Moodle and Internet - changing and enhancing the learning process.

What I am going to dwell upon is the use of blogs and Moodle in teaching and learning language and literature in the high school classroom.
I am a Moodler with a five-month experience, which means I am just at the beginning, still exploring the wealth of opportunities that Moodle offers for making the process of learning more interesting and rewarding.

Before Moodle, there were the blogs. As a huge internet fan, I've always been thinking of how to make students more involved in the process of learning using Internet. I knew that the world wide web is an ocean of information which needs an excellent surfer to be able to stay on the surface. Thus, I decided to involve my students by providing, so to say, a guided tour of what might be useful for our study of literature. So, three years ago, I created a literature blog where I regularly posted excerpts from the books we studied, analyses, critique. Now, I must say, that this venture of mine, was, to a great extent, a passive activity on the part of the students. I simply saved their time browsing. And I did some censorship, that is, I channelled their attention to critical articles of value. How we worked with the blog: students were given assignment to read those parts of the books I had uploaded, or critical articles, and to do some tasks – either answer some questions, or starting from what they had been supplied on the blog to make their own analyses, or write an appreciation of the book. In fact, the literature blog was a kind of virtual textbook with pictures, audio files or links to other web pages. What are the strong and weak points of this initiative of mine.

 The strong points:
        1.Saving up a lot of time in the classroom. Instead of reading passages from the textbook in class and explaining unfamiliar words /it needs be done when studying literature, especially from older periods/, students did this at home, while in class we placed the focus on discussion and analysis. How did they cope with unfamiliar words: I posted glossaries, and of course, there was a handy link to an online dictionary.
        2.Motivating students to read. In our post-Gutenberg times, it is a small feat to make students read.

The weak points:
        1.No reliable feedback for the involvement of all students. There are always students whom you cannot get to do the assignment given. And I had not found a way to monitor their internet activities, I never knew how many students had actually used the blog.
        2.I did not encourage students to post comments under the materials on the blog. One reason for that was security of private information. You know, a blog is open to anybody who might come across it while surfing. I did not want the information which students had written to become public. I did not have the right to do that. That is why, the blog was used mainly as an additional resource and all the feedback I got was from the performance of my students in the classroom.

There came Moodle! I heard about it at a training course provided by a school books publishing house. I did not understand much at first and I had even forgotten about it when one day our computer studies teacher sent me a link to the school site and said: look, what I have found and installed. It turned out to be Moodle. I needed a month to just get an idea of how things worked. And I started experimenting. To be on the safe side, let me admit that I have a lot more to learn about Moodle, but still, these five months I worked on this platform have helped me accumulate invaluable experience, be it limited though.

Before launching the system, I had to cope with a lot of technicalities, to read manuals, forums, and to make a lot of mistakes while trying to produce some teaching material. Besides being a lover of literature, I decided to focus on language. The reason was that I taught twelfth grade students and they had to sit their final exams, the so called "matura" in Bulgarian. I decided to regularly upload 'matura'-type exams. It was a real challenge to start the system working, technically speaking. All my students had to make their own accounts, then receive a mail which directed them to a link. Clicking the link, they got access to the system and I, as the administrator of the e-learning site, made them part of the class called Language and Grammar, 12th class, First Foreign Language. Some of them had problems not knowing what exactly to do and we actively communicated via skype or e-mail. The first exam which they did was also a challenge. Some had problems with the different kinds of browsers, others with the internet connection. I had to give them second attempts or to manually regrade some of their answers because of either technical errors such as not leaving one space but more, or because of my own mistakes in entering the correct answers while preparing the test. Despite all these problems, there was one great advantage: we, all my students and I, communicated on matters connected with learning and all of us were almost emotionally involved in this process. Moodle gave us what the blog could not – real communication and feedback. I should like to enumerate the positive sides of using Moodle in high school language learning, though I have explored only a tiny part of the innumerable opportunities that Moodle offers to a teacher and his/her students.

I think that using Moodle in a high school environment is highly motivating to the students. First, they had access to the system at any moment of the day or night (I usually gave them several days to do an assignment) and felt at ease because they could do the task assigned whenever they felt ready for it. Second, the students appreciated highly the objectivity of the system: they saw their results immediately and were aware that it was what they themselves had done and that there was no subjectivity in assessment. Third, it turned out that work with Moodle was the perfect way to make even the laziest student work. Perhaps, it was the points that I mentioned previously that motivated them, for all the students did all of the tasks. While in the traditional classroom environment, sad to say, but we, Bulgarian teachers, know that there is always a number of students, and quite often not that small a number, who do not do much in class or do nothing at all, and it is often almost impossible to get them involved. Moodle did that, it got them involved. All students did all the tasks assigned! What is more, they did not just imitate activity, let's say, by clicking whatever choice without thinking as they often do at exams in the classroom. I could see that they worked seriously because Moodle has an excellent system of monitoring students activities: I can see at what time they enter the system, whether they just view the tasks or make an attempt at a quiz. Some of the absent-minded students sometimes forgot about the deadline and asked for a second attempt, others who experienced technical problems with the Internet connection also asked for a second attempt. I always gave it to the latter, while to the former – I deliberately prolonged giving them access to the quiz again in order to try and make them more responsible. Students got strongly motivated by another feature of Moodle: at any time they could see their grades, they could see their mistakes in the writing task with comments by the teacher, they could calculate their grade themselves. The method of grading used in Moodle is the percentage of true answers to a task. But I ask the students to convert the percentage into our system of grading, from 2 to 6, and they feel happy to do it. They see themselves as real partners in the process of assessment. They have trust in the system, they realize that on the next quiz, if they try harder, they will get a better result.

Moodle turned out to be highly advantageous not only to the students but also to me, as a teacher. To be honest, especially at the beginning, Moodle requires a lot of time and effort from a teacher: the teacher has to prepare all the tasks, quizzes, resources, etc. It is really time-consuming but it quickly 'pays back' because the process of checking mistakes and grading is done by Moodle in the nick of time. The teacher only has to look in a student's profile to see what his results are. Just imagine how long it would take you if you had to manually grade the tests of 25 students, when each test comprises more than a hundred questions. Moodle does this in seconds. What the teacher does is just print the grades page and then transfer the grades into the official school register. As my experience showed, the time allotted to preparing the quiz or assignment was much less than the time it would take me to check and grade all the students' works. Another advantage is that once you have created your pool of questions, you can use them in the future for making other quizzes and then, it will take you just minutes. As I mentioned previously, I am a beginner at Moodle, that is why I have not learned yet how to use the various tools that are incorporated in Moodle and allow you to use ready-made tests or to prepare them much more easily. But I am intent on learning how to do this.

Teachers not acquainted with Moodle might ask the question: how do you cope with cheating and plagiarism. Moodle allows the installation of anti-plagiarism software that automatically checks if a piece of writing has been plagiarised. As for cheating, there are a number of ways to prevent this: Moodle allows shuffling choices within a question and shuffling the questions within a quiz. Thus, even students sitting next to each other and doing the test in the computer lab would see 'different questions'. Besides, every quiz is given a time limit; consequently, the student practically has no time to think of cheating because he/she will run out of time. Also, there is the option of full screen pop-up with some Java Script security and a password for each quiz. Furthermore, there is the option of groups and giving access to a group or individual within a definite period. My experience showed that my students did not make attempts at cheating: their results showed that. For example, an assignment included 7 different tasks or quizzes and there was not a single case of two students having absolutely the same results, or one student having all the tasks with the highest possible grade. I would add another positive side of working with Moodle that Bulgarian teachers present here will understand: all these Moodle activities I described were done with 12th grade students! I should explain to those who are not Bulgarians that over the recent years, due to many complex reasons and circumstances, it has been extremely difficult for Bulgarian teachers to handle 12th grade students' class attendance and performance. Moodle solved this task for me. Some of the students did not attend class because they had preliminary exams at a university, but they did their Moodle assignment.

In summary, I should say that Moodle is an invaluable tool for enhancing learning. It is completely in line with the 'third wave' civilization of which Alvin Toffler wrote some decades ago. The school of the 21st century needs changing from its traditional 'stationary' status into a more flexible one so that it can meet the demands of the economy of knowledge. Teachers and students should be let out of the prison of the centuries-old control-obedience scheme and become facilitators and partners.