

# **Teaching Sensitive Issues: Can A Course Management Tool Provide A Means Of Peer Collaboration And Protection From Peer Pressure?**

[ <https://moodle.dcu.ie/>. Select education, then “RE for the Third Millenium”]

## ***1. Context of study***

This study took place over five weeks in the months of November 2003 –January 2004 during the Religious Education (RE) classes of a group of 24 third year students in a girls’ Catholic secondary school in Dublin. Research from Garvey (2002) suggests that online learning courses succeed better with younger classes and this is the youngest group which I teach. The pupils are mostly interested and enthusiastic but this is tempered by the fact that 70% of them have a reading age of less than their chronological age, only four of them have Internet access at home and very few of the pupils have adequate computer skills.

The online project had to run entirely during class time and this constraint was compounded by timetable restrictions regarding the computer lab: access there was possible on only two out of our three weekly timetabled meetings. Therefore this project took place during seven lessons over a four-week period. The remaining period each week included the viewing of a film ‘Holy Cross’, a dramatization of the conflict in Ardoyne, Belfast during 2001. Juxtaposing this with the Moodle project meant that the students would enjoy a multi-sensory experience of the tensions between the two communities in Northern Ireland (NI).

## ***2. Rationale of study***

A difficulty arose with the study of a chapter in the textbook (Quigley 2003) on sectarianism in Ireland (this is part of the syllabus: see Department of Education 2000) there was a lot of pupil interest accompanied by heated and bitter abuse of Britain and of the Unionist community. Subsequently a number of pupils complained about this. It emerged that they had close relatives in the UK and NI and a more nuanced understanding of the Troubles in NI than their peers. They were upset by the abusive comments.

### ***3. Question(s) or Research Focus***

It was thus necessary to find an alternative methodology that would accommodate collaboration so the pupils would be able to explore both sides of the problem without pressure from peers. The research question was formulated as follows: could a course management tool such as Moodle provide a collaborative environment, within which pupils' use of a webquest on NI could be monitored? It was planned that students would explore a webquest on NI and a professional colleague who is a native of the North would answer questions on a discussion board. I was anxious that students would come to understand the causes of the deep division affecting daily life in NI and would learn the importance of compromise.

Students were given a number of tasks over the four-week period:

- They answered pre-test questions on Northern Ireland
- They completed journal entries on their webquest findings
- They posted to two discussion boards, one where they could post questions to a colleague who had lived in the North, and an evaluatory one on the use of computers for project work.
- They participated in a chat room.

- They listened to an interview with Patricia highlighting similarities and differences between daily life North and South.
- They completed an interactive quiz to evaluate their learning.

#### 4. *Findings and Discussion*

##### **A: Computer usage**

In my planning I had overestimated the computer skills of the class group (see field diaries in appendix.) Yet once the students had learned how to use Moodle, it proved very successful as a course management tool and showed itself to be ‘a learning tool, enabling students to build their own knowledge base’ (Chidwick, 2002).

##### **B: Peer Collaboration**

The webquest required the students to write a journal in the persona of the character whom they had been assigned and to design and to present a PowerPoint presentation of their work. The student’s reluctance to write their findings in their Moodle journal was overcome by including it as part of their forthcoming Christmas exam. Peer collaboration was evident at all times. The groups into which they had been initially assigned changed over the course of the four weeks (partly due to the layout of the lab) but pupil interest and collaboration remained an outstanding feature of the project. I was pleasantly surprised by the extent that use of Moodle allowed for individual student-teacher discussion and promoted self-directed and self-paced learning (see also Cox and Webb 2004:43). This process whereby the use of webquests increases the students’ creativity, autonomy and level of productivity is reported in Benz (2001). This is also consistent with findings regarding the use of ICT in general (see for example Gill 2003, Kimble 1999:2).

Although the work was confined to class time, some students logged in from home, one of them for quite extensive periods of time. To facilitate this, I posted extra resources on Moodle.

### **C: External Collaboration**

The outstanding feature of this research project was the use, on completion of the webquest, of the asynchronous discussion forum where students could post questions to a professional colleague, Realtan, who is a native of Belfast. Student interest was overwhelming, with many pertinent questions posted and answers eagerly awaited. Realtan's postings, combined with the audio files of Patricia's interview showed how normal life in Northern Ireland resembles that of Dublin in many respects. The life narratives provided by Realtan and Patricia acted as very potent conduits of understanding as did the fictional narratives on the webquest (see Williams 2002 and O'Dea 1994). As the focus of this research was on lived experience, pupils participated in an asynchronous discussion rather than in designing the PowerPoint presentation. In any case the latter was beyond their skills. This correspondence brought a sense of reality to the webquest and led students to explore further web links that I had posted on Moodle.

Pupils evaluated this project in two ways: they posted to a discussion board on the use of the web in RE projects and they completed an interactive quiz containing twenty questions true/false questions on Northern Ireland. The very positive nature of the discussion postings demonstrate increased interest and motivation and the large number of high scores on the quiz show an increase in pupil knowledge. This positive evaluation was reinforced through informal discussion with the students.

## ***5. Conclusion***

Moodle is a package that is well suited to secondary school use as described here. Other applications for this context have been described by De Zwart (2004). I agree with Garvey (2002) that using a course management tool for distance learning in secondary education in Ireland would be much more problematic (see also Ryan, 2003, WebCt discussion). The original research can be answered positively as use of Moodle proved to be a successful alternative to traditional classroom teaching where peer pressure is evident when dealing with sensitive issues.

### ***6. What Was Your Own Learning?***

I learned that it is possible to use ICT to overcome peer pressure in a class, and that during a project of this nature, student collaboration and self-directed learning increased significantly. I also learned to persevere through technical difficulties. The chat session on Moodle was not successful both due to the slow speed of the connection, and also because the students understand chat as being designed exclusively for recreational rather than educational purposes. I also learned that designing and teaching online courses is very time-consuming.

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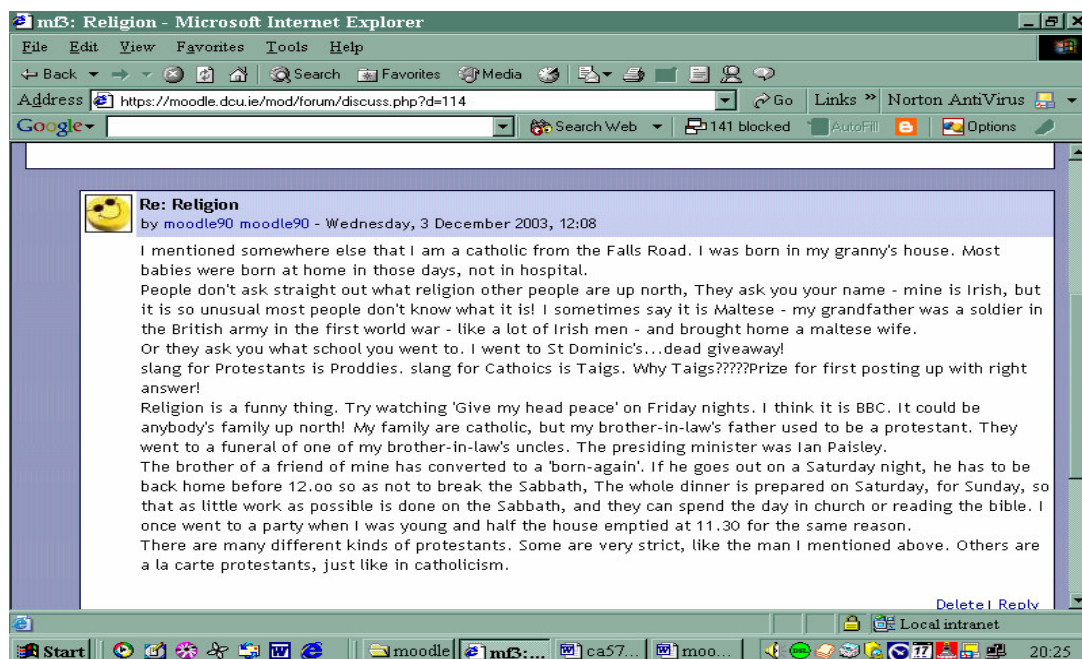
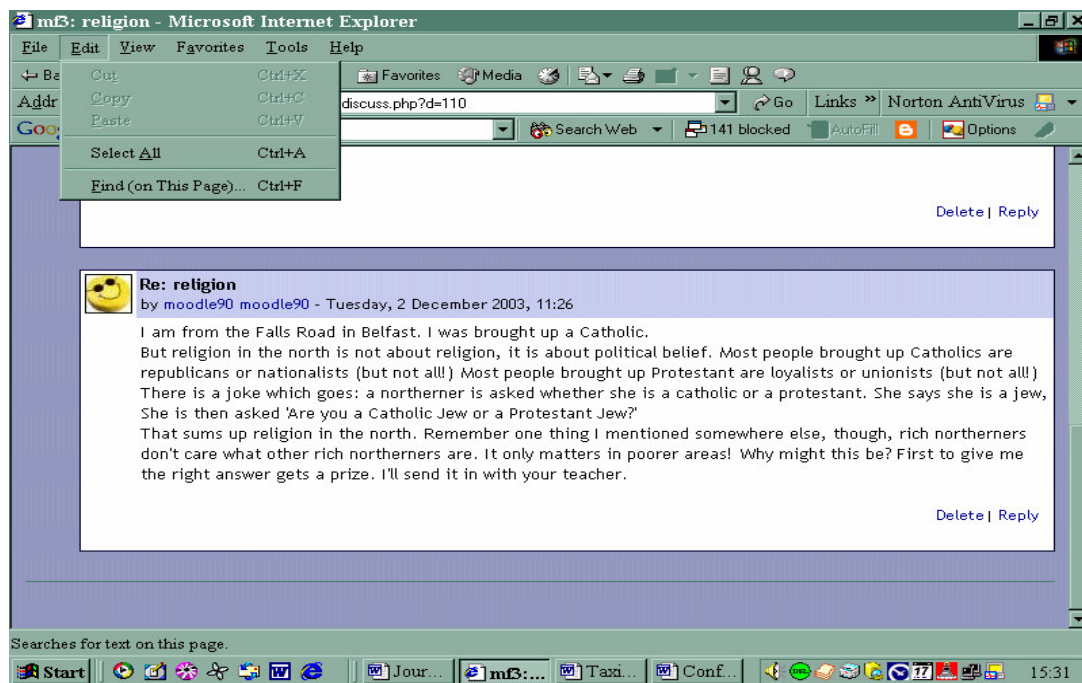
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## Appendix 2: Sample Discussion with Realtan on Religion.



#### Appendix 4: Quiz Results

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<b>Name</b>	<b>Attempts</b>	<b>Best grade /20</b>
Theresa	17	17
Janine	13,18,20	20
Sinead	12,14	14
Danielle	14	14
Laura Q	15,18,17	18
Shauna	14,16	16
Hayley	13,18	18
Emma C	15,18,20,20	20
Roisin	16,16,16	16
Aoife	20	20
Carleen	15,15	15
Laura F	17	17
Amada	20,20,20,20,20	20
Shereen	14,11,16	16
Melissa	16,17,19	19
Avril	13	13
Kiara	19	19

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## Appendix 5 First Diary Report

Logging into Moodle was very difficult

- 1) They did not know where and how to log in
- 2) User names and passwords baffled them
- 3) Edit profiles threw up a number of problems – email addresses: a lot did not have them, some logged in using mine, others made up some.
- 4) The lesson began at 1.30 and it was almost 2 pm before the first ones got to the questions in the journal. Class ended at 2.05 and seven of them recorded entries out of 24 – 2 were absent and the 2 pairs had to share pcs
- 5) Some asked if they could they log in at home

I started to despair at one point, but the students were very enthusiastic and did not get fazed. I praised their enthusiasm and thanked them. I had explained that I was doing a computer course to explore new ways of teaching using computers.

Tomorrow, Wed we will start the webquest properly. Pupils are already divided up into groups so it should proceed smoothly. It is vital that pupils get to record in their journals each day.

I am using Moodle to record and evaluate student learning on a sensitive subject – i.e.- Northern Ireland. They will use a webquest and record their learning each day.

## Second Diary Report

Second session took place in the lab this morning at 10.30. The following were noted

- Network is very slow which is causing frustration and a lack of work time
- Machines are old, very slow and every day there are some which will not log on
- Student ICT skills are generally very poor – for 15 out of 24 the total amount of their ICT usage is what they have done with me
- There are three challenges for the students in using ICT.
  1. Manipulating the pc: software and operating system (files, windows, finding windows on the taskbar) etc
  2. Navigating around Moodle – journals, editing them, assignments etc
  3. Grasping the concept of the webquest – their groups are exploring different aspects of the same reality.
  
- Students are very interested in the subject matter of the webquest and enjoy having classes on the computers, but because of the physical limitations and frustration I am afraid of losing their goodwill.
- This class group is by and large enthusiastic and co-operative, however ability levels are very low: in the school 70% of pupils have a reading age below their chronological age!
- Because of low ability levels and lack of pc experience, students need supplementary task sheets – e.g.- a detailed list of instructions was required to get them to the required area of Moodle. Once onto the webquest, they could not hold in mind the concept of the what was required for their task while they were looking up the sites in the webquest – I will have to do out a detailed task sheet for the next session explaining
  1. The idea behind a webquest – group work exploring different aspects of the same reality.
  2. The tasks required in the webquest journal – i.e.- write a journal from the point of view of the person
  3. This is collaborative group work.
  
- I am operating under a heavy time constraint: I have a maximum of six lesson periods in the lab before Christmas – I may not get them to do the PowerPoint aspect of the webquest.
- Input into Moodle is going to be very sparse because of the slowness of the machines, so I may give them questions to be done directly into Moodle.
- Several students had not brought the instruction sheets from yesterday and some had difficulty logging on.

## Third Diary Report

Six pupils were absent and another had a reprimand from the Principal. Several of them were quite subdued – it was first lesson after lunch and there had been a massive fight involving some. Consequently they were late up and most did not start work until almost 1.40.

They worked well today on the webquest – some have become very interested in the topic – Janine wanted to know if her character really existed and if a search on google would yield any more information. The weaker ones wanted to know when they would watch the video again! Two girls wrote today's work directly into their Moodle journal – a great breakthrough for me.

Tomorrow is my last Moodle lesson of the week, so I want to get the students to write into their journals what they have learned this week. This concentrates their resources on one thing at a time: most cannot manage Moodle and webquest simultaneously, although I think integrating the website into Moodle has helped here – the transition from one to another is quite seamless. These lessons take a lot of energy on my part.

To encourage journal entries, I think I will tell them that these will count towards a lot of their Christmas test, and use the grading facility of Moodle to do this.

I am not sure where to take it next week (or whenever they have finished their webquest).

1. Do I get them to progress and design a PowerPoint? Have I the energy and courage to do this? Have they the resources and concentration or will it put the weaker ones off computers together?
2. Will I implement some of the other features of Moodle such as a quiz, PowerPoint on the history of the north, discussion (q and a) with Realtan?
3. ?????

## **Fifth Diary Report**

I have just finished teaching my Moodle class and the following reflections come to mind:

1. The pupils have had five lessons up here: one spent logging into Moodle and the rest looking at the webquest. I feel that the webquest, while not complete is becoming exhausted, so it is time to look at other features of Moodle with the group. For example, when I told them the discussion forum I set up with Realtan there was some interest in it and although there were only five minutes to go, seven students out of the 20 accessed it. I was pleased with this... let's hope Realtan is able to access it.
2. The pupils are dividing out as follows:
  - Those who are almost finished the webquest questions and are becoming bored
  - Those who find this beyond them (managing windows and webquest and Moodle together): for example today, during lesson five of this, I had to demonstrate again on the data projector how you use a link to answer a question.
  - A middle group who are interested and enjoy poking around the webquest, but who lost some work because they saved it as file-save as, instead of save changes at the bottom of Moodle. As they were told that this would count towards their Christmas test, they are becoming frustrated and anxious. I will have to allow a minimal amount for this test – 10%.
3. It is time to expand other features of Moodle: I will set up two discussion boards to allow them to discuss
  - Using computers for RE
  - What they have learned about the North.
  - If I have time I will set up a quiz for them.
4. To wrap up the webquest, I will get each group to design one page in word with bullet points about what they have learned and hopefully compile this into a PowerPoint to be shared.
5. I will also have to reward them for their patience and co-operation: a box of sweets next week!

## Sixth Moodle Diary

At last I am starting to experience success. I made the right decision to wrap up the webquest and not do the PowerPoint - I may do that after Christmas for the first few sessions. It would have been a step too far for them and I am anxious to retain their goodwill.

Last night at home, two students logged in (out of five who have access at home) and completed work, one of them wrote in a discussion forum which I had set up for today. They are very enthusiastic about using the computers for project work. I am delighted with this.

Today I added a chat session, invited further questions for Realtan, and invited feedback on the use of computers.

The chat session was greeted with great enthusiasm and the students tapped away well. However, although they were meant to discuss topics, they got carried away and basically inputted a lot of rubbish. The synchronous dimension of this appealed to them. The network could not take it, not all could access it, download times were very slow and content very poor. In future I will avoid chat sessions.

Noticeboards work better - some of them were very interested in Realtan's session; they tend to focus the pupils more, avoid giddiness and are more work oriented.

Having Realtan answer questions has given this project another dimension - I am very grateful to her. She answered some questions at midnight, and again logged in immediately after the lesson. The girls are delighted with the feedback.

Some of the students have shown their parents at home: they are very favourably disposed to it.

What I think has happened is that the girls have now got used to Moodle and moving around it. In retrospect, if I had realized that their basic ICT skills were so low, I may not have attempted it.

I will bring them back for a final session next week and have them answer a quiz; input into the computer evaluation board and look again at Realtan's answers.

So far I am quite pleased.

A physical problem I have not mentioned is the size of the screens: when doing the webquest as part of Moodle, the active part of the screens is very small. also, I am typing now on a student pc - it has got very blurred and I can hardly read what I am typing.

## Session Seven Diary

Here are my reflections on my final moodle session this morning.

It went well and I was very pleased with it.

1. The quiz that I had spent over an hour designing was very popular. The pupils mostly scored quite high which pleased them. They admitted that they would not have scored as highly before the project (which is what I have been calling the Moodle work on NI), so I know that there has been productive learning over the past few weeks.
2. They are all now trained into Moodle, logged on without problem (again some girls persist in losing their passwords)... practice makes perfect.
3. The discussion with Realtan on the discussion forum has proven very popular – they are intrigued by a real native of NI who survived to tell the tale being interested in corresponding with them. It has given a new life and focus to the whole Moodle initiative and shows. They perceived this to be a great compliment to them: this interest from her really boosted their egos and has helped put flesh on what they have learning.
4. They inputted very positively into the discussion forum on computers.
5. Some of them were looking for the chat: I explained that the network couldn't take the traffic; they accepted that.
6. Motivation in the form of prizes tomorrow was applied.
7. A positive feature of this whole experience that I had not really expected was the self-directed and self-paced learning that took place. I had thought that normal classroom group-work dynamics would apply: they would work as a group, especially since they were divided into fives, with the possibility of some trying to doss. What actually happened, was that collaboration happened more informally – each helping her neighbour and each individually accessing material on the webquest, rather than full group work and reporting. I think this was because most of them had a terminal each, and the draw of the buttons and screen was too much to overcome for them.
8. In the post-webquest work, they worked individually, but again collaborated to a varying degree and followed their own paths of interest. It is interesting to reflect on the practical uses of the pc for mixed-ability teaching, and for mixed pass/hons classes. In this final session, there were few technical bugs for me to iron out: this allowed me to discreetly give each girl some individual attention as required. E-learning brings its own classroom dynamic.