

insight

# Evaluating Moodle for your organisation

An Epic Insight by Mark Aberdour, Head of Open Source Solutions

# Moodle is the popular open source

Learning Management System (LMS) that has taken the training market by storm in recent years. The eLearning Guild LMS Survey in 2010 showed that of the top three LMS applications (Moodle, Blackboard and TotalLMS), Moodle had the highest satisfaction ratings for ease of installation, cost, reporting capabilities, time to implement, fulfilment of vendor promises and assessment capabilities.

However, when evaluating Moodle, a newcomer could easily become confused by a proliferation of releases: Moodle 1.9 or [Moodle 2](#), various distributions such as Totara and Joule and [Moodle Flavours](#), packages which comprise standard Moodle with the author's favourite plug-ins. So where do you start if you're considering a Moodle implementation? If you're not sure whether to use Standard Moodle, a Moodle Distribution or a Moodle Flavour, then this Insight is for you!

## Official Moodle versions

The first thing to consider when selecting Moodle is which version to choose – there are currently two, the 1.9 series and the 2.x series. Release management and bug/security support for these versions is provided by the core Moodle development team in Australia. It is important to understand Moodle's support service terms so you don't put your organisation at risk by using versions that are outdated or unsupported.

Moodle 1.9 has been in widespread use since its release in 2008; however, it is considered a legacy system and official support is now being phased out. As a result, no feature updates are being developed, bug fixes have already ceased and the core Moodle team will only keep working on security fixes until June 2012, after which Moodle 1.9 will no longer be supported in any way.

Released in 2011, Moodle 2.0 introduced a host of new features. There is a major new release every six months (e.g. 2.0 to 2.1) and each major release receives 12 months of bug fixing support and 18 months of security issues support. It is therefore important to plan your ongoing LMS upgrade strategy with this in mind to reduce the risk of running unsupported software.

Minor versions such as 2.1.2 are released more frequently, typically when there are a significant amount of fixes since the last version or if there is a fix for a security issue.

## Moodle distributions

As well as the standard Moodle system, there are a number of commercial distributions of Moodle such as Joule and Totara. These all build on the standard Moodle system and extend it with features geared towards specific sectors. It looks nice on paper but there are some risks to be aware of when considering an LMS from these sources.

**Beware the support red-herring:** One of the key benefits that a distribution offers is commercial support around a pre-packaged set of extensions geared towards a specific sector. The appeal of this offer is that it takes some legwork out of the LMS implementation and maintenance. However, there are a multitude of LMS suppliers in the market who offer enterprise-level installation, support and maintenance services for Moodle.

**Core code changes:** Moodle is a modular system, therefore it is best practice to extend the system by creating plug-ins. However, sometimes core system changes are unavoidable, and this can make maintenance and upgrades a real headache. The fewer core code amends, the better.

**Slow upgrade times for merging in core Moodle releases:** There is a serious issue with distributions lagging several releases behind the official Moodle version, which means you may lose out on new features, bug fixes and security patches. A distribution requires an incredible amount of maintenance effort to track changes, write documentation, maintain modules, provide upgrade paths, manage releases and provide support. It is for this reason that, in January 2012—one full year since the release of Moodle 2 - all of the known distributions are still based on Moodle 1.9. This time lag suggests a lack of flexibility and responsiveness in the distribution model.

**The individual components may already be available:** Many distributions, Joule in particular, package up a large number of extensions which are freely available via the Moodle.org community. This has over 800 downloadable extensions, including some excellent extensions for reporting and management. None of the distributions really offer anything that is particularly cutting edge, except where they include completely separate applications like ELIS does. For those features which have no freely available alternative extension, standard Moodle should catch up fairly quickly. In a community this size in which the corporate world is now fully embedded, the vast majority of needs eventually get met.

**Open or closed distribution:** The existence of distributions demonstrates a maturity in the Moodle ecosystem. However, existing Moodle distributions are typically developed by closed groups rather than in the open Moodle community. As a result, the standard Moodle development processes have not yet evolved to support distributions in the same way that some open source projects, such as Drupal, have successfully done. To be done responsibly and in the best interests of the core system, distributions should use public forums to discuss community concerns and development/update processes and should make available downloadable source code for peer review and comment. If there are no public forums available, then you should do your due diligence very carefully (see below).

**Excessive maintenance:** The extensive maintenance task required by distribution vendors is extremely expensive. Don't expect to see much in the way of R&D and maintenance from these vendors in the next few years unless they find commercial sponsorship for new features. Even if they do gain sponsorship, this will skew the feature set towards the needs of the sponsor rather than the needs of the wider community.



## Moodle-based application suites

In addition to commercial distributions such as Joule and Totara, there are other systems like ELIS and 2tor which package up a standard or lightly customised Moodle with a number of additional applications such as User Management/CRM and Business Intelligence applications to create a more fully featured Enterprise-level offering. These are less risky propositions in terms of the Moodle system itself (ELIS, for example, is now upgraded to Moodle 2), but they are obviously much bigger procurement efforts given the additional applications they are packaged with.

## Moodle flavours

In 2011, Moodle released an extension called Moodle Flavours, a tool which can be installed into a Moodle site which will allow you to create a downloadable package containing any installed plug-ins, the site settings, installed language packs and any language customisations. This package can then be distributed and deployed elsewhere. For example, flavours could be created for particular markets such as schools, universities, small and medium businesses, enterprise businesses and hospitals.

Moodle Flavours was sponsored by Google and released in September 2011. Interestingly, the core purpose of Flavours replicates what the first movers in the distributions space have been trying to achieve for several years: a standard Moodle plus a set of extensions targeted at certain sectors (Joule in Education, Totara in Corporates). It may be that flavours are the late, second mover that becomes more widely adopted. After all, the flavours plug-in is open source and supported by Moodle HQ. Furthermore, Flavours do not change the Moodle core code, therefore you can upgrade your core system with peace of mind and keep up to date with the latest features and security patches, while still getting all the advantages of distributions such as sector focus and commercial support. This new plug-in will almost certainly become widely adopted by the hundreds of LMS suppliers who offer Moodle services.

## Due diligence

Whether you choose an official Moodle version or a distribution, you must do your due diligence effectively to have full confidence in the LMS you are procuring and to reduce your investment risk. Make no mistake, even when the license is free, an LMS implementation remains a major investment of time and effort. This due diligence needs to be implemented very differently for open source and commercial distributions.

Traditional due diligence for software procurement involves looking at three years of vendor accounts and analysing staffing levels and experience, company ownership, track record and so on.

This changes with open source projects like Moodle which are not backed by a single commercial organisation but are developed by a geographically dispersed community of designers and developers. Due diligence therefore becomes linked not with company commercials, but with community sustainability. Fortunately, Moodle is one of the best examples of a sustainable open source community. With 48 million end users and 1 million registered Moodle.org forum members across 60,000 LMS implementations, there is no doubt about the size and stability of the community. There are 240 developers involved in the core Moodle system and thousands of developers who have worked on the 800+ contributed extensions. This a much larger team effort than many commercial LMS vendors can manage, and there is evidence of good throughput of new talent becoming engaged with the project and moving through the ranks – from user to bug reporter to contributor to core developer.

On the other hand, closed distributions are maintained by vendors, not communities, triggering a return to the traditional vendor model of engagement. When considering Moodle distributions, you need to employ a mix of traditional and open source due diligence. There may well be three layers of supplier here: the community-developed Moodle, the Moodle distribution vendor and the Moodle partner or reseller (the partner/reseller could be for either standard Moodle or distribution). You need complete confidence in all levels applicable to you.

The core Moodle system is at the heart of your solution. This means you must review the community statistics, understand the development model and release process and be aware of how these affect your organisation.

The distribution vendor is responsible for updating the distribution with those six-monthly updates and minor releases, in addition to providing technical support to the reseller. You should ask to see three years of accounts as well as find out their funding sources. If they claim the distribution itself is open source, check for the existence of publicly available downloads and source code, and for evidence of collaboration with the core Moodle community.

The reseller/partner is your long-term partner who will handle your organisation's LMS implementation and ongoing maintenance. They will get to know your business intimately over the years and should become a key and valued supplier, so again ask for company accounts, staffing levels and resourcing capabilities. In these economically challenging times, you should look for a supplier with a solid and diverse client base, well-controlled operating costs and plenty of cash in the bank.

## Epic's open source LMS

Epic offers an open source LMS that incorporates the official Moodle 2.1 plus a number of well-used and supported extensions, as follows:

| Standard Moodle          |   | Epic Standard LMS        |   |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|
| User management          | ✓ | User management          | ✓ |
| Course management        | ✓ | Course management        | ✓ |
| Content authoring        | ✓ | Content authoring        | ✓ |
| User communication       | ✓ | User communication       | ✓ |
| Learning resources       | ✓ | Learning resources       | ✓ |
| Collaborative activities | ✓ | Collaborative activities | ✓ |
| User assessment          | ✓ | User assessment          | ✓ |
| Learner tracking         | ✓ | Learner tracking         | ✓ |
| Reporting                | ✓ | Reporting                | ✓ |
|                          |   | Classroom events         | ✓ |
|                          |   | Webinar events           | ✓ |
|                          |   | E-commerce               | ✓ |
|                          |   | Course certificates      | ✓ |
|                          |   | Book module              | ✓ |
|                          |   | Enhanced reporting       | ✓ |
|                          |   | Improved navigation      | ✓ |
|                          |   | Improved look and feel   | ✓ |

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