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Author: Eugenia Smyrnova-Trybulska

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USE OF THE DISTANCE LEARNING PLATFORM OF THE FACULTY OF ETHNOLOGY AND SCIENCES OF EDUCATION IN CIESZYN (UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA) IN TEACHER TRAINING

Eugenia Smyrnova-Trybulska
Faculty of Ethnology and Sciences of Education in Cieszyn
University of Silesia in Katowice
Bielska 62, 43-400 Cieszyn, Poland
esmyrnova@us.edu.pl

 Abstract: This article presents examples of good practice in comprehensive, systematic and effective use of the distance learning platform of The Faculty of Ethnology and Sciences of Education in Cieszyn (University of Silesia), based on CLMS MOODLE system, in order to: 1) provide pedagogical support for teaching programme courses, run in the full-time and part-time mode (hybrid learning), 2) train future teachers in distance learning – to use e-learning in own profession and to act as tutors, 3) help teaching staff as well as graduate and post-graduate students to carry out scientific research and pedagogical experiments 4) provide access to educational materials for students and other users. This article contains numerous screenshots of specimen distance courses and other resources, available on the platform.

Keywords*: distance learning platform, remote courses, electronic resources, teaching materials, computer competence, tutor, CLMS MOODLE.*

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to imagine today any contemporary university or department without a website. Moreover, it is getting more and more common for a university and individual departments to possess distance learning platforms which implement various teaching, scientific and educational aims. The distance learning platform of The Faculty of Ethnology and Sciences of Education (WEiNoE) University of Silesia, whose coordinator and administrator is the author of this article, is based on the CLMS MOODLE system and serves, among other things, to:

1) provide support for teaching programme courses, run in the full-time and part-time mode (hybrid learning),

2) prepare future teachers to take advantage of distance learning – to use e-learning in own profession and to perform the role of a tutor,

3) provide assistance with scientific research and pedagogical experiments carried out by department staff, graduate students as well as post-graduate students,

4) provide access to educational materials for students, the local community and all other people interested, also for the disabled, people with financial limitations, residents from small and remote towns and other users in order to give all citizens the equal chance to have access to the knowledge, as one of the main priority aims of the European Community.

In the year 2003, on the department's server, at first the educational portal Erudyta was launched [5], which was based on CMS Nuke PHP Apache system, whose aim was, first of all, to promote the teaching achievements of WEiNoE students, post-graduate students and the department's academic staff. On the portal one could find the papers, presentations, multimedia programmes, the gallery with photo-reviews showing many interesting teaching and scientific events (conferences, seminars, courses, lessons using multimedia and Internet etc.). But as time was passing it turned out that there are too little resources and possibilities to ensure all teaching and scientific necessities of its users.

So in the year 2004, a new idea to start the Internet service giving not only the access to educational materials, but also support all stages of education via well prepared distance courses. These expectations could be provided thanks to the platform of Content Learning Management System (CLMS), one of the most popular and quickly developing system is MOODLE .This system was chosen as a tool to the realization of becoming the defined plans of department reality and the future integration of local space into the European one, and worldwide computer-educational space. As the practice showed the system MOODLE did not fail the expectations of its users.

1. DISTANCE SUPPORT OF PROGRAMME SUBJECTS, PROVIDED IN A FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME MODE (HYBRID LEARNING).

1.1. Subject: Information Technology

Information Technology (IT) is a subject taught on study programmes as a general education subject, taking up 30 hours of teaching units of which 15

are delivered as lectures and 15 as workshops. The general aims of the course are to provide students with basic theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the use of the office package Microsoft Office 2003 (2007), or other software packages, for example OpenOffice, Works, etc. as well as individual utility programmes: word processors (Word), which are useful in office work, in the writing of any term essays, diploma or master's thesis, in the preparation of teaching and methodical materials in the future teacher's work; other software covered includes spreadsheets (Excel) to gather data, calculate all kinds of figures, to perform data analyses and to present output in graphical forms (graphs) as well as programmes preparing multimedia presentations (PowerPoint).

The general aims also include familiarization with media processing programmes: graphics processors, sound recorders, programme recording, video processing sequences, programmes-converters, etc. Among the aims is also familiarization with basic services available on the Internet and with CLMS MOODLE - the system supporting distance learning and developing distance education competences. The aim of practical classes is, first of all, to develop practical abilities of using computer equipment and to solve practical tasks with the help of utility programmes and the Internet.

The high value and relevance of the subject, and also its practical aspect, at the same time the small number of hours envisaged in the curriculum, have led to contradictions between ambitiously justified aims and objective problems with their implementation, connected first of all with the small number of hours. In such conditions, as real-life experience shows, active and systematic use of distance learning is a sufficient solution, adapted to the formulated on the subject necessities and permitting to support all stages of teaching process: familiarization with new teaching material, formulating practical abilities, recording theoretical knowledge and practical abilities, casual and final check-up of the knowledge, evaluation.

That is just the supporting system of distance learning MOODLE and a department platform http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl based on it, which effectively handle performing all these tasks. In the framework of this IT subject students take part in distance courses "*MS Word and its possibilities*" ("*We are getting acquainted with the word processor Word*", "*The word processor for advanced learners*", "*Analysis of data in the spreadsheet MS Excel*" (fig.1), "*Arrangement of multimedia presentations in the programme MS Power Point*" ("*We are making multimedia presentation in Power Point*").

Also as an optional subject, students can take part in any computer course, for example: "*Creating web-page on Front Page Express*", "*My first front page in HTML*", "*Basic WebDesing*" ("*Internet Technologies*"); "*Graphic in IrfanView*", "*Raster Graphics in Photoshop*", "*Vector Technology in CorelDraw*" ("*Computer graphics*"), "*Digital photography - we are making multimedia album*", "*Creating animation in Macromedia Flash*", "*Film Development and Editing in Computer Programmes*", "*Sound Recording and Processing in Computer Programmes*" ("*Computer Science and Technology Information*"),* and others.

In this context it is worth mentioning the rules of the Bologna Process, which Poland joined a few years ago. One of these rules envisages that the number of hours of instruction on tertiary education programmes will change so that more time will be devoted to self-study than to traditional face-to-face classes. When this changes materializes, it will be of crucial importance to provide means of two-way communication between the instructor and students and to ensure high teaching standards. Comprehensive and systematic implementation of distance learning methods, well-thought-out beforehand, can significantly contribute to the achievement of this goal.

E-learning courses are also actively used to support classes in various courses offered on post-graduate studies organized on WEiNoE, for example: *Oligofrenopedagogy, Educational Therapy* (Fig. 2, 3), *Education of Family Life* (Fig. 4) and others.

Taking into consideration the fact that post-graduate students mainly include active teachers, who pursue their post-graduate studies and at the same time work in their jobs and perform official duties, who have families and quite often commute to university a few dozen and even a few hundred kilometres, enabling them to take part in distance learning is a good and flexible solution, allowing them to organize their own education process and to ensure high professional and teaching standards.
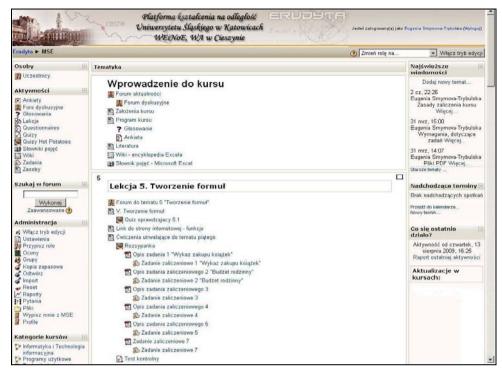
Figure 1. **Main page of the course called "***Data analysis in MS Excel spreadsheets***" (http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl)**
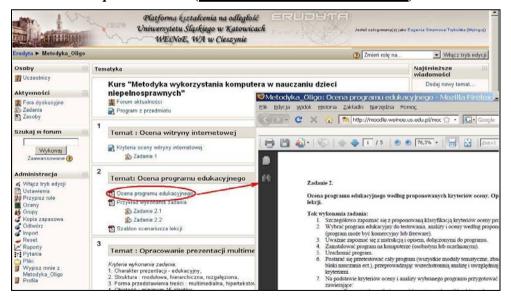

Figure 2. Main page of the course called *"Methodology of computer use in teaching disabled children"* **and resources in the form of a PDF file (http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl)**
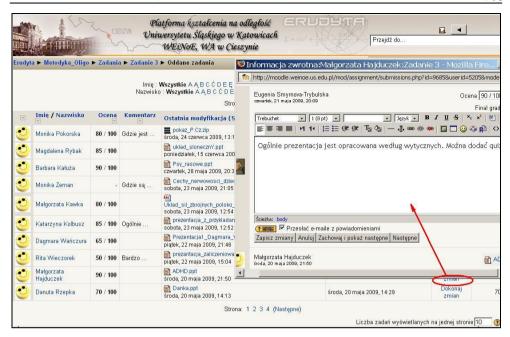
Figure 3. Course constituent element *"Methodology of computer use in teaching disabled children".* **Task Type:** *Send the file* **and its evaluation. (http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl)**

Figure 4. The main page of distance course of *Forum* **type, in the subject called** *"Mass media and family's problem"*, **with speaker dr J. Urban (http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl)**

2. PLATFORM AS A MEANS AND A RESEARCH TOOL

Platform WEiNoE (FEaSE) can be and is actively used by the department's graduate and post-graduate students as well as academic staff for the purpose of scholarly research and educational experiments. Thanks to an advanced tool available in the MOODLE system - *Questionnaire* (fig.5) one can very quickly and in an easy way carry out a research survey, make it available for the respondents. After the questions are answered in the survey, the system itself very precisely and immediately processes the data in different ways, presenting them in numerical form, as percentages and in graphical form to every particular respondent, or to all respondents according to separate categories.

Figure 5. Research survey designed to gauge the level of computer's competence among fifth-year pedagogy students, developed by D. Willmann as part of the M.A. thesis preparation, available on the platform (http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl).

Publishing the survey on the platform allows for carrying out research on a wide scale, without distance and time limitations, which makes research more reliable and objective, while the data processing through the MOODLE system enables scholars to save time, helps to them avoid having to carry out routine activities and ensures the accuracy of calculations.

3. USE OF THE PLATFORM IN THE PREPARATION OF FUTURE TEACHERS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF DISTANCE LEARNING – TO USE E-LEARNING IN OWN PROFESSION AND TO PERFORM THE ROLE OF A TUTOR.

3.1. Using the distance learning platform in teaching the course called "Information technology in the work of a disabled person's assistant"

In the information society, in knowledge society, there are several goals of equal importance that should be pursued. One of them is affording the opportunity to acquire knowledge to all citizens, including the disabled, persons with financial limitations, residents of small and remote towns and other users, in order to create equal chances for all citizens to have access to information resources and knowledge. These rules are the priority aims in the development of European society.

Simultaneously with the new concept of the development of educational system and standards of teachers preparation, every teacher should be a computer teacher, possessing the competence of distance learning. The implementation of these tasks should be ensured by institutions of higher education employing active and common remote controlled forms and teaching technology. The positive example in this context is the distance learning platform WEiNoE and its use in IT training for teachers while they attend the course called "*Information Technology in the work of an assistant to a disabled person.*"

The course has been developed by the author of this article. The course workload is 30 practical hours and 60 hours of individual work. The course is deemed successfully completed if the students receives a pass for her/his coursework. The course is included in the study schedule for the second year of the pedagogical specialization called "*Assistant of a disabled person*".

When teaching this course, it is worth taking into consideration that first-years students attend a general education course called Information Technology, where they broaden their knowledge and improve their information competence.

The aims of classes include: familiarizing students with modern multimedia means and Internet technologies that can be used effectively in instruction – in educational and therapeutic classes for disabled children and for people with special needs; development of the ability to critically evaluate Internet resources and educational programmes; familiarizing with domestic and foreign experience of distance teaching of children and elderly people with special needs; development of theoretical knowledge and practical skills of preparation of multimedia, electronic teaching aids in the form of distance learning courses, intended for elderly people with special needs.

Programme curriculum: The role of the computer in special education, computers for special education. Classification of educational programmes, examples. Software classification for revalidation, examples:

- Classification and evaluation criteria for computer programmes; review of educational and therapeutic programmes available on the market, their analysis and evaluation; design of educational and therapeutic programmes using multimedia programmes. Analysis and testing specimen programmes according to the evaluation criteria; designing a lesson plan using one of these programmes.

- Role of computer technology and the Internet in providing access to knowledge and the integration of the disabled. The Internet - the source of educational resources. Distance learning - as a alternative for many disabled people. Distance learning-distance learning for disabled children, the implementation of different models of distance learning [1], [6]. Review of specimen Internet resources: servers, educational portals, distance learning platforms   (also   including   http://erudyta.weinoe.us.edu.pl, http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl, and others). The analysis and evaluation of Internet website on the basis of proposed evaluation criteria.

- Internet communication technology on the basis of such programmes as Microsoft Netmeeting, Skype, Gadu-Gadu, Yahoo Messenger.

- Theoretical and practical aspects of the development and utilization of distance learning courses for disabled people using the MOODLE system. Specimen courses. Using the components of distance learning: Lesson, Task, Journal, Quiz, Hot Potatoes Quiz, Forum, Chat, Survey, Questionnaire, Voting and others. Teacher's competences in the area of distance education.

Credit requirements:

1. Acquiring theoretical knowledge and practical skills included in the course.

2. Preparing and defending a report on the evaluation of an educational programme based on test results and analysis according to evaluation criteria.

3. Development of a lesson plan (for a lesson, therapeutic class, form tutor periods), including the use of tested programmes during the lesson.

4. Development and presentation of an evaluation report about an educational website, based on test results and analysis according to evaluation criteria.

5. Development of a distance learning course for one of topics relating to education of disabled persons

6. Successfully completing at least one distance learning course, available on the department' distance learning platform http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl formulated, prepared by a fellow student and its evaluation.

The course was successfully taught in the academic year 2008-2009. All the students of this specialization effectively fulfilled the credit requirements and defended their reports, acquired indispensable competence in using computer-communication technology in their future professional careers, and developed courses which are being used by a great number of users: persons with limitations of possibilities, therapists, form tutors, educators, parents of disabled children and so on.

Thus it can be concluded that the course, developed and implemented by the author, *"Information Technology in the work of a disabled person's assistant"* is a positive example of comprehensive and effective implementation based on information technology and the Internet, designed to prepare specialists, educators of new generation, who will successfully be performing their work duties in the contemporary context of information and knowledge society, using distance learning and teaching technologies and will also continue self-learning and improving their professional skills.

Figure 6. Main page of the course called *"Special pedagogy"*
(http://moodle.weinoe.us.edu.pl), developed as part of the course called
"Information Technology in the work of an assistant to a disabled person"

Based on similar concepts, the author of the article also teaches such courses as "*Information technology in teaching ecology", "Information technology in teaching philosophy and social science*", which are offered in the second year of doctoral programmes for particular specializations, and comprise relevant topics and take account of the specific nature of individual fields of study.

The platform also offers such as distance courses as *"Distance learning"* and *"Developing distance courses in the MOODLE system"*, which are available free of charge to all those interested in obtaining tutor's competence: future and active teachers, post-graduate students, counsellors, teacher trainers, therapists, and others.

4. PLATFORM AS THE SOURCE OF EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

As it was mentioned before, the platform also provides access to educational materials for students, teachers, post-graduate students, local residents and other people.

In the menu on the left side of the main platform page you can find available components of MOODLE system such as: *Vocabulary of useful ideas*, containing, in hypertext format, the most important passwords, ideas, and their definitions from pedagogy, psychology, computer science, media, and so on.

Resources called „*Useful publications and links*", contain a list of a few dozen of books, magazines, encyclopaedias, Internet addresses of educational portals, digital libraries, Internet magazines etc.., which can be beneficial for students, educators, as well as for all Internet users who want to learn and improve their pedagogical and information competence.

The Forum and Chat services allow users to engage in discussions, both in the synchronic and asynchronic mode, about all current topics and provide explanations for any questions that may arise. In the centre of the platform's interface there are folders with educational materials from different fields, developed formulated by academic staff. Users can access these materials without having to log on to the system and having to set up passwords. There are other resources and services which can be found after accessing the platform.

CONCLUSION

Summing up all issues mentioned above, one should highlight the value and multipurpose character of the distance learning platform WEiNoE (FEaSE) in helping to identify right solutions for different educational, academic, social issues and so on that have proved to be difficult or impossible to solve in a conventional manner. At the same time it is worth mentioning that there is still large potential to be tapped and wide spectrum of tasks and projects which will be implemented in near or further future perspective through the active use of the platform, in particular: international project supported financially by International Visegrad Funds (IVF) "E-learning – as a road to the communication in the multicultural environment", implemented together with University of Ostrava (Czech Republic), Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica (Slovak Republic) as well as support for all courses offered by the University of the Third Age; support for all courses run on full-time and extramural programmes; support for the disabled; organizing the competition "The best distance learning teacher (tutor) " and others.

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