

THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE AND THE MOODLE FRAMEWORK SYSTEM

Edina Kriskó
 College of International Management and Business
 Budapest Business School
 Hungary
 krisko.edina@kkfk.bgf.hu

ABSTRACT

In this article I will argue that the use of learning content management systems is also justified in full-time education, especially in business education and communication studies. Nowadays not only multinational companies, but domestic medium enterprises also manage the training of new employees and existing staff with LCMSs. Companies in Hungary’s financial sector are cutting edge in the development of electronic learning objects, and base employees’ training on these new technologies. That is why it is extremely important for students to get acquainted with learning management systems and other web-based applications as tools that support the learning process and also as sites of communication. I will present the business communication Moodle course, which was introduced to international business and commerce and marketing studies in the 2010/2011 academic year. I want to present the wide range of web2.0 applications that can be used to explore the fields of business communication.

INTRODUCTION

Today, when our students (as well as our colleagues) spend a significant proportion of their spare time on Facebook and similar networking sites and virtual communities, communication cultures and expectations in the workplace also seem to be changing. (More than half of the Hungarian Internet users between 18 and 64 enter at least one networking site - iWiW, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter etc. – each day according to domestic surveys. www.technet.hu) Professional blogs, analyses, audio and video commentaries published on the Internet (message boards, profile pages, photo, file and other content sharing sites) have by now become part of business communication, and consultations can also be held online in education. However, when our students are asked if they know what web 2.0 means or what is behind the expression semantic web, we invariably get negative answers. Therefore it seems necessary to set some concepts, phenomena and applied tools straight, even within the sometimes rather narrow frames of subject curricula. The business communication course offers a good opportunity for this. Its perspective as well as its content (curriculum) enables it to follow technological changes flexibly, and the innovations of social and new media can be presented at the attendance courses and alongside them. The question is whether the institutions and the students are open to receive this, and how well the instructors themselves are prepared for it.

Teachers

As regards the skills of teachers, the National Institute of Vocational and Adult Education has provided accredited in-service teacher training programs related to e-learning for years, under titles like „E-learning, „The School of the Future”, „From Synopsis to E-learning curricula”, „E-textbook – developing electronic curricula in the framework system”, etc. (<https://www.nive.hu>) (The author of the present paper also participated in such training courses.) However, no imperative other than their self-imposed professional standards and motivation is in force as yet in domestic practice to incite teachers to participate in these programs. (The new act on public education and act on higher education, the model for teachers’ careers, as well as the principles of quality assurance are currently being outlined as part of the reform measures of the second Orbán government that came into office last year. The plans are as yet subject to heated debates, and they are also rejected by the Teachers’ Union.)

The composition of the teaching staff in the institution in question (Budapest Business School, College of International Management and Business – BGF CIMB) is also relevant to our theme; it is summed up in the following table:

	2008	2009	2010
Holds academic degree	32%	36%	37%
30 years old or younger	4%	3%	2%
31-45 years old	30%	35%	39%

46-54 years old	21%	20%	17%
55-62 years old	33%	30%	31%
older than 62	12%	14%	14%

Table 1: Age of instructors and proportion of instructors holding an academic degree
(Source: Supplements No. 4.1 of the yearly reports of BGF CIMB for 2008, 2009 and 2010)

The table shows that similarly to other universities and colleges, the age group in which the educational activities were definitely not accompanied by the use of computers from the beginning is represented at around 62-66%. They were the ones from whom the appearance of web technologies demanded the greatest shift in attitudes and equipment use. Their age, on the other hand, may also give rise to certain concerns regarding the issue of replacement.

Students

We do not doubt that our students are open to everything new, although we sometimes get a distressing picture of their motivation and diligence. For example, it is not clear why they try to catch up with a whole semester's study during the 1-2 days before the exams instead of continuous learning. (This is what we can conclude from teachers' accounts, our own teaching experiences and, as we shall see later, the course statistics available in the framework system. See also Kriskó, 2011a on this topic) It is not clear why they claim that they are not familiar with the framework system, when it is built up of tools and modules they already know from other computer applications.

Participants of the study were groups of first year full time students of international management, commerce and marketing. Most of them were first degree students who took the given course for the first time. There was a total of 6 seminar groups with some 30 students each. Due to the limited length of the present paper, I will concentrate on the business communication course of the international management program in this lecture, and will only present data from the commerce and marketing program as a basis of comparison where this seems relevant.

The Business Communication Course

The subject taught is business communication, which consists of a theoretical lecture series and a seminar course. Both the practical and the theoretical courses take place in two hours biweekly. (The teacher of the theoretical subject and the seminars is not necessarily the same person.) The aim of the subject is to acquaint students with the basic know-how and knacks with which they will be able to communicate adequately in the wide-ranging field of business life.

To this end, all we need to do is involve students in communication, in the traditional as well as in the virtual classroom. If we take the interactive view of communication (namely, that it proceeds towards something and has a definite end, and every participant has to make an effort in order to achieve the common goal) as a starting point, we can witness a fortunate encounter of the subject and the method under the aegis of web2.0. The primary aim of the course is to convey to the students the message that „[...] in order to profit more from the knowledge base of a community, first of all you have to be an active participant of the community in question.” „[...] the more you read and write, share and communicate, the more the opportunities that are close to you will find you.” (Kulcsár, 2008, no page number)

Interactivity in terms of communication

To stay on the field of communication, my courses can probably be most easily described in Newcomb's interactive model (Newcomb, 1966), as communicative acts in which we communicate as A (teacher) and B (students) about X (communication, business communication), and we mutually orient to each other and the topic (X) as well. In the system of group exercises, all this means that students produce and experience the same communicative acts within the groups, and the group exercise will be the reflection of some state of balance within the group. Their solutions will reflect that they acquire knowledge about each other during the work, and also about X (communication) and other Bs (who assume the roles of A' or A'B in the new models), and their attitudes towards the Bs and X also change. All this results in a multiple coorientation network, and leads to what the literature defines as networked learning. The latter is a process in which the informal, networked exchange of information supported by electronic facilities (LCMSs) dominates, and which turns learning into a networked process, where the students also learn from their peers. (Bessenyi, 2007)

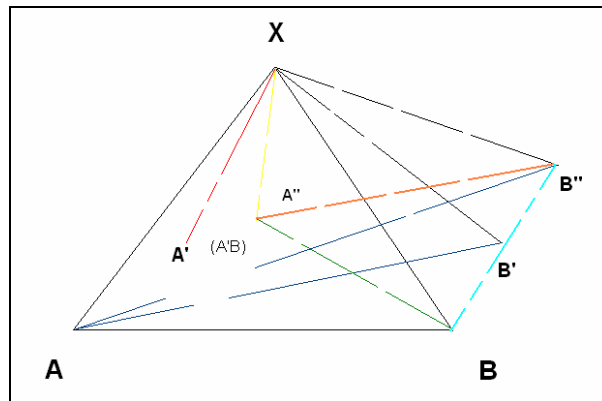


Figure 1: The extension of Newcomb' model for communication during a course
(image created by the author)

As a teacher, I aim to focus on what I can add to this, so that the Bs develop positive attitudes with respect to X (communication), and aim to incite them for further study, even if this will not be manifested right there and then or during the course, only years later in their professional practice. If being open to others and being oriented on a subject together happens at a site like the LCMS, the returns are twofold. It leads us to a site which is not included in classical business communication textbooks as yet, the systematic analysis of which is ongoing, and the experience has the power to increase the credit of group communication, group thinking and Web 2.0. All of this is implemented with a method that employs the current paraphernalia of business life, and integrates them in the learning process. (Kriskó, 2011b) Thus blogs, the e-portfolio, the time band, the message board and all the other applications help update our whole set of business communication tools (up to the point of video conferences).

To all those who ask about the areas of pedagogy and IT, I would say that I am thinking in terms of the first step of connectivism. My attempts aim to make the Internet and virtual spaces part of our everyday lives, sometimes even against institutional powers that withhold us, and to find a place for group work that is not subject to simultaneous physical presence among our acts of communication and our sites, while our theme is business communication all the time.

REASONS FOR USING MOODLE

The framework system developed in New Zealand is fairly widespread worldwide, and has been one of the most popular in Hungary, too for several years. (There are 50519 registered Moodle pages in 211 countries and 266 in Hungary - <http://moodle.org/sites/>, download: 03.21.2010. 13:46h) „Moodle is an open source program package that enables the complex implementation of learning and teaching by the provision of a learning environment.” (http://docs.moodle.org/hu/A_Moodle) It is practically an LMS also equipped with Web2.0 applications.

It was introduced at the BGF CIMB in the year 2009 as a pilot project, upon the initiative of technical language instructors. The first users were the staff of the German language department, who primarily used it to publish language placement tests. The use of functions supporting learning, editing curricula and group work has become prevalent by now, but the faculty is still in the phase of the initial steps. The system has 5163 users and 33 courses are available, which is a significant number if we consider the fact that the faculty does not offer distance education. However, the high number of users is misleading in that every active student of the department has been given a user account, but not everyone has an active course to take as yet, due to the small number of courses. For the time being, there is no full scale course management within the system.

Business Communication subject curriculum

In the following section I present the structure of the business communication course provided in the programs of commerce and marketing and international management. The subject has different contents in these two programs, one reason for which is administrative: the two subjects are managed by different departments (Department of Applied Communication and Department of Social Communication), and, on the other hand, the programs situate the subject in different curricular networks. Therefore in the following section I present the teacher's conception and the first results (not analysed in detail so far) through the course offered to students of international studies.

The major themes are: 1.) Organisational culture and behavior, 2.) Job application, CV, interview 3.) Internal

communication, negotiation, meeting, 4.) Written communication, writing tools, 5.) Decision making in a group
5.) Organisational communication, mass communication.

Students engage in group work throughout the semester, and are given written assignments to be submitted at the end of each class. After the first three group exercises – that is, after six weeks' time – they receive a written evaluation of their performance through Moodle, broken down by the individual chapters of the curriculum. On the last occasion, they give group presentations of their work during the semester.

Curriculum elements in the Business Communication course

In the case of the seminar, there was no traditional, paper based material among the compulsory readings. A textbook available in electronic form was included (Béla Buda: *A közvetlen emberi kommunikáció szabályszerűségei*), and a Power Point summary (based on different textbooks) was compiled for each topic. References were included on the slides in each topic to encourage participants for further research and reading. Any aids that offer specific guidance or secure subsequent control for elaborating the group exercises during class are available as a website in Moodle. In addition to the above, test questions and a mini self-check (10-question true or false) test offer support to preparation, and a teachers' blog has also been available since spring. Students have been informed about the existence of the former in a message sent through the Neptun system in each course, and its availability has also been demonstrated during class.

The blog has a double function: on one hand, it enables the presentation and sharing of spontaneous assignments during class, which are based on relevant current events of public life (Fukusima and the nuclear emergency, or what are the major principles of crisis communication), on the other hand, assignments are offered for marks, in order to help students apply what they have learned in real life situations. (What is the difference between a statement made in a live radio program by an executive of the Hungarian Television on the program policies of the channel, and the same person publishing preliminary plans ahead of time in his professional blog, and this leads to dismissal? Does the director of the Festival Orchestra criticise the work of the government in an interview given to a foreign paper as a private person?) It would be important to develop critical thinking in students.

Among the above elements, it was the blog from which I was expecting a breakthrough, because it was the one that secured the widest frames for the study of communication phenomena and the initiation of dialogues. Theoretical considerations can be made more colourful by multimedia elements, and as this ensures a more informal tone, humour and irony also have a place here. Individual themes are meant to illustrate that what we talk about during the sessions is very human, everyday, subjective, manipulable, and any related knowledge can be used to our own ends.

Experiences in the Business Communication course of autumn 2010/11

The following diagram is meant to demonstrate that most students only entered the course on the eve of the final test of the semester, and this was when they reviewed the material and aids uploaded there or read the detailed description of requirements or skimmed through the compulsory and recommended reading list. One might say that there was no activity in the Moodle course before that. 8 students from the 30-member group did not visit the Moodle course at all. The average time spent in the system was 10.4 minutes. The attendance sessions also resembled lectures rather than seminars. It was difficult to initiate dialogue, there were no questions that catalysed the debate. There was not a single forum comment or response (except for the teacher's comments on the requirements, recommended literature, links and other relevant issues). Not one student began to compile an e-portfolio, and not one participant of the course started a blog.

This was when the idea of group work was raised, and the necessity of active tutoring was admitted. This gave rise to the rethinking of the whole conception, aiming to generate active participation by students through the combination of the interactive view and Web2.0.

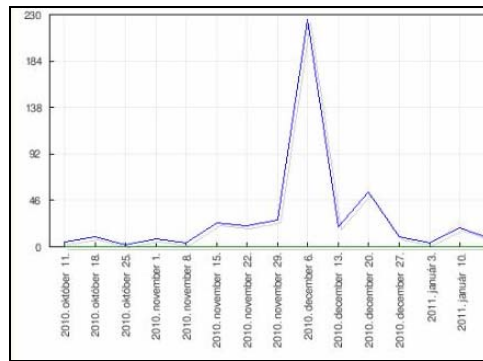


Figure 2: Student activity in the autumn course
(Source: <http://moodle.kkfk.bgf.hu/>)

Experiences in the Business Communication course of spring 2010/11

The academic year is still on at the time of writing, 3 weeks are left from the term time, but the available data already point to some progress towards dialogue-based work. As opposed to the previous semester, more than half of the students logged in to the system and entered the course after the first contact hour. The rate of viewing each element of the curriculum varies widely between 12 and 90%. The only item visited frequently in every course is the Job search and Job Interview Encyclopedia created in a Wiki format (a visiting rate of 180% with respect to active course members).

The first steps of the realisation of the teacher’s intention are seen in the G7 group (top right diagram of Figure3), with a continuous activity around 20. (Unfortunately, this also reflects the extent of student interest experienced at the attendance sessions.) As a comparison: attendance at the course varies around 3 and 5 per cent in the marketing program.

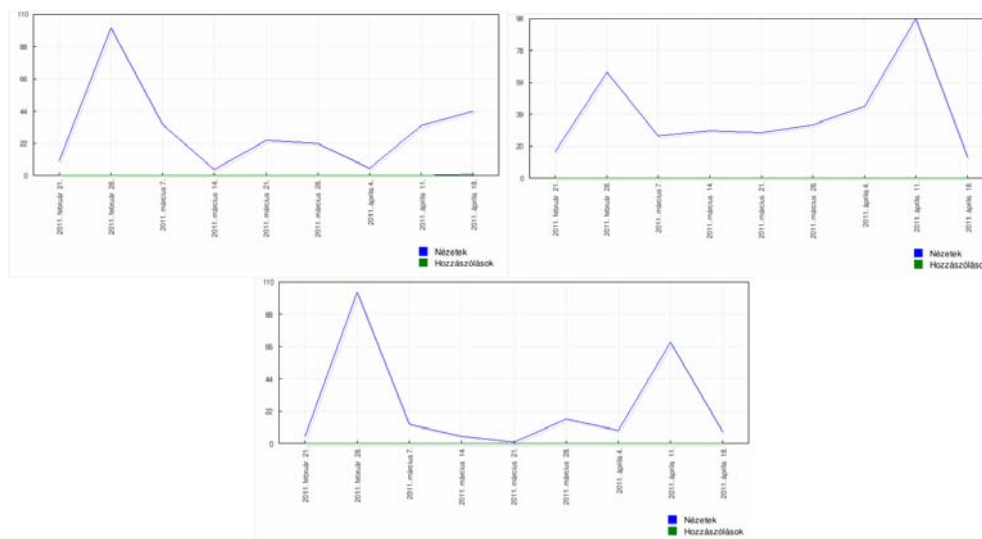


Figure 3: The activity of the 3 spring groups (G5, G6, G7)
(Source: <http://moodle.kkfk.bgf.hu/>)

However, the number of views for course elements was 1.5-2 times higher than it was in the previous semester, calculated for the corresponding period of time. This is most striking in group G6. The average amount of time spent in the system is expected to be as high as 20 minutes/person – due to the fact that students still only use Moodle for downloading course material most of the time

It remains a question whether stronger and more compulsive methods should be used for promoting the use of electronic facilities (e.g. compulsory exercises to be submitted through the framework system, on a weekly or be-weekly basis), as the amount of course material required in this subject is small. It would be much more important to see interpersonal dynamics, processes and states in practice, and to get to know students’ own set of

communication tools in vivo and extend them to web-based tools that also enable group work from the distance.

SUMMARY

We have found data (course journals and personal activity lists) supporting the finding that we hold our classes to 4-6 students per group, which is reinforced by the personal feedback by other teachers on their experiences at attendance sessions. Naturally, this is enough to generate tractive force in each group, but does not secure permanent participation by each course member. A positive reading could be that students have first-hand experience of the difficulty of work organisation, and face the burden that slackers constitute, as well as the difficulties of motivation and engagement, but the concerns we are faced with in the phase of evaluation are twofold. It is difficult to separate the reward of work inside and outside the classroom if we evaluate the work itself and not the process. If the submitted work is evaluated favourably thanks to the most diligent and most apt group members, everyone can equally take part in the success. This is realistic, but it will cause a tension between aptitude in the subject and the mark received in many cases.

There are, however, some positive returns as well. The atmosphere of the attendance sessions and the standards of the submitted works have improved, the jointly prepared assignments are more professionally adequate and comprehensive than individual students' works have been or used to be. Students have learned to think in a group, and as a result of the themes discussed, they are more reflexive on their participation and the biases within the group. Also, more questions are raised at the attendance sessions. Apart from a few exceptions, if a group member misses a meeting, he or she asks for an extra assignment, so they will not make the impression of taking a smaller part in the group work.

In sum, we can say that this chosen track has made the subject that students had been averse to more popular, it initiated a dialogue, and finally created a distance from the teacher's style at the attendance sessions and made them more like an event of joint thinking characterising seminar work. Even if at a less profound level, they acquired some experience on the operation of framework systems, and gained an insight into the view of electronic learning and teaching, which has been gaining ground extensively. They have approached Facebook more consciously as a site of communication, as a tool for self-management and civil will formation. This is a good preparation for their studies in (online) marketing next year.

REFERENCES

- Bessenyei, István (2007): *Tanulás és tanítás az információs társadalomban. Az e-learning 2.0 és a konnektívizmus*, www.ittk.hu/netis/doc/ISCB_hun/12_Bessenyei_eOktatas.pdf, downloaded at: 2011-04-19
- Krisko, Edina (2011a): *Moodle a felsőfokú szakképzésben – Az Üzleti kommunikáció szeminárium tapasztalatai*, In: III. Oktatás-informatikai Konferencia Tanulmánykötet, (1) (pp.168-174), Budapest
- Krisko Edina (2011b): *Kurzusmenedzselés a web2.0 árnyékában*, (conference presentation) Nemzetközi Neveléstudományi Konferencia, Kolozsvár, 2011.04.16.
- Kulcsár, Zsolt (2008): *Web2.0@munka*, <http://www.crescendo.hu/2008/08/07/web20munka>, (no page number) downloaded at: 9. March 2011, 15:23
- Newcomb, T. M. (1966): *An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts*, In: Smith, Alfred G. (ed.): *Communication and Culture*, (1) (pp. 66-79) Co.: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, New York
- Pete-Kató-Palovits (2010): *A kommunikáció interaktív felfogása*, In: *Kommunikációtudományi Nyitott Enciklopédia* (Alkalmazott Kommunikációtudományi Intézet), (no page number) http://ktnye.akti.hu/index.php/A_kommunik%C3%A1ci%C3%B3_interakt%C3%ADv_felfog%C3%A1s, downloaded at: 12 March 2011, 12:17
- Supplements 4.1 of the yearly reports of BGF CIMB for 2008
- Supplements 4.1 of the yearly reports of BGF CIMB for 2009
- Supplements 4.1 of the yearly reports of BGF CIMB for and 2010
- http://docs.moodle.org/hu/A_Moodle, downloaded at: 18 March 2011, 10:12
- <http://moodle.kkfk.bgf.hu/>, last downloaded at: 18. April, 2011, 19:42
- <https://www.nive.hu/>, downloaded at: 15 March 2011, 14:22
- http://www.technet.hu/hir/20110310/a_magyar_nok_facebookoznak_a_magyar_pasik_twitterreznak/ downloaded at: 18 March 2011, 10:17