

The Other Way Around: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Dedicated LMS Support

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Abstract

This poster will present our experience of the past 9 years in supporting Moodle LMS on a large heterogeneous humanities and social sciences – Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Following the successful selection, testing and implementation process came the years of actual use and growth of our LMS, both in user base and the complexity of support. While in the fall of 2004 the LMS had few hundred users and no more than 20 online courses, in 2013 it has over 7000 users and more than 1300 online courses. During the production phase of our LMS support, we have experienced 4 out of 5 stages of development regarding institutional e-learning practice according to Bates, but not in the particular order: Stage 1, Stage 2, Stage 3, and finally, Stage 4 (instead it was 1, 3, 2, 4). After years of successful LMS part-time support we have established a dedicated E-learning Support Center (ESC) that should enable future growth of our institutional LMS and quality control and assurance when it comes to e-learning materials and activities (and respective online courses they reside in). The fifth stage, sustainable and high quality use of e-learning is our final goal in the years to come.

Keywords

Moodle, support, institutional, strategy.

Introduction

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb is a complex, heterogeneous organization consisting of 23 departments, 125 chairs, with teaching staff of approximately 1500 (800 full time and 700+ part time), non-teaching staff of 150 and over 8000 students dispersed over 100 study programs. Teaching staff has access to more than 1500 personal computers in their offices and classrooms and students have access to more than 350 public personal computers in the library building and computer labs. ICT-related support is provided by the institution's IT Support Service - ITSS (9 employees), divided into 3 sections: General IT support, Networking and server support and Programs and applications support.

Moodle has been chosen as our institution-wide LMS in 2004 after a successful process of selection, testing and implementation (Klindžić & Banek Zorica, 2008). The initial numbers in 2004 were, expectedly, low: few hundred users (mostly students) and no more than 20 online courses. During the past 9 years, the number of end-users, online courses and quantity of teaching materials and online activities has grown significantly, and now (June 2013) the LMS has over 7000 users, more than 1300 online courses and around 500 GB of resources. While some of our support and practice phases went according to Tony Bates' five stages of development regarding institutional e-learning practice (Bates, 2007), some phases were more developed/present, while others were achieved in the "wrong order", because in our case stages played out as Stage 1 - Lone Rangers, Stage 3 - Chaos, Stage 2 - Encouragement, and finally, Stage 4 - Planning (but, strangely, that did not have the negative consequences on online course quality or the speed of e-learning adoption). Stage 5 – Sustainability - is yet to happen.

Early Support Phase

During all that time the support to LMS users (both teachers and students) was provided by the 2-person staff from the Networking and server support section of the ITSS. One of the employees was supporting the LMS server, it's network and authorization infrastructure (as a part of his everyday duties, along with administration of the other 20+ general purpose servers (with more than 20000+ user accounts) and 200+ active networking devices and infrastructure), while the other employee's tasks were organization of LMS end-user support, teacher and student education (face-2-face, workshops, guides and manuals), teacher assistance (with both

technical and instructional design issues), translation of Moodle language pack to Croatian and many others (as well as his “normal” duties of general purpose system administration of large number of servers and end-users).

All online courses on our Moodle LMS are designed for the hybrid (blended) learning model. None of them are meant to be fully online, at least for the time being. University of Zagreb recognizes three different levels of online courses according to the application e-learning technologies (University of Zagreb, 2009): Level 1 (L1), Level 2 (L2) and Level 3 (L3) - Level 3 signifying the most advanced use of e-learning technology. Majority of our 1300 online courses belong to the L2 courses - 562 (45%), while 431, or 34% of the online courses belong to L1 and the rest of the online courses – 266 or 21% are at the most advanced level, L3 (see Figure 1). Both the University of Zagreb and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences have a goal that most of online courses must be taught at the L3 level, so we are trying to improve our existing courses and create new courses as L3 from the start (but it will take a lot of support time).

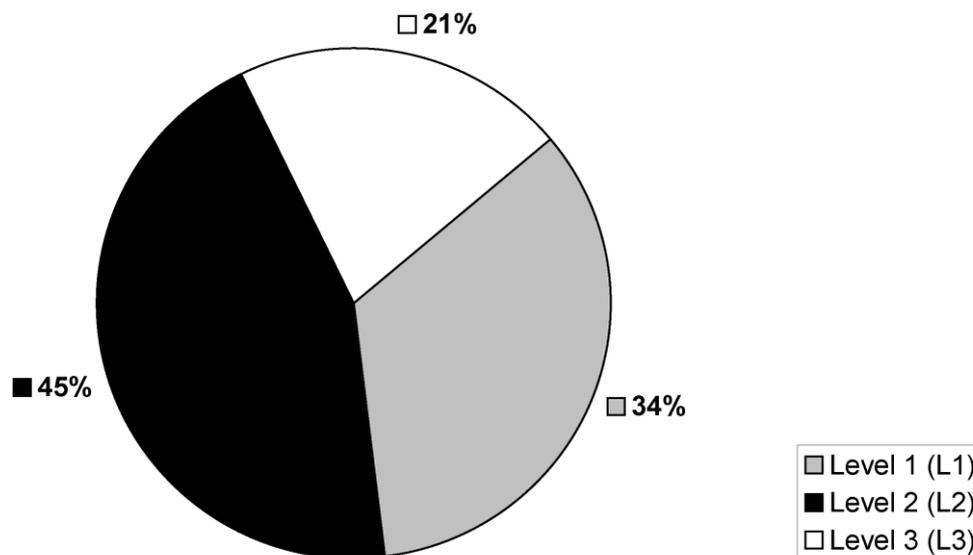


Figure 1. Percentage of L1, L2 and L3 online courses (January 2013)

E-learning Strategy and Future Support Phase(s)

Since 2007, the University of Zagreb has an official e-learning strategy. In addition to standard strategy elements (vision, mission, strategic objectives), the Strategy contains the action plan with a number of activities within several areas of strategic operations, concrete assignments of activities to competent/responsible bodies and deadlines for activity realization (University of Zagreb, 2007). We have not yet implemented all of the activities from the strategy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences mainly because of the financial and organizational constraints in the past 6 years, but number of goals stated in the strategy have already been accomplished. One of the most important activities of the University’s e-learning strategy is the establishment of the e-learning support centers on all member institutions.

By the year 2009, we have reached the fourth stage of the development regarding the institutional e-learning practice: the beginning of strategic thinking (Bates, 2007), which in our case meant that we realized that we have to establish a specialized and dedicated E-learning Support Center because part-time supporting the LMS and its users proved to be challenging at best, and sometimes even impossible (NB: “Part-time support” means that staff had to accomplish other tasks and duties not related to the e-learning, such as the maintenance of network infrastructure and administration of other general purpose servers).

While the bottom-up approach has served us well until now, we have to admit that it does not satisfy our future needs and plans, so we are trying to implement a more systematic, top-down approach, beginning with the establishment of the E-learning Support Center (ESC) in June 2013 (and full-time employment of at least two e-learning specialists) and continuing with the process of creating our own institutional e-learning strategy in November 2013.

Our 3 main goals can be summarized as follows: 1) establishment of permanent teacher education on new educational technologies by February 2014; 2) at least 80% of courses taught at our faculty should have their online equivalent by October 2014, and 95% goal should be achieved by October 2016; and 3) 50% of all online courses should be at Level 3, 30% at Level 2 and 20% at Level 1 by October 2015.

Conclusion

Although we have not always followed the appropriate or expected path to systematic LMS support, we have, nonetheless succeeded in nurturing the constant growth of end-user base, numbers of online courses and quality of teaching materials and activities. The future level of support provided by the newly established E-learning Support Center (ESC) will enable our teaching staff to re-evaluate their current e-learning practices and possibly help them to embrace or even develop new ways of using present and future educational technologies.

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