

Open Source: The Developer Speaks.

Michael Chalk interviews Martin Dougiamas.

Michael: Martin Dougiamas is the creator of a new learning management system (LMS) - known as 'Moodle'. He has described Moodle as an '...acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment .. [and] .. also a verb that describes the process of lazily meandering through something .. an enjoyable tinkering that often leads to insight and creativity'. Thanks again, Martin, for agreeing to an interview.

Martin: You're welcome!

Michael: You've come from a background in Computer Science and Education - how has this dual approach (also reflected in your description of the meandering acronym above) fed your enjoyment of both the technical and pedagogical aspects of online learning - the interface between the machine and human learning?

Martin: Oh, it's all very inter-related. Despite the unforgiving rules of computer code, the process of creating software is actually a very colourful, human activity filled with interpretation and multiple meanings. My interest has always been in the pragmatic applications of technology. I believe technology is useless unless people can grapple with it.

That's why our development community is deliberately framed as a learning community, within a Moodle site, what's more!

Michael: Only one year since you released Version 1.0, and there are reportedly 500 sites in over sixty countries using Moodle - you must be thrilled at such a rapid uptake? Could you tell us about the experience of discovering so many people interested in your work?

Martin: Those are just registered sites - there are actually many more sites out there than that - I see them in Google or coming in via referrer links. It's **amazing to see so many sites, it really is. I always knew I was onto a good thing, but to see others taking hold of Moodle and using it to power their own various dreams is really terrific.**

The largest user I know is using Moodle for 3700 courses and 18,000 students, which makes it comparable to the university where I started working on Moodle - it's a nice feeling to have come this far in such a short time.

Michael:... and what do you think has attracted so many users?

Martin: Well, being FREE helps. I also think the simplicity of the design attracts many who might find the alternatives quite complicated and a little daunting.

Michael: Moodle was recently rated very highly in an independent review of a full range of open source learning management systems (Rob Reynolds at Xplana.com) - did this review vindicate the many hours you've spent dedicated to the process?

Martin: Well, it's just one review of many, but yes, it was great to see that. From my perspective Moodle is still a baby ... I have big plans for it, but it's good to see that it is already competing so well against systems that have a much larger backing behind them.

Background

Michael: What first inspired you to build your own learning management system? Fed up with the corporate tools?

Martin: Indeed. I was working with WebCT (Web Course Tools), and got frustrated with not being able to customise it for our local environment, as well as seeing the frustration of teachers trying to use it for their classes. There had to be a better way, I thought.

Later I drifted into teaching myself and wanted to try all sorts of new things that the current tools couldn't do for me.

Michael: Your background is in higher ed., at Curtin University - you were the webmaster and manager of the WebCT systems - that must have been a great preparation for managing such a large development project as moodle.

Martin: Probably the best thing was the daily contact with a large variety of teachers using the system. I'd been supporting them in online education for years so I developed a pretty good idea of their needs and concerns. The best kind of support involves education, since it reduces the support you have to do later! The other way to reduce calls for help is to improve the toolset.

In fact, real development was minimal, since we were using WebCT we had to work with what we were given. Project management is something I learned later (and am still learning, obviously!) after being involved in a number of other open source projects.

Michael: Could you tell us something about the sort of content areas you've taught? Are you still teaching at all, and has all your teaching been entirely online?

Martin: I taught a course called Hypertext 212 at Curtin Business School. This was basically a crash course in web development for business undergraduates, taking them through conceptual understanding of how the web works and ending up with a group-developed web site.

Until recently I also co-taught a postgrad course called Constructivism, which as you might imagine is quite theoretical. This course was the context for a lot of Moodle development and my PhD includes case studies of these courses.

Nowadays, I'm teaching more than ever. All my teaching and moderation is within the Moodle community, ranging from very technical programming issues through to pedagogical issues. I also help a lot of clients who are using my hosting on Moodle.com.

Open source

Michael: Why did you choose to release your source code - to make your product 'open source', instead of creating a commercial product? Isn't open source just for geeks and hackers?

Martin: No - most of the Internet is running on open source programs (Linux, Bind/DNS, Apache, ssh etc). Open source is just a better way to write good software. For one thing you can take better advantage of the energy among your users to help you test and debug existing features, and to create new features.

Paying for bits just feels too wierd to me.

Finally, because people who are there really WANT to be there, the whole community is just so much more fun. A lot of people tell me they're finally having fun again just downloading and playing with Moodle code, and that's one of the most important things for me.

Michael: Have you found your users to be useful in developing new features, or finding bugs in the existing code?

Martin: Very much so...as long as the project is structured to receive their input. For example, I had to write the code that makes Moodle translatable, and set up the infrastructure to make translating relatively easy to get into. But once I did that, Moodle has blossomed into over 30 different language translations purely because of users donating their time. It's because of them that Moodle is as successful as it is today.

Pedagogy

Michael: You've written about the four underlying pedagogical pillars - constructionism, constructivism, the need for both connected and separate ways of knowing, and social constructivism. You developed this approach to learning and teaching while studying your Masters at Curtin (I think) - what factors led you along this path?

Martin: My mentor and friend Dr Peter C. Taylor deserves a big credit here. Much of this theory is due to his influence, sometimes directly through his recommendations but also indirectly by studying what he does in his courses. These ideas are those that most appealed to me for online learning, and have proven themselves as strong referents for action.

Michael: Whew - how do you keep your eyes on such a detailed pedagogical sense while developing the technical side of things?

Martin: Well, it's second nature to me. Once you are seeing things that way a lot of other ideas about education seem to fit the pattern, even if people presenting those ideas aren't using that terminology.

In practice, it informs technical development by helping with small decisions - for example, Should this screen do this or this? Well, which of the two methods is more active/ collaborative/ constructive/ connected?

and finally

Michael: What does the future hold for the moodle environment and the production team?

Martin: Recently, work on serious pedagogical features has had to take a back seat to some technical infrastructure work, and this will be continuing for the next six months at least. Moodle 2.0 will have some terrific new architecture that makes it even more attractive to systems administrators who need to mix Moodle with other systems (such as templates, wider database support, external control). Then I hope to return to some serious new work on new activity modules.

Moodle.com is my growing support company. My main aim for the near-term future is to be able to hire a small team of full-time programmers so that I can push development in a faster and more predictable way.

Michael: Thanks for your time and consideration, Martin!!

Martin: Cheers and thanks!

References

Moodle - open-source software for collaborative learning

- Free software, community, information: <http://moodle.org>
- Commercial support and other services: <http://moodle.com>
- Dougiamas' articles - <http://dougiamas.com/writing/>

Reynolds' review at Xplana.com -

http://www.xplana.com/whitepapers/archives/Open_Source_Courseware

Chalk FLL link - <http://prace.vic.edu.au/flex>