With the integration of learning apps, what are *Moodle*'s prospects?

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Abstract

The role of technology in enhancing teaching and learning cannot be over-emphasised. Often, tutors use innovative tools from the virtual learning environment (VLE) provided by the university. In this piece, I reflect on the prospects of VLE, as tutors and students have begun to find other tools more engaging and interactive.

As a university lecturer, I have always been interested in student engagement and the role of technology in enhancing teaching and learning. I attended the SHIFT (2018) conference to present my work on student engagement using *Kahoot!*, an online quiz system, projected in class, with which students can engage on their laptops, tablets or smartphones. I have used this online tool for more than two years and SHIFT offered me the platform on which to share my experiences.

At the conference, other lecturers offered their own experiences of using these online tools. There were presentations on *Mentimeter* ('*Mentimeter*: a practical workshop', by Katherine Leopold, Martin Compton and Jamie Harle), *Kahoots* (In Kahoots with guest lecturer by Cathryn Peppard and Karen Richardson and 'Re-engineering challenging and abstract topics using a student response system', by Dr Maria Gebbels), *Twitter* ('Fake News: there is no place for Twitter in education – a 21st-century case study', by Scott Goudie, Gemma Boden and Ashley Stewart), *Pebblepad* ('*Pebblepad* ePortfolio – case studies of uses at the University of Greenwich', by Lawal Muhammad, Dorothea Fadipe and Louise Atkinsand) and *Slack* ('Facilitating a *community of learners* with Slack', by David Watson).

People often question the need for using these tools instead of *Moodle*. It sometimes appears that those using them are rebelling against the 'almighty' *Moodle* provided by the university and that those not using them are either not creative enough to do so or just naive and do not want to step outside university provision.

Moodle is the virtual learning environment (VLE) for the University of Greenwich and lecturers and students are meant to use it as a one-stop hub for student engagement. Lecturers often upload their lecture slides there, give information and expect students to engage on the platform, join the forums and contribute. In addition to *Turnitin Assignment*, which appears to be the most used application of this VLE, there are also, on the platform, such other possibilities for embedding activities as chat, dialogue, feedback, forum, group choice, quiz, scheduler and survey. My main concern, however, is about how well and how often we use these resources, either as students or lecturers.

Furthermore, despite all these VLE possibilities, I wonder why there is so much interest in stand-alone online applications, such as *Kahoot!* for quizzes, *Mentimeter* for surveys and

pools and even *Slack* for chat, dialogue and forums. This can all be achieved in *Moodle*, the prescribed VLE, which offers a unique environment for student learning and engagement.

Following interaction and discussion, especially after raising my concerns at conferences, I have been reflecting on the comments of other lecturers. There are three key factors that I have been able to identify, albeit arising more from anecdotal data than being substantive findings from research. Nevertheless, they offer an insight into the challenges faced by both lecturers and students while engaging with VLE and into their implications both for an institution and for the developers of VLEs.

Firstly, the user interface appears too rigid, is not social and does not offer flexibility for lecturers or students. With advancements in design, we have seen the interface reconfigured to suit how users interact with websites, but it is apparent that the interface and design of *Moodle* are not conducive to creativity and the exploration of various opportunities.

Secondly, accessibility seems to present some challenge to students. Seeing them log into the VLE through the website, I observe that they have to follow various links before they get to what they need. Perhaps they are not aware that it is available as a mobile app.

Thirdly, *Moodle* is widely considered by students as a platform for weekly access, rather than a site they visit daily, and they are more likely to log in on the day of their lectures – they generally see it as a resource location, holding the slides necessary for the week's lectures. Though most of the slides have been made available some time before the start of the session, students just log in during class to download the slides and therefore do not really engage with them. I often ask my students whether they have checked what we will be doing in class and, generally, most have not.

So, with these limitations of the VLE in mind, I again reflected on what makes the other apps in question more social and more encouraging for students to use in order to engage in their learning. From my observations, the designs and interfaces are more creative and beautiful. The colour and music in *Kahoot!*, the simplicity of *Mentimeter* and the multi-functional benefits of *Slack* make these platforms more appealing and students can relate to them. In addition, students don't always feel tracked and trapped by using these standalone apps and they see them as unique entities, which makes them more interesting. *Kahoot!* and *Mentimeter* can simply be projected on to the screen on any given day and students can engage with them.

Despite these positives, I feel it is important also to highlight some concerns, which may shed light on why other lecturers may not want to use these apps:

There is the matter of privacy. Particularly on social media sites – such as Facebook and Twitter – students may feel that tutors have access to their private information and they may feel monitored. Questions like 'Are you monitoring me?' arise when students do not want interaction and may not be willing to engage. Likewise, staff may feel students have the opportunity to encroach into *their* private space. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013), reporting on the lived experiences of faculty with social networking sites, suggest a conflict between private identities and social networks. Manca and Ranieri (2016) further highlight great concerns – about privacy – which may discourage tutors from adopting social media for their teaching.

Next, as students are wary of unwanted interaction, they may not want to create another account solely for the purpose of engaging with the institution, seeing *Moodle* as the one-stop hub. There are challenges in creating *Twitter* and *LinkedIn* profiles for student engagement, as students appear not to be very familiar with these platforms. I have, however, seen the potential of *Snapchat* for learning and engagement, as it is a platform the students like. Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008) do, nevertheless, report positive attitudes from teachers towards integrating social media into their teaching and suggest that pedagogical beliefs should be considered while adopting such media. Students should be made to see reasons for exploring alternatives to VLEs.

Finally, in line with creating new accounts, there are challenges in relation to limited phone memory with which to instal additional applications, as confirmed by findings in Mogaji (2018) regarding student engagement on LinkedIn. He states that students believe they can use their remaining phone memory for better purposes. Even though *Moodle* is available online and accessible on mobile, this may explain why some students do not download the mobile application: they prefer to instal apps they will use more often.

I certainly wish to explore other technologies in order to enhance students' experiences; I am sure, too, that other lecturers are considering this. I do remain very concerned about the steps *Moodle* and other VLEs, such as *Blackboard*, will have to take to retain, for the purposes of engagement on their platforms, both lecturers and students alike. Perhaps it is the institution which keeps us all on this platform? I suggest that, if *Turnitin* were to become a standalone application and students were able to engage with it outside the VLE, this would cease to be the case.

However, I like the idea that everything is in a centralised location, as you can monitor progress and see how everything is going, instead of having different platforms and monitoring points. Given the contention over this matter, the provision of empirical insight – through research into how students really engage with VLEs compared to other standalone learning and teaching applications – is essential

The SHIFT 2018 conference has proved very thought-provoking. Even though it was just for one day, its debates and discussions were very engaging and helped individuals to evaluate their teaching practices. In my own opinion, lecturers will still have to use such platforms as Moodle for all learning activities. The students either engage, or they do not. I think it is vital that we have everything embedded into a single hub. However, web applications are here to stay and it is up to the institution to discourage the use of them. Bearing in mind the way SurveyMonkey was stopped and Office 365 preferred in my own institution, *Moodle* and other VLEs need to improve their user experiences or face similar displacement.

Reference list

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