Analyzing and enhancing the image and content of online courses for non-Finnish students and non-Finnish courses at TAMK and amk.fi portal.

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ABSTRACT

Using the Internet to augment e-learning has become a trendy development in modern education. It is becoming increasingly more popular and important for schools and institutes to deliver flexible and usable e-learning (education through the Internet) opportunities for their students. The main advantage to the online education is the possibilities to interact electronically with other students and teachers using chat rooms, discussion boards and forums. TAMK has chosen Moodle for its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This text focuses on how the image and content of the non-Finnish courses available at TAMK and the amk.fi portal could be improved to better serve the students who do not speak nor study in the Finnish language. One of the most important factors of succeeding at online education is to guarantee that the image is appropriate for a learning atmosphere and maneuverable and easy to understand by the students and the instructors.

Keywords: e-learning, Moodle, Virtual Learning Environment, non-Finnish, image, students
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1. Introduction

Using the Internet to augment e-learning has become a trendy development in modern education. It is becoming increasingly more popular and important for schools and institutes to deliver flexible and usable e-learning opportunities for their students. The main advantage to online education is the possibilities to interact electronically with other students and teachers using chat rooms, discussion boards and forums. TAMK has chosen Moodle for its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This text focuses on how the image and content of the non-Finnish courses available at TAMK and the oncampus.fi (AMK) portal could be improved to better serve the students who do not speak nor study in the Finnish language. The image is solely one of the most important issues of designing and creating an online learning platform. If the image and content are not understandable or pleasing to the eye, the students and instructors will not be able to use it to their advantage.

When TAMK first started creating and providing online courses for their students, they used WebCT. This was in 1999 (Tirronen 2006: 16). Eventually after some issues and feeling the need to update and create new and improved courses, TAMK had Moodle installed into their own server in 2003. This has opened and broadened the possibilities for online courses to further develop at TAMK enormously.
1.2. Methodology

This study has been conducted at the TAMK University of Applied Sciences for the non-Finnish students and the students participating in the non-Finnish programs in Tampere, Finland. The two main areas this was directed at were to the BBA (Bachelors of International Business Administration) and the ENVE (Environmental Engineering) programs. Exactly fifty-three students participated in this survey with eagerness offering valuable insights on how they perceive the significance of online learning. The other outlook offered by the students who participated in this questionnaire was on how the courses could be improved, why and what other courses they hope the school could offer at some point in their curriculum changes.

1.3. History

The idea and creation of online courses were first introduced in the early 1970’s hoping to persuade the world that it is possible to learn in many different ways. In 1971, Ivan Illich, an Austrian philosopher and an anarchist social critic, imagined a world where people could learn anytime, anywhere. He imagined a world where people, not only students, could learn from each other, not only from appointed experts and teachers. He imagined a world where information would be readily available all the time – in cafes and restaurants, hospitals, schools, railway stations, work places and any other public and private place (Illich 1971). The quest for expanding the possibilities and opportunities to learn was becoming increasingly. Universal education through schooling is not feasible or possible for everyone. The current search for new educational funnels: educational webs, which allow the opportunity for everyone to transform each moment of their living into one of learning, sharing and caring. This has been achieved by the creation and public usage of the internet and World Wide Web. Students are responsible for their learning by managing their time, using their skills and keeping up with the studying and assignments (Fogarty 1997: 91).
1.4. Online Learning Platforms

The definition of a learning platform is based on three objectives. A ‘learning platform’ is a term covering a variety of different products, all of which support an on-line element portraying something that is to be learned in some way. There are three main tools that form a learning platform. Those three tools are undoubtedly the most important factors of the outlook of an online learning platform.

Content is the main tool. This enables the delivery of electronic learning content whether this content is written by the owners (say for example TAMK) or a commercial designer and engineering program (for example Moodle).

Communications is a tool that supports all the communicating done for the online learning platform such as discussion boards, chat rooms, emails, assignment posts, group work, and contact from instructor to student.

Management is the tool that includes a system that supports the management of the teaching and learning process such as formative or summative assessment or tracking of progress throughout the duration of the online learning term (Magoulas & Chen 2006: 47).

There are three main terms to describe the online learning platforms and they are commonly known as:

- The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- The Managed Learning Environment (MLE), and
- An Intranet or Portal

The differences between those three are minimal but important. A VLE is a combination of the three tools mentioned above; content, communications and management. This is what Moodle is. It supports the range of learning processes from a traditional classroom use; to off-line, to distance learning
and online learning. An MLE is a system designed to assist teachers in the management of online courses. It usually includes access control, the provision of e-learning content, communication tools and administration of user workgroups. It incorporates a VLE and Management Information System (MIS). An Intranet or Portal based platform is a site that is controlled and normally produced by an organization. Some organizations do not allow access to the internet to download selective information for learners to use on their intranet. One example is how an intranet system is highly used in prisons and correctional facilities to encourage flexible learning but to limit and restrict access to the Internet (Magoulas & Chen 2006: 50).
2. Why Moodle?

‘Using a virtual learning environment to promote learning and communication,’ Moodle stands for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. When thinking of the importance and availability of education and communication, Moodle creator (Martin Dougiamas) who created Moodle based on social constructive pedagogy, came across an obstacle that left him with the equation: Global Education vs. Classroom Education (Why Moodle? 2008). Global Education won and he focused on creating the most appropriate system that would and does enable students, teachers, parents and advisors to know exactly what is going on, all the time. The idea behind this platform that TAMK has been using now for many years is to create global collaboration, critical thinking skills and social constructivism. Moodle is also known as Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (How Moodle Works 2007).

2.1. What can Moodle do?

Moodle opens the access to worldwide information with teacher/supervisor control. It can differentiate learning and accommodate multiple learning styles and create communication and collaboration channels. Moodle has a variety of tools that can assist in many forms of teaching, learning and creating. Not only do the social networking tools assist in many ways, they are information platforms for many classes. The blogs and journals can be posted publicly or privately, the chat tools allow for teacher and peer tutoring and synchronous collaborating. The forums are meant for questions, parent information areas, peer-to-peer communication (blogs, reports) and teacher-to-teacher communication (How Moodle Works 2007).

2.2. Why should and why does TAMK use Moodle?

TAMK is using the Moodle platform for their online learning services to promote and smooth the channel of collaboration and communication amongst students and teachers of all ages, ethnicities, locations and degree programs. It
meets the NETS (National Educational Technology Standards) and ISTE (International Society for Technology and Education) standards (ISTE 2004). It is easy to customize so our TAMK Moodle is not exactly the same as other schools. It is readily available for any institution to install in their own individual school owned and organized servers, which TAMK did in 2003.

NETS (National Education Technology Standards) for students which Moodle closely complies with are: Creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration, research and information fluency, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making, digital citizenship, technology operations and concepts (ISTE 2004).

2.3. Online Course Participants

This past year while participating in studies at the TAMK University of Applied Sciences a large amount of students chose to do a portion of their credits online in 2008. We notice a large increase in the online course participants from the year 2007 to the year 2008. In year 2007: 115 applications were placed through the amk.fi portal. In year 2008 there were 383 applications (363 applications were approved). These applications are made by TAMK students to other polytechnics online courses (Honkanen 2.2.2009, interview).
3. Survey Questions and Responses

3.1. Question 1

What program are you studying in here at TAMK?

35 students who answered this questionnaire which was run through the TAMK’s email system in May of 2008 are from the BBA (Bachelor’s of International Business Administration) program and 18 of these students are from the ENVE (Environmental Engineering) program. The questionnaire received 53 responses in total out of which 40 were female and 13 male. TAMK offers 40 studying slots each year for the International Business program and 30 studying slots are offered for application for the Environmental Engineering program.

3.2. Question 2

What type of student are you? (Exchange student or degree student)

TAMK offers a large amount of space for international students to come as exchange students to come and study in their English programs. Some of them come just for a semester and some stay a year or longer. Out of the respondents to this questionnaire, four of the students who answered are exchange students and 49 degree students. TAMK is known for its internationalism and the amount of foreign students in this school is magnificent. The Bachelors of International Business portrays its program very well when almost half of the selected students are non-Finnish, thus giving the internet education for non-Finnish students and speakers at TAMK a good audience with their willingness to participate.
3.3. Question 3

What is your native language?

![Pie chart showing native languages]

3.3.1. Figure 1.

This is very clear at describing the vast majority of ethnic groups and diversity we have at TAMK. This gives us a picture as to how important a common language (English) is for our studies. The majority of these degree students studying in English are Finnish. 64%. Nine percent are native English speakers, seven percent Russian, six percent Chinese, four percent German and four percent as French and two percent for Swahili, Bulgarian and Amharic (Ethiopian).

3.4. Question 4

Are you familiar with TAMK’s or any other universities online courses?

Everyone who answered this question had at least heard of the opportunity to participate in online courses although only 73% had actually participated in them.
3.5. Question 5

Have you participated in any of TAMK’s or any other universities online courses?

According to 73% of the respondents to the questionnaire, they have participated in some online course, whether it was in TAMK or another online university. There would be a larger percentage than that if there were enough interesting courses available for participating in. Later on in this thesis it will become evident why some take the online courses and why some do not.

3.6. Question 6

What courses have you taken virtually?

A semi-large range of courses are offered in English in the TAMK and AMK online portals. Though the courses available are not necessarily any other than necessary module-related courses, the ones mentioned in the table below are the ones that the students here in TAMK did participate in, the percentage of participants (the percentage taken from the total number of 53 respondents to the questionnaire) and their overall rating of how the course worked. Below the table you will find a list of reasons and the generalization they made for why it was good, okay or needs improvement. Most of this information was voluntary. When asked what courses students have taken, most of them were more than happy to share their opinions and thoughts about the course. The problem so far has not been ‘image’ so to say. Moodle does a fine job of keeping their online platforms organized and appealing for usage. The problem is mostly the content and lack of instructor participation.
3.6.1. **Table 1.** This table is a description of the courses that the students at TAMK have taken part in. The percentages are the amount of students who have taken these courses. The overall rating is their opinion and feeling about the course, how it worked and how much the content assisted them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course name</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
<th>Overall rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing module courses</td>
<td>82 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge management</td>
<td>80 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business plan</td>
<td>74 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced scorecard</td>
<td>74 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business game</td>
<td>71 %</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business logistics</td>
<td>71 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic marketing</td>
<td>67 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental engineering</td>
<td>61 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial innovation</td>
<td>54 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing for websites</td>
<td>51 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific methods</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial process</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental management</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic management</td>
<td>49 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and environment</td>
<td>42 %</td>
<td>Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste management</td>
<td>32 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English grammar</td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>27 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>Okay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can clearly see from the table above, a large percentage of students did participate in these courses, especially the ones that are related to the professional studies. The courses that needed improvement were; Transport and Environment, Strategic Management, Scientific Methods, Writing for websites, Electronic Marketing, Balanced Scorecard and all of the Marketing Module online courses. The reasons that students gave for needs of improvement were: not enough teacher to student contact (virtually or physically), unclear rules and guidelines, unfair grading, irrelevant content unrelated to the exam, poor evaluation from the supervising teachers, the ability and willingness to cheat was escalating due to lack of interest and laziness and problems with other students copying answers and not doing the work on their own.
The courses that were given the passable evaluation of ‘okay’ were; Knowledge Management, Business Plan, Business Logistics, Environmental Engineering, Commercial Innovations, Industrial Process, Environmental Management, Waste Management, Economics and Statistics. The reasons that they were ‘okay’ is because of the fact that the teacher was semi-helpful and made an effort to reply to emails and the endless questions, the course material was interesting and the exam actually had quite a bit to do with the course material and assignments completed during the course. Grading was deemed fair and evaluation techniques were explained which gave the students a clear idea as to what was expected of them for the duration of the course.

The ‘good’ courses as listed above were; English Grammar and Business Game. Not too many but at least there are some. The reasons these were ‘good’ were because of the few factors that really do help students; contact with the teacher whenever needed, good feedback, fair grading and interesting content. More of these courses are needed and wanted by the student clientele here in TAMK and later on you will see what sort of courses the students would like to see added to the list of available online courses in English here at TAMK.

Overall the variety of courses that are offered online here at TAMK and also on the amk.fi portal is growing. Since this school offers numerous programs in English it is important for students to be offered appropriate and degree related courses that will benefit them fully. It is easy to take the online courses just for the credits, but the main goal here is to benefit from them and use them to the school’s and student’s greatest advantage, hoping that more of the modules here at TAMK would and could incorporate more courses that closely and solely relate to the topic at hand.

For example, the logistics module, which is one of the four modules here in the degree program of International Business at TAMK is very popular, very detailed and students who participate in it are very fortunate to be given that
opportunity to learn and practice as much as they do. The one thing is, while
taking part in the logistics, there are many hours every week of in-classroom
lectures and lessons. It is the wish of some of the students that perhaps some
of the logistics courses could somehow be incorporated into the Moodle
platform to allow more independent study and a student’s own speed to study.

3.7. Question 7

Part 1: What kind of online courses have you participated in?

3.7.1. Figure 2. The figure above gives us a clear picture as to what form of
classes the students here in TAMK have participated in. The options available
are Professional studies in which 37% partook in, Basic Studies was 33%
total participants and the Free-choice studies included 30% total participants.

Professional studies are vital for the degree programs, for example, the
Marketing Module consists of numerous different courses online that are a
large portion of your degree studies. The free-choice studies are beneficial
being that everyone who participates in TAMK is required to accumulate at
least ten free-choice credits. The online courses have proven to be a great
alternative for students to fulfill their free-choice required credits. The basic studies are regular studies that can be included in the degree credits.

Part 2: Which university did you do your online course with?

![Pie chart showing participation in online courses]

3.7.2. Figure 3. The figure above shows us that 76% of the students who answered the questionnaire have participated in TAMK’s online courses but at the same time possibly in AMK’s as well. There were seven percent who did participate in AMK’s online courses and a total of 17% didn’t participate in any online courses at TAMK or AMK during the year 2008.

With the hope of increasing the online course participants, TAMK and AMK are working together to encourage the online learning potential. With the creation of possibly more courses of a larger variety, that might help. Students nowadays don’t necessarily do anything ‘extra’. They focus on the minimum amount of credits, make that their goal and strive for it. They don’t bother with online courses unless it will benefit their studies and their degree.
3.8. Question 8

What have you liked about the online courses? Why?

3.8.1. Table 2. This table below shows the most popular benefits to taking online courses as a busy student. The number of nominations is taken from the number of respondents to the questionnaire, which was fifty-three.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Pros (Advantages)</th>
<th>Number of Nominations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Flexibility in schedule</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Saves time on travel/no parking problems</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Convenience to work anywhere/anytime</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Easy to access material, no libraries needed</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Learn new technology, improves internet skills</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Can take time doing work, no pressure like in class</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Easy credits</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Freedom to go to work as much as necessary</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Can review class material as needed</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Reduces stress, no being late for classes</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Saves money on gasoline/childcare</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>No worries about what to wear to school</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Avoid boring or unpleasant classmates</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Nominations</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above chart shows the thirteen most popular reasons for participating in the online courses vary from flexibility to no class time. Students nowadays are very busy outside of school working, extra-curricular activities, sports and so the ability to manage studies and personal/social life have been made possible by the invention and creation of online courses.
3.9. Question 9

What haven’t you liked about the online courses? Why?

3.9.1. Table 3. The table below shows the ten most popular reasons why online courses don’t work very well. Once again, the number of nominations comes from the number of respondents to the questionnaire which was fifty-three.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Cons (Disadvantages)</th>
<th>Number of Nominations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lack of face-to-face, personal or social contact with other people</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Technical problems, or fear of technical problems</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Technical skills required, computer literacy a must</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Too many distractions at home</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lacks the feeling of a 'school life'</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>You have to type everything</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Team activities online are too hard to manage</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Physical problems: headache, stiff neck and back</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Requires access to the internet</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Too time consuming</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Nominations</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As apparent as it is from the above table, the toughest part of participating in online courses is the fact that a student’s social life can slowly dwindle and their time spent with computers increases ten-fold. The lack of teacher/students mentorship and assistance is sometimes one of the most difficult aspects when turning towards online education. Some students don’t appreciate online courses due to this reason, whereas some like the online courses but feel they need the support from the teacher. One of our biggest problems here at TAMK is the lack of teacher and student contact lessons while participating in an online course.
3.10. Question 10

What of the following subjects would you like to participate in, as an online course, in a foreign language (English)?

3.10.1. Figure 4. This figure shows us the types of courses that students would like to have offered at TAMK and/or AMK.

Event Management, Environmental, Design (Advertising outlook), Structural Engineering, Art, Languages, Finance, Government and Law, Business related (more than we have), Mathematics, Cultural and Computer/Technical related studies. These are all courses that have been expressed by students as very interesting and relevant to what they are studying. If more of these kinds of courses could be offered, they guarantee more of the students would be participating in online courses.
3.11. Question 11

What kind of online courses do you wish TAMK or another university would offer?

For students to really benefit from online courses, it is very important that they take an interest and fully commit to the rigors of online learning. Some of the issues being dealt with are the facts relating to students not being interested enough in what TAMK and amk.fi have to offer. They feel that they are just a necessity to get simple and easy credits without going to class. The classes that were nominated as the ‘what we would like’ are the following: Finnish for Foreigners, Swedish, English (more than there is right now), more technological courses for building websites, using SAP/ERP programs, Arts and Media, Mathematics, Accounting, Corporate Finance, Event Management and Law and European Union courses. These eleven ideas were from students who usually need these types of courses for their professional studies and feel that they would benefit from them just as well if not better in an online form of learning than the actual classroom teaching. Some of these courses are not even part of the TAMK curriculum but students have the hopes to install more variety to their learning possibilities and options.

3.12. Question 12

Have you had good or bad experiences while participating in online courses?

The voting majority who participated in this questionnaire have said that their online course experience overall has been good and they have also offered the insight as to how to make the experiences even better.
3.12.1. **Figure 5.** The majority of students who have participated in classes at TAMK and with AMK have generally had a good experience. Some of them chose to let us know that they have had both good and bad experiences, or been unsatisfied with the way the courses have been constructed.

3.13. **Question 13**

Has there been good contact with course advisor while participating in online courses?

![Pie chart showing contact with online course supervisor]

- Yes: 28%
- No: 26%
- Don't know: 28%
- 46%
3.13.1. Figure 6. As apparent in the above figure, the amount of contact with supervising teachers of the online courses has not met the satisfaction of the students.

As seen in the figure above, a pie chart of students letting us know if the contact with supervising teacher has been plentiful enough and no it has not. The biggest concern right now is trying to figure out how teachers can find enough time and interest to fully participate in the online courses that they are supposed to be running and managing. It is quite difficult for students to appreciate these opportunities such as online course possibilities when they feel as though they are left to fend for themselves with no or not enough assistance from the supervising teacher.

A message board, a blog, a constant email circulation, or even individual emails from teacher to student could offer very valuable feedback during the course to give ideas how things are going and how they could be better. Normally with how things are going now at TAMK during the online courses, the teacher opens the course with a general email, stating when it starts, ends, a few simple rules and the ‘key’ or ‘password’ that is needed to access the course on Moodle. After that email, the students have directions on Moodle that give brief instructions on how to begin and what the course entails. Then a few cycles and evaluations from the students to other students, the exam time rolls around. The exam is done and the students know how they did from checking their grade from Winha Wille.

This is not a very good example of how some of the courses here at TAMK have gone. The online education possibilities are endless and the opportunities plentiful, so why don’t we make the most of it and improve where things need to be improved! Absolutely none, or very little evaluating, support, feedback or acknowledgement from the online course teacher or supervisor makes students feel unimportant and their motivation to excel academically decreases by a large percent (Blake & Standish 2000: 92).
3.14. Question 14

What would you like to change about the way online courses are organized, if you could change something?

This answer was responded in a very generous manner giving lots of valuable feedback and ideas that will assist in the planning of future online courses and their content. First and foremost, the main subject of importance in this matter is that the ability for the supervising teacher to maintain contact throughout the duration of the course. It has been very difficult for many students to feel that they are even on the right track when their emails go unanswered, no evaluations are clearly made by the teacher and there are not contact lessons with the actual teacher. So the number one change that students here at TAMK are striving for regarding the online learning courses is the contact with students needs to be increased ten-fold.

The next matter that was discussed openly and widely is the fact that the Marketing module, as interesting as it is, is not necessarily great as online courses. Marketing could be much more interesting if it was taught in the classroom with hands-on experience and real-life lectures of experiences, techniques, styles, examples and help from the teacher. The main reason people do take the marketing module is because it is mainly online courses which makes their schedule and school life much more lenient. The overall rating of the Marketing module has been poor due to the fact that the courses are more interesting and valuable in real-life, the feedback is minimal and grading unfair and it hasn’t felt to be of any benefit to the students for as soon as their online course is finished, they forget what they just did.

One factor about the online courses is that nobody usually has any idea how to work the Moodle platform when they start the online course. It seems as though a popular vote to have an introductory course to Moodle would help the students benefit from the online courses so much more. One student had been explaining how he figure out how to work it, shared his knowledge with
the other students so they too could finish their assignments and tasks online and then finally felt they were able to participate fully in the course. Isn’t that the duty of the school to familiarize the students with the way the platform for online learning courses works?

It would be nice if it could be possible to re-organize the Moodle platform to make it impossible for students to see each other’s answers and make it difficult to copy other answers to their own posts. These are a few of the main concerns the students here at TAMK have expressed. They feel that the online courses will be much nicer, interesting and secure if their wishes were listened to and perhaps taken into consideration.
4. Online Learning in TAMK and AMK

Only four out of the 53 who responded have participated in the oncampus.fi portal’s courses. That number would definitely increase if more students were aware that it is an option. Students have mainly taken courses that are related to their professional studies and module based courses such as: Knowledge Management, Balanced Scorecard, Business Plan and Electronic Marketing. A few have also taken basic courses and free-choice courses. At the moment there are very few online courses offered in English that are related to the Environmental Engineering line which quite a few foreigners are enrolled in. We were given a very long list of what kind of courses people would be interested in and would like to be included in, if they were to be offered by TAMK or AMK.

4.1. Pros (advantages) of Online Learning

Online courses are popular to a certain degree because of the valuable factors that play a big part in how students juggle their home, working and school life schedules. The University of Applied Sciences in Tampere has been focusing on how to improve this part of their curriculum trying to cater to the needs of the students in today’s busy world. The students readily let us know what they feel are the most important aspects to online learning, not only the fact they are learning, but the bonus’ that come with independent studying. In this case, referring to the questionnaire that was run through TAMK, the top fourteen reasons for participating in online courses is because of the following:

- No certain schedule
- Convenient
- Flexible
• Easy access to the course material, and easy to fulfill course requirements when one has access to a computer that has the Internet

• Students can work in peace and quiet and at their own pace

• Students have the option to do the course work during their own time, not necessarily having to stay at school

• The possibility to work around other busy schedules is a great bonus

• Freedom from the classroom

• Easy credits

• Able to study and stay on top of the course even if you travel out of Tampere

• Linguistically favorable by foreigners

• Short-term courses

• Clear deadlines

It is good to do stuff online so the school day isn’t always taken up with only sitting in classroom and the fact that the more a person uses computers, the more comfortable with them they become and the more their technological skills advance.

In this case, all the popular reasons stated in this thesis are in a positive form. The students were happy about the online courses offering these issues. Online courses are welcomed, appealing and positive. This is the optimistic view on online learning. It is all related to a students personal values, priorities and preferences.
4.2. Cons (disadvantages) to Online Learning

For reasons already mentioned in previous charts, graphs and tables, there are reasons why these online courses do not benefit the students and their studies as much as they would like, nor as much as the intended purpose of online courses is meant to be beneficial. The reasons are listed below:

- Not enough or no contact from teacher running the course
- No feedback: positive or negative
- Implementation is poor and unsuitable for learning efficiency
- Boring choices, nothing interesting to take, useless selection of courses
- Learn more from classroom teaching as online courses are not motivational
- No inspiration or guidance from the teacher
- Too much tedious work and hardly anything learned
- Increased freedom causes laziness
- Some of the online courses should be taught in classroom and vice versa
- Ridiculous exams (need to memorize book in order to pass)
- Online exams are always cheated on
- Hard and unfair grading by the teachers, some who never seems to be around or helpful
- Communication problems
- Students should not be required to do group work online (very difficult)
• The supervisor should be in touch with students to let them know he/she is available and willing to help.

Unclear rules and poor assessment of moodle platform, teacher not in contact enough as promised to be, inadequate information and useless information flow through online courses, cheating is a problem, evaluation not fair, online courses always pushed away while immediate homework gets attention, struggle to do all the work at the end to finish in time and then no learning is accomplished anyway, very few courses offered, balanced scorecard is pointless and taught very poorly, new platform structure is needed, easy to cheat and copy other students work since teacher doesn’t seem to notice anyway, dependable on internet connection, teachers don’t know how to help students, more contact with teacher.

4.3. The image of online-learning platforms

The image of online learning platforms is very important for the success of an online course. In order for students and instructors to be able to use it, it should be nice, neat, bold but not too flashy, organized, clean, simple but full and easy to maneuver from one place to the next. The image of online courses here at TAMK gives us a close look at Moodle and how it works.
4.3.1. **Figure 7.** This is a screen shot of how the Moodle-Learning Environment of TAMK looks like physically. When speaking of ‘image’ this page is very important. It is also simply organized so students and instructors alike can navigate through the system with few or no problems.

Moodle is an international online platform and thousands of universities do use it. The wonderful thing is that it can be catered to each school and program to make it more personal and individual. If a person were to use the Moodle platform at TAMK and then go to the main university and access their Moodle platform, it will look different and work differently. If your username and password are accessible for one platform, it won’t work for another school’s platform.
5. The importance of Teacher Presence

The importance of ‘teacher presence’ in online learning environment is vital to the students interest and overall success in the course. This has been analyzed before by professors at the Rochester Institute of Technology Online Learning Department. This analysis on teaching presence has been conducted through surveys by Peter Shea, the director of SUNY Learning Network (SLN) which is based out of the State University of New York. Shea conducted a survey in the spring of 2003 and found that the students who had participated in courses where the instructors were fully participating as well, with discussions, weekly feedback and comments to the students, were much better at drawing a larger amount of students each semester. They were better at keeping the students on task and focusing discussions on specific lecture material and issues. Students reported learning a lot in these courses, and their testing grades course evaluations proved that the behavior of the teacher matters a lot (Teaching Presence 2003).

Teaching presence is the facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes. In a learning center, having the teacher in place whether physically in a classroom or virtually, has proven to be more motivating for the students and creates an overall successful accomplishment of the course (Teaching Presence 2003).

Class community and teaching presence can be expressed in an online course in the following ways:

1. Instructor and students
   - Connectedness
   - Building social/group spirit
   - Establishing trust
• Learning

• Engaging in supportive contact and interaction

• Sharing educational expectations

2. Instructional design and organization (by the instructor)

• Setting the curriculum

• Designing methods

• Establishing time parameters

• Utilizing the medium effectively

• Establish Netiquette (or net etiquette refers to etiquette on the internet. Good netiquette involves respecting others’ privacy and not doing anything online that will frustrate or annoy other people (Definition of netiquette 2008)).

3. Facilitating Discourse/Interaction (by Instructor and Students)

• Identifying areas of agreement and disagreement

• Seeking to reach consensus

• Reinforce student contributions

• Setting climate for learning

• Drawing in participants, prompting and encouraging group discussions and more interaction virtually and physically.

• Assessing the efficacy of the process

4. Direct instruction (by Instructor and Students)

• Present and up-to-date content and questions
• Focus the discussion on specific issues

• Confirm understanding with feedback forms

• Diagnose misconceptions and problems, giving guidance on where to focus on next

• Inject knowledge from diverse sources

There is a relationship between teaching presence and the development of working together with the students in online learning environments (Online environment Shea 2003). The more the teacher is included and facilitating the course, the stronger sense of community is gained by the students.
Table 4. Below is a table that gives ideas and suggestions to instructors and online course planners, as to how to improve the relationship between the student and the instructor, being that the lack of teacher contact and feedback is one of the biggest issues concerning why students are not willing to participate in online courses here at TAMK.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>STRATEGIES</th>
<th>SUGGESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building social/group spirit</td>
<td>Personal information about the instructor, including a photo (the students feel they know you better)</td>
<td>Model expected student behavior in the Meet Your Classmates’ section with the profile of the instructor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talk or at least greet students when and if you see them, they will know the face behind the computer screen somewhat better and respect ‘the face’ more.</td>
<td>Create a learning platform that includes the possibility for chat rooms, discussion forums, instant messaging and email lists for the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contact students before the beginning of the course, making them feel welcome and let them know that they are a valuable part of the course.</td>
<td>Create a section on the platform entitled Instructor Assistance’, ‘Peer Assistance’ and Student to student discussions’ as well as Instructor to student’ discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing Trust between Students and their Instructor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Study groups</td>
<td>Provide opportunities to let students know they are doing well in the course.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Journals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private Folders/Portfolios</td>
<td>Respond promptly to students questions and concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term meeting with Instructor for evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student-led discussions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small group discussions</td>
<td>Provide clear guidelines for chat room use, but encourage them to discuss openly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Convenience and Inconvenience

6.1. Financial Issues
Online courses may be more affordable than those offered at colleges or trade schools. You may also save on transportation costs, including gas, bus passes or parking permits because you don't need to commute to school. Online courses offer the flexibility many students need if they are trying to hold down a job at the same time they are completing their studies.

6.2. Limited Social Interaction
Since you're not on campus or in classes, you may lack opportunities to meet other students. You will not have many opportunities to interact face-to-face with your professors, so they may not have a real sense of who you are as a person. If you enjoy meeting new people and learn better while you're interacting with other people, you may want to reconsider online education.

6.3. Problematic for Instructors
Since the software is becoming more advanced, instructors are constantly trying to learn how to keep up. Some instructors who are more accustomed to traditional methods of teaching like lectures and handouts may have problems adapting to the new software, which can create problems for you. Instead of sitting in classrooms learning from professors' lectures, some students turn to their computers and login to get their next assignment. Online classes are becoming popular since students are able to receive their assignments at anytime, with just a few clicks (Lynch 2002: 22). However, an online education can't fully replace sitting in classrooms all day. There are interferences such as a computer screen blocking face-to-face communication and kinesthetic learners are left without the hands-on, interactive learning.

6.4. Dishonesty with Online Learning

"Cheating is not limited to online classes," Lew Sanborne, Dean of the College for Professional Studies, said. "It's a possibility in just about every
class. In large lecture classes it's possible for students other than those on the roster to take tests for students who are." In any class students can plagiarize, from not quoting borrowed material to turning in purchased papers. Sanborne believes students who want to cheat will find a way, no matter what kind of class. "I feel about cheating in on-line classes the same way I feel about cheating in any class," he said. "The most cheated person in the transaction is the student who doesn't do the work, so doesn't learn the material, and so doesn't gain the benefit of taking the class. If we only offered courses where we could guarantee no one would ever cheat, we wouldn't be able to offer very many classes" (Keith-Speigel 2002: 73).

6.5.1. Problems with Plagiarism

A student who wishes to remain anonymous has participated in almost all the non-Finnish courses offered at the University of Applied Sciences in Tampere. She thought it was less time consuming, since there were assignments and they had deadlines, however, she was not sitting through an entire class. "It was a lot easier to get things done on your time," she said. "If you did not have time one day to do something you could do it the next day. It was easier to do the class work at my own convenience." All of her online classes had weekly assignments, so she had to stay self-disciplined and motivated. "You have to make sure you stay on top of things otherwise you can get behind, like any other class," she said. The majority of her grades were calculated from assignments and papers. However, there were tests too. "There were tests (and) the instructors figured you would use your textbook, but every exam was timed so you had to be familiar with the material." The biggest problem was that the tests were only related to the textbooks and the course material rarely was, so we would get together in a large group, sometimes even six of us, and we’d have two or three books. One person would do the exam, one person would look for answers on the internet, and the others would flip through the books looking for answers. By the sixth exam, we had all the answers memorized and we all ended up with very good
grades for the course. Good grades look nice on my transcript but honestly, I remember nothing from the course and only did it because of the easy way to get credits (Anonymous student interview 17.01.2009). "I don't know if cheating is more prevalent in on-line course. Clearly anyone can sit down at a computer, and with the right user name and login, do someone else's work. In that sense, it may be easier for students to cheat in on-line classes, but I don't know if easier means more likely" (Roberts 2008: 72).
7. Summary and Conclusions

Electronic learning is technology supported education and learning. As we know, the rate of growth of online education is astonishing and it will continue to grow to the point where large schools and universities are organized and ran entirely based on technological advances and digital technologies (Kearsly 2000: 54).

In 2006, nearly one-third of the college-age and university-going students in the European Union were studying solely through the internet with occasional test days and meetings with instructors. This is very important to students of yet an older age who are trying to hold down a job and support a family at the same time. This makes it possible to study ‘full-time on your own time’ and work and gain experience at the same time. This is one of the most popular and supporting ideas behind online education in Scandinavia and the European Union (Paulsen 2003: 112).

Communication technologies used in e-learning

Communication technologies are generally categorized as asynchronous or synchronous. Asynchronous activities use technologies such as blogs, wikis and discussion boards. The main idea behind this is for the participants of the online course can exchange information, have discussions based on the course material or assignment and include as many of the participants of the course together as possible without depending on the participation of other course members. These options are only a bonus to the participants and instructors, giving them a very clear idea how things are going on in the course and what level the students are taking the course seriously. Electronic mail (email) is also considered asynchronous and can support the instructor and students without needed constant face-to-face meetings or gatherings.

Synchronous activities are more for giving the students an idea who their instructor is, it involves gathering together physically, through web cameras and video conferences. This is usually set up to include all the participants at
once. This gives the feeling that there are real people behind the computer screen participating in the same course, focusing on the same things and the course content is being led by an actual instructor (Figueiredo & Afonso 2002: 112-116)

This thesis topic came to light while as a student I personally participated in the online courses here at TAMK. The idea of online learning is very appealing and it’s a very excellent idea if set up and organized in an appropriate manner. There are numerous ways to portray lessons through the internet and Moodle is just one of the easiest ways for setting up online courses. Thrilled with the notion that learning on one’s own time was a possibility, our class eagerly signed up to participate in the online courses.

Disappointingly the course advisor led us believe this was a very fast-paced and intensive learning atmosphere, whereas we found it was study on your own time, turn your assignments in, on time and pass the exam. Not once did we see our advisor face-to-face, which is not always necessary, but we never had the feeling that our assignments were even analyzed or graded by the said advisor. After this experience I started thinking that how could online courses here at TAMK be improved and what needs to be done to improve them.

In my third year of studies I participated in Thesis Practicalities wondering what on earth I would do my thesis on. Well, the idea came to me, I expressed interest, the right people took active interest and I was able to establish this project with the help of many lovely staff members at TAMK.

First of all, when trying to figure out online courses can be improved, the students are the key informants since they are the top participants. I organized this survey (Appendix 1) which gave the students in the International Business Administration line as well as the students in the Environmental Engineering line a chance to speak up and voice their thoughts and concerns regarding the online course system at TAMK as well as the amk.fi portal. Not as many were
or are familiar with the amk.fi portal but its popularity is increasing yearly, as well.

This survey as responded to very actively and the ideas that came from this questionnaire provided me with more than enough data to write about this topic in hopes that the ideas and thoughts behind this are the voices of the past and current students at TAMK. To give the students the best possible education with the highest level of learning experiences, it’s vital that the online courses are updated, re-organized and managed better or else it will continue to be a source of ‘easy credits’ for the students, whether they learn something or not.

Online learning has the capacity to grow and the early results demonstrate the benefits of students given the choice of a variety of learning options. This bases from full online courses from a distance (e.g. home) to classroom-based courses with the blended learning options in between which accommodate both Moodle and the teacher instruction in the classroom.

Even though we don’t know if the online learning will eventually improve the match the vision that the students and staff members at TAMK hold, we do know that regardless of the content, the online learning environment will continue to grow at an astonishing rate. Do not place limits on what students need: whether working online or in the classroom, let’s do what is necessary to do for their success (Saddik 2001: 98).

This thesis has been based majorily on the data analysis of the questionnaire and feedback that was gathered by myself and the information given by the students at the University of Applied Sciences in Tampere (TAMK) who are part of the degree programs of International Business and Environmental Engineering. The main focus was on how students perceive the online course system here, how to increase the numbers of students participating and how to improve the content and image.
The image of the online courses is actually quite fine, it doesn’t need much improvement. The Moodle platform is functional and appealing to look at. Of course there is always room for improvement, but since that works fine, we are focusing more on the content. It is no secret or surprise that the content of some of the courses really needs to be improved. These courses are listed as Professional studies and they are very important and interesting courses when they are taught in the appropriate manner. In this case, the feeling is that the content of the courses is not up to its full educational advantage when being taught as an online course. The overall summarization is that the students at this point, would benefit more and learn more if these courses were classroom taught lessons.

The gathered ideas from the students on how to improve the content and why it needs to be improved are listed throughout this thesis. The reasons for students either liking or disliking these courses and the online learning system at TAMK are also listed, written about and analyzed in this document. It is the true wish of the student clientele at TAMK that the online course content and variety would be improved and updated as to ensure better learning online for the future students. This was a very interesting project and we sincerely hope that it is taken into consideration.
9. LIST OF REFERENCES

Book References


Fogarty, Robin, 1997, Problem-Based Learning & Other Curriculum Models for the Multiple Intelligences Classroom, 91-94.


Roberts, Tim, 2008, Student Plagiarism in an Online World: Problems and Solutions, 70-75.


Online References


**Personal Interview**

Anonymous Student Personal Interview, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, 17.01.2009.

**Email Interviews**

Honkanen, Marja. TAMK University, Study Secretary. Email Interview 2.2.2009. Tampere
8. APPENDIX 1

This is the questionnaire that was sent out to students at TAMK who are non-Finnish or who are studying in the non-Finnish programs.

1. What program are you studying in here at TAMK?
   a. Male/BBA
   b. Female/BBA
   c. Male/ENVI
   d. Female/ENVI

2. What type of student are you?
   a. Degree student
   b. Exchange student

3. What is your native language?
   a. English
   b. Chinese
   c. French
   d. Russian
   e. Finnish
   f. Other, what?

4. Are you familiar with TAMK’s or any other university’s online courses?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Other __________

5. Have you participated in any of TAMK’s or any other university’s online courses?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Other __________

6. What courses have you taken virtually?
   a. Basic studies
   b. Professional studies
   c. Free-choice studies

7. What kinds of courses have you participated in? (Please list which course and with what university).
8. What did you like about them? Why?
__________________________________________________________

9. What didn’t you like about them? Why?
__________________________________________________________

10. What of the following subjects would you like to participate in, in a foreign language?
    a. Computer/Technical related studies
    b. Mathematics
    c. Cultural
    d. Business
    e. Government/Law
    f. Finance
    g. Languages

11. What kind of courses do you wish TAMK or another university would offer?
__________________________________________________________

12. Have you had good or bad experiences while participating in online courses?
    a. Good
    b. Okay
    c. Not Satisfied
    d. Bad
    e. I don’t know
    f. ______________________ (Your own opinion).

13. Has there been good contact with the course advisor while participating in the course?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I don’t know
14. What would you change about the way the courses are organized, if you could change something?