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## HOW TO MASTER THE BASICS OF A LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM, OR THE TAMING OF PEGASUS

**Monika SOBEJKO**

Jagiellońskie Centrum Językowe, UJ  
ul. Krupnicza 2, 31-123 Kraków  
tel.: 12 426 13 65 e-mail: monika.sobejko@uj.edu.pl

**Abstract:** Our university's Learning Management System had been ready for use for two years or so, but largely ignored by most of the teachers at our language centre. The situation changed when the real need to try it appeared. We were asked to meet a new requirement – namely, to cover for our temporarily absent colleagues, sometimes at a moment's notice. It seemed a good solution to harness our Learning Management System, or Pegasus, to help us do that.

A year has passed since then, and the scheme is working – helping us very well. Hopefully, it all happens without “short-changing” the students. In this paper, as one of the participants in the scheme, I will present the story of how we managed – not without a few hurdles – to turn our LMS into a useful, everyday tool in our language centre.

**Keywords:** LMS, e-learning, e-learning platform, new skills.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are busy people, so covering for those of us who are temporarily on a sick leave, was never very popular – especially if the request came at a moment's notice. The phone rang and you answered it only to learn that the very next morning, afternoon or evening you should cover for an absent colleague. What could be worse? With more than eighty teachers of English and well over 500 groups of students taught at our language centre, there is often a need to cover for an ill colleague. So various schemes had been devised and tested, but none of them seemed to be working really well.

And yet, for the past three or four years, we have had access to a tool which could have helped us out – until, finally, we decided to try it. I am referring here to our Moodle-based learning management system (LMS), creatively named Pegasus.

What makes Pegasus an ideal tool in our situation is that the class can be taught from any place and – if we assume asynchronous teaching or learning – at any time. What makes it somewhat more challenging is that one does not meet the students in ‘real life’, and therefore one cannot spontaneously adjust to their needs and expectations in the way one could if he or she were teaching them face to face. However, since we introduced this new system of covering for absent colleagues, it has been working really well. In this

article, I would like to present the way our system of covering for absent colleagues works and how it has influenced the way we are beginning to perceive and use technology with our students.

### 2. PARTICIPATING TEACHERS

In the beginning, only a small group of teachers was voluntarily involved in the scheme – there were only seven of us, and this year one more teacher decided to join in. To call us technophiles as opposed to the other teachers – luddites – would be a gross oversimplification. In the short survey that I conducted among those of my colleagues who volunteered to participate in the scheme, all of us said that we volunteered because we felt the need to learn or experience something new. As one of my colleagues said “it constituted a new challenge”. Another teacher was “simply curious”. Interestingly, one of my colleagues indicated that she wanted to improve her skills by learning new things from other participants in the scheme – underlining the collaborative character of our new venture. So, novelty, curiosity and the need to develop technical skills played the key role. We were all on a steep learning curve. As one of my colleagues said when the academic year of 2012/13 was over – “we were learning like crazy” (translated by the author).

Still, we were not complete novices – we all had already had some previous experience. In the survey, all of us admitted to using digital technology for teaching – for example, Google Docs, wikis, emails, pdf files uploaded for students onto our LMS, or electronic workbooks from some well-known publishers.

### 3. TEACHING DRIVEN BY PEDAGOGY – MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES

In the words of Barney Barrett and Pete Sharma, “we must ensure that the teaching is driven by pedagogy and supported by technology” [1], and it was clear to us that the materials and activities designed for our LMS must be supported by sound pedagogic principles. We have chosen to

design separate ‘modules’ for teaching our single forty-five-minute or ninety-minute long cover classes, mainly focusing on developing receptive skills (reading and listening). Each ‘module’ consists of either a video or audio, accompanied by a listening comprehension quiz, and a reading activity, also accompanied by a reading comprehension quiz. Additionally, the reading and listening comprehension activities are followed by vocabulary quizzes. Both parts of any given module (i.e. listening and reading comprehension) are on a similar topic.

After completing those activities, students are asked to participate in a forum discussion, where they have the opportunity to voice their own opinions and to practise the vocabulary they have learnt. The discussions are monitored by the teacher who is responsible for covering a particular class and who provides them with some feedback on the language they use.

However, we have not restricted our modules to the above described design. For example, one of my colleagues chose to try out activities designed in a somewhat different way – first her students are provided with some target vocabulary by means of a PowerPoint presentation, then asked to participate in a webquest, and finally they join in a forum discussion.

Currently, we have a wealth of materials and activities stored in our ‘bank’, with all of us freely drawing on the resources which we are gradually improving and developing. The obvious benefit of this – one might say a little chaotic – approach to designing our activities is that we can freely and creatively contribute to the existing bank of resources, find inspiration in other teacher’s ideas, and learn from one another. As for the resources, we use mostly the Internet (among especially useful sites are YouTube.com, TED.com or Vimeo.com), choosing either the recordings or videos that are under the Creative Commons licence, or – if in doubt – we simply provide a link to the source and only upload on the LMS the quizzes created by us for a particular source. However, in that case, once the video or podcast is removed by the owner, our module can no longer be used.

#### 4. BENEFITS

I have mentioned some of the benefits already. First, as all of the teachers responding to my survey observed, we can cover for our absent colleagues classes at any time and in any place. Secondly, there is less waste – no need to photocopy any materials for the cover classes, as they are all uploaded on Pegasus. Thirdly, and most importantly, according to a paper survey conducted in three different groups immediately after such a cover class, students prefer online to face-to-face cover classes – with 100% in one group (12 respondents) and 98% in the other two groups (32 respondents) supporting online classes organized to cover for an absent teacher. Occasionally, we also receive ‘unsolicited’ emails from students – again, in support of our online cover classes, thanking us for the interesting materials or the feedback they have received from us. Also, in private conversations with me students have often indicated that they find working at their own pace motivating.

#### 5. PROBLEMS

With any online activities, there is always the problem of technical glitches. Fortunately, most of such technical problems are temporary, or can be easily solved with the help of our E-Learning Centre. For example, at the beginning of this academic year, it turned out that after the latest upgrade of Pegasus, the platform only supported one video format (namely, flv.), and we had to wait for the E-Learning Centre to develop the plug-ins to support other, very popular formats. However, some problems might be more permanent and require re-writing or re-designing of some activities, which is obviously time-consuming as well as extremely annoying.

As mentioned before, our activities are only designed for short, forty-five or ninety-minute classes, so there is not enough time for longer, more interactive discussions among students to develop, no matter how much they might be encouraged to do so by cover teachers. So, at the moment we are not making full use of some of Moodle’s affordances – namely, the fact that “[it] focuses on tools for discussion and sharing artefacts” rather than being solely content-driven [2]. However, we must bear in mind that some of the students might not have used Pegasus before, so expecting immediate social interaction during a one-week online cover class is perhaps unrealistic. Also, we must remember that Pegasus is visually less attractive than many other online platforms. Using Pegasus looks like doing homework – in terms of entertainment, it is not really as appealing as popular social networking sites.

Last but not least, some of our students are not as proficient at using technology as we imagine them to be, and they need some guidance in technical matters on the platform. But, in the words of one of my colleagues, “they are learning how to do it very quickly”.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

In our language centre, we have made a good start – and we are now a ‘learning community of teachers’, collaborating and supporting each other. Our online cover classes were very much a grassroots development – arising out of a genuine need, with technology providing us with a solution, and they were a kind of small-scale laboratory where we could experiment and find out how to achieve good outcomes while teaching online – we are now more confident, more resourceful and ready to undertake new challenges. I want to finish by quoting Margaret Driscoll who wrote that “blended learning solutions are a great way to initiate an organization into e-learning” [3]. Indeed, they are.

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## **JAK PERFEKCYJNIE OPANOWAĆ NAUCZANIE PRZY POMOCY PLATFORMY EDUKACYJNEJ, CZYLI UJEŹDŻANIE PEGAZA**

Platforma edukacyjna na naszym uniwersytecie była dostępna od co najmniej dwóch lat, ale przeważnie ignorowana przez większość lektorów, prowadzących zajęcia w Jagiellońskim Centrum Językowym. Sytuacja zmieniła się z chwilą, kiedy pojawiła się rzeczywista potrzeba jej wykorzystania, a mianowicie konieczność zapewnienia krótkoterminowych zastępstw, czasem dosłownie z dnia na dzień. Okazało się, że można w tym celu 'zaprząć' Pegaza, czyli naszą uniwersytecką platformę edukacyjną.

Od tego czasu minął rok i Pegaz znakomicie się sprawdza. Wydaje się, że nie tracą na tym również nasi studenci. Artykuł ma na celu opisanie jak udało się nam zamienić mało wykorzystywaną platformę w bardzo przydatne narzędzie, z którego korzystamy na co dzień w naszym centrum językowym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** LMS, e-learning, e-learning platform, new skills