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## К ВОПРОСУ ОБ АКТУАЛЬНОСТИ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫХ ПЛАТФОРМ В ВУЗАХ: ПЛЮСЫ И МИНУСЫ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ ПЛАТФОРМЫ MOODLE В ПРЕПОДАВАНИИ ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ В БАЙКАЛЬСКОМ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОМ УНИВЕРСИТЕТЕ

**АННОТАЦИЯ.** Статья обращается к проблеме использования он-лайн и цифровых образовательных платформ и их актуальности для современной системы отечественного образования, которая проходит сложный период перемен в связи с ограничениями, связанными с пандемией, а также ориентацией на цифровизацию образования, что подтверждает актуальность и своевременность исследования. Особое внимание уделяется изучению существующих в научной и методической литературе мнениям относительно цифровизации как глобального тренда в мире и в нашей стране. Освещаются риски и возможные негативные последствия, к которым данный глобальный тренд может привести как мировую и отечественную системы образования, так и общество в целом. Основной акцент в исследовании делается на применение системы Moodle, популярной образовательной платформе для онлайн обучения, которая получила широкое распространение в вузах мира и которая активно обсуждается профессиональным сообществом. Эффективность и продуктивность платформы рассматривается как основной аспект в процессе проведения анализа ее использования, выявляются преимущества и недостатки использования платформы в Байкальском государственном университете. Рассматриваются характерные особенности применения данной образовательной системы для преподавания практических курсов, в частности в изучении иностранных языков, делаются выводы и даются рекомендации относительно ее более эффективного использования.

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА.** Цифровизация, онлайн образование, цифровые форматы образования, образовательные платформы, Moodle, проблема онлайн образования, проблема дистанционного обучения.

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## ON THE RELEVANCE OF USING EDUCATION PLATFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: PROS AND CONS OF USING MOODLE FOR TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT BAIKAL STATE UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT.** The article deals with the problem of using online and digital education platforms and its urgency for the modern system of national education, which is going

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through big changes due to the pandemics conditions at present, which proves the relevancy of the issue under study. The text focuses on the problem of digitalization as a global trend in the world and in our country, highlighting some risks and negative effects the trend may cause for the society and national system of education. The main subject of the present research is Moodle-system, a popular modern platform for on-line education, which is widely used in the higher institutions around the world and actively discussed by professional community today. The effectiveness and productivity of the platform is considered as the main issue in the text, which also defines its advantages and disadvantages for framing the teaching process in our universities. Special attention is paid to the pros and cons of Moodle in terms of its application at Baikal State University, particularly for teaching foreign languages. The research provides conclusions and practical recommendations concerning the most effective usage of online platforms.

**KEYWORDS.** Digitalization, online education, digital formats of education, education platforms, Moodle, problem of online education, problem of distant learning.

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The problem of using education platforms for universities is currently urgent and relevant. The format of learning process has radically changed since 2020 due to the pandemic restrictions, as well as to the national strategy towards digitalization of all the socially-meaningful processes including education, that was declared in our country several years ago<sup>1</sup>. Before 2020, digital formats in education were known to be relevant first due to their technical origin, which used to be considered innovative and modern. Despite all these facts, the issue of relevancy of online platforms is raised again in this article, since strong arguments for their usage need to be found today. Digital and online platforms are to be analyzed and discussed in detail. It is necessary to define the innovativeness of modern electronic, digital and online platforms and their efficiency for the teaching process in our universities.

According to the Handbook of Pedagogy and Theory of Teaching, innovative methods are supposed to *enhance interaction* between a student and a teacher, their cooperation, individualizing the learning process and unleashing the potential of each student. Innovative methods are methods, involving new ways of the interaction frame ‘teacher–student’, as well as providing a certain novelty in practical activity of learning the teaching material. Innovative methods are divided into:

1) *general innovative methods*, which are represented by global concepts of learning, such as optimization of education and learning process, implementation of humanist provisions, practical informative technologies, organization and management of teaching processes;

2) *specific innovative methods*, which are usually represented by authorial experimental approaches, techniques and methodologies, that have been worked out on the basis of modern paradigm of education and implemented into the learning and education process<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, *interactivity*, enhancing the efficiency of learning process, which is based on searching the new interaction methods between a teacher and a student, is considered to be the main criterion of *innovativeness*. It is to be noted, that technical methods and electronic ways of interaction themselves are neither interactive, nor innovative in their nature, they only suggest means and formats for their implementation within the new requirements and trends of modern education process.

<sup>1</sup> Putin Set the Goal to Achieve Overall Digital Literacy. URL: <https://tass.ru/pmef-2017/articles/4307379>.

<sup>2</sup> Handbook of Pedagogy and Teaching Theory. Innovative Methods of Teaching. URL: [https://spravochnik.ru/pedagogika/teoriya\\_obucheniya/innovacionnye\\_metody\\_obucheniya](https://spravochnik.ru/pedagogika/teoriya_obucheniya/innovacionnye_metody_obucheniya).

Some researchers, studying the education environment and its current problems stress the inequality of the terms *innovative*, *interactive*, *electronic* and *technical* that brings clarity to understanding of the problem. A. Subacheva and O. Subacheva consider the features of interactive methods in modern education environment: “understanding of interactive methods should not imply using information and computer technologies only. The meaning of interactive learning should be seen as ability to interact and be in the conversational regime not only with a computer but with a human first of all” [1].

Scholars and teachers considering and discussing interactive learning on the pages of textbooks and scientific articles, show a wide range of methods, that involve multilevel interaction between a teacher and a student, which aims to reveal abilities of the student and build his/her skills. Foreign researchers also see the main aim of teaching students as providing “diverse undergraduate students with the opportunity to “do” the work of those disciplines and find personal connection within them” [2]. Facilitating active engagement with their discipline within classrooms of diverse undergraduate students is considered as the main challenge of teaching process [3]. It means that the most meaningful and developing component of teaching and learning process is providing active cooperative joint activity of a teacher and students, where the main focus is put on creative and dynamic content of this cooperation, but not on the technical formats of it.

Famous Russian scholars, who see the issue as the ‘substitution of goals by the means for achieving them’, raised a more serious problem of methodological and philosophical character. They addressed the open letter to the President of the Russian Federation where they ask to ‘correct’ the chosen course towards overall digitalization of education: “*Digital technologies* must be considered as one of the means for enhancing the quality of education and one of the intensifiers of human natural intellectual power. Thus, the development of practice on their usage *cannot be the main goal of education policy*. It is clear there is a substitution of education goal, which we should see in full harmonious development of the individual, for the means of its achieving. This misunderstanding can cause the ‘mistake of the wrong goal’ known in cybernetics, which may direct the education development to systemic catastrophe<sup>3</sup>. The debates are underway, and the scholars express their concerns about underestimation of serious problems and consequences that digitalization has brought, such as:

- insufficient training of educators for online teaching [4; 5];
- moving towards full digitalization in education as more effective format of it [6];
- the risk of excluding the human with his/her creative potential from the learning process;
- limiting the educator’s role to managing functions only or replacing him/her with artificial intelligence [6].

As it was mentioned above, the importance and urgency of distance learning methods, various digital systems and platforms have undoubtedly increased recently due to the orientation towards digitalization and the change of education format during COVID-19 pandemic. However, not every technical means or platform will be considered effective and novel for human formation and education process. The present study aims to evaluate and pragmatically assess the online platforms offered, defining their strengths and weaknesses.

In accordance with all these factors, the learning system Moodle as the main subject of our study needs more attention and a more detailed analysis, since it is being

<sup>3</sup> The Scientists Ask Putin to Review the System of ‘Digital’ Education in Russia. URL: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/05/11/uchenye-prosvyat-putina-peresmotret-sistemu-cifrovogo-obrazovaniya-v-rossii>.

implemented at Baikal State University for more than 10 years. Currently, the university pays special attention to various forms of distance and online learning available, transforming more and more theoretical and practical courses to online formats based on Moodle system, offering regular training courses on mastering the Moodle program for the tutors and professors. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider and highlight the most significant characteristic features of the platform under study.

The founder of Moodle is Martin Dougiamas, who was brought up in Australian provincial countryside in the middle of the 70-s. He created the new free online platform in the early 2000-s, which became very popular around the world during the next two decades. He was the one who refused to sell the rights for its distribution, wishing to keep the free open format of the application and its accessibility for users.

As for Moodle, it is a system of managing courses (electronic learning) known as a virtual learning environment. The abbreviation MOODLE means *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*. The system is a free web application distributed under the terms of the GNU General Public License, which provides the opportunities to create sites for online learning under the license. The first version was issued in August 2002. It covers 18 % of the market in the USA<sup>4</sup>.

Moodle has many strengths and a wide range of opportunities for communication is one of them. The system supports the files sharing function for any formats of files as both, between a student and a teacher, and between students themselves. The platform includes many learning instruments, such as lecture, task, resource, test, glossary, forum and others. The service can promptly inform all the participants of the course or the groups about the current events. Forum is an instrument of Moodle that enables learning problems to be discussed online, which can be also organized within the groups. The function 'assessment of messages' can help participants organize the discussion of the message or a learning problem in real time. The system is able to create a portfolio of each student and keeps all the commentaries, marks, grades and reviews of all his/her works registered in the system. Through Moodle, one can control and supervise the attendance records of the students and their participation in the learning activities. The tutor can organize the teaching process varying different course elements and combine them according to the learning objectives and tasks<sup>5</sup>.

Wide distribution of the platform around the world and its successful application in many universities of our country proves its effectiveness or at least its popularity. The users, teachers, tutors, students, IT specialists and programmers actively discuss the advantages and disadvantages of Moodle system. The discussion continues online and in research publications, highlighting the range of its advantages and disadvantages. The technical characteristics and functions of the system, aspects of its application and user-friendliness as well as its learning potential are under constant analysis. The present study also aims to define and describe some of the important aspects of Moodle. Among the positive features, the following aspects can be mentioned:

- *free character* and accessibility for downloading. We consider this aspect as a characteristic feature rather than as an advantage;
- *flexible interface* with the possibility to configurate the model and design of certain pages. The platform can be integrated with the large amount of software, including instruments for communication and joint activity, managing documents and other applications for improving productivity;

<sup>4</sup> Systems of Distance Learning. Moodle. Advantages and Disadvantages. URL: <https://www.hostedmine.com/documents/2256>.

<sup>5</sup> Electronic Education Environment 3KL Moodle // Open Technologies. URL: [https://www.opentechnology.ru/info/moodle\\_about.mtd/](https://www.opentechnology.ru/info/moodle_about.mtd/).

– *open original code*. The original code for the newly created programs is open that means it is available for online viewing and changing. It enables the existing code to be used for creating new program versions, for correcting errors and possibly for modifying the open program;

– *openness and capacity for changing*, additions and modification of the content.

– *easy installation and upgrading* for transition to new versions<sup>6</sup>;

– *wide range of functions* to organize, fill and control the content and the types of learning activities;

– *variety of options* for making tasks etc.

Thus, summarizing the main advantages of Moodle, we can define the most meaningful ones which are: accessibility, high potential for modifications, multifunctional character and variety of noncontact types of learning activities, which can be effectively used in lecture courses and in self-study activities of the students.

However, a number of serious disadvantages and drawbacks makes Moodle the focus of constant debates on the pages of research and scientific-methodical manuals, as well as in academic sites in the Internet. The following aspects can be considered as disadvantages of the system:

– *complexity and labor intensity for data input*. Complexity of using or user-unfriendliness of the platform is pointed out by all the groups of people, including not only tutors, but also programmers and IT-specialists;

– *unclear mechanism of copyrights protection* for the course authors, arranged in Moodle.

The aspect was pointed out by the scholars of Syktyvkar State University named after Pitirim Sorokin during their discussion, where they express their concerns on the transition of education process to the Internet environment, which generates a number of questions. These questions refer to the pay issues of the tutors' and authors' labor, regulatory framework of the university, authorship of the online courses, training tutors for making quality content and other issues. As a result, they decided to discuss these issues with other teachers and refer them to the university administration<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, according to the experience of online education in the Russian universities, the tight link between Technical Support Departments or IT specialists of the universities and the educators or tutors should become a prerequisite of the platform implementation. The factor of close cooperation between these groups of specialists could mitigate the drawbacks of the platform and improve its effectiveness. Other difficulties of digital platform's usage are to be noted:

– *risk of information leak* from the universities' internal databases;

– *a wide range of opportunities for student's cheating* which the platform provides does not enhance the quality of educational and learning process; (it is known to be a typical disadvantage of all the distance learning systems and digital platforms);

*lack of video-conferencing facilities* included into the original version of Moodle, doesn't allow the platform to be suitable for fully-interactive distant learning format.

Moodle platform has serious operational and technical disadvantages:

– *lack of site-level groups (academic groups)*, that makes it difficult to keep records of students from different specialties and faculties. The groups are formed inside the course only and cannot be transferred to other courses;

<sup>6</sup> Systems of Distance Learning. Moodle. Advantages and Disadvantages. URL: <https://www.hostedredmine.com/documents/2256>.

<sup>7</sup> Syktyvkar State University named after P. Sorokin: Education in Online Environment // Expert Board "Education Accreditation". URL: [https://akvobr.ru/sgu\\_im\\_pitirima\\_sorokina\\_obrazovanie\\_v\\_onlajn-srede.html/](https://akvobr.ru/sgu_im_pitirima_sorokina_obrazovanie_v_onlajn-srede.html/).



– *lack of functions for university-level monitoring* means that marks received by the students can be put and operated inside the course only. There is no opportunity for building academic statements on the subject or the course for example term-based or annual statement.

The reason why the Moodle-system does not meet all the requirements of the learning process in the Russian universities is obvious: Moodle is a system oriented to the Western model of education, which includes learning the course by several groups of participants, while the national higher institutions need the distant-learning system which is more oriented to academic groups<sup>8</sup>.

Based on practical experience of the Russian universities of the last two decades, we conclude that the orientation towards the western model of education development has not proven to be highly effective. It is obvious that the means and methods of learning should be chosen in accordance with the needs of national education system, based on the values and practical goals of the national society.

The strategy of the university development in accordance with the new conditions is under review and constant analysis of the scholars and academicians including the researchers of BSU and other Russian universities, who try to analyze the challenges of the modern period on the pages of research literature, predict and avoid the wrong direction of the universities' development. According to their studies, it is important to choose the individual direction of the university development taking into account the internal needs of the institution and the external trends of global education environment [7]. The researchers also proposed to consider all the pros and cons of electronic and online formats of education, including bachelor and master's programs, while choosing the appropriate direction of a higher institution development [8]. The authors describe the challenges of digitalization and transition to online education. Some of the analyses are student-oriented, they are mainly aimed to define the difficulties, expectations and desires of the students today [9], although they do not pay much attention to the educators' feedback, which is worth to be studied as well [4]. Other researchers try to define the possible risks and notice the bottlenecks of the distant learning process, stating the decrease in students' motivation during distant learning and the great importance of off-line academic environment, which is necessary for making students feel as a real part of the education process [10].

At the same time, there are research papers, which consider general positive effects of digitalization, describing its importance for economy development and for integration of production processes [11]; or try to define the reasons of negative public attitude towards digitalization, explaining it as conservative resistance of consumers towards innovation [12]. Although, it is not very reasonable to put at the same level the potential impact of digitalization on economic environment and its possible effect on education system development in our country, taking into account all the long-term social and humanitarian goals of the latter.

Analyzing the application of Moodle at Baikal State University, it is necessary to note that having 3 automatic electronic systems and databases the university obtained (ESM, Teams, Moodle) makes it difficult to monitor and coordinate the teaching process, therefore it does not optimize but multiplies the number of operations on inputting and processing data. All these factors might seriously complicate the job of an educator and decrease the effectiveness of using electronic systems in the university. BSU needs to upgrade the technological approach, as it is necessary to synchronize all the existing electronic platforms, optimizing redundant modules and

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<sup>8</sup> Systems of Distance Learning. Moodle. Advantages and Disadvantages. URL: <https://www.hostedredmine.com/documents/2256>.

creating a unified monitoring system of marks, results of education and learning activity within the university frame.

Therefore, the transition of education system towards digital, electronic or on-line formats does not mean its higher efficiency; it can enhance it in case of optimal and reasonable approach to its usage in accordance with the necessities of the higher institution.

As for using Moodle for teaching foreign languages at Baikal State University, there are several important issues to be noted:

- in teaching practical courses (including foreign languages) the system is convenient for making *tests and assessment materials*, however it has *limited range of advantages* for current learning activities;

- the variety of tasks offered by the platform is great, it includes using audio-, video-, text materials, that meets the requirements of teaching foreign languages, contributes to building necessary competences, but does not cover all the required learning activities, excluding for instance dialogue type of communication or unprepared oral communication;

- the types of activities within the platform mainly *do not include direct interaction with a student*, but provides indirect interaction (through documents, instructions, forums, video-lectures etc.), that does not prove the platform to be highly interactive;

- several tasks for current assessment are relocated outside the system, with using format “answer off-site”, which decreases the productivity of the platform in the learning process;

- deferred feedback or teacher’s reply to the works made by the student, in contrast to lecture courses, decreases productivity of learning activities particularly in teaching practical courses including foreign languages;

- lack of connection between Moodle and all-university base of assessment, credit tests and exams, document flow and learning process monitoring, that is supported by the systems Teams and ESM BSU, creates difficulties in immediate and regular data input and control, *increasing labor intensity* of serving these systems for educators and technical university staff.

Concluding all the factors mentioned above it is to be noted that implementation of Moodle at the higher institutions in general, and in BSU particularly, is to be based on on-going analysis and feedback from the participants of the platform. Constant modification and adaptation for internal needs of the institution should become a prerequisite for using Moodle in teaching foreign languages at BSU to make it more effective, as it allows programmers and IT-specialists to improve and perfect the system on regular bases in the interest of the learning process participants.

Summarizing the biggest risks and negative effects of digitalization in education, we also have to describe the additional factors that make the process problematic and controversial. The main difficulty, as we can see it, is connected with the bigger workload on the educators and teachers, as all the changes of the transition period have burdened their work and lives, which is often neglected by the scholars writing articles on this issue. We consider that it is important to define all the challenges and difficulties of distant learning for the educators, teachers and tutors who are often alone with their problems:

- the range of the educator’s responsibilities and necessary competences has expanded, but the range of resources has remained the same or even shrunk;

- provision of stable Internet connection and solving current technical problems are the issues the educator has to handle mainly on his / her own every day;

- arranging own work station in new conditions in practice is also the duty and concern of the educator;

- it is the teacher who is supposed to establish and control the stable connection and regular communication with students;
- the search for new forms of interaction with students in digital environment is one of the main challenges and tasks the educator should facilitate; these forms are expected at least to keep the effectiveness of the teaching process and make students concentrated and interested during the lesson online;
- all the digital educational platforms open many opportunities for student's cheating and make it difficult for a teacher to prevent it;
- it is necessary to arrange assessment activity in new conditions and providing objective evaluation as well as working out new rules and criteria for this process;
- higher physical strain during online classes requires more energy and concentration from the educator etc.

The present article attempted to describe the important aspects of the current state of modern national education, which is experiencing the transition and transformation towards digital format due to the new conditions. It is clear, that the current situation calls for constant analysis and monitoring from the professional and research community, on-going creative and scientific inquiry for solving the urgent problems, as well as defining pros and cons of the new digital formats. This pragmatic approach is expected to help the educators overcome difficulties of the present moment and keep the most valuable component of the national education system, which addresses the human, his/her values, emotions, harmonious development in accordance with the needs of our society and the requests of the time.

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