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TRENDS AND LEADERSHIP IN LEARNING TECHNOLOGY

# E-LEARN

No.12

MAGAZINE

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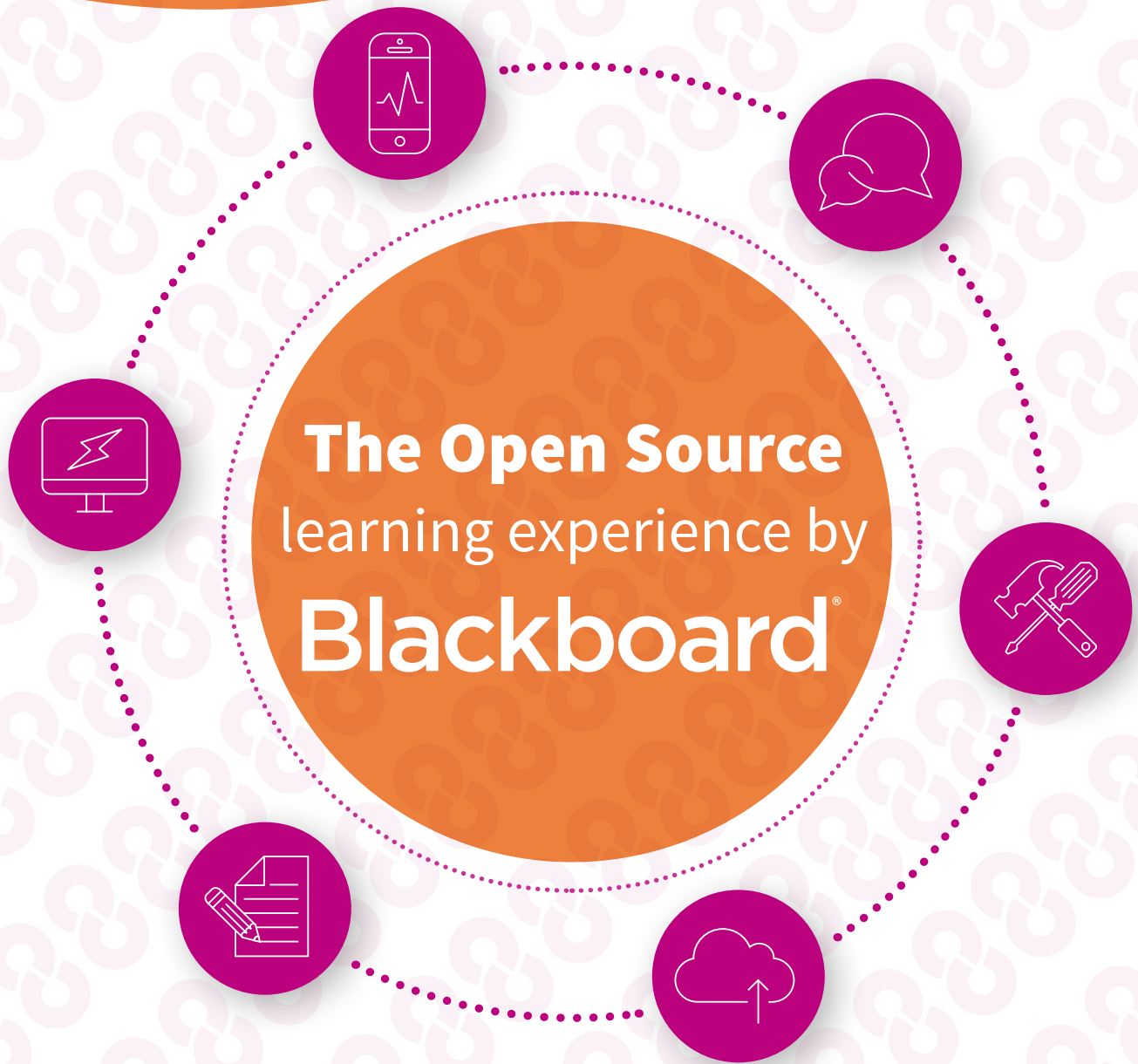
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**Rediscover** **Moodle**

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# Editorial



▲  
CAROLINA PINTOR - EDITOR  
MANUEL RIVERA - CONTENT DIRECTOR

# W

e are very pleased to present our second international edition, with success stories from all over the world. As the E-Lean Magazine team, we feel very proud of all the work accomplished and of being able to share these experiences in e-learning and learning technology with industry global leaders.

In this edition, our featured article is on the partnership with Blackboard, the Moodle partner with the largest global presence. Its objective is to strengthen open source through support to the community.

We would like to thank James Taylor from the Challenger Institute of Technology in Australia and Burck Smith, StraighterLine CEO. Thanks to Andrew Chiu from the American International School of Hong Kong and Delaina Tonks of Mountain Heights Digital Academy, who shared their virtual learning strategies oriented towards K-12.

We also want to thank Omar El Kheshen, Managing Director at the Arab Academy in Cairo, Egypt, as learning Arabic has never been easy; Teresa Sancho Vinuesa, Professor for IT engineering, multimedia and telecommunication studies at the Universitat Obertat de Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain, who talks to us about the challenge of teaching and learning mathematics over the internet; also thanks to Gemma Maxwell, Learning Manager at the Francesco Group, one of the largest and most renowned beauty salon chains in the United Kingdom; and Jason Hollenberger, Professor at the River Valley School District, who demystifies that e-learning is just for large corporations, on the contrary it is also for schools in places with no more than 1,000 inhabitants such as Spring Green, Wisconsin, in the United States.

Thanks to Bas Brands and Julie Dirksen for their participation as experts and leaders in our industry.

Additionally, we present our special infographic on predictive analytics and the testimonials of Moodlerooms internal leaders like Kris Stokking and Terri Ann Bennett, who together with their teams are committed day in, day out to offer customers the best solutions.

We hope you enjoy the articles we have prepared for you. ∞

**The E-Learn Magazine Team**

# Challenger Institute of Technology, eLearning for vocational education

**UNIVERSITY DEGREES ARE** expensive and time consuming. Not everyone can afford the luxury of spending so much time and money to get a diploma. Society tells us that the only way to get a quality job is to first have an education. With this in mind, programs have been created that differ from the traditional university system, yet give thousands of people a quality education in specific fields. This is what the TAFE system in Australia is designed to do: allow people to receive a practical education so that they can get a better job and keep climbing the job ladder.

BY: Christina Gómez Echavarría  
Fremantle, Australia

**T**AFE stands for Technical and Further Education, and it's a program that focuses on providing vocational education and practical skills. "At universities, you go for your degrees, undergrad, postgrad, doctorates, etc., but the TAFE system sits right under the higher education sector, and being vocational, its primary focus is on preparing people for the workplace", James Taylor explains. He is in charge of learning technologies at the Challenger

Institute of Technology, an institute in Western Australia that teaches vocational system and has 140 different courses. Taylor manages the technology as such, staff capabilities, and the strategy and the policy behind it.

Taylor explains that people go to a TAFE institute for different reasons. It might be a pathway to higher education, where a person gets a certificate in nursing, grasps the fundamental concepts, and then pursues a career in medicine. It could be that they have already had work experience in a certain field, for example in social work, and they want to get a better position in the same area, so they study for a certificate in order to extend their knowledge beyond what they have learned by working. And finally, a person might need a job urgently but can't afford the luxury of being a full time student for four years while they get a degree at a normal university, but still wants to be qualified.

Vocational education is essentially of an overwhelmingly practical nature; it is interested in what really works, and anything else counts as wasted time. This is why people failed to understand the fact that e-learning was being introduced into this type of teaching. "I explained that the national training system for every course and every qualification has required skills and required knowledge, so there's the part of learning how to do a particular task, but also learning the concept and the knowledge that underlines that. It could be legislation, safety practice, etc., so a lot of the required knowledge ends up being delivered online" James explains. When students were told they could take the online courses at the same time as they were taking their regular classes, and that this would mean they could progress in less time, they never hesitated. In fact, today, students expect there to be an online component in their education.

However, implementing e-Learning wasn't easy, and if it hadn't been for the help provided by the Australian government, vocational education in Western Australia might today still be considered crazy by many. "We were fortunate in Australia in the early 2000s that there was a federal government program called the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, which did a significant amount of work to help vocational educational institutes across Australia with training and resources. When the time came to implement e-learning in the organizations, they did a lot of good work to start building that culture".

It has been a bit harder for the older teachers, who have traditionally thought of vocational education in the old-school way. However, it is part of James' job to make sure those teachers know how everything works, and basically give them vocational education in teaching via a computer screen.



The faster students can get through each class, the more likely it is that they will get further in their studies. The way the Challenger Institute works is that the level at which a person starts is based on how much knowledge he or she has. So, if a person is completely new to the practice and has no previous knowledge, they start from the bottom and begin by studying for the first

**MOODLEROOMS HAS ALLOWED STUDENTS TO GO THROUGH THE COURSES FASTER, AND THEREFORE GO FURTHER.**

certificate. But if, for example, a person has already had some work experience and knows all the basics, he might start at point three or four on a course. Just as they can enter at a certain level, so they can also stop at a certain level. So, if a person is in a real hurry, he might study until the third or fourth certificate and then

**JAMES TAYLOR**  
PROJECT  
MANAGER  
LEARNING  
TECHNOLOGIES,  
CHALLENGER  
INSTITUTE OF  
TECHNOLOGY

stop while he works, or he can continue until the highest level and be awarded a diploma. This system allows the student complete freedom.

Moodlerooms has helped because it has allowed the online lecturer more control, and in an easier way.

Moodlerooms has allowed students to go through the courses faster, and therefore go further. "Moodlerooms has helped because it has allowed the online lecturer more control, and in an easier way. Previously, we were using vanilla Moodle, and it was a hosted solution, so we didn't have the benefits of being able to tinker with the backend, which you can if you host it yourself. So we only felt like we had 80% of what we needed, and moving to Moodlerooms added that extra 20% because it has more of a teaching focus, so the ability to build more personalized learning into the courses with things like the personalized learning design, adaptive release and even the reporting capacity allows the teacher to get a better idea of how the whole group is performing" adds James Taylor.

"It's a basic premise that adult learners and lifelong learners want relevance and impact, and they want immediate reward for their training. They aren't doing something because it's going to benefit them five years in the future; they are doing it now because they need it now. There is definitely a demand for the need to support self-directed students who want it now", James adds. ∞



### INSTITUTIONS AND TEACHERS FIND

teaching mathematics via online courses a big challenge, due to the complexity of the task and the high drop-out rate. A number of different Moodle-compatible tools therefore exist that can solve these problems.

BY María Triviño  
Barcelona, Spain

**W**hen mathematics are being taught, a number of common problems arise which cause students to drop out of classes, and they even make people not consider enrolling on one of these courses. These problems include the following:

1. For many years, students have been given manuals containing exercises that have to be completed, while a tutor discusses the answers as a group.

2. When the time comes for a final exam, students are incapable of answering correctly because their doubts and queries were not resolved in time during the course.

3. Many teachers find it impossible to read answers to exercises because students' handwriting is hard to decipher, and this means they evaluate only the final answer and not the process. And, of course, doing exercises on paper and then passing them to a computer is a waste of time.

In view of the above, dozens of universities have opted to use Wiris Quizzes on Moodle, a complement whereby questionnaires with varying levels



# Universitat Oberta de Catalunya: The challenge of teaching and learning mathematics online



TERESA SANCHO VINUESA

TEACHER OF INFORMATICS  
ENGINEERING, MULTIMEDIA AND  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

name of some operation. Similarly, the editor has an automatic syntax corrector, which shows when any data are missing in the exercise.

One of this engineering's biggest achievements is that students can be evaluated on the basis of mathematical criteria, and the possibility exists of not only answering multiple choice questions, since the tool is capable of understanding equivalent answers, such as  $17/6 = 34/12$ .

"The Wiris Quizzes experience has been a very positive one, because we can use the calculator to evaluate numerical answers and we have gradually increased the difficulty of the exercises, and the student response to this has been good. Additionally, it has enabled us to improve the retention index by 13%, and students are enrolling almost without realizing", maintains Teresa Sancho Vinuesa, a teacher of Informatics Engineering, Multimedia and Telecommunications Studies at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC).

There is also a group at UOC called LAIKA (Learning Analytics for Innovation and

Knowledge Application in Higher Education), in which four teachers, including Sancho, are researching the student enrolment and graduation environment for this type of course and the true position with respect to MOOCs.

In addition to the personalization and the support by advisers that are vital to the mathematics learning process, whatever the modality – and especially so in the case of e-learning – the experience, inventiveness and ability of teachers to propose other ways to solve algorithms are essential qualities that can be exploited to the maximum through Wiris Quizzes. ∞

**THIS IS A MARVELOUS  
TEACHING  
EXPERIENCE IN THE  
FIELD OF INNOVATION.**

of difficulty can be set, while students have immediate feedback on the platform.

Questions are based on pre-established matrices or functions in the tool, such as random variables (polynomials, matrices) or 2D and 3D graphic representations. Meanwhile, the student has a visual formula editor that contains all the expressions used in basic mathematics, which means it is impossible to make mistakes when attempting to find the

PHOTO: PAU BARRENA



## Mountain Heights Academy: A 100% digital school

### UTAH'S PREMIER ONLINE SCHOOL

is leading the way in terms of e-learning strategies. We talked to DeLaina Tonks, director of Mountain Heights Academy, about the main challenges and the great advantages of virtual education.



**DELAINA TONKS**  
DIRECTOR OF MOUNTAIN  
HEIGHTS ACADEMY

*Interviewed by:* Laura Orozco  
Salt Lake City, United States

**E** -LEARN MAGAZINE: MOUNTAIN HEIGHTS ACADEMY IS A VIRTUAL SCHOOL. WHAT KINDS OF STUDENTS CHOOSE THIS TYPE OF EDUCATION?

**DeLaina Tonks:** Since Mountain Heights Academy is a public school, we take all students. Some are previously home-schooled students looking to graduate from an accredited school, while some have an IEP or 504 plan and are seeking a customized pathway for their education. Others come for the

flexibility because they are actors, athletes, and musicians who take their laptop with them around the world as they perform and compete. And finally, some attend for our accelerated university programs and the ability to take courses at their local Applied Technology College.

**E.L.M:** WHAT ARE THE MAIN ADVANTAGES YOUR VIRTUAL EDUCATION SYSTEM OFFERS STUDENTS?

**D.T.:** Mountain Heights Academy's student population varies from year to year. Students come because they value the flexibility of fitting school in



around their own schedule and the unparalleled interaction they enjoy with their teachers.

Some of the advantages are:

- Flexibility and the ability to work anywhere, any time
- Individualized teacher interaction for students
- Teacher and administrative responsiveness
- Social activities and leadership opportunities
- Customizable curriculum
- Use of a school laptop for full-time students

**E.L.M: WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH MOODLEROOMS BEEN LIKE, AND WHAT KIND OF UTILITIES DO YOU GIVE IT?**

**D.T.:** Our Learning Management System (LMS), Moodlerooms, is an integral part of our school. It is essentially our "campus," where all of our courses "live." Students access all content through Moodlerooms. Teachers are able to track student progress, digital footprints, and use that information to know which students to contact so they can work individually with them in order to fill gaps in understanding or provide extra assistance.

**E.L.M: ARE THERE ANY IMPROVEMENTS THAT THE SCHOOL HAS MADE TO THE LMS THAT YOU CAN SHARE WITH US?**

**D.T.:** We have connected Moodlerooms with Genius, a Student Information System designed specifically for online platforms. Genius pulls the data out of Moodlerooms and displays it in a dashboard that is conducive to viewing by both parents and students.

**E.L.M: WHEN IT COMES TO VIRTUAL EDUCATION, WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN EDUCATING STUDENTS BETWEEN THE AGES OF 12 AND 18?**

**D.T.:** One of the biggest challenges in virtual education is the learning curve of moving from a traditional setting to

online. In a bricks and mortar setting, a bell rings, signaling that it's time to change classes. Online, students have to determine on their own when to move on, which provides flexibility, but also opportunities for distraction. They have to make the choice to open the laptop and log in, then to manage their time wisely once they are there. It prepares them for the world they will face after they cross the graduation stage.

**E.L.M: WHAT VIRTUAL TOOLS DO YOU USE TO FACE THESE CHALLENGES?**

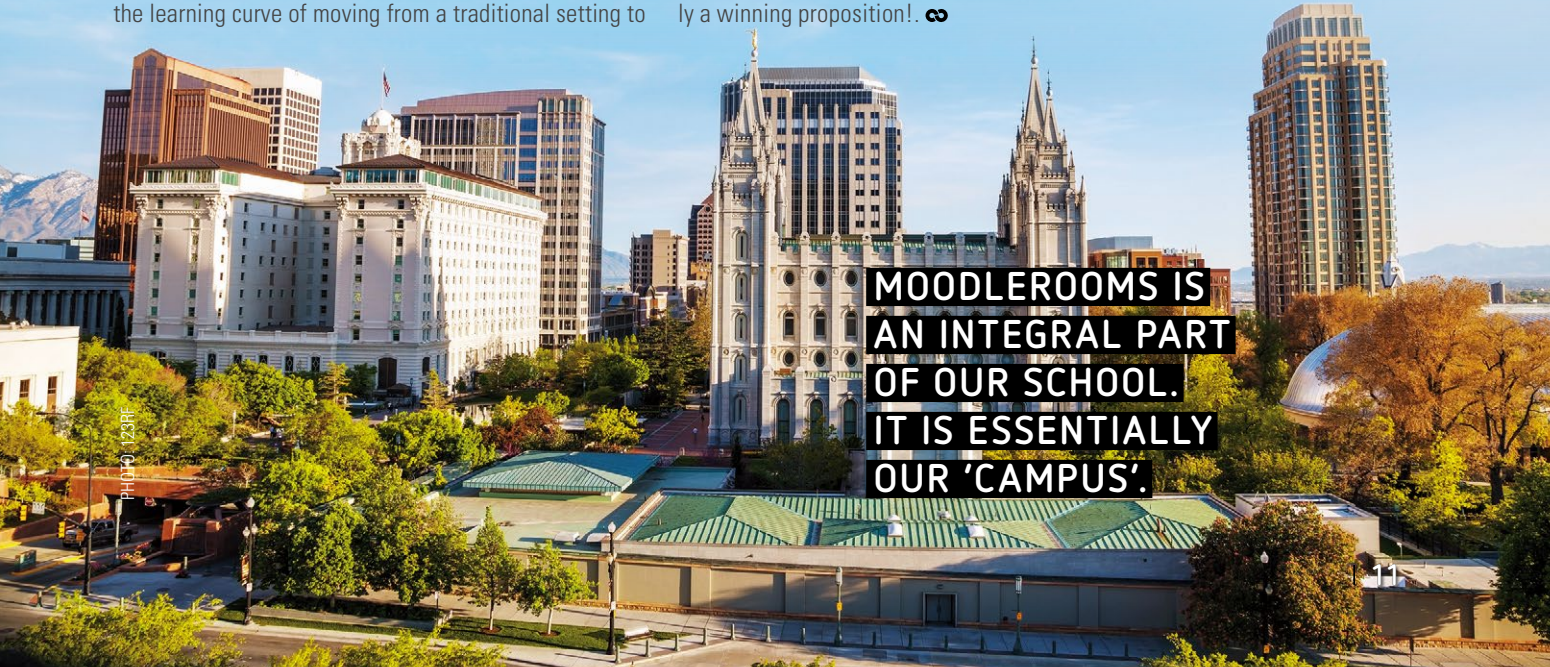
**D.T.:** At Mountain Heights, a laptop computer is provided to each student, along with cutting-edge applications, programs and social media tools. Students learn to use real-world, 21st century technology in their competency-based Tech Tools course, and create cross-curricular e-portfolios to showcase stellar work throughout their high school experience. Moodlerooms integrates with our Gmail platform to provide access to the Google Suite of tech tools as well. And finally, we use Blackboard Collaborate to provide virtual face-to-face time and synchronous learning opportunities for our students and teachers.

**E.L.M: LAST YEAR, THE SCHOOL WON THE BEST OF STATE PRIZE. WHAT'S THE REASON FOR THIS RECOGNITION?**

**D.T.:** Mountain Heights Academy maintains its position as the highest-rated online school in Utah, based on graduation percentages, state test scores, and completion rates, due to data-driven instruction, teacher interaction, and a customizable, open educational resource curriculum that can be tailored to meet the needs of every student.

**E.L.M: IN YOUR OPINION, IS E-LEARNING THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION?**

**D.T.:** Digital education is certainly part of the fabric of the future of education. It provides avenues for equity and access to students who otherwise would not have the same educational advantages as their peers. It provides options for students who, for whatever reason, cannot easily attend in a bricks and mortar setting. It provides flexibility for those looking to find the best of both worlds in their schooling experience. It provides a customized educational pathway where gaps can be filled based on data. Digital education is certainly a winning proposition! ∞



**MOODLEROOMS IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR SCHOOL. IT IS ESSENTIALLY OUR 'CAMPUS'.**



# Straighter Line: Flipping the Script for Today's Non-Traditional Learners

FOR TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENTS, "non-traditional" is the new normal.

BY Christina Gómez Echavarría  
Baltimore, MD, United States.

According to the Department of Education, non-traditional college students (over the age of 25, working at least part time, and/or raising a family of their own) account for more than 65% of the total college student population in the United States.

Of course, the traditional model for higher education (on-campus, face-to-face classes) doesn't mesh well with the busy schedules of non-traditional students. While the growth of online learning and other education technology has enabled institutions to more flexibly deliver courses, cost remains one of the primary hurdles that deters or even prevents non-traditional students from finishing a degree program or even beginning one.

This was the issue that inspired Straighter Line, a non-traditional online learning community for non-traditional students. Founded in 2008, Straighter Line offers

reduced-price general education college courses, such as economics 101, psychology 101, accounting 101 and many others. Burck Smith, Straighter Line's CEO and founder, was originally struck with the idea in the 90's while studying at Harvard University for his Master's degree and when online learning was still in its infancy. Knowing that if education technology evolved and reached a particular level of adoption, courses could be delivered much more easily and at a lower cost. Yet, according to Smith, despite the growth and adoption of online education, "93% of colleges charge the same or more for online courses as for face-to-face classes, even though the cost of delivery isn't as much."

**"93% OF COLLEGES CHARGE THE SAME OR MORE FOR ONLINE COURSES AS FOR FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES, EVEN THOUGH THE COST OF DELIVERY ISN'T AS MUCH."**



Straighter Line not only cuts the typical costs for introductory classes, but enables students to save time and finish courses at whatever rate (or hour) they choose. "We have seen data that students who come from us do much better than average college undergraduate student," says Smith. In part, it's because we have great courses, I'm very proud to say, but also because when students use our courses, they are proving themselves before they enter a full college program. They are basically demonstrating that they are going to be successful students who are more likely to succeed."

## **STRAIGHTER LINE IS A NON-TRADITIONAL ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR NON- TRADITIONAL STUDENTS.**

Smith says that statistics also back up Straighter Line's approach, as college graduation rates for students that use non-traditional online courses (similar to Straighter Line's) are higher than for students who don't. The higher rates of success are attributed to the courses' flexibility, which gives students the opportunity to work for a living and/or take care of a family and study in their free time.

Improved program retention and graduation rates are very attractive to universities, which is why has been able to partner up with over 100 universities who allow students to transfer their Straighter Line credits to a degree program they choose. "Straighter Line can also be a referral destination for universities who have lost engagement with students", says Smith. "Many colleges have students who applied but failed to enroll, or who enrolled but failed to complete their course, and this way they can get in touch with those students, tell them to take a couple of Straighter Line courses, and then come back and hopefully receive their diplomas".

It wasn't easy for Straighter Line at first, because the idea that you could receive college-level courses that could be used at universities for a tenth of the price was highly controversial. "We built our courses just like any other college would," says Smith. "When people criticized us, it was a veiled insinuation that our courses were of a lower quality, but that isn't the case. Also, the market has evolved. In 2012, when MOOCs became widely available, people began to understand that online courses are a valid way to go."

On the technology side, Smith doesn't claim to have made some enormous breakthrough, but rather, used existing technology and transformed it. "In education, we tend to look for a silver bullet from technology to change structures," says Smith. "But as in every other industry, technology is only powerful when it's accompanied by new business models. So when we started, we realized we didn't need any new technology, we just needed to put existing technology into a new economic model. We took the best of what was out there: online tutoring companies. We use Moodlerooms because is a great open source platform where we can make our own adjustments; we integrated it with proctoring services, and we transmit the classes via videos or podcasts".

At the end of the day, Straighter Line wants to help students graduate with marketable skills, save money and prevent them from becoming part of the 40% of today's students who don't complete their program and end up having a massive debt without the reward of a degree. "Low risk options like Straighter Line are an opportunity to do that," says Smith, "because students are more confident of their future success and ultimately we could see success rates go up and debt go down, which is very exciting". ∞



**BURCK SMITH**  
STRAIGHTER LINE  
CEO & FOUNDER







# The human element behind the Moodle machine

BY Christina Gómez Echavarría  
Sumter, SC, United States

◀  
**TERRI ANN  
BENNET**  
DIRECTOR  
OF CLIENT  
ENGAGEMENT,  
BLACKBOARD

In order to understand the human element behind the machine, E-Learn Magazine spoke to Terri Ann Bennet, director of the client engagement team who explained the way her “machine”, or her team, works.

Whenever you acquire new software or even open an account on a website, you have to sign a contract, or at least agree with the terms and conditions we rarely read.

In Moodle, this isn't the case. The first step is to go to the sales team, who tell you how everything works, and offer you a package based on your previous knowledge of Moodle, the goals of your company and other characteristics. There is *the Foundations Package*, which is for clients with more Moodle knowledge and a small team. The *Smart Start Package* is for clients who need a little more help starting out and who are larger institutions. The *Enterprise Package* is only available in certain areas of the world, because this package allows face-to-face implementation of your Moodlerooms site. This way, the client can choose to implement the Moodlerooms service in three different ways, whichever seems more convenient.

**T**hat is why Moodlerooms created a team made up of experts that help the customer reach all their teaching and learning needs in just one platform. This is referred to “in the biz” as Software as a Service (SaaS), because they don't want to sell just a program and a bunch of code, they understand that the program is used by humans, for humans. They are with you every step of the way until you reach the platform you envisioned.

## BEHIND EVERY COMPUTER THERE

is, obviously, meticulously crafted hardware that allows everything to function correctly. From wires to buttons and from microchips to high-resolution screens. We all know this, but rarely think about the human element that put it all together, the person who designed with a pencil the first draft of what the computer screen was going to look like and wrote the code, correcting it thousands of times. In Moodlerooms, the human element is taken very seriously.



After signing the contract, you get a welcome presentation by the Engagement Manager. This is a person who has been assigned to you from the very beginning so that if there is a problem, you have a name to call. Your EM will call you and welcome you to Moodle. Next, the EM works as the “sign up” sheet you have to fill out when joining a new service. The EM will get to know you as a person, will understand your needs, will ask you exactly what it is that you want for the site that you just acquired, and will give you an idea of what the finished product will look like.

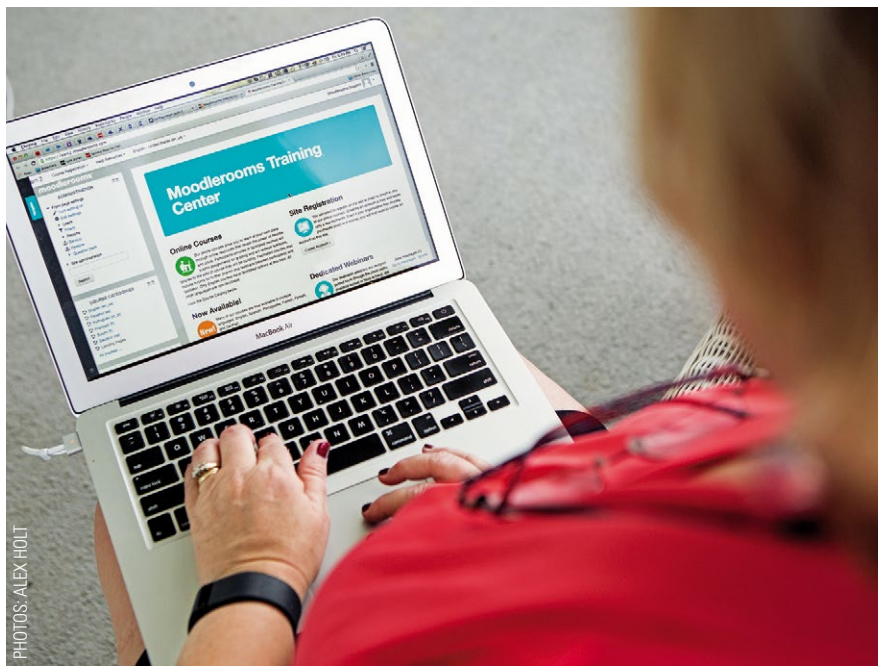
Next, your EM will introduce your Configuration Consultant. The role of a CC is a very technical one, and could be likened to the step-by-step instructions on a website about what each and every button does and how to use it, and you have to press ‘next’ to keep going. There are six CC’s in the client engagement team and they offer different languages, such as English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish. The CC ultimately helps you put the puzzle together. Depending on what you want and need, the CC will help you put your

page together, will add all the different applications you need, and will even guide you through creating the course catalogs for your class.

After going through the Configuration Consultant, your page should be up and running perfectly. By this time, you should already know the basics of Moodle, so that if there are any changes, you can handle them yourself. However, there are always a few issues, and Moodle doesn’t leave you all alone to handle them on your own. They work with a ticket system.

One of the two administrators that are allowed per page is welcome to submit a ticket, which will go directly to the Tier One team, or the Application Specialist. A ticket is simply a request for someone to take a look at a problem that the page is presenting. The Tier One team is the first one to look at the problem and to try to fix it. If Tier One can’t solve it, they will send it to Tier Two, which will then do a more thorough job of looking at the code more closely, to make sure there aren’t any glitches in the system.

If the client chooses, they can “escalate” a ticket, which means that they will send it directly to their Engagement Manager so that a more personalized way of fixing the problem can be found. Depending on the seriousness of the ticket, if it’s an emergency or a high priority, one of the six teams all over the world will be able to help you, since they are located in six different time zones, and therefore provide 24/7 support. If the priority is medium or low, someone in your same time zone will help you on the next business day. Technology is a big part of our lives, and somehow we still think that every program we use on a daily basis just magically appears before our eyes. Terri Ann Bennet knows this is not the case and that it takes hard work, time and a lot of communication to keep a client happy. She attributes the worldwide success Moodle has enjoyed to the effectiveness of the client engagement team, because the client never feels he’s been left alone. He knows he has support. It’s clear after reviewing each of these steps that the “machine” behind Moodle is made up of muscle and bone. ☞



PHOTOS: ALEX HOLT





## Blackboard partnership with Moodle: Strengthening 'Open Source' learning



## BLACKBOARD AND MOODLE

recently signed agreement covers 12 countries, strengthening the commitment to this open source community and Moodlerooms customers.

BY: Juan Felipe Guerrero C.  
Madrid, Spain

**B**lackboard Inc. and Moodle Pty Ltd.'s relationship first began in 2012 as a result of the acquisition of Moodlerooms by Blackboard – the world's largest and most reliable provider of 'open source' teaching and learning solutions. This was the beginning of a partnership that would only grow over time, and a new agreement between these two companies has recently been made.

The agreement was initiated on March 29, in Madrid, Spain, by Phillip Miller, International Vicepresident of Open Source Services for Blackboard Inc., and Martin Dougiamas, Founder and CEO of Moodle Pty Ltd. They gave some of their time to talk about the deal with e-Learn Magazine. Blackboard and Moodle have always shared a common goal: to transform the traditional, teacher-based education model and introduce an intense but dynamic change to the field. For almost four years, they have been increasingly aiming their collaborative efforts towards e-learning solutions.

As a result of the recent agreement, Blackboard will undergo an expansion to develop a stronger presence in multiple, different markets in order to directly support Moodle and open source. They have decided to focus on countries such as the US, Australia, UK, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Spain, Germany, France, Japan and the Philippines – all places with a significant number of Moodle platform users, with Blackboard now being their official 'Moodle Partner' in these territories. *"I am very happy to move forward in our partnership with Blackboard; we gain tremendous support from you and,*

◀ LEFT TO RIGHT

**JAVIER GREGORI**  
SOLUTIONS ENGINEER MANAGER (SEEMEA)

**PHILLIP MILLER**  
INTERNATIONAL VICEPRESIDENT OF OPEN  
SOURCE SERVICES FOR BLACKBOARD INC.

**MARTIN DOUGIAMAS**  
FOUNDER AND CEO OF MOODLE PTY LTD.

**JUAN RAMÓN ALEGRET**  
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**GRACIELA ALARCÓN**  
MARKETING RESPONSIBLE (SEEMEA)



of course, from other 'Moodle Partners' and the rest of the community. This partnership makes it possible for Moodle to really focus on the future and be able to provide everything the community needs. It is important that true 'open source' remains a strong option, and for this I am happy to have the support that Blackboard provides", said the Moodle creator.

Meanwhile, the Blackboard team of open source developers continues to grow thanks to ongoing acquisitions of 'Moodle Partners', such as those previously made with NetSpot, Remote-Learner UK and Nivel 7. This new deal will bring much more success to the Moodle project and to its 'open source' community of over 70 million users.

Phillip Miller appreciates the changes that have been incorporated into Blackboard partly as a result of its partnership with Moodle, and recognizes the importance of being their biggest and most important 'Moodle Partner': "We support the academic industry, since Blackboard is a global company and the largest of its kind in the e-learning field. The closer our relationship with Moodle becomes, the more we can support 'open source', and therefore academia," said Miller. But the relationship between the two corporations doesn't end there. "Blackboard's business model has changed substantially over recent years; before we only focused on offering proprietary software, but today we have a much broader solutions portfolio and since Moodle has such a robust global presence, it's important that we connect with their community".

## THIS NEW DEAL WILL BRING MUCH MORE SUCCESS TO THE MOODLE PROJECT AND TO ITS 'OPEN SOURCE' COMMUNITY OF OVER 70 MILLION USERS.

With the implementation of this new agreement, both parties will clearly benefit. On the one hand, Blackboard continues to grow within its role as the main 'Moodle Partner' in many parts of the world, providing support, as Phillip Miller said, to both open source and academia; on the other hand, Moodlerooms and Moodle have together ensured themselves a large amount of resources and contributions that will allow them to focus on the future and to continue to provide its extensive clientele and community with everything they need to make their LMS an increasingly stronger platform. ∞



**MARTIN DOUGIAMAS**  
FOUNDER AND CEO OF MOODLE PTY LTD.

**PHILLIP MILLER**  
INTERNATIONAL VICEPRESIDENT OF OPEN  
SOURCE SERVICES FOR BLACKBOARD INC.



# odlerooms

**BLACKBOARD AND  
MOODLE HAVE ALWAYS  
SHARED A COMMON GOAL:  
TO TRANSFORM THE  
TRADITIONAL TEACHER-  
BASED EDUCATION MODEL.**

**Powerful,  
beyond any  
other moodle.**

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# THE POWER of predictive analytics

**THE FIELD OF EDUCATION IS DEMANDING EVER** more new platforms for optimizing teaching and learning. One predictive analytics application in this area, for example, allows the teacher to intervene promptly in a course and ensure student success.

It is possible with Learning Management Systems (LMS) to gather an infinite amount of data from virtual classrooms, such as the class program, task records, or forum participation. Any student behavior in the system is saved there.

**MOODLE, THE OUTSTANDING LMS**

1 \* DATA STORAGE

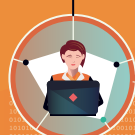
**HOW DOES IT WORK?**

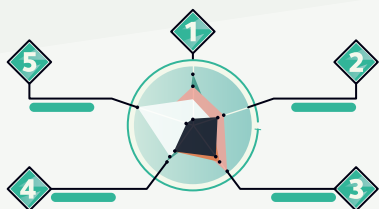
**WHAT IS IT?**

Predictive analytics uses the statistical analysis of historic or current data derived from the learning process to create models that allow predictions to be made about students and their results to therefore be improved.

**WHAT IS IT USED FOR?**

The model can provide statistical predictions that will enable the teacher to know how his or her students are going to get on and, particularly, who could do badly. With this information, both the teacher and the institution will be able to intervene in good time and assure student success.





Just as 'one swallow doesn't make a summer', so one piece of data doesn't allow behavior patterns to be fully identified for analysis. The ideal thing is to be able to use numerous variables relating to a subject which, when combined together, make historical data analysis possible.

#### Examples of variables:

- Platform access frequency.
- Time spent on it or words used that are repeated.

2

## \* ANALYSIS OF VARIABLES



The relationship between variables creates a mathematical model with **statistical accuracy** between the behavior of these facts and students' results. This is the predictive model.

#### Example:

- One of the **X-Ray Learning Analytics for Moodle** tool models studies the use of language in depth in order to increase students' academic success.

3

## \* PREDICTIVE MODEL



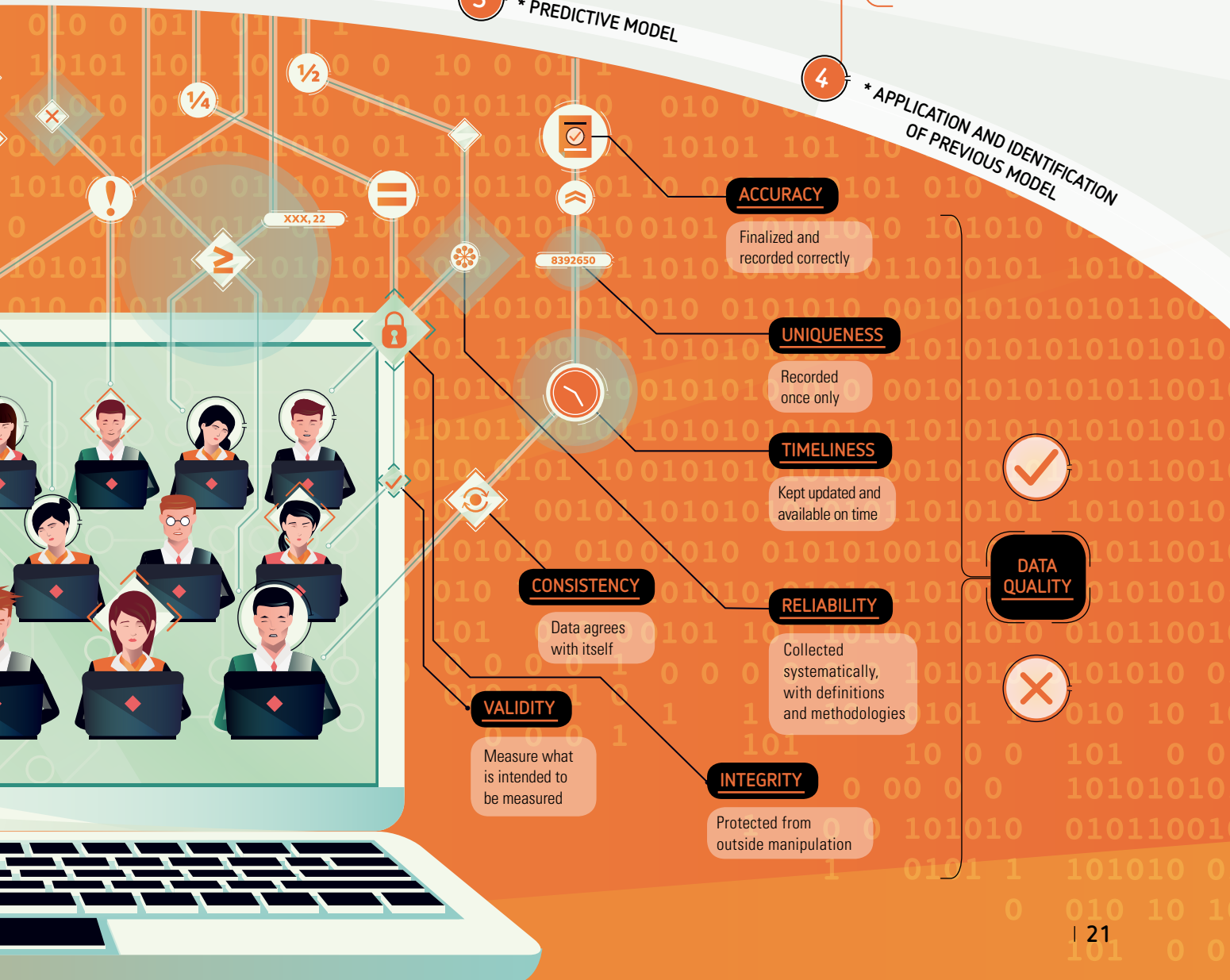
#### Learning results can be predicted,

based on the observation of variables and application of the model to current data. The reports that are built up are used to identify students who are at risk, on the basis of:

- Frequency and use of key words.
- Interaction between them.
- Influence on each other.

4

## \* APPLICATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF PREVIOUS MODEL





# Blended learning and 4 other reasons for studying at Francesco Group

BY: Christina Gómez Echavarría  
Staffordshire, England

PHOTO: OLI SCARFF

## FRANCESCO GROUP IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST AND MOST REPUTABLE

hairdressing salons in the United Kingdom. It started out as a family business in 1967 and today has more than 33 salons all over the Midlands, in central England. Francesco Group is recognized for maintaining very high standards in hairdressing, and it therefore decided to pass that knowledge on. Today it has four academies that teach hairdressing, and over the last year and a half it has adopted E-Learning for teaching its methods; it now has over 200 students.

# W

e spoke to Gemma Maxwell, a work-based learning manager at Francesco Group who told us five reasons why this salon group is the best place to study.

**1.** Francesco Group uses a blended learning methodology. This means that the theoretical part of the hairdressing industry is taught online via Moodlerooms, and the practical side is taught both in a classroom and in one of the FG salons, other independent salons or one of their prestigious academy salons, so that students can understand customer demands and requests. They started working with E-Learning because they found that teaching theoretical work took up a lot of the teaching staff's time. E-Learning has allowed students to work at their own pace and has also led to self-directed learning. Additionally, the Moodlerooms platform allows them to keep in touch with their students all the time and track their progress. With this blended learning teaching style, students only have to go into the academy every other week, thus giving them time to study at their own pace and even do other jobs when they aren't at the academy.

**2.** In order to maintain Francesco Group standards, it is important for the academy to be able to understand what exact level a student is at. With Moodlerooms, they therefore established a badge system. The way this works is that for every level, a student has to earn 6 or 7 badges, and once the student has got all of them, he or she is awarded the course badge. This helps, because the student can't move on to the next level unless he or she understands everything needed in order to proceed. This is good for both student and teacher, because the student, since the system is virtual, can go back and repeat until he or she fully understands the concepts, while the teacher can ensure that students have no basic flaws in what they are learning, thus raising the bar in terms of future graduate quality. Francesco Group teaches a range of classes through E-Learning: everything from coloring courses, cutting courses, advanced color, advanced cutting and gentleman hairdressing to an induction program for new learners, employer responsibility, and customer service. After students receive the course badge, they can work on their practical skills in one of the salons with real customers, and an assessor is there to make sure they are doing everything correctly and maintaining the standards that should be adhered to.



**GEMMA MAXWELL**  
WORK BASED  
LEARNING MANAGER,  
FRANCESCO GROUP

**3.** Being able to graduate from any of the various Francesco Group courses means that students are employable not only by FG but also in other salons around the world, and even in other fields. Gemma explains that since they teach customer service, they focus on speaking and listening skills and students are taught to work with real customers, which means they can work in retail, merchandizing, customer service and a number of other areas if they choose to. However, if they complete their studies successfully, they will find that they have 33 Francesco Group salons where they can work, plus another 52 FG partner salons. The job opportunities after studying in one of these academies are amazing. Gemma says that working for Francesco Group is like being part of a family because it is a family business and Frank Dellicompagni, the owner, will appreciate everything a person brings to the company and will make sure that he or she isn't simply one more employee. She says that this, in the long run, has been what has made Francesco Group so successful.

## THE MOODLEROOMS PLATFORM ALLOWS THE FRANCESCO GROUP TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITH THEIR STUDENTS ALL THE TIME AND TRACK THEIR PROGRESS.

**4.** Francesco Group has developed each of its styles and techniques over the years, and this is something every student learns at the academy. The group's standards are what have won it a number of awards, created the reputation it has, and are the most basic reason why a person interested in this field should want to study there. On top of this, there are creative experts in the field who are always looking for new trends in the world that customers and the industry are therefore asking for. These experts ensure that the teaching staff are always up-to-date on the latest trends and that they pass that knowledge on to their students. With this in mind, Francesco Group has 18 partner colleges all around the United Kingdom. What this means is that FG teaching staff go to those colleges and train their teachers in FG standards, thus ensuring that students who aren't under the Francesco Group umbrella are equally employable.

**5.** Hairdressing is not an exact science. It is a job fueled by creativity, along with knowing how to interact with the customer. This is the final, fundamental reason for studying with Francesco Group: it understands that every student and employee is different and has his or her own set of skills. It therefore allows creativity and dynamism to flourish at all times. Francesco Group works with the most commercial hair demands, as well as competition challenges, and teaches and trains its staff in line with their individual skills, allowing them to embrace their creative side.

High standards are what any teaching institute in the world should aspire to bring out in its students, and Francesco Group has definitely made this a priority. This, together with E-Learning to allow the individual to grow, is in itself a good enough reason for considering this academy as a place to study at. ∞





# Learning Arabic was never this easy

BY: Catalina Sánchez  
Cairo, Egypt

**SPEAKING A SECOND OR THIRD** language is virtually essential in today's globalized world. Academic opportunities, better job competitiveness and, even, greater cognitive development are but some of the advantages of being multilingual.

**T**here are currently around seven thousand different languages in the world. Among this vast number, Arabic occupies fifth place on the list of the Top Ten most popular ones, with an estimated 300 million native speakers. It is therefore no mere chance that more and more people are interested in studying it every day.

The problem is that until a decade ago, learning a language – especially when it is as complex as Arabic is – necessarily brought with it an inseparable trio of problems: money, time, and travel. However, with the democratization that has resulted from the internet and the introduction of virtual tools (such as *Moodlerooms*), we have entered a New Era of Learning. No

longer is it necessary to be physically present in a classroom, to adapt our work schedule or to deplete our savings. All we need now if we want to learn is the desire to do so.

It was precisely due to this vision that Arab Academy was formed in Egypt. The aim of this private, independent corporation is to promote not only the Arabic language but also ethical and professional values and business skills by exploiting virtual and technological tools.

It has been a resounding success. Arab Academy currently has 90,000 students from various countries. Most of them have some type of connection with the Arabic world: on the one hand are those from the United States and/or Canada who have a Muslim tradition or Arab tradition, while others

## ARAB ACADEMY CURRENTLY HAS 90,000 STUDENTS FROM VARIOUS COUNTRIES.

include students who need to perfect their knowledge of the language for some academic, professional and/or political reason, and non-natives who simply want to acquire some basic knowledge as beginners.

### AND WHY CHOOSE ARAB ACADEMY?

Omar El Kheshen, the academy's managing director, explained to *E-Learn Magazine* the ten reasons why someone, whether an amateur or at an advanced level, should enroll on one of the platform's courses.

1. Experience: Arab Academy is one of the companies that leads the field. Few competitors offer such good academic courses in the Arabic language in terms of costs, time, quality and benefit.
2. It is economical: price depends on the particular course, but some of the most 'expensive' in the portfolio costs around 100 dollars per month, which is very affordable.
3. Technology: Moodlerooms gives the course interface a practical, agile touch that makes courses more enjoyable for students.
4. Variety: it makes no difference if someone has had no previous contact with the Arabic language. There are various levels of intensity, just as there are different types of courses: Modern Standard Arabic, Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and Islamic Arabic. Each one meets the individual needs and the profiles of the multifaceted students.
5. Personalized tutoring: there is a one-on-one speaking option that allows students to have personalized conversations with teachers once or twice a week. They also have access to them at all times through chatboards and/or email addresses.

6. Interaction: one of the academy's slogans is that students 'learn by doing'. Not by listening or by watching videos. There are interactive activities that test them all the time, thereby guaranteeing recruitment and reducing the desertion rate, which is very common in other language academies that do not use state-of-the-art learning methods.
7. Flexible schedules: there are no fixed classes, specific schedules or time limits for completing courses. Everyone is free and goes at his/her own pace.
8. Quality: teachers are chosen carefully, and are strictly and fully trained.
9. Transparency: a further important aspect is that there is no possibility in the courses for governmental and/or cultural opinions to filter through. Promoting controversial issues relating to religion or politics is strictly prohibited.
10. Forming a team: this is one of the most important points for El Kheshen. "Students are in contact at all times not only with the teachers but also with their colleagues. They don't have to navigate the journey through learning a new language alone, since they do it as part of a community".

### TESTIMONIALS ARE WORTH MORE THAN A THOUSAND WORDS...

"The Arab Academy has a good study plan for learning the language. I can improve it via a website that explains everything in two languages: English and Arabic. The academy has excellent teachers who have special talents for making the learning process more enthusiastic". Dr. Windratmo Suwarno, First Secretary at the Indonesian Embassy in Cairo.

"It was a good decision. It was almost four months ago that I started this great online course, and my experience so far has been fantastic. I started at beginner level (Arabic 101), and I can say that my progress has been incredibly fast. I love it, because it allows me to study at my own pace and, more importantly, AT ANY TIME! The teachers are incredibly patient, competent and willing to help. In truth, all the staff are very helpful. I'm certainly going to continue studying at Arab Academy until I have mastered Arabic. Insha'Allah!". Dragana Selakovic, Slovenia. ☺



# Moodlerooms keeps innovating with help from their own clients

## PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT IN

the technology market now a day is a very challenging job. Companies have to keep up with the different trends, update existing software and innovate while hundreds of thousands of people are trying to do the same. Kris Stokking does exactly this for Moolerooms, the most widely used Learning Management System in the world. Moolerooms has a wide variety of services that are available to clients all over the world and Kris, as the director of product development, promises to keep innovating and keep offering such a wide range of services for the whole international market so that Moolerooms maintains its high reputation in the e-learning community.



PHOTO: YURI GRIPAS

BY: Christina Gomez Echavarria  
Baltimore, United States

**H**is job is to oversee all Moodlerooms platforms. Moodlerooms is the biggest provider of open source Moodle on the market and in the world, and this has been the goal since the beginning. “We wanted to build an open source platform because we wanted to work with the open source community”, Kris explains. This is a fundamental part of his job, because it involves working with the community and allowing the outside community to work with them and influence future products. However, they didn’t want to be like all other open source products, which give the customer total freedom without guaranteeing high quality, and today this is what has earned Moodlerooms its reputation.

They found a middle ground. Moodlerooms allows anyone in the world to contribute to it, based on their own experience. Kris explains that many teachers who have used Moodlerooms for a while have specific needs that might not be available in the catalogue of plugins offered. Plugins are like applications for a cellphone. They are functions which can be downloaded and that alter the way Moodlerooms are used, and either Moodlerooms staff themselves or an external user can

create them. Many teachers and users have actually learned how to write code in order to create plugins.

At first, all plugins were accepted. However, writing code is a science, and a very small error can mean that a plugin doesn’t work, or can even stop certain different Moodlerooms functions from working. In order to prevent this from happening and to continue assuring their customers of the quality they promised, Moodlerooms staff established a code review process. So, when somebody submits a plugin, a Moodle developer who has been working on the software for over five years looks at the code and sees if it is going to work or if it has any errors, and then gets back to the client and tells them what they have to fix. If there are no errors, the plugin goes into the database and anyone who thinks it might be helpful can download it and use it as they wish.

Moodlerooms was the first Moodle partner to publish code review guidelines, and these are now being used widely in different open source sectors. They have progressed so far with this quality assurance that Moodlerooms lead developer Mark Nielsen has actually created a plugin where it is no longer necessary for a human being to check to see if the code works, since the program does this automatically and points out errors, if there are any. These guidelines are currently being used as a de facto standard for what is acceptable as a plugin in a hosted online platform.

But even though it is now the machine that points out errors in the code, it is Kris’ fifty-person team who maintain the high quality commitment to their customers. He remembers the time when the team was very small, and if there was ever a problem with the system or with the server, a person could turn round and ask whoever who was sitting behind them what was happening, or what they were working on. Today, his team is spread all over the world and they have to rely on instant messaging tools to communicate with each other.

Kris has introduced a “daily scrum”, where engineers and admins get together to find out what is going on, what product development is creating, what flaws they have found and how to fix certain problems. Whenever there are new products, they implement a training program so that everyone knows how to use everything.

Thus, when there is a problem in the system, and since Moodlerooms is a cloud provider, they have fully-integrated external availability monitors that are constantly validating that sites are up and running. If they aren’t, an alarm alerts any of the engineers who are on call 24/7 somewhere in the world and who will find any solution they can in order to get the site up again.

Kris says that the beauty of Moodle is not only that it is freely available and that it invites anyone to use it, but Moodlerooms as a SAAS provider (Software as a Service), offers everything clients need: hosting, consulting and support. Additionally, it gives them the option of writing their own plugin for a more personalized service. This, Kris says, is the most wonderful part of the company he works for, because this was exactly the goal from the very beginning: Bringing E-Learning to the masses. ∞

◀  
**KRIS STOKKING**  
DIRECTOR  
OF PRODUCT  
DEVELOPMENT,  
MOODLEROOMS

**MOODLEROOMS ALLOWS  
ANYONE IN THE WORLD  
TO CONTRIBUTE TO  
IT, BASED ON THEIR  
OWN EXPERIENCE.**





## The American International School Hong Kong uses digital tools to foster collaborative learning

BY: Catalina Sánchez Montoya  
Hong Kong SAR, China.

### ANDREW CHIU, EDUCATIONAL

Technology Coordinator, is leading a series of digital and structural changes at American International School Hong Kong (AIS HK). The target is to transform teaching and learning, so that the education process can be more efficient and relevant -more fun, even. E-Learn Magazine talked with him to find out more.

In Hong Kong, the local and/or British-inspired school system rules. Part of American International School Hong Kong's success is therefore due to the fact that its method is very similar to the American system, being divided into Elementary, Middle School and High School, with graduation from the latter depending on the student getting a certain number of credits.

The student profile is extremely varied, but there can be no doubt that all students have certain things in common. They want a different approach to education, one that goes beyond the traditional natural and social sciences courses and mathematics. They also aim to gain admission to top universities around the world, and the individual assistance the school offers in this respect is therefore particularly valuable. That promise, in fact, is part of its success. And



**\*ANDREW CHIU,**  
EDUCATIONAL  
TECHNOLOGY  
COORDINATOR,  
AMERICAN  
INTERNATIONAL  
SCHOOL HONG KONG.

it is why, faced with an imminent need to introduce new academic resources and educational tactics, the school has set new targets for providing its students with a practical, innovative, opportune, valuable and, above all, comprehensive education.

We talked about this major change process directly with one of its leaders, Andrew Chiu, the Educational Technology Coordinator at the school. He explains the challenges, objectives and spirit behind the initiative.

**E-Learn Magazine: WHAT DOES THIS TRANSFORMATION PHASE CONSIST OF?**

**Andrew Chiu:** We have what might be referred to as a series of objectives based on the internal changes we want to make. And it's not because we're following a worldwide trend, rather because we can see that learning can be more effective, more fun. The most important thing for us is to alter the way people teach and learn. How? By reinforcing networking, breaking down communication barriers between teachers and learners, and becoming more student-centered than teacher-centered. Another key issue is changing from 'consuming' meanings and concepts to 'building' meanings and concepts.

**E.L.M: WHY IS THIS LAST POINT SO IMPORTANT?**

**A.C:** It has been shown that group work is a skill that is key to being successful and achieving personal and professional satisfaction. Under the 'Old School' method, a student can get the best grades on his course through individual effort. But I believe this is changing. The idea that we can be successful because we work together means we can learn to fail and to get support from our colleagues.

**E.L.M: ARE VIRTUAL TOOLS ESSENTIAL IF STUDENTS ARE TO GET INTO THE WORLD'S TOP UNIVERSITIES?**

**A.C:** They're important. In fact, it's only this year that we have really started to look into the question of technological platforms. In 2015 we didn't even have unlimited WiFi access for Middle School and High School. Now we do. And most students in any given class are working on their computers. We saw the need, and we recognized that there are new approaches that have

to be taken on board. Thanks to this, our students now answer tests faster, go to Google for support, and spend more time and energy on group work. We don't have to remind them to do their homework any more because they're more responsible, they have a greater sense of belonging, and something very important: they have an audience. Their work no longer goes to the teacher on a 'private' sheet of paper, because it's available for their colleagues, and even their parents, to see.

**E.L.M: HOW IMPORTANT ARE DIGITAL TOOLS AND ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS AT AIS HK?**

**A.C:** They have opened up a world of opportunities. In the past, each student would do a project and would have access to off-line information, and it was impossible for the teacher to support and supervise search methods and sources. Now there's much more help, greater access to correct information. Something else that's important is that students can choose from various projects, which means that learning can be meaningful for them. Before, if they had to explain an opinion, the one who adored writing 'stood out' by handing in the essay.

**E.L.M: WHAT ROLE HAS MOODLEROOMS PLAYED IN THIS TRANSFORMATION PHASE?**

**A.C:** We use Moodlerooms in grades 6 to 12. Each group has access to a Course, and can see their work and the teachers' feedback. The most visible changes we've noticed from using Moodlerooms, together with Google tools, are that a student can get immediate feedback, can actively participate in the group work, has access at all times to dialogue with everyone, can show his work and his essays, and can express his doubts and comments. We've been so successful that we've shared our Moodle experience with other schools in the region. I think it's even been important insofar as we've challenged Moodlerooms: we've had to innovate in the way we use the platform due to the internal needs of each course.

**E.L.M: WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP?**

**A.C:** I'm excited when I see the way the school is heading. The changes are being taken on board very professionally, and the fact that teachers feel empowered to make a difference is essential. I think their attitude and seriousness fit in perfectly with the objectives. But the most exciting thing is not just the virtual question. Yes, we have Moodlerooms, our system, Google tools, but the transformation is the result of a combination of physical (infrastructure) and virtual changes and a change in teachers' mentality. ∞






## High-tech education in a farming community

Spring Green, United States

**G**enerally, when people think of e-schools, they think of thousands of students who no longer fit in the overcrowded classrooms of a metropolitan city and who therefore resort to taking virtual classes. However, the reason why such a small community, with such a small student body, decided to have an e-school is simple: because the community has

so few people, this naturally means that it also has few teachers. In order to allow students to have more classes and a better quality education, the School District decided to open an e-school for middle and high school students.

Jason Hollenberger, one of RVSD's e-school teachers, is also the district liaison for the e-school and he explained that traditional schools always have the basic courses

  
**JASON HOLLENBERGER**  
PROFESSOR OF THE RIVER  
VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

## WHEN YOU THINK OF SPRING GREEN, AN OLD

farming community in southern Wisconsin, high-tech education doesn't really come to mind.

However, amid the big open spaces, the cows and the towns with 1,000 people or fewer, River Valley School District has been able to innovate in its education system, thanks to Moodlerooms and a wide range of services that help its students receive a better and broader education.

understand why those fears are present, and talk about future fears, like getting a job or having kids. Needless to say, this isn't a course you can pass by answering multiple-choice questions. The students need feedback, they need to open up and to participate. Jason uses two different methods: asking them to write up their personal journals, which he can later read and grade, and asking them to participate in a class discussion board that he stays out of, so they can express themselves more freely.

Seeing the way students participate in these types of classes in comparison with traditional classrooms has shown Jason that when the traditional method is followed, a mere handful of students really dominate the discussion, and those who aren't comfortable opening up or who are more introverted will sit back and listen. Through Moodlerooms, the students don't feel intimidated and are ready to say what they think; it also allows them time to think of a proper response that they feel comfortable with, and finally, it leaves them with no way out, since everybody is expected to participate.

## JASON TEACHES PSYCHOLOGY OF FEAR THROUGH MOODLEROOMS TO AROUND 30 STUDENTS.

Jason finds that traditional schools have ended up trying to adopt a "cookie cutter" approach to teaching students. The traditional school system sets classroom times and schedules without considering that every student is different, as are their learning methods. While some are more focused and after a few hours of intense studying have finished all their work, others like to pay attention for 20 minutes and then switch off and think about another subject or even a sport. The e-school allows them to do this without missing out on anything, because it's as easy as pressing a pause button. This helps the students' self-esteem, their grades, because they aren't missing any information, and also their willingness to learn.

The River Valley School District has forged an alliance with the Wisconsin eSchool Network, and together they are working on sharing a course catalogue, a curriculum and teachers, so they can make the e-school more diverse, have more teachers and more knowledge and hence be able to personalize the learning experience for each type of student they have, and ultimately add more active voices to tomorrow's world. ∞

covered. But when the time comes to talk about special classes or even advanced placement courses for students who have a higher level, they seem to get misplaced, since the State of Wisconsin's priorities usually concentrate on the subjects that appear in standardized tests. Since e-learning was implemented, Hollenberger has seen advanced placement classes' double, thereby giving students more options.

Jason teaches Psychology of Fear through Moodlerooms to around 30 students. On this course, students are taught to first identify what their fears are,

PHOTO: ANDY MANIS





# Leaving behind the myths about language in instructional design

**IT'S A CURIOUS THING THAT,** generally speaking, when someone tells you that they're an expert in usability and instructional and educational design, it's tough to imagine what type of person they'll turn out to be. *"The only thing you need to learn how to survive here, is the winter. The city gets really, really cold during those months,"* Julie Dirksen tells us, in between laughs, as we settle into her living room.

BY: Juan Felipe Guerrero C.  
Minneapolis, MN, United States

Julie is an instructional and educational design strategist and a native to Minneapolis, a city she's completely enamored with for its artistic atmosphere, even although she doesn't like it quite so much in winter when the temperatures drop well below zero Fahrenheit.

When listening to Julie speak—no matter if it's about how much she enjoys to spend a weekend strolling along the Mississippi parkway (which is only some five minutes from her home), or her love of watercolor painting and museums, or her passion for instructional design and e-learning—you realize that she is a joyful and passionate person.

For two decades, one of Julie's biggest interests has been in usability and instructional design. Early in her career, Julie worked as a trainer in a customer service call center. It was only six years ago that she decided to begin her path of independence and take the first steps towards fulfilling her passion. *"As you know, my average day is not very orthodox. I have no work colleagues in the traditional*

*sense. I deal with a lot of virtual conferences, many clients whose faces I've never seen, emails, and other things."* Julie tells us.

Countless doors have opened up in the field for Julie since she graduated from the Indiana University with a degree in Instructional

Systems Technology, making her the figure of authority she is today when it comes to such topics. She believes that there are several problems to be addressed in her field, among these the lack of relevant feedback. *"We don't always know what works and what doesn't; for example, we might build great sales training, but we don't really know that's the reason sales go up, and if there are no sales, we can't conclude it's because the training doesn't work. Behavior is complicated, and it's difficult to measure the success of our work."* she concludes. And of course, training and learning are not always the reasons behind usability issues. *"Sometimes it's a motivation problem, not a knowledge problem. Also, sometimes it's easier to fix the system than it is to fix the person."*

Although it's also an attention problem, her dog—who hasn't stopped nosing around since we entered

the property—would tell us, if he could speak. *"I have to take Max out."* Julie tells us, laughing.

Walking a couple of streets away from her home, I truly understand now what she meant about strolling along the river. In just five minutes, you feel as though you have left the chaos of the city behind for the tranquility of the country. It even smells different. It is an enviable feeling.

Julie's dissatisfaction with the current trends in instructional design is equally evident. *"I don't think there is much guidance for new people that want to approach this subject,"* she affirms, with a certain degree of frustration but also a clear desire to change this situation. One of the things that Julie has been working on in the last few years is an effort to put the best practices of Instructional Design into essential guides for people who want to enter into the industry, but have little previous knowledge. Indeed, once we have returned from the morning walk with her four-legged friend and she's set the schnauzer free from his collar to enjoy a drink of water, Julie moves to her library and shows me a book of her own: 'Design for How

## ONE OF JULIE'S OBJECTIVES: TO REDEFINE THE WAY IN WHICH PEOPLE WRITE ABOUT E-LEARNING ISSUES.

People Learn.' *"One of the goals I had in writing the book was to help people understand not only what to do in terms of instructional design, but the reasons why and what for,"* Julie tells us. She shows us the back cover, closes the book and says: *"If people can understand that, then I'm sure they'll be able to make better decisions."*

It's no secret that a large portion of the the literature on usability and instructional design is highly technical and complex material. There is a lack of accessible books, and that is one of Julie's objectives: To redefine the way in which people write about e-learning issues. *"One of the ways to take this problem on is to use conversational language, despite the fact you're discussing a highly technical subject."* Of course, there are many technical terms which cannot be omitted, due to cognitive load, but the language and the discourse can be changed. *"People don't use contractions, they don't directly address the reader... We can speak in a professional manner, but too much formal language is harder for people to process, and interferes with learning,"* Julie concludes.

Fortunately, our encounter with Julie Dirksen didn't take place in winter; the low temperatures would have surely made the visit less pleasant. Although perhaps it would not have mattered much. After all, if we can understand that the language of instructional design doesn't necessarily have to be complicated, withstanding a little cold needn't be so difficult either. ∞

**JULIE DIRKSEN**  
EXPERT IN  
USABILITY AND  
INSTRUCTIONAL  
AND EDUCATIONAL  
DESIGN.



# "It's very inspiring to see what's happening in open source communities"

## BAS BRANDS IS A WEB DEVELOPER

and open source expert, and has been a great freelance developer for the Moodle community. We spoke with him in Holland and he explained for us his expectations and views about the platform.

INTERVIEWED BY:

María Paula Triviño Salazar  
Arnhem, The Netherlands

T

**HE E-LEARNER: WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF MOODLE BEEN LIKE?**

**Bas Brands:** Moodle has been a great learning experience. The Moodle community is quite unique, and that might be because learning and teaching are the main reason for using Moodle. Once you learn your way around it, it becomes more and more fun, and adding your own plugins and tools is great, especially when you notice people appreciating your work and additions.

**T.E: ARE THE MOODLE'S INITIATIVES YOU HAVE WORKED ON AVAILABLE FOR OPEN USE BY THE COMMUNITY?**

**B.B:** Most of my work with Moodle comes from projects paid for by clients, and for each project deciding if the outcome or code can be shared depends on a number of factors. Is it generic enough, and can it benefit other users? Is the client willing to share this with the world?

**T.E: WHAT WOULD YOU ADD TO MOODLE TO IMPROVE THE EXPERIENCE?**

**B.B:** I don't think Moodle needs a lot of new features to improve the User Experience. I would prefer removing or disabling a lot of the standard features for new Moodle installations like Moodle messaging, blogging or notes. The next step would be to really focus on basic Moodle, research what can be improved, share this research with the community and suggest improvements.



**T.E: HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR KNOWLEDGE CAN BENEFIT THE COMMUNITY?**

**B.B:** I think my specialty is being able to create for form and function. I try to learn from other User Experience designers in Open Source projects like Drupal, Diaspora and WordPress. I think sharing what I have done and learned could help other community users when working with and creating for Moodle.

**T.E: WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF, AT A HYPOTHETICAL POINT IN TIME, MOODLE OR OTHER OPEN SOURCE TOOLS BECAME LICENSED SOFTWARE?**

**B.B:** I think it can't really become licensed software. Moodle HQ has built its business model around open source and all Moodle code is licensed to be GPL code. So even if Moodle HQ stopped doing community development, the Moodle community could organize and continue an open source version of Moodle and rebrand it. ∞



**BAS BRANDS**  
OPEN SOURCE  
WEB DEVELOPER  
AND CONSULTANT,  
INDEPENDENT

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Drive positive outcomes  
for at-risk learners by  
recommending specific actions  
in a timely fashion.

## GAIN DEEP INSIGHTS INTO STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND PERFORMANCE DRIVERS

Improve course-wide student  
performance and satisfaction.

## EFFECTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY MANAGE COURSE ACTIVITIES AND MATERIALS

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drive deeper interaction and  
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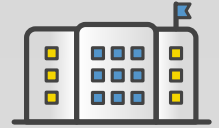
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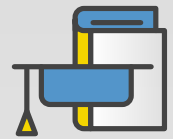
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