Institute Moodle "Dos and Don'ts"

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The following is a set of "Dos and Don'ts" for using the Institute of Technology Moodle (http://moodle.insttech.washington.edu/) to host your classes. It is heavily biased toward what has worked well for me, having used Moodle for all the classes I have taught here (and many of the ones I taught at Caltech), but it may be useful to anybody who is using Moodle for their classes.

A look at some of my existing Moodle courses will provide an overview of the general structures I have used successfully. Note that I am not claiming any sort of inherent Moodle superiority for myself; I just don't know which courses taught by other instructors have had well-received Moodle components. Some of my recent courses are Autumn 2008 TCSS305 - Programming Practicum, Winter 2009 TCES230 - Introduction to Logic Design, Winter 2009 TCSS322B - Discrete Structures II, and TCSS498 - Verified Gaming/Verification-centric Software Engineering. The first three use Moodle's weekly format; the last, which as a 498 independent study is a "Research Projects" course (and is not localized to a particular quarter), uses Moodle's topics format. Others can be reached from my UWT Courses page. All should be accessible both by guests and by logged-in faculty members, with the exception of their forums and gradebooks.

Dos

General

- **Do** take advantage of Moodle's online help system. Almost every element on every configuration page has a little yellow question-mark-in-a-circle help icon, and the help text is generally clear and concise.

- **Do** ask me questions about using Moodle. I'm happy to help!

Course Construction

- **Do** feel free to create your own Moodle courses! There should be a button at the bottom of the category page for whatever category you want to create a course in, such as "Current Courses (Autumn 2009)", that says "Add a new course". Note that this button does not appear on the main categories listing page that you see when first entering Moodle; you must actually view a specific category page. If you don't see such a button when you view a category page, let me know and I will fix your permissions.

- **Do** follow the naming guidelines for Institute Moodle courses when you create them. Institute Moodle courses are always named "Quarter Year Course - Full Name of Course", such as "Autumn 2009 TCSS305 - Programming Practicum". There is no space between the department designator ("TCSS") and the course number. Institute Moodle course short names are always "QuYr-Course", where Qu is the quarter abbreviation ("Au", "Wi", "Sp", "Su"), Yr is the 2-digit year, and Course is as above; for example, "Au09-TCSS305". Institute courses do not have "Course ID number"s, so leave that field blank in the course settings. **Do** expect me to bring any course that does not follow these naming guidelines into compliance if I notice it... but please follow the guidelines anyway so I don't have to.

- **Do** place a brief summary in the "Summary" field of your course settings. This is displayed on the course listing page along with the summaries of all the other courses, so try to keep it small.
• **Do** choose the Sunday of week 1 of the quarter as your "course start date". For Autumn 2009, this is 27 September. Along the same lines, **do** include finals week in your "number of weeks" if you are using weekly format for your course; Autumn 2009 has 12 weeks including finals week, because week 1 is a half week.

• **Do** reuse material and structure from older Moodle courses when appropriate. If you have taught a course before and you want to import your own old assignments, notes, activities, etc., you can do so with the "Import" function in the Administration area of your course once it is created. If you want to import materials from somebody else's course (after getting their permission!) you have two choices: (1) ask them to provide you a course backup (a .zip file) of the materials, which you can then "Restore" the activities from (also in the Administration area), or (2) ask me to do the import for you.

**Organization**

• **Do** include an overall sense of your course organization on the front page of your course Moodle.
  - If you use weekly format, **do** include a brief description (maybe a few words, maybe a whole sentence or two) in each week's block of what will be done in class that week. You can of course change this as the quarter goes on, but having it there at the beginning gives students a sense of the course structure. I typically do this instead of putting a schedule into the syllabus.
  - Speaking of syllabi, **do** put the syllabus, any other course policy documents, and forums applicable to the entire course (News forum, General discussion if applicable) in the "week 0" box (above week 1) in weekly format or the "topic 0" box (above topic 1) in topics format.
  - If you use topics format, **do** include a brief description of each topic; having blank topics is just puzzling.

• **Do** strive for consistency in presentation. If in week 1 you have the homework assignment listed first and the lecture notes listed second, and in week 2 you have the lecture notes listed first and the homework assignment listed second, usability suffers; moreover, such inconsistencies contribute to a student impression that the course lacks organization. Obviously there may be exceptions to this rule; in general though, as with most things visual, consistency is good.

• **Do** give homework assignments, lab assignments, exams, quizzes, etc., their own pages (usually of activity type "Assignment"), even if you are not using Moodle's gradebook. For a written homework assignment that doesn't require any pictures or special formatting, **do** consider simply entering it into Moodle directly as text on the assignment page rather than uploading it as a Word or PDF file; this saves space and also integrates the assignment better with the rest of Moodle's appearance. A benefit of creating "Assignment" activities for your assignments is that you can set due dates for them, even if they will be submitted offline, and they will appear in Moodle's course calendar and in the upcoming events list.

• **Do** use hierarchical organization. For instance, if a homework assignment requires a bunch of supplementary files, put those on the homework assignment's page rather than on the main page to reduce clutter.

**Communication**

• **Do** use the News forum (one is created for every course, by default) to communicate with your students. It effectively functions as a course mailing list, but with easily-accessible archives. By default, the News forum forces everybody in the course to be subscribed forever; you should probably leave it that way.
• **Do** create a forum for general discussion (I usually call mine "General discussion"). In some classes this will be used heavily, and in others it will not be used at all; this depends very much on the particular students. Such a forum is a great venue for questions about assignments, concepts, etc. to be dealt with outside class for everybody at once, and for students to interact with each other outside class.

• **Do** enable the RSS feeds for your forums to allow more flexibility for students. I typically set "RSS feed for this activity" to "Posts" and "Number of RSS recent articles" to 10 for each forum.

• **Do** try to use Moodle's other communication-related modules, such as Survey and Wiki, in your course as appropriate.

**Grading**

• **Do** give Moodle's gradebook a try. In conjunction with Moodle's homework assignments, online quizzes, and other capabilities, it is a very easy way to compute the grades for your course; it also has the added benefit of notifying students when grades have been posted for them and allowing them to see all their grades in one place. Moreover, with the current version of Moodle, you can manually use the gradebook just like an Excel spreadsheet (and even export it to one), if you choose to... and students will still be able to see their own grades. While you cannot look at the gradebooks on any of the sample course Moodles I linked to above, I am more than happy to sit down with anybody who wants to see how I have set up Moodle to do some of my more complex grade calculations.

• **Do** read, or at least skim, the online help for Moodle's gradebook if you're going to use it. It is extraordinarily powerful, and has many options that you will want to know about before using. You may also wish to read the [Grades page on the MoodleDocs wiki](https://repos.insttech.washington.edu/trac/_faculty/wiki/MoodleDosAndDonts) for further information and tutorials about the gradebook.

• **Do** consider using Moodle to communicate students' final grades to them at the end of the quarter. Essentially, I create a Moodle "offline activity" assignment with a grade range from 0 to 40 that is not averaged in with the rest of the quarter's assignments, multiply each student's decimal grade by 10, and "grade" that assignment accordingly.

**Openness**

• **Do** make sure your course is visible on the first day of the quarter (the setting is called "Availability", and you want "This course is available to students"). There is little that frustrates students more at the beginning of a quarter than being directed to visit a website that, as far as they can tell, doesn't exist.

• **Do** enable guest access for your courses, at least after the quarter is complete. This can be done in your course settings, near the bottom in the "Availability" section; typically, the setting you want is "Allow guests without the key". Guest access is important because it allows other faculty members to view your course materials if, for instance, they are assigned to teach the same course or they are reviewing your teaching. By default, guests will not have access to view student discussion forums (for privacy reasons) or grades (for obvious reasons). If you have posted solutions to the course material and you want to hide them from guests, you can accomplish this by making them invisible after the end of the quarter. Less preferably, because students like having their old courses for reference, you can also make the entire course invisible after the end of the quarter. In either case, faculty will still see the course (though not the hidden items).

• **Do** use a enrolment key to restrict enrolment, if you're concerned about random people registering for your Moodle course (and thus showing up in the roster and gradebook). You
can always remove such people, but it's less hassle for you if they have to do a small amount of hoop-jumping to register.

**Don'ts**

Clearly, any action that is the opposite of one of the above **Dos** is a **Don't**. The following are additional **Don'ts** that are not implied by the above list.

**General**

- **Don't** use Moodle for things that aren't classes, if you can avoid it. Using it for directed research/directed readings classes is reasonable if you're going to be providing "course materials" for your students, but as a general research project website system, Moodle is rather suboptimal. You are much better off asking Stephen Rondeau for a Trac (like the one that served you this page), which will allow you to have an affiliated code repository, a much better Wiki than Moodle's, and other nice features such as ticket tracking. The Institute Moodle does not have a whole lot of disk space available to it, and the more non-class projects live on it, the more quickly it will run out of space.

**Communication**

- **Don't** abuse the News forum. Students do not appreciate tons of email about your class, but one message every once in a while to update them on a homework assignment, correct an error made in class, remind them of an upcoming exam, etc. is generally considered OK.

- **Don't** force students to be subscribed to any forums other than the News forum, as doing so tends to make them really angry. I typically set "Force everyone to be subscribed?" on my general discussion and other non-News forums to "Yes, initially", at which point students can opt out if the message volume starts bothering them.

**Access**

- **Don't** assume that students know where the Institute Moodle is. Always give them the URL - [http://moodle.insttech.washington.edu/](http://moodle.insttech.washington.edu/) - on the first day of class (along with your enrolment key, if applicable). I also send this information to the students using the automatically-generated mailing lists that MyUW provides for classes; that is typically the **only** email I send on those mailing lists for an entire quarter, as I use Moodle for all subsequent communication.

- **Don't** require guests to use an enrolment key to see your course after you enable guest access. This annoys not only external guests, but also internal colleagues who need access to your course material... especially if you don't provide the key anywhere outside the course material itself!