analyzed situations from someone/something else’s perspective. We called this activity “Object Objections”. They wrote from a non-human entity in the book about how oppression in the book affected “them.” Options included the noose, the general store, the lie that was told, the frog that was mutilated, the mirror of the self-loathing Maureen, or any other entity they found significant. These reflections allowed students to see the large scope of oppression, a new layer to the concept which no longer just applies to humans, and to register the huge ripples that result from both small and large incidences of such injustice. This practice was to come in handy through looking at multiple perspectives which they could synthesize in their “Extended Definitions” in a push toward the final, multi-genre project.

**No, Actually, You Have To Call Me**

As mentioned before, the growth and understanding of this unit relied heavily on scaffolding. The discussion prompts, “Extended Definition”, art synthesis, and “Object Objections” persona writing all lead into the final multi-genre project. For this project, students were to first read over their “Extended Definition” of oppression and think about how their ideas on oppression could help fight it. They were then to choose a character from *Guardian* to offer advice and encouragement through any of the following genres: letter/email, poem, brochure, collage/diorama, website/blog, or an original idea. The problem we ran into when it came time for the multi-genre, solution-oriented portion of our unit, was that students hadn’t yet completed all of their required activities and therefore hadn’t put in the proper preparation to branch out into an activity like this.

My biggest concern when we reached this point was that, as we were trying to teach for social justice, we had taken the already complex idea of oppression and convoluted it through the rigor of our expectations. Only a few students had been updating their “Extended Definitions” and many discussion boards looked like ghost towns as I clicked through, yearning for posts to cut, copy and paste onto my rubric sheet. Furthermore, no students had been posting questions in our optional question forum, sending us emails, or calling us up for clarification. This is where online education can feel unattached, uncertain, and unreliable. Because I didn’t get to joke with them in class, talk with them between passing periods, or take on-the-fly questions, I didn’t know why they weren’t participating fully, what was going on, what they didn’t understand, or why they couldn’t get their work done. When communication became this broken, I worried that teaching social justice issues was just a luxury. I kept thinking “I just need to get these kids to hand in something, ANYTHING!”

With my collaborators, the conclusion was reached that, as constructivist pedagogues, this was part of the deal. Instead of looking at the teaching philosophy as the flaw, we started to zoom in on our methods of carrying it out. Were we allowing students to co-construct knowledge with us, or were we waiting on pins and needles for them to say what we wanted them to, to come to the conclusion of what we already thought was “right”?
And just like the fight for social justice, nothing can move forward without communication. We revamped the work load, took out two entire lessons substituting them with guided work days, and sent out individual emails to students with missing work providing them with a new, penalty-free deadline. This tone shift helped students who needed help with the content, work load, or technology component to speak out and voice their concerns to us. We finally got the base we needed to build on, which was good for the success of the multi-genre project, but truly too late, as some important scaffolding pieces were lost in the modifications. Learning about the perils of online communication in regards to class facilitation was a lesson we, the teachers, could’ve benefitted from before the cob webs started to take over our Moodle page. Accountability, we found, was much less tangible in an online classroom.

Real Live People

There really is no substitution for real, live people working together in real, live time, seeing each other’s real, live faces. Using the internet for pieces of an academic class is a good experience for students and teachers because it gives a discussion forum that is very relevant to the way modern communication happens with Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other popular online outlets. The internet also gives students an interactive window into school, the ideas they’re learning, and the peers they’re learning with while they’re at home. This infusion encourages student collaboration, another important component of constructivism. Constructing knowledge alone promotes constructing solutions alone which promotes the idea that the solution must be carried out alone. Not only is this unrealistic, it’s dangerous. Preventing this isolation danger is where constructivism met, and started to court teaching for social justice during our unit...and go figure, they met online!

The exploration of social justice issues and the solutions we desire our students to crave shouldn’t happen in solitude, but in solidarity. Social justice is about the unification of people committed to one another and to standing up for their ideals, for what they think equality, liberty, justice, and hope mean. Moodle is a great tool for students to respond to one another’s thoughts and a great tool for collaboration. Next time, I would go further with this collaboration and have a private “Extended Definition” for each individual, but also make a forum for a whole class “Extended Definition” possibly constructed as a “Class Wiki”. This could further promote the group solution tactic that is crucial to the reality of real life problem solving.

Conclusion

When I say “next time” though, what I really mean is the next time I utilize Moodle with my students, not the next online class I teach. I think that moving education toward online integration is generationally relevant, but toward a fully online experience is not appropriate. Our society is pushing forth the concept of the individual more than ever and in my classrooms it seems as though students are interpreting humanity as clusters of individuals instead of communities of people.

I believe Moodle can enhance a class through school-to-home infusion and student collaboration, as a way to bring the class closer together. But if the class turns into twenty-five students meeting in a computer lab, sitting next to one another but only typing to the computer, something has been lost. The humanity that English teachers try, day in and day out, to have our students grasp can get foggy and overlooked. Good education is interactive. There is no substitute for real, live interactions with real, live people, and it’s important to give new technologies the chance to complement (but not take over) these experiences.
References


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