Idea Sharing:
Experiences Introducing
an Internet-Based English Course

Willard Van De Bogart
Language Center, Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University

Abstract

This paper focuses on how an active learning model was applied to an internet-based course to develop English writing, problem solving, critical thinking, and literacy skills. It was found that the time needed to evaluate student work arising from the internet based course was much greater than that required in the former paper based course. Based on this experience it is recommended that institutions changing over from paper based ELT materials to internet based ELT materials should really reduce class sizes.

Experiences introducing an internet based course to help Thai students develop critical thinking, problem solving, literacy, and writing skills in English

Phase I – Portfolio Development

Finding ideas
Collecting material
Taking notes
Organizing
Getting ready to

Showing each student how the subject or topic they selected is integrated into the larger world was a key factor to getting students to think about many aspects of the topic they selected. At this juncture in the course it was important to pose many questions about the student's topic so they can see how a topic could be expanded or developed.

The five learning paths suggested in Phase I were selected in order to get students to go out and find material related to their topic. Many students found too much information for their subject. In an early effort to succeed in the course the students would rely on quantity of information since it was easier to come by than finding quality or relevant information. The reason for this was because no analytical skills had been introduced to qualify what information had to be found. However, finding information was very successful and the portfolio instantly became an unwieldy stack of books, journals, newspaper clippings, CD's, and a host of other media. Only when the concept of note taking in chapter three was introduced and applied to the information in the student's portfolio could there be any possibility of prioritizing the information. Then the students readily learned how to slow down their quest for data.

After all the information was finally organized, either by level of importance or by categorizing the information, were writing skills introduced.

The Grammar Bridge

Five learning paths were introduced by the fifth week, but the bridge to expressing ideas and presenting arguments had yet to be crossed, and here is where grammar was introduced as well as learning new vocabulary. At this point in the course the subject had been selected and somewhat developed in terms of its relevance to the larger world. The next teaching task was to introduce the usage of verbs for the story as well as identifying all the key nouns. The students were asked to use verbs for the past, present and future. Steering the subject into the past, bringing the story into the present, and projecting the story into the future were done to emphasize the importance of time in the story. Every

name and object was identified until the students reached Phase II.

Phase II, finally brought the students into the domain of critical thinking and five more learning paths.

The use of all the verb tenses was very successful. However, knowing the proper way to use a verb was still not helping the students analyze their subject. The verb exercise was intentionally placed midway in the course so the material thus far collected by the students could be expressed in time frameworks.

Phase II - The Path to Critical Thinking

How to write a point of view
How to express ideas and arguments
How to write an opinion
How to use Boolean logic when doing web searches
How to use the library on-line

Phase II is where critical thinking was introduced. Up to this point in the course no attempt was made to have the students do any critical thinking on their topics. At the mid-term juncture the students had a sense of achievement with the production of a portfolio, a diskette of all their assignments, and a fairly comprehensive understanding of their topics. However, there may not have been any understanding of what to do with the topics they selected.

Now the students would have to determine the difference between facts and opinions, or what problems might exist in their topics. Here was the place in the learning path where the students had to understand the reasons they were collecting and synthesizing their materials and be able to comprehend how others might interpret those ideas.

The next five learning paths would expose the students to the concepts of judgment, arguments, opinions, and points of view. These concepts are not easy to deal with and teacher assistance was necessary to help the students move along their learning paths. At this point in the course the internet and the on-line libraries played a big part in terms of helping students

become exposed to other references related to their chosen topics. Simple search strategies were elevated to advanced search strategies. Libraries were explained as places where periodicals could be found as well as special collections within libraries. The concept of first person point of view and third person point of view was demonstrated by examples of other writings. The ownership of the students ideas using the personal pronoun "I" was a big stepping stone to having the students understand how to write in the third person.

Most of all, the concept pf having a personal opinion or idea and being able to defend that opinion was a crucial link to get the students to break out of their own personal interest areas and into a wider context of community, and the world.

Final Realizations

For a teacher who is about to embark on developing an on-line course I must advise that the amount of time required to design and implement such a course for the internet, and the time needed to evaluate the students work increases many times fold as compared to a more traditional text based course. Evaluation of portfolios, reviewing of diskettes, reading all the papers and making critical observations by writing on student papers extends the amount of time necessary to review all the students' work.

So, a fair question to ask is that if an internet based course requires so much time to evaluate student output is it worth the increased effort? Better still, is the quality of the work produced any better than if the internet was not used?

One factor which needs to be taken into consideration besides the increased amount of time required to evaluate the students work is the size of the class. This course had nearly 40 students. Ideally a course of this nature, with the requirements sought after, should be limited to fewer students.

Recommended further reading

1. Tuzum, H. (2000). *Methodologies of Online Learning and Teaching.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

2. Warschauer, M. (1997). Computer-mediated collaborative learning: Theory and practice. *Modern Language Journal, 81(3)*, 470-481.

3. Warschauer, M., & Whittaker, P. F. The internet for English teaching: Guidelines for teachers. *TESL Reporter, 30 (1)*, 27-33.

4. Holmes, D. (2004). *Speaking Activities for the Classroom: To the Teacher.* Bangkok, Thailand: Chulalongkorn University Press.

5. Jakes, D. S., Pennington, M. E., & Knodle, H. A. (2000). *Using the internet to promote inquiry-based learning.* Internet Innovations e-paper.

6. Khanthong, T. Keep in mind the advice of Dr Gardner: It's a smart move. *The Nation*, February 21, 2005.

7. James, J., *LIS 598 Google Syllabus*, University of Washington, Winter 2004.

8. Perrin, K. M. & Mayhew, D. The reality of designing and implementing an internet-based course. *Online Journal of Distant Learning Administration, Vol. III, No. IV*, Winter 2000

9. Markoff, J. Internet is morphing once more. *The Bangkok Post*, July 13, 2005.

10. Jones, D. (1996). Critical Thinking in an Online World. Aptos, CA: Cabrillo College.

The Author

Willard van de Bogart is an English instructor and an e-learning course developer at Nakhon Sawan Rajabhat University. He holds a Master's of Fine Arts degree in Multimedia and has been involved with media and information technologies for more than 30 years. The emphasis of his work is in the application of media and information technologies in knowledge acquisition.