

A comparison of functionality and usability of Moodle versus the in-house WOLF VLE.

Gemma Witton: Multimedia Learning Development Assistant, SHaW MMU

First Impressions

On first glance the sheer volume of options within Moodle makes it more intimidating to use than WOLF. This could be a potential barrier to use by staff who are less confident with the use of a VLE in general and are comfortable with the simplicity of WOLF.

As a technical user with experience in a variety of VLEs and other content management systems, I found that although there was an initial learning curve, adding and editing content to Moodle quickly became quite intuitive.

Building a course from scratch.

The way a course is displayed with links to all of the content in the large central column is very different to WOLF. I prefer the Moodle layout to the WOLF layout as I think signposting students through the module content would be more straightforward. From the focus groups I remember some staff disliking the Moodle layout, so it would be useful to provide a comparison of the alternative content layouts and gather opinions from a group of students.

Once I had familiarised myself with the in-line editing icons I found building a course quite intuitive. Being able to see how your course will look while in edit mode was the main reason for this.

The drag and drop interface for altering the order of content is particularly useful, and would be a timesaving alternative to the cut/paste or move up/down options in WOLF.

Uploading material.

Adding standard content such as html pages with images and text felt quite familiar as the HTML Editor is similar in layout to that used in WOLF and other systems.

A nice feature of the HTML editor is that you can resize the editor window, which makes working on a larger screen easier.

Multimedia

The HTML Editor has a built in function for embedding media, which is not a feature available in WOLF (currently media has to be hand-coded). This made video embedding very quick and easy. The built in media player controls for video were simple and effective.

The media embed function also allows embedding of flash movies, however there is no option to upload any associated files (some of the learning materials we produce rely on the embedded flash movie linking to an XML file which pulls

in text, images, audio and video from a folder situated relative to the swf file on the server). This is currently achieved by uploading all required files via FTP. Having no option to FTP groups of files into Moodle meant it was not possible to embed these types of learning materials.

The limit on file size was an issue for uploading multimedia as 2MB is not enough for most rich media such as video or audio. We currently use FTP as a way of uploading files which exceed the file size limits in WOLF, although files are always optimized before we do this.

RLOs

I liked the interface for uploading an RLO, which took place all on one page. I thought it was more user friendly and less time than in WOLF where there are options over several pages. I also liked the drag and drop file upload feature although that would not be essential. Unfortunately the limit set of 2MB was too low for most of our RLOs which tend to be media rich with audio, video etc. Like other media we usually FTP these into WOLF.

I particularly liked the ability to edit the HTML on the RLO launch page. Being able to provide information on the contents of the RLO, along with some images or icons would be beneficial signposting for students.

The ability to export reporting/tracking data on RLOs is a feature with potential usefulness. Particularly for mandatory updates on SHaW Professional courses e.g. basic life support, manual handling fire safety which have to be completed annually before students are allowed on placement. A record of participation is recorded manually at present I believe.

When I go to my home page, Moodle tells me I have SCORM packages that need attention. I have no idea why they need my attention and there is no additional information or links regarding this statement. This kind of message has the potential to cause confusion and frustration for course administrators – particularly if they are not comfortable with the technology in the first instance.

Creating Quizzes

Creating quizzes is a two step process in Moodle . 1 – creating the quiz object and 2 – adding the questions.

When you initially create the quiz object there are a lot of options available. This flexibility adds some benefits. I think it could be overwhelming for less confident users who are comfortable with the simplicity of WOLF.

There are a greater variety of question types within Moodle and they appear to be nicely laid out. I was particularly interested in the ability to add a description question type which allows you to add text, images and other content at points within a quiz without requiring a user response (all text currently has to be within a question in WOLF).

Pagination options for quizzes are useful for longer quizzes or ones that use graphics. The one question per page option is similar in style to QMark which we use for summative assessment. The option to add pages of content between questions is also a useful feature – this is something we have been doing using the workbook feature in WOLF. I did not have time to look into the branching options. But I can think of several areas of past development where this would have been useful.

The general layout of the quiz in both edit mode and student view seems more user friendly. The question layout and quiz review style is very clear in student view. In edit mode it is handy to be able to see the question text from the main quiz edit page.

Time Taken to Achieve Tasks

The ability to drag and drop files directly from your computer into place in the Moodle course could be potentially time saving – however this could also encourage the continuation of the culture we currently have of using WOLF as a content dump for PowerPoint presentations which would not improve the student experience from that which we currently have in WOLF.

Embedding media such as video, audio and flash animation could potentially be much quicker than it is using WOLF with the option to do this through the HTML editor in the same way that you embed an image. However, a limit of 2MB is not enough for this to be useful.

Some types of multimedia that we currently embed within WOLF pages would be impossible to re-create in Moodle without FTP access, or re-packaging the objects as RLOs (adding items to an RLO repository is not always appropriate in SHaW courses due to confidentiality).

Usability

There is a learning curve when using Moodle as it is very different to WOLF. The added flexibility would be well received by technically confident users but may confuse staff who are less comfortable with technology.

FTP is an essential requirement for the work of the MMU to be used in Moodle.

The in-page help text was really useful when creating more complex content such as questions or when attempting to use some of the more advanced options.

General Thoughts

I deleted the news forum from the course introduction section several times but it kept re-appearing.

Moodle allowed me to copy and paste text and images directly from WOLF. But continued to source the images from WOLF, which may result in problems of broken links if staff are required to migrate their own module content.

Conclusions

I enjoyed using Moodle and as a content developer I can see some potential benefits of moving to this as our VLE e.g. the flexibility of options, the simplification of adding media, the intuitive user interface etc. However, there would need to be proper integration with the other university systems in order for these benefits not to be cancelled out e.g. automated archiving and copying of topics. There would also need to be FTP access and an RLO repository if SHaW is to continue to make best use of the multimedia learning resources it has invested in developing over the last few years.

In addition, I think the training implications for changing to the Moodle VLE would be huge. In order for staff to feel supported I think a dedicated telephone helpline would need to be in place for the swap over period and to support early use, in addition to staff training.