

## Chapter 1

# Discovering Moodle and What You Can Do

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting to know Moodle
  - ▶ Finding your way around the Moodle course front page
  - ▶ Checking out Moodle basic structure and organization
  - ▶ Understanding resources, activities, and blocks
  - ▶ Mastering Moodle terms and conventions
- 

Using new software applications isn't always easy and can even be overwhelming if you focus on the ever-changing Internet and all the new software and gadgets that keep appearing. When you want to use a new software, you must think about the time (and possibly money) you need to invest initially to set it up, and then there's the pressure of learning the new software. If the thought of using a new piece of software — such as Moodle — makes you reflexively reach for a bottle of something, take a deep breath and allow me to ease you into learning a few basics about Moodle. Before you know it, your worries will be left behind.

I begin the chapter with a brief definition of Moodle and show you some numbers of how many people and organizations use Moodle. Next I explain some useful terminology and conventions to get you started and help you navigate Moodle. Finally, I dive in to an explanation of software acronyms to alleviate any confusion about the space Moodle occupies in this eLearning (also referred to as *distance learning*) market.

## *Meeting Moodle*

Moodle is a large, Web-based software package that enables instructors, trainers, and educators to create Internet-based courses. Moodle is an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. Moodle

provides a robust system and an organized, easy-to-use interface for learning over the Internet. One of the greatest advantages in sticking with Moodle is that developers have kept the look and feel consistent over the years, and they promise to continue to keep it consistent so that each upgrade doesn't feel like it's a piece of new software.

Moodle enables educators and trainers to create online courses. Moodle's home page (Moodle also calls it the course front page) displays, in its basic form a link to a list of participants (including the teacher and students), a calendar with a course schedule and list of assignments, resources, activities, updates, and news. This book explains all of Moodle features, including online quizzes, forums, glossaries of terms, wikis, access to documents, and links to other Web resources, and more.

Moodle is referred to as a course management system (CMS), learning management system (LMS), virtual learning environment (VLE), or more recently a learning content management system (LCMS). Near the end of this chapter, I explain the differences among these terms and why I refer to Moodle as an LCMS.

So why would your organization use Moodle, or why should you learn to use Moodle? I can give you a number of reasons. Moodle is

✔ **Widely used, domestically and globally:** As of January 2011, more than 39 million registered users are using Moodle. This list shows you a few other stats (the numbers are from <http://moodle.org/stats>):

- *Registered courses:* 4,303,011
- *Users:* 40,590,582,899,203
- *Teachers:* 1,190,743
- *Enrollments:* 18,794,573
- *Largest site:* 59,920 courses with 225,546 users
- *Site with most registered users:* Open University 714,310 (Moodle.org has 1,030,779)
- *Countries using Moodle:* 213
- *Languages:* 83

✔ **The largest community of users around the globe for a distance learning software:** Moodle has an incredibly large and active community spanning the globe. It has been vital to the success of Moodle, and I can guarantee that if you post a question to the help forums, someone will be awake, somewhere around the globe, and you will have a reply. It's like a 24/7 tech support group. See <http://moodle.org/forums>.

✔ **Based on a sound educational philosophy:** Moodle is based on sound pedagogical principals and educational philosophy, making it one of the few LCMS that's learning-centered instead of tool- and gadget-centered.

✓ **Free:** There's no initial cost to purchase the software and no license fees! Moodle is open source software, meaning it's free and governed by GNU Public License ([www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html](http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html)). You may think that nothing is free. Moodle *is* in that you don't have to pay for the software or the upgrades or license, installation, and training (what the marketing and sales team try to get you to commit to when you purchase large software packages).

But in some respects, you are partially correct in thinking that everything has a cost attached. If you add development time to build your course, time to learn the software, and Web-hosting costs, Moodle is not free.

## *Understanding Moodle Basics*

If you want to explore Moodle and perhaps are excited to start developing your first Moodle course, you need to know a few details about Moodle to navigate it and speak the language. The following sections help get you started.

### *Creating a Moodle account and logging in to your course*

You need just a couple things to get started with Moodle:

✓ **An account with a username and password:** Aren't you glad to learn that Moodle is secure? You need a Teacher, a Course Creator, or an Administrator account in order to have editing privileges and create courses.

You can contact your system administrator to set up an account for you. If you will be responsible for looking after Moodle, refer to the discussion regarding roles and registration in Chapter 3 and also the discussion regarding Moodle system administrators in Chapter 13.

✓ **A URL:** The URL depends on your organization or a third-party company that will host your Moodle site.

If you have an account and a URL, open your Web browser (Moodle works best with Internet Explorer and Firefox) and go to the URL. If this is your first time accessing your Moodle site, you come to a page similar to Figure 1-1.

Next time you return to the course, either you see just the login box as shown in Figure 1-2 (or Figure 1-1) or you go straight to a list of courses on your Moodle site with a login link in the top-right corner. You have a number of options to log in, all quite straightforward and simple.

**Figure 1-1:**  
The Login  
page.

**Figure 1-2:**  
Returning to  
the Moodle  
Login page



The Safari, Google Chrome, and Opera browsers do not show all capabilities of the built-in HTML editor in Moodle, and there are a few issues with the Chat module using Safari. To be safe, I recommend using Firefox or Internet Explorer.

## Navigating the Moodle interface

Finding your way around the Moodle course front page is not difficult when you understand some of the basic terminology and where things are located. Before I begin to help you familiarize yourself with the Moodle interface, you need to understand some terms that I continue to use throughout the book, and the explanation in this chapter will make more sense. These terms are specific to Moodle, so it's a good idea to use them as your reference starting point.

- ✓ **Moodle site/Moodle site front page:** Refers to the Moodle software platform that contains all of your organization's courses and blocks with utilities for managing the site. Figure 1-3 shows an example of a Moodle site front page, which includes all the courses available on the site. There is a login link in the top-right corner, a site calendar, site news, and the Site Administration block. When a reference is made to a *site*,

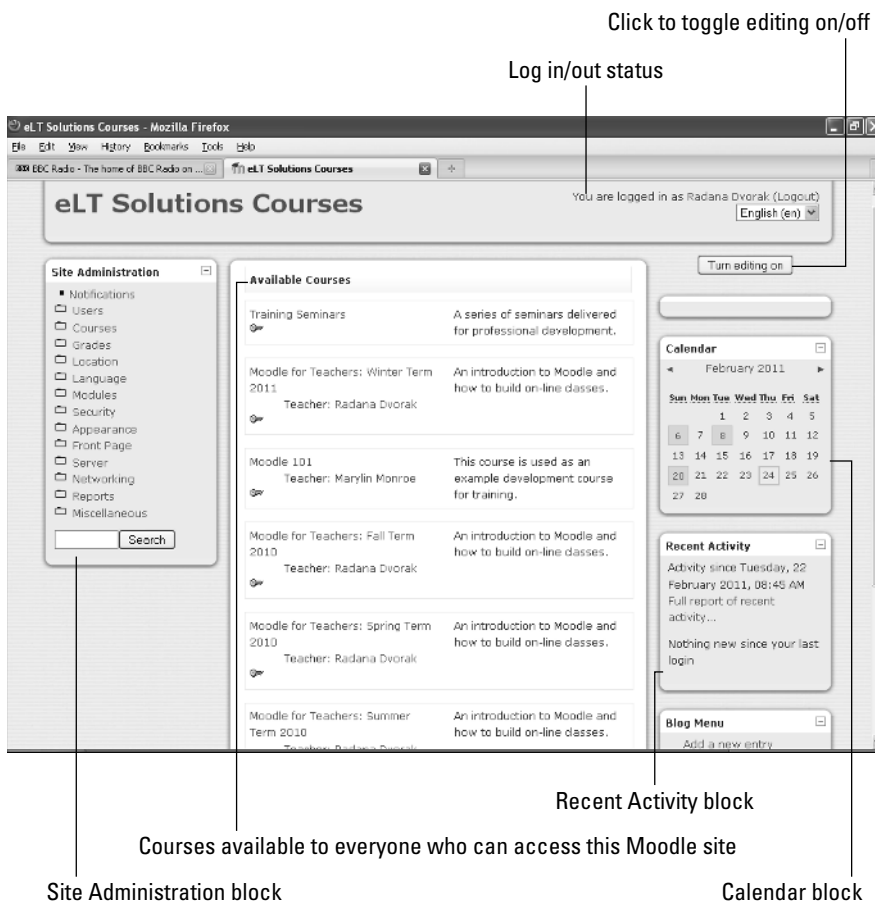


it's available to all courses and all users in the site. Organizations usually run only one Moodle site.

A Teacher or Student account would not be able to see the Site Administration block located on the left in Figure 1-3. See Chapter 4 for more information on user roles.

- ✓ **Moodle course:** A Moodle course is much like a real-world course, but online: It's a collection of lessons, assignments, quizzes, documents, projects, grade book, and class discussions. An instructor constructs a syllabus, which is posted on the course front page, and students can download instructions, upload completed assignments, and collaborate through wikis, chats, and online forums.
- ✓ **Course front page:** Refers to the course home page — it's your work space and where your learners come when they log in to your Moodle course. On your course front page, you have more tools available to you than your learners do. These additional tools enable you to build and edit your course.

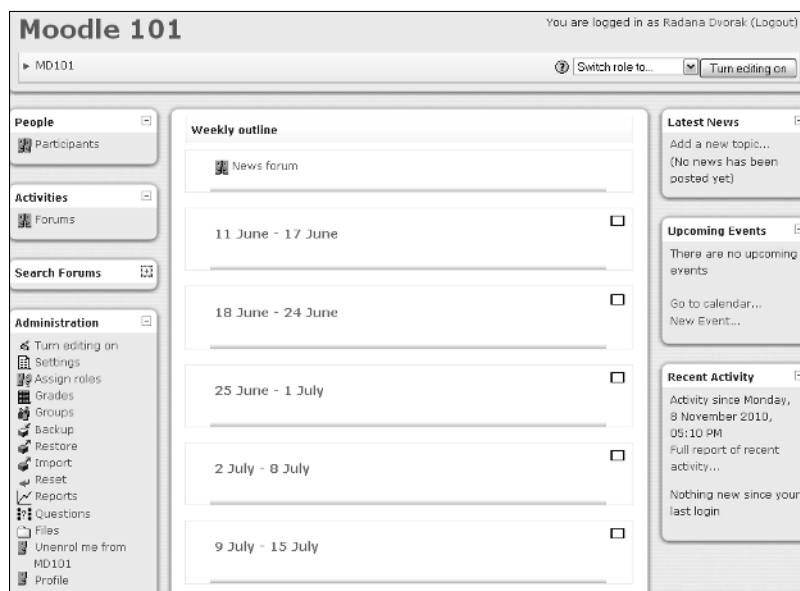
**Figure 1-3:**  
The Moodle  
site front  
page.



A number of settings offer the instructor controls and tools to add content (called *resources*) and modules such as Wikis, Forums, and Quizzes (called *activities*). The course front page is broken into course sections by week or topic (there are other settings that enable you to set up the course to meet your teaching requirements), and you can add resources and activities to each section.

Chapter 3 goes into detail about each editing tool, icon, block, and menu. Figure 1-4 shows what a teacher view of the course front page looks like without the editing features enabled. Figure 1-5 demonstrates the same page with the editing features enabled and number of activities and resources listed under the different sections (topics or units).

**Figure 1-4:**  
The Teacher  
view of the  
course front  
page.

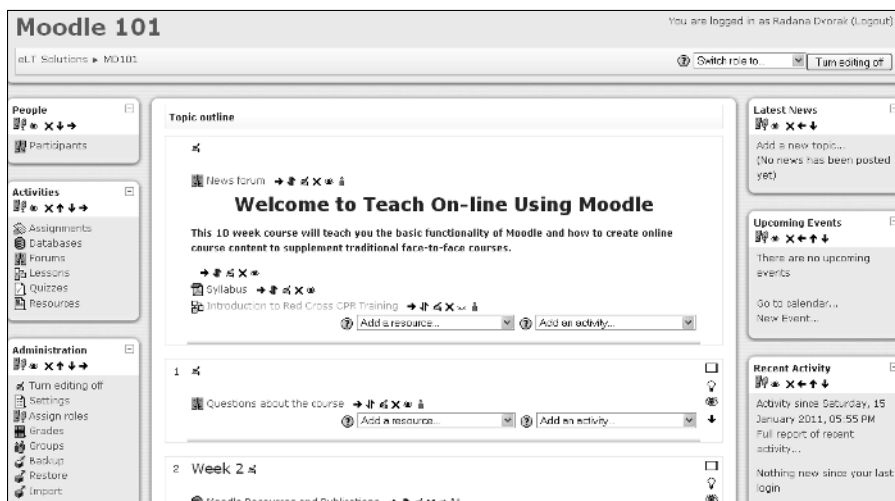


The course front page includes *blocks* on the left and right sides with the center column reserved for the course content. Blocks are tools — kind of like containers for you and your learners. For example, you have blocks for a calendar, search box, lists of activities and resources, participants, news-feeds, and so on. Many blocks can have links to various activities. By default, each course front page has specific blocks, such as Participants, Latest News, Upcoming Events, and Recent Activity. You can get more information on blocks later in this chapter and in Chapter 3.

When you first access your course, familiarize yourself with the course front page. Find the Turn Editing On button, located in the top-right corner, and click it. You see your course front page come to life, displaying colorful

editing icons, including the Activity and Resource drop-down lists appearing in each section. A new Block drop-down list also shows up on the right side. Explore and familiarize yourself with what you have available.

**Figure 1-5:**  
The editing  
tools are  
available.



If you don't yet have access to your own Moodle course and want to explore and try editing, go to the Moodle.org demo site at <http://demo.moodle.net>. You can sign in as a teacher, a student, or an administrator, and you can access courses and demos in many different languages. Don't worry about making any changes; the server is refreshed back to the original every 20 minutes.

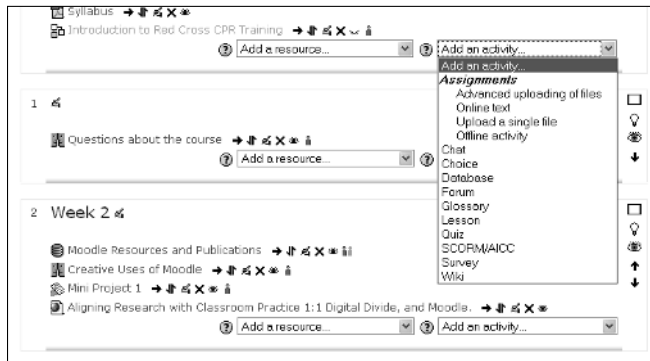
## Understanding Moodle terms and conventions

Moodle uses a number of terms and specific conventions particular to the software. In the following list, I mention and explain some of these terms and conventions to help you ease into the book:

- ✓ **User:** A specific participant who is allowed to enter a Moodle site. Each user account has a specific role, which carries a set of permissions.
- ✓ **Roles:** Roles are user accounts identifying the participants in the site and course. Each role has a set of permissions with capabilities to interact with Moodle. When Moodle is installed, it automatically creates a set of default roles — Administrator, Teacher, Non-Editing Teacher, Course Creator, Student, and Guest — which I define in Chapter 4.

- ✔ **Capability:** Capabilities are Moodle features. Each activity has specific capabilities and certain roles have the capabilities assigned to interact in different capacities with the activities. For example, a Teacher role can post discussions to the News forum, but a Student role can only read a news forum and not post to or reply to it. Capabilities are further discussed in Chapters 4 and 13.
- ✔ **Permission:** Permissions are specific settings for capabilities. You have four options: Not Set/Inherit, Allow, Prevent, or Prohibit. See Chapter 13 for more details.
- ✔ **Activities:** You can add separate, interactive learning activity modules to your course. They are robust, and each one can be set up to work with individual students, groups, or everyone in the course. The Add an Activity functionality is enabled when you click the Turn Editing On button. (See Figure 1-5.) The drop-down list appears in each section/week of your course. Many of the activities can be graded and push information to a course grade book. The activities available are shown in Figure 1-6.

**Figure 1-6:**  
The Add  
an Activity  
drop-down  
list.



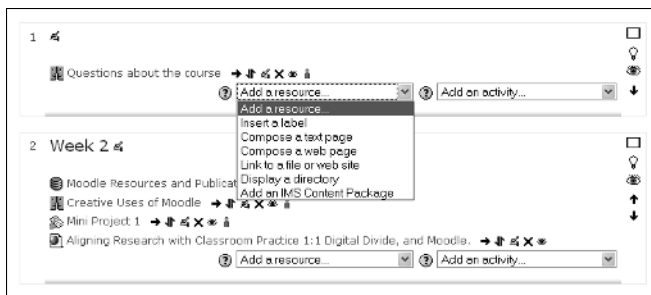
- ✔ **Resources:** Moodle resources are types of tools that enable you to include almost any kind of file, including multimedia files and links to resources on the Internet. Resources include simple text pages, Web pages including a WYSIWYG editor, IMS packages, and more. Like activities, you add resources by using a drop-down list when editing is turned on. Figure 1-7 shows the drop-down list of various resources.

Chapter 3 goes into detail about the various modules and how to use each one.

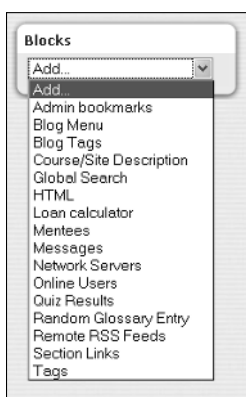
- ✔ **Blocks:** Blocks are container-like tools that provide specific information or functionality. There are more than 16 types of blocks, many of which are flexible so that you can use them for a variety of functions. For instance, the HTML block can display a short video on the course front page. The Blocks block appears bottom of the right column when you turn on editing. (See Figure 1-8.)



**Figure 1-7:**  
The Add a  
Resource  
drop-down  
list.



**Figure 1-8:**  
The Blocks  
drop-down  
list.



## Clarifying Moodle and CMS, LMS, VLE, and LCMS

Moodle continues to be referred to by a number of acronyms that may cause confusion. You've probably heard of few (if not all) of these terms and may be wondering about the differences among them. In the following list, I describe each and highlight the similarities and differences:

- ✓ **VLE:** A virtual learning environment is a software system designed to support teaching and learning in a form distinct from a managed learning environment (MLE), which focuses on management. A VLE usually uses Internet browsers to deliver instructions and assessment tools, such as quizzes. More recent VLEs include wikis, blogs, and RSS.
- ✓ **LMS:** A learning management system (LMS) is a software system that enables the management and delivery of online and instructor-led training content to learners. Most LMSs are Web-based to facilitate anytime, anywhere, and any pace access to learning content and administration. You will see LMS and VLE used interchangeably.

- ✓ **CMS:** A content management system (CMS) is a repository for data, where *data* can be defined as any type of file, such as documents, movies, sound, pictures, and so forth. CMSs are frequently used for storing, controlling, revising, collaboratively sharing, and publishing documentation. Usually a CMS serves as a central repository. This is most likely the oldest term used to refer to software like Moodle.
- ✓ **LCMS:** A learning content management systems (LCMS) combines the powers of CMS and LMS. An LCMS is defined as a system that creates, stores, assembles, and delivers eLearning content that can be personalized. It delivers the content in the form of learning objects. Though an LMS manages and administers all forms of learning within an organization, an LCMS concentrates on online learning content, usually in the form of learning objects.

Because of Moodle's extensibility and its separate modules that can be used with individual learners, saved, and reused (wiki, database, blogs, and so on), I refer to Moodle as a LCMS throughout the book.

An LCMS such as Moodle gives instructors, course authors, and designers the ability to create eLearning content more efficiently. The goal of an LCMS is to create small chunks of content to meet the needs of individual students or groups of learners and to offer capabilities to update and change the content as and when needed with ease. For example, traditionally, an entire course would be developed and then adapted to multiple audiences. With a LCMS, instructional designers are able to create content chunks that are reusable.

The LCMS can also provide certification and tracking for individual learners who need specific knowledge. LCMS can deliver degree courses or training to certify for regulatory needs, professional licensure, or quality control. For instance, a construction company using a new piece of heavy equipment can use an LCMS to ensure that all workers are fully trained on the processes and health and safety. The training includes certification tests employees need to pass in order for a company to receive insurance certification. These tests, set up as separate modules, can be easily updated or changed to support employees' needs (second language, learning disabilities, and so on) and/or changes made by the regulatory organizations. LCMSs are used in high schools, Web academies, colleges, universities, and companies.

## *Keeping Moodle Versions Straight*

I wrote this book using version 1.9.9, and it covers Moodle versions up to version 2.0 (which was recently released). I have confidence that this book will help you set up courses and teach you all you need to know for versions 1.8 through 2.0.

The main changes in the new release are designed to give third-party developers more flexibility and scalability and to integrate Web 2.0 technology. Moodle 2.0 is still viewed as *beta* at the time of writing this book, which means the changes are essentially transparent to you as the end user. (Again, though, the material covered in the book is applicable to get you going if want to upgrade to Moodle 2.0.)



Moodle docs, which are referenced throughout the book, are for versions pre-2.0 with notes where upgrades have taken place. Unless you're a developer or actively want to test the software for bugs and intend to contribute to the development of 2.0+, I strongly recommend that you use the latest version, 1.9 (which to date of publication is 1.9.10), because as the Moodle.org site reports, minor upgrades to Moodle 2.0 are found weekly, and patches will be released regularly. Hence why you see versions 2.0; a month later you see 2.1; and then 2.1.1

Moodle has been consistent with every new release, leaving the front page, navigation, and setup pages for teachers and learners the same. For most instructors and teachers, the main difference they will see is changes in how files are handled in the new versions. As with any new releases, there are bugs and minor issues, and the Moodle forums are quite hot with activities around these issues. No doubt all minor issues will be resolved over time.



Please see the Moodle 2.0 release notes at <http://docs.moodle.org>. Many forum discussions still say there are improvements to be made and changes in the wind. I know I will be sticking with 1.9+ versions for my teaching courses for some time yet, though I'm excited about the future possibilities, especially the potential for integrating third-party modules and mobile apps.

## Determining Where to Host Moodle

If your organization doesn't support a Moodle site and you cannot convince your System Administrator to download it for you to the organization's server (even after you've tried bribery), you will have to look at other options. In a crunch, your three options are on your computer, on your server, or through third-party hosting. The following list highlights a few pros and cons to help you to decide the best option for you:

- ✓ **Running Moodle on your computer:** Running Moodle on your home computer is not really a difficult process, setting it up doesn't take too long, however getting your Moodle site online is more cumbersome. If you want learners to access your course, it's a complex process involving a Web server, and you may as well use a third party to host it. However, if all you want to do is learn how to build a course and play,

then it's a good way to start. Make sure you read the system requirements before you download it.

To download Moodle on your own computer, go to <http://moodle.org/downloads> and scroll down to Moodle for Windows or Moodle for Macs OS X and follow the instructions.

- ✓ **Run on your own server:** If you have your own Web server, I assume you have the skills needed to set up Moodle. Go to <http://moodle.org/downloads> and click the Standard Moodle Packages link.
- ✓ **Third-party hosting:** There are few options for third-party hosting. You may find non-profit organizations that offer free hosting for educational organizations. For example, Key-to-School <http://www.keytoschool.com> or similar organizations such as ORVSD (Oregon Virtual School District), a free resource for online teaching learning, offers free hosting to Oregon educators. Check with your district education office for information on similar government- and grant-funded programs.

Many ISPs support open source software and enable you to download Moodle. You have to make sure you have Linux hosting and the ISP supports MySQL. This is a good option if you have few technical skills. Most ISPs will not provide technical support for third-party software.

If you need technical support with the third-party hosting option, I recommend that you contact a local Moodle.org partner. These partners will host, maintain, and provide a secure environment for your Moodle site. Moodle partners are located in many different countries. Go to <http://moodle.com/hosting> for a list of companies that have partnered with Moodle.org.