

**“ASK AN EXPERT” ACTIVITIES:  
AN EXAMPLE OF INTERPERSONAL EXCHANGE**

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ESP students can solve doubts related to their discipline or know more about topics that interest them by using the Internet to contact with experts in far away parts of the world. In an “ask-an-expert” activity students ask a question and a subject matter specialist answers it. Consulting experts is a type of interpersonal exchange activity. These are activities or projects which involve students communicating with other individuals or groups (other students, teachers or experts). These activities take advantage of the capabilities offered by the Internet as a new mode of communication.

The consultation of experts offers multiple benefits for ESP students. First, students will probably be more motivated because by using e-mail they are engaged in real communication in authentic contexts, and they get familiar with a communication tool that they will probably use in their work. Second, as they are involved in genuine communication with a real purpose, students need to write their questions clearly, correctly and in appropriate language (taking into account purpose, addressee and conventions of the medium). In addition, communication via e-mail with experts in the discipline enables students to feel part of a knowledge community. Computer-generated writing also helps students to perceive writing as a process, since this writing is seen as less static and more changeable than traditional writing. Finally, the Internet becomes an organic repository of knowledge where students can find any kind of information. A class doing a project can consult different specialists that they wouldn't have been able to meet otherwise and they can get information from the experts that they couldn't find (or that would be difficult to find) anywhere else.

“Ask an expert” services offer several possibilities for use in the ESP classroom. Students could think of questions they would like to know, ask an expert of their choice, and report the answer to the class. By having students ask questions of the type “How does X work?”, “What causes X?”, “Which are the potential uses of X” or “How can X be done?”, they can get answers which constitute appropriate input to learn how to describe a process, how to express cause, hypotheses or predictions, or how to write instructions. Students could also use “ask an expert” services as one of the sources of information to write essays on different subjects or for long-term projects. This activity could be done at the end of a content-based

unit to get more information about the topic dealt with in the unit. Students may brainstorm questions that remain and for each unit a group of students could be in charge of asking the question and reporting the answers. Students could even ask questions related to their content classes (or to content projects they are carrying out) and then write a text where they describe the question/problem and the answer/solution given by the expert.

### **Designing and implementing an “ask an expert” activity**

Although the consultation of experts is an activity enabled by the Internet, much of the students’ work is done off-line. I will describe here how one such activity could be carried out in class. The page from *Eduscapes* (<http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic14.htm>) provides detailed step-by-step guidelines to plan an “ask an expert” project.

First, the teacher should choose a topic for the activity. It is important to choose a topic on the cutting edge of students’ discipline so that they are motivated to ask about aspects they would like to know. It is also necessary to analyse the sites with “ask an expert” services, in order to provide the students with the most appropriate sites for the activity. When choosing the sites the following aspects should be considered: the type of questions and the level of expertise of the questions that will be answered, how long it is necessary to wait for the response, how the students will get the answer (e-mail, newsgroup, FAQs or archives of the “ask an expert” site), the number of questions that get answered (some sites only answer a sample of the questions they receive).

In the first step of the activity, students can reflect upon the aspects of the topic on which they would like to have more information. The teacher can give some examples of questions that can be asked so that students can pose suitable questions. They should be high-level questions that require answers involving comparing and contrast, hypothesising, making predictions, explaining reasons and consequences, etc. For instance, some questions sent to the service “Scientific American: Ask the Expert” are the following: What is CTI (computer telephony integration), How close are artificial noses to development and what are the potential uses, How do MRI’s detect medical problems.

Students then generate a list of questions, and if any student knows the answer to any of the questions they can share the information with their peers. These questions, as well as the questions that can be answered with traditional sources, can be removed from the list. When a short list of questions is left, student groups could be assigned a question to ask the expert. They can choose the expert among a few (or among the experts on the site provided by the

teacher). Students should be reminded of the need to write a clear message, so they should ask for the teacher's feedback if they consider it necessary.

Upon receiving the answer, each group can share the results with the others. That way, the other students can discuss the answers, show their agreement or disagreement, and pose questions that still remain. As the response may take hours, days or weeks to arrive (although timely experts should be chosen) this part of the activity should be done some weeks after sending the question to the experts.

### **“Ask an expert” sites**

There are many "ask an expert" services on the Internet. While some of them offer information on a specific subject (e.g. Geology, Veterinary), other sites list experts in a wide range of disciplines. These services usually offer an index with different topics or subgroups (e.g. economy and marketing, computers, Internet, law, health, science and technology) so that visitors can find the best expert to answer a question. Question-and-answer services often include archives of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), which can also be of interest for the students. Moreover, these sites may offer the possibility to visit the expert's Web site, where a great deal of information in their area of expertise can be found.

Some "ask an expert" sites which can be useful for ESP students are the following:

- *Pitsco's ask an expert site* (<http://www.askanexpert.com>), which connects the users with hundreds of real world experts, organised by subjects (e.g. science/technology, Internet/computer, health).
- *The Mad Scientist* (<http://www.madsci.org>). A great network of scientists providing answers.
- *All experts* (<http://www.allexperts.com>). Users have to pick a category and click on an expert's name to answer their questions. The developers of this site describe it as consisting of "libraries of people": "Each expert is a circuit, or a chip, in a giant human computer which will be capable of answering nearly any question."
- *Expert Central* (<http://expertcentral.com>). Another site with lots of experts.
- *XpertSite.com* (<http://www.askme.com>). A large directory of experts in a wide number of categories.
- *How Things Work* (<http://rabi.phys.virginia.edu/HTW>). A site where the creator provides explanations to questions about how things work.
- *MathNerds* (<http://www.mathnerds.com>). A site to ask math questions.

- *Ask an Architect* (<http://www.askanarchitect.com/form.html>)
- *Ask a Geologist* (<http://walrus.wr.usgs.gov/docs/ask-a-ge.html>)
- *Science Net Information Services* (<http://www.sciencenet.org.uk/index.html>). The experts answer questions about physics, astronomy, chemistry and others.
- *Ask the Space Scientist* (<http://image.gsfc.nasa.gov/poetry/ask/askmag.html>)
- *Ask a high energy astronomer*  
([http://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/ask\\_astro/ask\\_an\\_astronomer.html](http://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/docs/ask_astro/ask_an_astronomer.html))
- *Write to a Scientist or Engineer* (<http://www2.SPSU.edu/gystc/So.htm>)

**Lists of expert resources with links to expert sites:**

- *CIESE - Ask-An-Expert Links* (<http://www.k12science.org/askanexpert.html>)
- *Virtual Reference Desk – Ask an expert* (<http://www.refdesk.com/expert.html>)
- *Ask an Expert Sources* ([http://www.cln.org/int\\_expert.html](http://www.cln.org/int_expert.html))

**Information on “ask an expert” activities:**

Further information about “ask an expert” activities can be found on the following sites:

- *Jim Forde’s site: ask-an-expert* (<http://home.earthlink.net/~fordemm/expert.html>)
- *Online collaborative projects: ask an expert* (<http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic14.htm>)