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Using E-Learning Platform for Enhancing Teaching and Learning in the Field of Social Work at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

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Abstract

This chapter explores the issue of e-learning as a helpful method in higher education institutes and universities in general, and specifically, in the field of social work education. It is based on a study carried out at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman and presents knowledge and attitudes of students towards reliance on the e-learning platforms, such as Moodle, as a helpful educational tool. It highlights that Moodle as an e-learning platform enhances communication between teachers and students, and among students themselves. The chapter presents the findings about the usefulness of Moodle, as an e-learning platform as well as challenges of social work students face during using e-learning platform in their learning. Finally, it offers recommendations to deal with the challenges and highlights implication of the study beyond social work education.

Keywords: e-learning platform, higher education, Moodle, social work education, student perspectives

1. Introduction

The world today experiences the strongest era of revolutionary transformation in knowledge and information seeking behavior. This is due to enormous progress based on the technological revolution, especially in the field of information and communication technology (ICT) with all its patterns. The emergence of computer technologies late in the twentieth century, and consequently, the world wide web (the Internet) have had a great impact on the speed of information transference among people since the world has become a global village. The emergence of Web 2.0 has transformed the web into a more dynamic and interactive environment, offering a set of tools that enhance contact and collaboration between users. Several applications, such as online social networks, wikis and blogs, support such Web vision [1].

Most fields of contemporary life have benefited from the enormous evolution of communication and information exchange technology. Accordingly, this evolution reflection to various fields has affected all aspects of life and changed its patterns and styles. The educational sector has never been an exception. The educational process was gradually affected by technology until reaching now to “e-learning” [2].

Mastering the basic skills necessary for using ICT is a requirement in the learning process in all fields of education since these skills play an important role in facilitating communication, getting information and preparing research and studies. The lack of these skills limits the interaction between teachers and their students and getting knowledge resources necessary for teaching.

Using computers and network has become the main prerequisite for education, including teaching and research. Ability to access these resources and using it have become a factor that contributes to the development, progress, and improving the quality of education. It becomes necessary for teachers and students at higher educational institutes to master the skills necessary for extracting and using information quickly and easily [3].

The author, in the following paragraphs, presents a summary of a previous study that he has already conducted. The study was titled: “*The Moodle Application Constraints among Students in Social Work at Sultan Qaboos University*” [4]. It was an attempt to identify the constraints against Social Work students when they were using e-learning applications in their education, specifically, Moodle application.

2. Key concepts

Defining the key concepts is a cornerstone and important task in scientific research. It prevents overlapping between concepts, and it draws a boundary for understanding meaning of a concept in that particular context. The concepts of e-learning and Moodle are the most important key concepts for this chapter. In order for this chapter to achieve its goal, both concepts should be explored so that the readers can understand the intended meanings in the context of this study.

3. e-Learning

People use different words when talking about teaching and learning. Sometimes the same word will mean different things to different people, and sometimes different words will carry the same meaning [5]. The term “learning”, according to Webster Dictionary, refers to The act or experience of one that learns, knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study and modification of a behavioral tendency by experience (such as exposure to conditioning) [6]. More recent theories of learning view it as an active, constructive process. Individuals attempt to make sense of incoming information by interpreting it in terms of their prior knowledge, by questioning its meaning, and by exploring its uses [7]. In the light of the above definition of learning, it can be said that learning as a process can be done through a larger and wider process of education. Hence, the term e-learning can be tackled as a process that is done in terms of the larger and wider process of e-education. Accordingly, the author thinks that the concept specified and intended in this chapter is e-learning, not e-Education, since the current chapter sheds light on a specific part of a larger process called e-Education that includes policies, goals, plans, programs, methods, and techniques.

Recently, e-learning has become a vital word in the field of education and one of the main issues of translation, which was added to the knowledge society. e-Learning – or electronic learning – has been referred to as “technology-enhanced learning,” and more recently as “digital learning.” e-Learning describes a set of technology-mediated methods that can be applied to support student learning and can include many elements [8]. e-learning can be perceived as a wide concept covering a wide group of applications and processes included computer-based

learning, using networks, virtual classes, digital cooperation, and internet-based learning. e-learning can be defined as “communicating the content/material through electronic media: internet/intranet, internal/external networks, transmission by satellite, audio and video tapes, and CDs. e-learning is perceived as a narrower concept than distant learning- that includes learning based on text and courses delivered through written correspondences [9].

e-learning has rapidly grown since two decades after the wide availability of internet services provided to the public, especially in the industrial field since the 1990s. It became an accepted and commonly used component in tertiary education [10]. Currently, activities of e-learning are various and multiple, such as typing the content, training, communicating through the internet and intranet of a school or a university. It also provides students with electronic media, such as, audio and video media, CD ROMs, TV, and finally mobile phones that can facilitate a sound environment for e-learning and support communication wherever the learner is [11]. In addition, e-learning is perceived as a method of teaching using technology and internet with all sections of the course’s content. It helps students be more effective learners and provide them with more knowledge through the internet and mutual interaction among students and teachers. It is also appropriate for the design of “virtual reality” that helps students to solve real-world issues. Since technology is merely a vehicle, the e-learning requires well-developed teaching practices with these new instruments.

E-learning, an instructional strategy for imparting needed knowledge, skills, and attitudes in organizations, is here to stay. Its viability, effectiveness, and potential to return tangible benefits to organizations depend largely on how it is designed, delivered, and evaluated [12]. In the recent years, this term was limited to tracks provided by the web or direct electronic lines, using e-mails, visual conferences, focus groups, chat rooms, e-whiteboards on the internet [13]. To avoid overlapping between e-learning and other learning or teaching related concepts, the author provides readers with an operational definition of the term: A joint process between a learner and a teacher, where the learner is the core of the process.

It is a process complementary to the traditional education, that is, university blended learning which uses modern technology in teaching without abandoning the typical educational reality and attendances in classrooms. It starts from certain principles: principles of educational democracy, educational programming and individualization, self-motivation, and developing and continuing education. It depends on the accessibility of learning materials through electronic media related to the internet, an intranet, or direct electronic lines; and a specialized application such as Moodle, Blackboard, Web CT, or any other relative accredited application.

The role of communication media plays a considerable role in the realization of skills necessary for learning. These media can be the internet or intranet with their developed features. It includes all forms of electronically supported education that is based on a set of teaching and learning tools: computers, smartphones, and iPads, etc. It uses emails, visual conferences, discussion groups, chat rooms, and electronic whiteboards on the internet, and supports exchanging audio and video files, pictures, texts supported by such programs as a word, PDF, PowerPoint, and Excel. These applications provide various opportunities or the acquisition of the scientific material and retrieving it, and for mutual dialog among learners, and between the learners and their teacher whenever they agree to do this dialog, through virtual spaces.

The learner, with easier ways, is able to search and get knowledge from e-libraries and different websites. The learner is allowed to do evaluations, tests, and reviews of reports and research, and to correct them electronically before

sending them back immediately with the least efforts and the greatest benefits, and precisely.

4. Moodle

Moodle is a learning platform designed to provide educators, administrators and learners with a **single robust, secure and integrated system** to create personalized learning environments [14]. Also we can describe Moodle as a Web application used to manage online courses. It provides the ability to develop courses in an integrated manner. It is one of the open source software packages to provide an electronic environment to manage academic courses. It is a relatively modern system developed in 1999 to by Marti Daugiamas to manage educational activities. “Moodle” is an acronym for “Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment”. In this context, Moodle is a dynamic educational media in the learning environment. It is also:

- Course Management System (GMS)
- Learning Management System (LMS)
- Learning Content Management System (LCMS)
- E-learning Platform

This application is distributed under GNU license, which means that it can be downloaded at no cost from the link (<http://www.moodle.org>). It works without any modifications on any computer using PHP, UNIX, and Windows. It also supports many databases, especially (My SOL). The application is available with various languages and supports the Arabic language in a simple way. This application also supports Word, PDF, PowerPoint and Excel files, in addition, audio/video files, pictures, and external links.

Across the globe, the spread of novel coronavirus COVID-19 has led to profound changes in social interaction and organization, and the education sector has not been immune [15]. Therefore, most of universities and academic institutions relied on many types of e-Learning applications to provide lessons and training to their students, one of these applications is Moodle. It helps us to upload our academic programs, either in undergraduate or graduate stages. Also, through Moodle, we can submit training courses and life-long learning workshops.

Moodle has the superiority over a lot of similar application concerning feedback, its variety of tools for monitoring students’ activities, ease of use, quick update that is compatible with learning software developments- according to a comparative study conducted by the German University of Humboldt between Moodle and Blackboard applications. The study found out that Moodle is superior because of ease of use, multiple social interaction tools, and many other accessories.

5. University education and necessity for relying on e-learning applications

The university education is one of the fields benefiting from progress made in Information-Communication Technology. Due to this progress, many methods help in presenting the study material to students easily, quickly, and clearly. This progress has added a new pattern of learning, so-called e-learning [16]. The e-learning

is based on an educational philosophy focusing on self-learning: converting the teaching into learning with highly self-dependent students. Accordingly, the communicative media have an increasingly considerable role in realizing skills necessary or learning process. These media can be the internet or intranet with their progressive features. This means that the educational virtual reality, in its philosophy, is based on a number of principles that conceptually differs from the principles on which the traditional education is based: principles of democracy of learning, programming and uniqueness of learning, self-motivation, and developing the continuing learning [17].

Benefiting from computers and WWW in e-learning has not been limited to certain disciplines than others since all disciplines gradually have begun to rely on this new type one way or another. The Higher Education institutions have provided many offers of e-learning, where the traditional methods of learning have improved. The traditional teaching methodology often includes presenting the study material containing the formally assigned texts through lectures, forums or workshops. In this respect, many academic studies have asserted that students learn more effectively when they have the opportunity to discuss the academic material with others and to deal with learning as a cooperative process.

As to applying the e-learning in the Arab universities, a study showed how the Arab universities go along with modern technological developments concerning E-learning management systems, distant education, to what extent they use these developments, and in what courses they use them; where the researcher checked 517 websites of Arab universities, faculties, and institutions. The findings showed that only about 15% of Arab universities have e-learning management systems. They included open universities, virtual universities, and some universities of science and technology in Arab countries and Gulf countries, except the religious universities. In addition, a number of electronic courses were relatively low. Since using the electronic courses management systems will lead to quantitative and qualitative shift in education, and non-use of these systems may lead to technological and scientific backwardness, the researcher presented a set of recommendations for activating the electronic courses and distant education in Arab universities in a simple, quick and affordable way [18]. Although this study showed that weak adoption of E-learning management systems by Arab universities, it asserts the adoption of this pattern of education would lead to the quantitative and qualitative shift in the university education in Arab countries.

The academics have different preferences of teaching methods. Some of them prefer traditional methods that depend on face-to-face lectures and traditional lessons. Others prefer using technology to support their teaching practices. The first group of academics thinks that the traditional methods enable their personal communication with students and that using technology takes students away from teachers, and consequently teachers feel themselves away from their students. This traditional perspective focuses on the role of the lecturer as a source of leadership in the learned subject or material. They think that personal communication between lecturers and students is an empowering thing, where more opportunities for receiving feedback in homogeneous groups support these traditional methods.

The other perspective assumes that using technology enables academics to play the role of facilitator who helps students achieve high progress in the study subject when available and when needed [19]. In this context, one of the applied studies, which included all faculty members in various scientific departments, including the Department of Sociology and Social Work, recommended the integration of the faculty member in the teaching method between the traditional method of teaching in the classroom and contacting students face to face and electronic method through application electronic content management "Moodle" [20].

6. e-Learning as a helpful method in social work education

The specialization of Social Work is one of the recent fields that attempt to depend on this type of learning to complete the professional preparation of its students. The literature or previous studies in this field, in the Arab world, are hardly available. One of these studies assessed the benefits of professional intervention based on using Moodle as one of the e-learning applications. The study found that using this application though developing an e-course has led social work students to acquire efficient knowledge and experiences; they also managed to gain the capacity to solve problems during their study of the course. One of the most important recommendations of this study is to implement research on constraints against social work students' use of e-learning and how to overcome them [21].

Ahmed F. Saleh [22] carried out a descriptive analytical study "trainers and students' attitudes towards using e-learning in Social Work". He assessed the current level of e-learning related knowledge, attitudes, and practice of students and trainers in the field of Social Work education. The findings asserted the high average of attitude component, taking the first in order, the knowledge in the second place, then the third component of practice in the third place [22].

In a study titled "E-learning in Social Work; a Case Study of Assiut university" - a descriptive study applied in the Faculty of Social Work, Assiut University- the study showed that there were no significant differences between student's type and their perspectives on possible constraints when applying the e-learning in Social Work. It asserted that there are significant differences between students' place of residence and their perspectives on the possible constraints in applying the e-learning in Social Work. In other words, it was shown that rural students tend to describe e-learning as more difficult, unlike their counterparts who live in cities [23]. This study directed attention towards the possibility of the existence of some constraints that students may face when applying the e-learning in Social Work Education.

A study by José Albors-Garigos showed students' satisfaction of using e-learning methods. It found that satisfaction rates of learners increase by using e-learning, as compared to the reliance on traditional methods of leaning [24].

Elizabeth Johnson presented a paper on strategies for establishing Management Information Systems (MIS) and technology to improve social work practice and research. She showed the possible role of Management Information System (MIS) to result in the integration of information, management, and monitoring through a single program or special information network of the organization; and that this will improve management, services provided, and the assessment of professional practice. The paper included three strategies for directing and developing MIS programs. The paper showed some lessons produced and implemented by MIS programs to work as administrative and evaluative tools for policy followed at the national level.

The model of MIS presented by Elizabeth Johnson sheds light on possibilities of social workers for integrating technology into social work practice and formulation of creative policies. In addition, these strategies can be used for improving and developing the formulations of concepts and developing various technological creations within social work practice [25, 26]. Accordingly, the paper mentioned above pointed out the positive results achieved by using the MIS in social work practice. Hence, these positive results can also be achieved if the e-learning is used as a complementary type of learning with the traditional learning in both field and theoretical aspects; since the e-learning can be utilized in field training of social work students as well as in-service social workers or before their job assignment.

The above theoretical reviews assert the importance of learning patterns and methods; and that this development is related the developments of the teaching methods used as a response to the enormous evolution in technological methods, communication, and networks...etc. On the other hand, the accelerated increase of information to the so called the knowledge explosion; the growing numbers of students and researchers in the field of social work; their crowdedness within academic rooms; or in the light of far distance between students' residence and academic places, all this makes seeking new methods for communicating information and knowledge to students a very important matter.

Accordingly, reliance on e-learning methods and application and developing them have become inevitable necessity in the field of higher education including social work education; since a lot of developed countries have been depending on it one way or another as a method complementary to traditional education. To make sure how successful any developments in teaching and learning processes are, we should conduct extended studies on all related issues, trying to answer or related questions [27].

The urgent imperative to "move online" caused by the recent Covid-19 pandemic [28]. and It has become necessary to conduct studies and research on e-learning issue, as it is one of the modern issues in our contemporary society in general, and specifically in social work education. In the light of the author's modest experience in the field of e-learning in Social Work Education, and his introduction of some e-learning in the recent years, He observed how students of social work avoid participating in or benefiting from e-learning courses presented through the Web and based on Moodle application. Accordingly, the author believes in the importance of submitting this topic for scientific discussion and research.

7. Methodology

Methodology is generally a guideline for solving a problem, with specific components such as phases, tasks, methods, techniques and tools [28]. In that study, the author adopted the descriptive approach by using the social comprehensive survey method, applied to students of social work as a separate specialization at Sultan Qaboos University's Department of Sociology and Social Work. Data-collection was based on an assessment tool designed by the researcher. The tool's reliability and validity were tested on the basis that it would assess students' preparation and attitudes towards using Moodle and define constraints against using and benefiting from it. The researcher applied content analysis for focus group discussion reports, as one of qualitative research type. The groups consisted of well-selected individuals aiming at benefiting from them through group discussions on a certain topic [29]. Two sessions for two groups of specialized students were held to discuss with them the main subjects of the research.

8. Benefits and advantages of e-learning

Although many people still consider traditional universities as the best way to achieve knowledge and get a diploma, online learning proves to be a great alternative. Students have the chance to study in their own time and especially for free. It represents a great way to study many fields and to boost the level of self-motivation. Online learning is so effective because students can finish their homework quickly, and there is more time left for hobbies or for finding a job [30].

E-learning is characterized by depending on the internet as a medium to present the study materials and submitting them to students without stop and twenty-four seven. This educational pattern views a student as the main element in the learning process, where a student can determine the way and time of his/her learning. In addition, there is the possibility of using multiple learning methods through e-learning, such as virtual class, simulation, cooperative learning, and discussion group. e-learning follows the steps of the traditional learning, e.g., study, tests, and certificates. Registration, management, fee payment and monitoring are done through the Internet in educational institutions or universities that depends on such learning pattern.

In addition, e-learning has many other characteristics reflecting on both student and instructor, on the development and respectable management of courses. Thus, E-learning leads to improve student-learning opportunity for exchanging knowledge and skills. The Web community as an e-learning environment is a comfortable way for communication and more practical for Part-time students, or those who cannot attend in regular classrooms because of distance or for other reasons [31].

E-learning has many features and benefits, starting from the scientific concept of e-learning and instruction and its role in distance education and virtual university learning. They can be summed as:

- a. It is beyond time and spatial constraints of education,
- b. Increasing communication among students on one hand, and between students and the university on the other,
- c. Providing educational opportunities for those who had had no access to education, besides saving much efforts, costs and time,
- d. Lessening the managerial burden on teachers,
- e. Teachers are accessible anytime.
- f. Enhancing students' feeling of equal opportunities in learning, breaking blocks of fear and anxiety, and empowering students to express their thoughts, and
- g. Providing considerable accessibility of various resources of information with different kinds [32].

9. Findings

The most important results found by the study included students' enough preparation for using Moodle: students have the basics of using the computer, exploring the internet, and English language skills that enable them to use Moodle. This was due also to the availability of university facilities that help them use Moodle. The following figure shows the arrangement of the sub-dimensions that make up the scale according to the relative strength of each dimension, and the relative strength of the four dimensions combined are: readiness, knowledge, attitude and actual use of Moodle (**Figure 1**).

It shows that the preparation rates reached 77%. Despite this high degree of preparation, it reflects some shortcomings, since the final degree of preparation is supposed to be 100%. Accordingly, it reflects shortcomings with the rate of 23%. The researcher thinks that there is a possibility of overcoming this shortage by

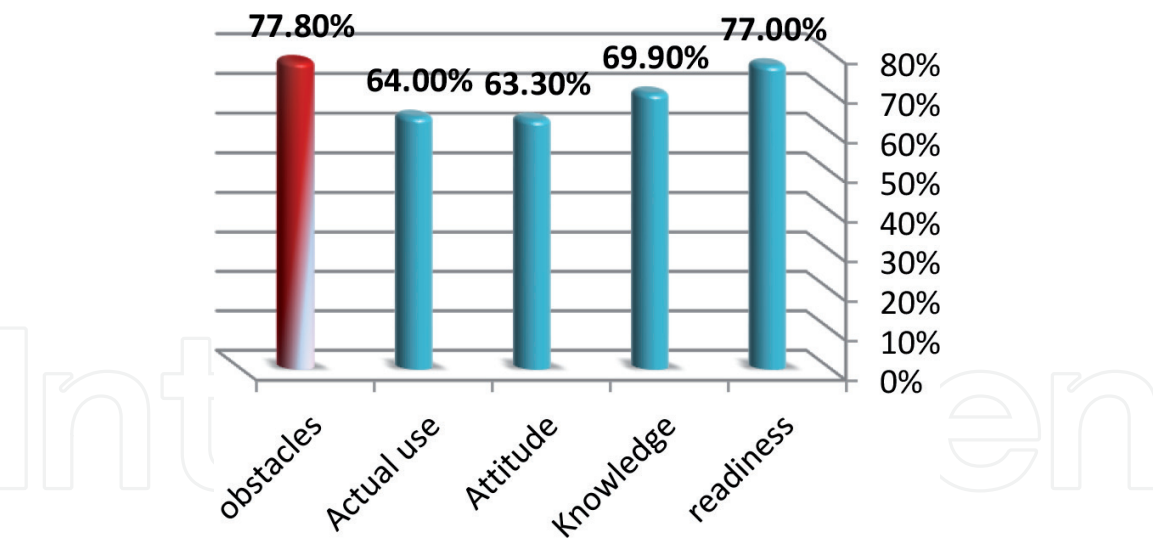


Figure 1.
Results of measuring the sub-dimensions that make up the scale used in the study [33].

helping students increase their computer skills, language skills, and facilitating their internet accessibility from any place wherever they are. On another side, the university should pay more attention to internet services by increasing its speed and efficiency, and continuous development of computer labs. Concerning the cognitive aspect of students, the results of the study showed that they have a good knowledge of Moodle, where the knowledge degree shown by the assessment tool was 69.9%, but it decreases with the total degree of the whole assessment. This means that it reflects the shortage of 30.1, which can be treated by providing students with more learning and training opportunities. As to the relative strength of students' attitudes towards using Moodle, according to the assessment tool, it reached 63.3%. Accordingly, this degree implies shortage in attitudes with 36.7%. The researcher thinks that this shortage can be overcome by getting teachers encourage students to understand this application to achieve the expected great benefits. The research thinks also that showing degrees of shortage in every dimension would serve to clarify the priority of attention needed for dealing with the dimension in question, so that students can get help in avoiding shortcomings, to improve their real usage of this application, and to make use of its all accessories

10. Constraints and recommendations

Concerning the constraints on social work students' usage of Moodle, their point of views came with the following order: insufficient training; few teachers use Moodle in some courses; no incentives from the teachers to encourage using the application; recurrent failures of the internet; the nature of courses does not require using Moodle; insufficient time for using it; and finally, insufficient equipped labs. Thus, the students' suggestions for overcoming these constraints are:

- a. To provide training on Moodle beginning from joining the university, especially in the foundation year. This is done through changing the content of computer courses. This course should contain training he students in how to use e-learning applications available in the university.
- b. To impose using Moodle on teachers as a means complementary to traditional education, at least in one academic course every academic season. This would affect students' interaction and using of Moodle.

- c. To dedicate a time agreed upon by the teachers and students to interact through Moodle, which can be counted as a part of the accredited study time.
- d. To pay more attention for developing computer labs and to increase speed and efficiency of computers.
- e. The importance of improving the quality of the university's internet services.
- f. To provide internet services at students' home through a national communication company to be socially responsible for providing educational support to students: through low costs of getting the internet services by students.

In the light of the constraints on students' utilization of Moodle, their suggestions for dealing with these constraints, and data-analysis, the study recommended the following:

- a. To provide continuous training by the university to students on using e-learning applications, or changing computer courses content to guarantee the availability of training in e-learning applications.
- b. To oblige social work professors and teachers to publish some E-learning course to encourage students to benefit e-learning applications. In addition, they should have more attention to the continuous activation of each application accessories so that students can achieve the most benefits they could gain.
- c. The university and professors should apply mechanisms encouraging students unwilling to use e-learning to use it. This can be done by eliminating the related constraints.
- d. To provide the training necessary for developing students' linguistic and electronic capacities, in order to enhance their preparation, knowledge and positive attitudes towards e-learning.
- e. It is important to eliminate shortcomings of individual capacities of students and to enhance university possibilities that prevent them from enabling them to absorb, use, or benefit from e-learning applications.

11. Conclusion

Social Work is a recently emergent humanist profession since less than 100 years; since acknowledging its first professional method of Social Casework Method in the period 1917-1919. Thus, this imposed on those who belong to it- academics and practitioners over the past decades- for the continuous development of its professional strategies, methods, and techniques, by which they facilitate an interactive educational environment able to attract social work students' attention. In addition, more efforts have been exerted to provide a better educational environment that helps students to easily exchange knowledge, opinions, attitudes, skills, and experiences. In addition, there have been attempts to facilitate communication among students themselves, and between students and lecturers easily through a safe, guaranteed, and affordable educational environment, and without any inconvenience to any of communication partners. All these can be provided through the appropriate use of e-learning with its multiple applications.

Hence, the astonishing evolution in sciences of computer, internet and communication technology, and its resulting communicative media has led to providing successful and safe educational environments that help learners and teachers perform their roles successfully. Through using e-learning application, students are able to develop their knowledge, attitudes, and opinions through communication with their colleagues who are sharing them the same e-courses; in addition to communication between lecturers and experts responsible for building and teaching these courses.

Students' use of the internet-related applications can develop and enhance their learning-related skills, such as skills of the computer, linguistic, writing skills, and internet skills.

The accessories that characterize e-learning provides lecturers with wider opportunities for benefiting from techniques of communication on the World Wide Web (WWW), and reaching educational experiences, experiments and methods that have never been achieved without the internet, and consequently, enabling students to benefit from such opportunities. Student relying on using e-learning applications provide save their time and efforts in gaining the learning material and exchanging it with any known electronic format (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Video, Audio and other types of files). Through the next lines, we will shed light on some accessories of Moodle.

The Moodle application has many extensions that enable the user- student or Instructor- to select an activity or resource to perform or play his/her role as instructor. Activities can be: Active Quiz, assignment, Attendance, Booklist, Chat, Checklist, Choice, Crossword, Cryptex, database, External tool, face to Face, Forum, Glossary, Hangman, Hidden picture, hot pot, lesson, Media Collection, Millionaire, Questionnaire, Quiz, Quiz venture, Scheduler, SCORM Package, Snakes and Ladders, Sudoku, Survey, Turn it in, Assignment2 and workshop. All or some of these activities will support the instructor to empower students to practice many types of works through Moodle Application wherever and whenever he/she wants.

The sources used by the instructor can be a book, file, folder, IMS content package, label, webpage, and URL. In addition, Moodle helps users to utilize and use some functions, such as Search forums, Latest announcements, Upcoming events, recent activity...etc.

Finally, the study recommends instructors and students in the field of Social Work Education to depend on using e-learning applications, to develop their abilities, skills, and experiences, in order to enhance their academic and learning performance. It does not matter which application of e-learning, but what is important is to use an advanced application that is easily accessible and usable by students with medium or good potential.

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