

Creating Meaningful Web Pages: A PROJECT-BASED COURSE

MANY RESEARCHERS AND ELT PRACTITIONERS HAVE NOTED THE VALUE OF PROJECT work in English language teaching. Characterized by student collaboration on concrete outcomes, project work has a number of benefits including purposeful language use and increased student involvement and responsibility (Sheppard and Stoller 1995). Project work can also add extra motivation for students because it offers them the opportunity to use their language skills in a new and challenging way (Fried-Booth 1986).

Educational technology, which is increasingly being used in ELT programs around the world, has immense potential for enhancing project work. Project-based computer assisted language learning (PBCALL) can be a powerful tool for language teachers because it combines the benefits of project work with new technologies. This article describes a course that was designed to train students in Web design and guide them in the production of an electronic project. It also addresses some of the benefits and difficulties of teaching such a course.

Project work and PBCALL

In PBCALL, students use technology to create meaningful projects that can be shared with worldwide audiences (Debski and Gruba 1999). For example, students from a variety of locales might produce Web pages by collaborating with other students electronically. Like traditional project work, PBCALL gives students more responsibility and control of their learning because they are able to select, plan, and create a project of their own choice (Fried-Booth 1986).

Although there are many similarities between PBCALL and traditional project work, Warschauer (2000) notes that while using technology, students have higher expectations in terms of their participation and control over the activity. Consequently, when students are assigned electronic projects without a perceived meaningful purpose, they are less motivated and may not take the task seriously. He argues that for electronic learning activities to be most purposeful and effective, they should be learner centered, based on authentic communication, and connected to larger goals, such as developing academic skills or providing a service to an organization.

Course description

Context. The course described in this article was developed for female native Arabic speakers at a Middle Eastern university, where the language of instruction is English. In the university's intensive pre-academic English program, students receive between 15 and 20 hours of English instruction per week. Designed to improve their language proficiency, the majority of the courses are skills-based and focus on English for academic purposes. Other instruction includes content- and project-based courses, which students take as electives. In addition to their English courses, students receive information technology instruction, where they learn the basics of computer operation. They are also introduced to applications such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. All students and teachers have their own locally and globally networked laptop computers, and teachers are expected to integrate technology into all aspects of the curriculum.

I designed a nine-week course that met for three hours per week and had two main objectives. First, it aimed to teach students how to

create a basic Web page that included text, images, and photographs. Second, it provided students with the opportunity to complete a Web project of their choice. The project needed to serve a practical purpose for the university, and it required students to do some research in order to gather information. I taught this course to two different groups of students, a class of 18 and a class of 12.

Syllabus and activities. The syllabus contained three main parts. During the first three weeks, students were taught the basics of Web design using Microsoft Front Page. In weeks four through six, students planned and gathered information for their project. During the last three weeks of the course students drafted, revised, and produced their final Web pages. Below, I outline the activities that were performed on a week-by-week basis.

Week 1

Course Introduction and Web Page Evaluation. The first week focused on viewing different Web pages and analyzing them in terms of content, organization, design, and audience. For the first class, I showed my personal homepage, which served the dual function of introducing myself as well as explaining the nature of the course. I also showed them a Web project students had completed during the previous term. While viewing both pages, students were asked to consider the following questions:

- What is the Web page about?
- What kind of information does the Web site supply?
- What is the purpose of the Web page?
- What is the audience for the Web page?
- What do you think of the Web page design?
- What is your overall opinion of the Web page?

Focusing on the questions above, during the second class students worked in pairs to evaluate Web pages made by students at different universities (see Appendix 1). In short, the first week's activities introduced students to possible projects and allowed them to analyze features of a Web page.

Weeks 2 and 3

Basic Web Training. In week two, I focused on teaching the following skills: creating and saving Microsoft Front Page documents, man-

aging files, using different text options such as bold and italics, changing background color, and inserting pictures and graphics. These lessons began with a demonstration of a certain procedure, which was projected to a whiteboard from my computer. For example, students watched me create a document, and then they repeated this procedure on their own computers. For their classroom assignment, students created three simple practice pages.

In week three, I taught students how to insert tables and use them to organize images. In addition, I demonstrated how to link pages together, insert hyperlinks from the Internet, and copy pictures and backgrounds from the Web. This week's assignment included students linking their three practice pages together and inserting hyperlinks to their favorite Internet sites.

Week 4

Defining and Planning Their Projects. After mastering the basics of Web design, students were ready to define the scope of their project. Once they had selected an appropriate topic and formed groups, they worked on a proposal for their project (see Appendix 2). To complete the proposal, they needed to consider the purpose of their project, their audience, and how they would organize their Web pages. The proposal also encouraged students to focus on the various tasks involved in the project and identify the steps needed to complete these tasks. For example, would they need to interview teachers, do research on the Internet, or make a visit off the campus? During the planning stage, students assigned roles to different group members and completed Action Plan 1 (see Appendix 3). They listed the tasks that needed to be done, the group member responsible for completing the task, and the amount of time needed for each task.

Weeks 5 and 6

Gathering Information and Researching. In week five, students gathered information for their project. Many groups interviewed teachers and students or conducted short questionnaires. Others searched for information on the Internet and in the library. At this point, the class became very student-directed and -centered. Students had their action plans, so they knew what they needed to accomplish in each class. Instead of fronting the class, my role became more of a mentor or consultant to

the different groups. Fried-Booth (1986) describes the typical role of a teacher in project work as that of co-coordinator.

Week 7

Drafting. Before they began drafting their pages, students needed to work as a cooperative team to complete Action Plan 2 (see Appendix 3), which focused on writing and designing the Web pages. During this process, they assigned different tasks to each group member based on her interests and skills. For example, some groups gave each member a different page to draft. Other groups divided the work between designing the pages and paraphrasing information found on the Internet.

Weeks 8 and 9

Teacher Feedback and Revision. In week eight, the first draft of the project was due. Groups signed up for a feedback session, in which I gave them advice on content, design, organization, and navigation (see Appendix 4). As soon as I gave the group feedback, they were required to complete Action Plan 3 (see Appendix 3), which focused on revision. In the final week of class, students revised their projects.

Example projects

Students' projects varied in content, purpose, design, and organization. One project provided an academic service to other students; another one offered useful information to teachers and staff. One group of students produced a page meant to entertain their classmates and other teenagers.

Research Course Resource Page. All students in the intensive English pre-academic program must take a course that requires they write a research paper. Because this course is difficult for most students, one group decided to make a resource page for the course as their Web project. They aimed to provide useful information and advice for students who would take this course in the future. Their project consisted of four pages: a homepage, a page that described the course content (syllabus and overview of the course), a page that included examples of student research projects, and a page that gave advice from students and teachers. To complete this project, students interviewed teachers who taught the course and other students who had taken the course. In addition, they gathered a sample syllabus, exemplary essays, and useful links.

City Web Guide. Two students made a Web page introducing their city to new foreign teachers and staff. Their project had many pages, including a brief history of the city, local shopping, and tourist attractions. To gather information and decide which aspects of the city to include, they made a short questionnaire for foreign teachers concerning their interests. They also searched extensively on the Net. Much of their drafting work consisted of selecting relevant information and paraphrasing.

Student Magazine. One group of 14 students chose to design a magazine called *Miss Teen*, which was intended to be a source of entertainment for fellow students and other women their age. Two students acted as Webmasters, designing the homepage and making sure that the other pages were consistent in design. The others worked either individually or in small groups to produce a section of the magazine, such as movies, fashion, health, Islam, pets, university news, and cooking. The majority of the group members obtained information from the Internet. Some also interviewed staff, faculty, and students.

Course effectiveness

At the end of the term, I interviewed 19 students about their experiences while taking the course. From these interviews and from my own observations, I was able to draw tentative conclusions about the benefits and difficulties of implementing a PBCALL course.

Benefits. The fact that their projects had an authentic purpose motivated many students. Most of them strongly identified with their group's purpose. When asked why they made the Web project, only one student stated that it was for the course. All of the others said they made it for their intended audience. This confirms Fried-Booth's (1986) assertion that project work is motivating because students have a personal investment in it and they see tangible results. Students were also motivated by learning how to use technology more effectively. They valued this skill and believed it would help them in their future studies and careers.

An unexpected benefit of the course was that many students went above and beyond my expectations. For example, many of the students mastered the technological aspects at a much faster pace than anticipated and were eager to learn more. An exceptionally bright student

learned how to edit HTML code on her own; thus, she was able to include several extra features on her Web page. As the course progressed, on her own initiative, she taught several of the others in the class what she had learned. Students often went to her for advice. The possibility of students adopting the role of teacher in such a project-based technology course has previously been noted (Toyoda 2000).


Difficulties. Ironically, one of the benefits also had drawbacks. Although mastering the technological aspects of the course was important, many students became sidetracked by design elements. Several became overly concerned with features, such as animation, and less concerned about the content of their pages. This resulted in impatience and resistance to spending their time on essential work, such as proofreading. Students also got bored with the action plans and wanted to spend all of their time designing their pages.

Other difficulties arose because students' projects were too ambitious. While at the beginning of the course I was awed by student initiative and creativity in their project plans, in retrospect I see that they needed to have boundaries set for them. Many of the projects were simply too extensive and required more time than a nine-week course allowed. Although all of the students produced a solid first draft of their pages, most did not complete the final draft. Unfortunately, the last few weeks of the course coincided with exam week, which compounded the problem. As a result, many of the pages never went beyond draft form. For example, the sections of the *Miss Teen* magazine were not all linked together and only a few pages were uploaded to the Internet.

Conclusion

Despite the drawbacks, this course provided students with an opportunity to be creative, take charge of their own learning, and produce something tangible. At the same time, it enabled them to develop information technology skills, which added value to their learning experiences. Courses like these are relatively new, so the exchange of teacher observations (Davey 2001; Toyoda 2000) and course descriptions is useful for practitioners and material developers.

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APPENDICES 1-4

First Week Activity

APPENDIX 1

A. Go to <http://www.habitat.org/> and answer these questions about the site:

1. What is the goal of Habitat for Humanity?
2. Read one of the True Stories. How did Habitat for Humanity help?
3. What do you think of the design and organization of the Web page?

B. Go to <http://habitat-for-humanity.uchicago.edu/who.html> and answer these questions about the site:

1. Who is involved in UCHFH?
2. What kind of work do they do?
3. What is MWA and what do they do?
4. Who is working on a 1928 convent in the South Shore area and why?
5. What is Matthew House and who does it help?
6. What kinds of things did students do on their Alternative Spring Break?
7. What do you think of the design and organization of the Web page?

C. If you finish early, go to a search engine and type in the name of an organization, topic, or place that interests you (for example, Red Crescent). After you find the Web site, answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think the Web page was made? What is its purpose?
2. What kinds of information do you get from the Web page?
3. What do you think of the Web page design?
4. What is your overall opinion of the Web page?

D. Be prepared to present your ideas to the class.

ASSIGNMENT: Each group needs to write a proposal for its Web project. The written proposal should include the following:

- A. Description of project:** State what your project is, what information it will contain, what the purpose is, and who will read it. (1–2 paragraphs)
- B. Description of plan:** State what information you will need to collect, who will work on the Web page, and what areas each person will focus on. (1–2 paragraphs)
- C. Description of design:** State what design elements you plan to have similar on each page. Who will work on the design? Where will you find images and graphics. (1 paragraph)
- D. Drawing of Web page:** State what the different pages are and how they will be linked together.

E. Completed Action Plan 1

Guidelines:

- A.** Include a title page that lists the name of the project and the names of people working on the project proposal.
- B.** If your group has more than four people, you need to divide into smaller groups. Assign two or three members as Webmasters to oversee the whole project. They will write a proposal for the entire group project. Each smaller group needs to make a project proposal for their section of the Web page.

ACTION PLAN 1: PLANNING AND GATHERING INFORMATION

In the next two weeks, you will plan and gather information for your project. List below what tasks will be done each week, which group member(s) will do them, and when the tasks will be completed.

Action Plan 1: Planning and Gathering Information

Group members: _____

Week	Task	Group Member	Date Completed
5. Planning and Gathering Information	Project proposal, organization, and action plan	All	
6. Gathering Information			

ACTION PLAN 2: DRAFTING AND DESIGNING

In the next two weeks, you will draft and design your project. List below what tasks will be done each week, which group member(s) will do them, and when the tasks will be completed.

Week	Task	Group Member	Date Completed
7. Drafting			
8. Drafting			
Web Project Draft Due:			

ACTION PLAN 3: REVISING

In the next week, you will revise your Web page project. List below what tasks will be done each week, which group member(s) will do them, and when the tasks will be completed.

Week	Task	Group Member	Date Completed
9. Revising			

Web Project Feedback

APPENDIX 4

CONTENT

Information	Good	OK	Poor
Links	Good	OK	Poor
Organization	Good	OK	Poor
Language: Paraphrasing	Good	OK	Poor
Language: Grammar	Good	OK	Poor
Language: Mechanics	Good	OK	Poor
Language: Vocabulary	Good	OK	Poor

DESIGN

Font/Images	Good	OK	Poor
Color/Backgrounds	Good	OK	Poor
Overall Consistency	Good	OK	Poor
Overall Style	Good	OK	Poor

NAVIGATION

Overall Organization	Good	OK	Poor
Pages linked to Home	Good	OK	Poor
Pages linked to each other	Good	OK	Poor

COMMENTS:

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Page from
Student's Task Journal
APPENDIX 3

Book: The Bridge of Madison County
DATE: May 28
PAGE(S): 124-149

1. Summary — Robert wanted to stay with her even if her family would come back, but Francisco didn't think separate there was a real life. He left finally with tears. Then her husband and children—actual life—arrived. She avoided going out as she might see him, but when she went shopping with Richard, this happened! Her hand was full of Robert, so she started crying in front of Richard.
2. Prediction — She won't be able to behave in her usual way in the house. Robert will be in her strongly. Although Richard will wonder at her, he won't care about it. I think.
3. Opinion — It seemed to be very hard and sad to part from each other. This situation and feelings occurred to me. I thought their love was serious though it was a short time.
4. Reflection — (Easy) OK. Difficult.
I was able to read these pages immediately. As some scenes, their emotions, and their expressions came into me, it was easy to understand it.
5. New Words:
 - marvelled: marvelled * She marvelled at the scene.
 - snicker: snicker * They would hear the snickering.
 - tear away: tear * I can't tear myself away.
 - reluctant: reluctant * He was reluctant to start.
 - brush: brush * I'm brushed.

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Watson, K. L. 1999. WebQuests in the middle school curriculum: Promoting technological literacy in the classroom. *Meridian: A Middle School Computer Technologies Journal*. 2, 2. Retrieved April 1, 2002 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.ncsu.edu/meridian/jul99/webquest/index.html>.



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