

研究ノート

## The Three P's for Increased Student Engagement in Moodle: An E-learning Guide for Teachers

Peter PARISE

### Introduction

*E-learning* is a phenomenon which has enjoyed a buzzword status in educational circles and has challenged our conceptions regarding the accessibility of learning. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) such as Coursera, is one such aspect of this phenomenon. ("Massive open online course," 2014) These courses gather learners by the thousands on a plethora of subjects both academic and non-academic, usually working closely with universities to reach a wider range of participants. One issue in e-learning is ensuring an adequate degree of engagement and completion of the course.



Optional online resources in support of ILCS training programs

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December 2014

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**Debate, Discussion and Presentation for Leaders・業務担当者のため英会話研修**  
Instructor: George Kumazawa  
Instructor: Peter Parise  
Instructor: Marcel Van Amelsvoort  
「業務担当者のため英会話研修」の資料と通信ウェブサイト

**Reflective Teaching**  
Facilitator: Yoshi Ehara  
Facilitator: RJ Murakoshi  
自分の授業を振り返って発見した問題点・課題について、解決のための手だてを考えて実行し、その効果を検証しながら、継続的に授業改善を進めます。

**教師のためのコミュニケーション文法演習**  
Facilitator: Yoshi Ehara  
英語で授業を進めるのに必要な知識と技能を学びながら、使うための英文法の復習も同時に行います。

**Advanced Program**  
Facilitator: Yoshi Ehara  
Facilitator: George Kumazawa  
Facilitator: Tomiko Motoyanagi  
Facilitator: RJ Murakoshi  
Facilitator: Peter Parise  
Facilitator: Marcel Van Amelsvoort  
Materials and activities to support Group A and B of the Advanced Training Program

**Support Writing Course A**  
Facilitator: Peter Parise  
Facilitator: Marcel Van Amelsvoort  
From better sentences to better paragraphs

Figure 1. Entry page of the Moodle website

The Kanagawa Prefectural Institute of Language and Culture Studies' In-service English Teacher Training Division also offers a more modest-sized form of e-learning to support

Japanese teachers of English in public schools in Kanagawa. This comes in the form of courses delivered via a Moodle website as displayed in Figure 1. The entire site is maintained by the group and includes four kinds of programs: the Advanced program (英語教育アドヴァンスト研修授業改善プロジェクト), a yearlong training program to create leader teachers in high schools; Communication and Grammar, a course for readying teachers to teach English in English (教師のためコミュニケーション文法演習) Reflective Teaching (Reflective Teaching 演習), a course on action research, and the Support Writing Course (英文ライティング添削講座) for English teachers in junior and senior high school. Since this article's main purpose is to discuss engagement in e-learning, to write about each of these courses is well beyond the scope of this article, so for the sake of brevity the focus will be exclusively on the writing program.

How do we define engagement especially since the topic is related not to learning in a classroom setting but in a virtual space? For this article engagement can be defined as the learners willingness to participate in an e-learning environment (in messages, number of times logged in, the time that has elapsed since the last login, etc.) in relation to measured results i.e. submitting assignments etc. (Beer, Clark, & Jones, 2010 p.76) Engagement can be increased if the instructor keeps in mind just three letters PPP: Presence, Personalization, and Plug-ins. The first two describe the affective aspects of an online course based anecdotal evidence and key concepts from theoretical and practical literature on e-learning. The final “P” involves making use of software that can be added to a Moodle website in the form of plug-ins. This paper will describe the Support Writing Course and what strategies that have been employed to maintain and increase engagement in the current course and for future courses as well.

### **A brief description of Moodle and the Support Writing Course**

Moodle is defined as an LMS or Learning Management System developed by Martin Dougiamas to create a space for learning and interaction on the Internet (“Moodle,” 2014) and is “designed to provide educators, administrators and learners with a single robust, secure and integrated system to create personalized learning environments.” (“About Moodle,” n.d.) It is also regarded as the most popular and top-rated system available when compared to other LMS systems. (Crosslin, 2009 p.505) At the moment there are about 55,031 registered Moodle sites throughout the world in 232 countries. (“Moodle Statistics,” n.d.) Moodle is a type of open-source software in which can be customized according to the user’s needs. To facilitate this customizability, the Moodle community creates and maintains a variety of plug-ins. This aspect will be described in more detail in the latter part of this article. The vital difference between open-source versus proprietary software is that the program is maintained and developed by the community of users, not by a private company.

### **Support Writing Course and Moodle**

The purpose of this course is to provide opportunities for in-service teachers to improve their writing skills. Part of this mission is to teach the basics of academic essay writing as well as build confidence. While the participants are most certainly professionals in their field, most have been taught by the grammar translation method which focuses more on knowledge about English and test preparation rather than on productive skills. As a result they have not had adequate time to hone this skill while they were students.

The Support Writing Course was offered originally by the previous incarnation of the Institute when it was a junior college for language learning: the Kanagawa Prefectural College of Foreign Studies. (“神奈川県立外語短期大学,” 2014) This transition involved adapting content from a classroom centered, paper based writing course to its digital, virtual incarnation. The early version of the Moodle site reflected this transition by being initially a place to download word files, which were digital versions of what was used in the university class. Currently the site has changed to become a more interactive experience where the text, multi-media and activities are integrated.

The participants attending this course have changed as well. At its beginning the writing program had served university level students who received a grade for their work in order to fulfill curriculum requirements, but the current course serves in-service teachers of English who work in public schools throughout Kanagawa. The goals of these learners are markedly different by the very fact that they are specialists in the language and have greater responsibilities outside the course: families, teaching and administrative roles. In addition, their motivation for participating is for self-improvement without the institutional pressure of grades or a degree.

### **Facilitating engagement with the three P's**

With these fundamental differences in mind, a major challenge for this course is the attrition rate. For about two years since our program became an online course only one or two individuals out of a group of about ten participants were committed enough to the course to complete all their assignments. The initial trend with the course is that the participants submit the first assignment, but after that only a few managed to submit all the writing assignments. It seems that the participants need more support in order to sustain their engagement. To counteract this situation, we will now look at the three P's starting with the idea of *presence*.

#### **Presence**

*Presence* is defined here as the degree in which the instructor and the participants actively participate in the e-learning space. The effort to recreate a presence on the web to

facilitate communal relations is an attempt to replicate a *social presence* (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011 p.112). Garrison (2011) describes this as the need for an e-learning course to have a balance of three forms of presence: *social presence*, *cognitive presence*, and *teacher presence*. A teacher's presence is said to manage social and cognitive presence and takes the role of organizing and designing, facilitating and directly instructing in the e-learning course (pp. 55-56). In a more practical treatment of the subject, Ko and Rossen (2010) more explicitly state that the instructor must "establish a presence and rapport in your classroom that are evident to students as soon as they walk through the online classroom door." and list three essential items for establishing this presence: projecting a sense of enthusiasm, adding an element of *personalization*, and reminding the learners that the instructor is available should they have questions (pp. 299-300).

But how do the learners sense the instructor's presence even though it is a purely virtual one? One way to promote presence is if the instructor sends a regular message out to the learners: A tweet, an email newsletter, a blog post that the participants can automatically receive are options but a better tool is the built-in message system on the Moodle website which can be utilized for this very function. Any message written will automatically be sent to the student's registered email. As the reader will see later in this article, if the instructor makes full use of this messaging system, there will be a profound difference in the participation level in the course. According to course survey reports, one recurring issue was the fact that the participants felt that they did not receive enough messages about the availability of assignments. Considering the situation of public school teachers, a timely reminder would be quite helpful.

There are two additional reasons for consistent messages other than just as a reminder. One is to give the students direction regarding what is expected of them in terms of viewing the site content and the assignments. This situates them in the "now" of the course by reinstating what is already written in the syllabus and on the Moodle. The likelihood that the participant will visit the site increases based on the suggestions in the message. Beer et al (2010) makes one telling discovery from their analysis of student engagement in e-learning. Students were more willing to participate in forum discussions if the teacher also participated as well (p.82) implying that creating greater engagement from participants stems from the teacher being active in the site along with the learners. An additional benefit of sending messages consistently via the native Moodle message service is that there is a link attached to the email which the participant can click to take them back to the site.

But *teacher presence* is not enough as Haythornthwaite and Andrews observe that "attending to presence alone is insufficient to create an active community. Creating a community requires attention to the basis of community, that is, what it is that constitutes interactions and group goals." (2011, p.112) The other side of the engagement equation is the

involvement of the participants, but this should be mediated with the content of the course itself. Activities must be established to allow interaction not only between the instructor and the participants but between the participants themselves. Conrad and Donaldson (2011) in their landmark text on engagement in e-learning, state that the success of an online course is based on the “amount of interaction between students and the quality of that interaction.” (p.24). What is interesting about this statement is the fact that it is supported by the actions of the participants of our program. The first assignment, which is an ice-breaker writing activity entailed that the participants in the first face-to-face class meeting must interview each other and write about their partner afterward for the assignment. When considering Conrad and Donaldson’s dictum above this is the closest to their definition. The following assignments for the course do not have this interactive quality, and this might be the reason why they fail to gather as much engagement as this first assignment.

Learners do want to interact, and given the right tools they will most likely do so. Returning to the native message function in the Moodle, one interesting anecdote is during the first meeting of the writing course, the participants as a class were shown how to use the messaging service in Moodle. They instantly gravitated to the tool and quite suddenly were messaging their partners from the interview task. They were so engrossed with the activity that the instructor had to intervene to keep them focused on the writing task at hand. Looking back on this episode, this was a mistake on the part of the author. This intervention weakened the very thing that Conrad and Donaldson advocated: the quality and amount of interaction. This was a learning experience for the instructor. The success of an e-learning course is to take advantage of this willingness to communicate which was initially generated as evidenced with the interview task and the effect of the messaging tool orientation, which set “the tone for future communications between learners; therefore, it should be fun, creative, and expressive.” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011 p.46)

### **Personalization**

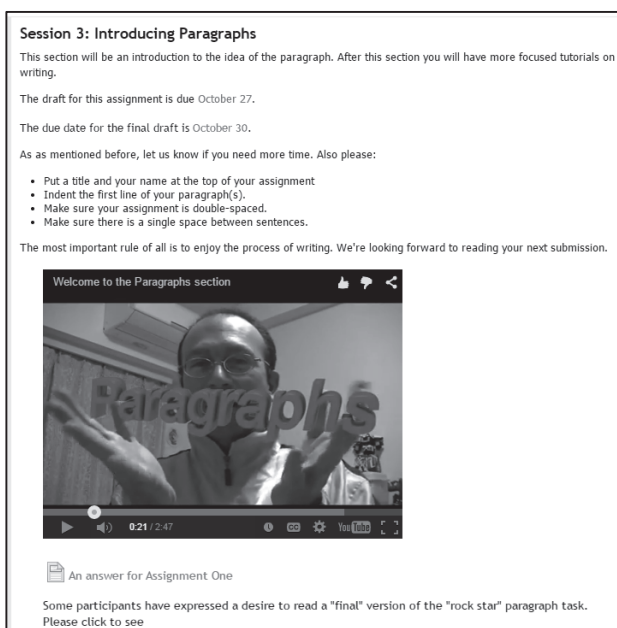
*Personalization* in this article means making the experience of the e-learning more “personal” than “impersonal.” While *presence* is sustaining interaction via the instructor to the participants, or between the participants, this section is focused more on the content of that message and the e-learning site itself. E-learning websites are primarily text based, in that the instructions are text and the responses are text ( Ko & Rossen, 2010, p. 289). As mentioned above, the fact that this is a “disembodied” learning experience in that there is no classroom, no chairs, no desks, no teacher nor other students. Since there is no consistent meeting place except for the Moodle site itself, this may fail to garner engagement since learning has been up until the early 21st century has been associated with going to a specific place to learn. Since there is

no physical anchor to learning, the online course must compensate with other strategies. Emoticons, images, videos plus a dose of slogans and words of encouragement can help make an otherwise text heavy medium more amicable for the learner. One example is the use of multimedia and these include audio recordings and embedded videos. The use of audio has been employed since the establishment of the online version of the course, which employs a web based audio recorder called vocaroo.com (“Vocaroo Online voice recorder,” n.d.) to facilitate a teacher to student conference. These messages are embedded as links in the documents and in the participant’s feedback page in the Moodle. While it is only a one way transaction from instructor to student about writing feedback with reasons and explanations why the instructor made a correction, it also is a platform for building motivation. These verbal messages are literally words of encouragement for the learner: citing what is good about the text, to contact the instructor when there are problems, and to give a sense of their progress by having the instructor say

“You have two more to go, so please keep going!” or “I look forward to reading your next assignment.” etc. Also they allow the learner to practice another skill: listening. By being exposed to audio and video, the participants are given an opportunity to enhance this skill even in a course devoted to writing.

In the Support Writing Course site, three out of the five lessons have at least one video embedded for the learner to watch. This variety of media allows the learner to access other means for appreciating and understanding the content of the course than just through text alone. Rather than just be a place for reading and writing, videos provide visual means for accessing the content and can appeal to different learning styles. Videos can be obtained via YouTube, which host lessons offered to the public on how to write academically or how to paraphrase from secondary sources. These can be embedded in the site itself. Even the instructors can film a video of themselves demonstrating a certain aspect of writing. In the case of the writing program, the author made a video for the Moodle site introducing the lesson on paragraphs as detailed in Figure 2.

Returning to the native Moodle messaging service, the instructor made a point to add



*Figure 2. A video embedded in Moodle*

images to most messages. Rather than just rely on text alone, emoticons can be used as a means of personalizing the experience of the learner and “enhance a sense of others in the community and to introduce a greater range of interaction via text.”(Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011 p.21). Emoticons can provide the missing cues that are quite necessary for face-to-face interaction and can be skillfully used by the instructor when giving feedback or sending messages to the participants as detailed in Figure 3.

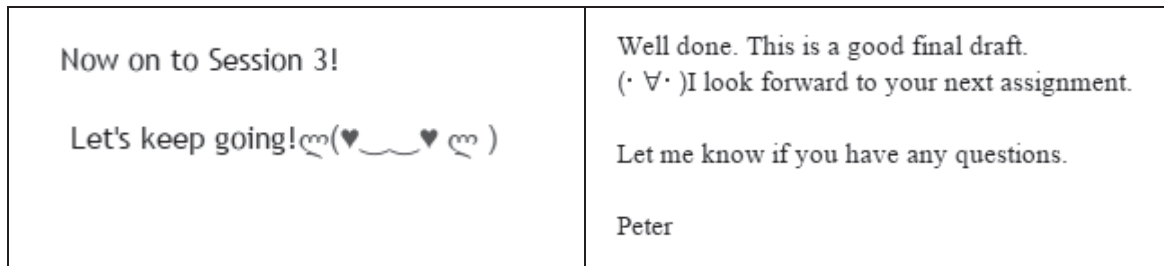


Figure 3 Examples of emoticon use

### Plug-ins

Plug-ins represent the technical side of Moodle and their inclusion in the course can help with promoting engagement. According to the statistics page for the Moodle Plugins Directory, there are 957 plug-ins available with approximately 5.6 million downloads (“Moodle plugins directory,” n.d.). Since there is a large number of plug-ins available for Moodle and describing this wealth of material is well beyond the scope of this paper, two plug-ins which are utilized for the Support Writing Course will be described below.

### Progress Bar

The progress bar was officially adopted by the site this year and is located on the right margin of the webpage. Colors are used to denote the status of the assignment or task as shown in Figure 4. The purpose of this bar is to guide the participants about which assignments, quizzes, or other tasks to do. Using the color green and a checkmark; this tells the participant that the assignment is complete. Blue is used to tell the learner that the assignment is available but not yet complete. Those assignments which are overdue are marked with an “x” and colored red. This bar is utilized to provide the participant with an easy way to monitor progress in the course, and to provide a greater sense of progress which in turn can help with motivation. An additional benefit for this plug-in is that it allows the instructor to monitor the progress of

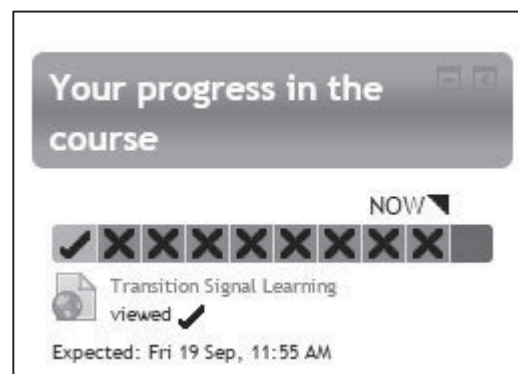


Figure 4. The instructor's progress bar

the participants as well and determine those who need additional assistance or guidance. According to de Raadt, research has shown that the bar assists in short-term time management and better retention of students in courses. (*The Progress Bar block*, 2014)

### **Certificates**

Since the progress bar is a plug-in used for the duration of the course, this plug-in is utilized for its conclusion. Certificates are a way to provide more motivation for the participants as a reward to those who put a great deal of effort to complete this course. Since there isn't an official degree offered from the institution, this certificate is a way to show recognition for hard work and for the participant to have as a record of their training, which can be used for resumes, curricula vitae or even a blog or personal website. Provided that the participant has met the conditions of successfully completing the course, the certificate module creates a PDF file ("Certificate module-MoodleDocs," n.d.) which can be sent via email, as a secure link or at the instructor's discretion, the learners can download the certificate themselves from the site. The certificate contains the name of the participant, the facilitators, and the description of the institution, the course and the accomplishment as shown in Figure 5.



*Figure 5. A sample Moodle Certificate*

### **Future directions**

The three P's: presence, personalization and effective use of plug-ins have hinted at



ways we can enhance engagement and enable our participants to complete the tasks in an online course. For the Support Writing Course though, and there is still room for improvement for this and other online courses offered by the In-service Teacher Training Division. One area of improvement is increasing the participants' opportunities to interact with each other. Since only the first assignment for the writing course is an excellent icebreaker which can facilitate good relations between the participants, the opportunity is lost once they go online to focus on the course material and their writing assignments. Conrad and Donaldson's Phases of Engagement framework for engaging learners online is based on the idea of gradually developing a community based on the idea of collaboration ( 2011, pp. 1–14). Moving from dyads to groups, the learners gradually have a greater stake in the course and the instructor takes a more facilitator approach once this is established. The question is to what extent does this model work for academic writing, which is a more solitary endeavor than a group oriented one? In addition, for those teachers with compromised schedules, how feasible is group oriented work if the members' schedules cannot be aligned? These questions can be answered with experimentation and can be approached from the perspective of action research.

Another potential addition to the Support Writing Course is the inclusion of gamification or gamified elements which can encourage another type of engagement, one that is focused on earning external rewards. *Badges* (see Figure 6) for example are one way to generate interest in the course by rewarding those who are able to acquire core skills related to writing. The writing course makes use of quizzes to enable the participants to check their understanding of the content, but according to Greeve these can be incorporated to create a gamified course where badges can be used as “a display of skills that can be seen and verified by the online community.” (2014, p. 10) With the public display of badges, the learners could be encouraged to excel in a course by witnessing the achievements of other participants.



*Figure 6.* Example badges for Moodle

## **Conclusion**

The three P's have been created serve as simple mnemonic for those who are new to the idea of managing e-learning. Depending on the situation of the instructor, whether it is

independently generated for a class or if the instructor's institution is supplying a Moodle or another LMS for use, the author believes that for those new to managing e-learning, the three P's are a fine toolset to use to get started.

Presence, personalization, and the effective use of some plug-ins can make a difference for the instructor, but most importantly it is the learners who benefit. An e-learning community is not something that happens organically and must be "deliberately constructed" in order to flourish. (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011, p. 118) If the instructor considers these ideas and puts them into practice, they can alleviate the confusion that learners experience when starting an e-learning course. As Ko and Rossen state that "students used to instructor-directed learning may feel somewhat lost in an environment that relies heavily on individual initiative and independent learning" (2010, p. 289) and so the instructor must provide some supports for the learner to follow, such as a consistent line of communication or a plug-in to guide the learner in terms of what is expected in the course.

While there are several other resources available for managing engagement in e-learning, the author fully recommends that the reader look at what is available starting with the material referenced in this article and get a full view of the possibilities that an online course can offer. There is definitely more that can be done with Moodle and other LMSs to increase engagement and hopefully the three P's are a step in the right direction.

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