

CONVINCING INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE TO ONLINE SETTINGS

by Laura Loder Büchel

Zurich and Schaffhausen Universities of Teacher Education

Zurich, Switzerland

[laura.loder @ phzh.ch](mailto:laura.loder@phzh.ch)

Abstract

The Zurich and Schaffhausen Universities of Teacher Education have ideal conditions for integrating computer-mediated activities into English language and methodology courses. This article describes a number of face-to-face and online computer-based activities and argues that learners who live in close proximity can nevertheless benefit from participating in online activities. Examples from each setting that promote in-class or online communication as well as help to provide opportunities for improving learners' language and content competence will be described. This article attempts to provide arguments for students to participate in - and thus instructors to host - learning opportunities in computer-mediated settings.

1. Introduction

The Zurich and Schaffhausen Universities of Teacher Education (PH Zurich and PSH) in Switzerland offer ideal circumstances for instructors and students to integrate computer-mediated activities into their teaching and learning. A 'media lab' and an IT department offer regular workshops on topics such as how to use Microsoft Office products, run an online forum or work with global positioning systems to students and instructors alike. One learning management system (ILIAS: University of Cologne, online) is in place and continually being developed with added functionality, and instructors and students are expected to work with it. Throughout the campuses, there are ample computer labs and a wireless network. Maintaining these resources is an important part of the university budget and there are enough resources and support available for students and instructors to use technology effectively.

The English department comprises twenty instructors who train approximately over one thousand German-speaking pre-service and in-service teachers per year. Courses are primarily held face-to-face on a weekly basis. Teachers attending courses in this department are trained to teach English to elementary and secondary school teachers through the medium of English. This means instructors focus on both the language production of the students as

well as their teaching competence. In terms of technology, all university services are available to instructors though there is no departmental policy concerning technology integration.

The purpose of this article is not to assume that the integration of technology by individual instructors is the best way to teach or is a ‘must’, but rather to provide convincing arguments and practical examples of integrating computer-mediated activities that promote both online and face-to-face communication for the development of language and teaching skills as ways of encouraging a class-centered approach (Senior, 2006). This article focuses on arguments instructors can use to encourage their students to participate but it is also aimed at encouraging instructors themselves to include additional computer-based opportunities in their teaching. Jones (2001) puts it as follows:

...the effectiveness of CALL [Computer Assisted Language Learning] depends greatly on teachers and that, while it may lead ultimately to autonomy, it cannot yet be regarded as being a self-access operation. It undoubtedly requires more learning training and supervision than other self-access pursuits, and such training and supervision would have to be carried out by teachers. Are they ready and willing to do this? (p.2)

Through exemplifications of tried and tested communication-based activities at PH Zurich and PSHH, this article will provide arguments as to why learners who live in close proximity to one another and see each other regularly can benefit from participating in class forums, wikis, blogs, activities that make use of previous students’ archived work and activities that use websites for the purposes of gathering and sharing information. This article assumes basic knowledge of the tools mentioned above and provides practical examples for ICT novices and experts alike.

First of all, one or two sample activities for each of these tools will be described. They have been selected as they try to promote communication. In this way, ideas for instructors to set up activities in each setting and factors to keep in mind for successful implementation will be developed. Secondly, the examples provide arguments as to how the activity or setting can help improve the language competence of the learner - thus giving arguments instructors can use to convince their learners to participate. This article concludes with a summary of general arguments to encourage students to participate in - and thus instructors to host – learning opportunities through computer-mediated settings.

2. The activities

2.1 Class forums

Class forums are the most typical form of computer-mediated interaction instructors have used. In most cases, instructors opened a content-based forum as well as a “fun forum” or a “shoot the breeze” forum with the students for socio-affective purposes. However, is it meaningful to require learners to participate in a class forum when they could just as well see one another and discuss the topics in class? The advantage of the class forum is that learners can work on it at any time or place. Furthermore, forums are good writing practice: as the class forum is moderated by the instructor, language will be more formal than informal, unlike simple text-messaging or chatting. This sort of language relates more closely to the register expected from language tasks on standardized tests that students are expected to pass in order to receive their teacher certification. Students have to take a little more time to formulate their thoughts. Moreover, in-class discussions have revealed that several students even typed their responses into Word for a grammar or spell check before posting them on the forum. A forum also gives the teacher an overview of where the whole class needs more support. When thinking of language functions, forums promote not only subject-specific language but the expression of agreement and disagreement and elaboration techniques.

The two descriptions below show forum work for two separate purposes. The first example demonstrates forum work that is an obligatory course component - for homework or to replace face-to-face lessons. The second example contains the advantages mentioned above but with one added ingredient: here learners can define what they need to learn, where they have ‘issues’ and how they can get support that is documented and can be stored for later use.

Example 1: Video discussion

This activity was carried out during the course “Foundations of Teaching Foreign Languages”. Groups of six students were assigned to watch two videos and they were given clear instructions (see below) to initiate at least two forum threads and provide feedback and comments on another three aspects initiated by their colleagues.

The purpose of this forum is for you to discuss aspects of the two videos you watched on <http://www.learner.org/>. What aspects of the lesson do you think are important to facilitate learning? Would you like to learn in this class? Why or why not? What methods did you see? Which teacher techniques foster learning?

This activity has been used for over five years by one instructor. At the beginning, she was less precise – students could choose one of ten videos and then discuss it in the whole class. The winning formula as described above has worked well for the past three years despite the fact that most forums started with a thread: “I’m not sure what I’m supposed doing” (Fall 2007) or a message from the instructor “Hello, is anybody there” (Spring 2006). However, once started, students went overboard: Instead of the minimum of five contributions, each student averaged seven. Language such as “I totally agree with you two; What do you think about ...; I totally agree with you there...; That’s also my meaning...; Yes, that’s an interesting aspect, too....”

Follow-up activities in class consisted of feedback on student observations on a content level and a language development worksheet covering some vocabulary choices (e.g. opinion vs. meaning), use of capitalization in English, grammar (e.g. prepositions) that students reviewed together. In this way, the errors were not linked to particular students and some general observations of miscues performed by students could be corrected in a non-threatening, class-centered manner.

Example 2: Negotiating course content

This activity was part of the courses “Teaching English 1 and 2” and was carried out by several instructors over the past five years. Although the activity instructions were phrased differently by different instructors they generally went like this:

Issues in teaching: Think back to the last English lesson you observed or focus explicitly during your next observation. What was difficult for the teacher? What was difficult for the learners? What questions do you have about English language teaching from these observations? For each new topic, create a thread. Be sure not to have different threads for the same topic! Initiate one thread and provide some advice in other threads.

This forum work was explained on the first day of the semester. For some classes it was voluntary, for others, it was obligatory. For those instructors who made it obligatory, the students had up to three weeks to observe and post their formulations. Topics included presenting vocabulary; sticking to English; explaining grammar to students in second grade; or dealing with native speakers. From a language point of view, students used similar language as seen in Example 1 when agreeing and disagreeing, they asked for help and they provided suggestions to one another, as shown in this example (Spring, 2008):

Initiator: I'm wondering how I should mark the achievements of the pupils. I'm afraid of demotivating them. How can I deal with that?

Response: To not demotivate the children it is very important to make the english lessons interesting and funny. I think this is the main thing, because if the kids have fun in your lesson they don't care that much about the marks. But like the others just said, the *lingualevel* [an online service that provides tests based on the Common European Framework descriptors, L.L.B.] gives some good ideas how to manage this problem. Certainly you have to make it transparent and just test one skill at a time, so the children can focus. [1]

From a content point of view, some topics that were originally meant to be discussed through forum work got put on the side-burner as solutions could be found sufficiently and quickly enough or the topic was better addressed in face-to-face settings, such as in the issue of giving grades. From a language perspective, different classes needed varying degrees of vocabulary support due to the wide range and complexity of topics addressed (see “demotivate” in the example above but also Germanisms such as “self-controlling the answers”). Minor rules were also reviewed such as remembering countable/uncountable nouns as shown in the word “achievements” above.

Especially for language purposes, it is important to remember that assigning roles is important as the roles require the use of different language aims. For example, students as initiators must use the language of starting conversations (“What do you think about...”); as responders they must practice agreeing and disagreeing; as summarizers they use linkers to synthesize main points; and as devil’s advocates they practice elicitation techniques (“... have you thought about...”). These roles allow them to practice a different type of language depending on their role. Moreover, setting a minimal number of contributions and roles is essential as stronger or more interested learners will automatically be more apt to participate but weaker or less interested ones might need this goal. In some cases, it is important to copy a weaker student’s text into a document (or print it out) to provide concrete feedback.

2.2 Wikis

Is it meaningful to ask learners to document their understanding of a topic using peer collaboration tools when they can more easily find a system that works for them alone? The advantage of a wiki (see Wikipedia, online) is that it truly is the product of its users and it depends on peer collaboration – this leads to negotiation of meaning and perhaps a deeper understanding of the content point as well as valuable language practice. However, because it belongs to the users, it has to be kept in mind that a wiki is only as good as those people

contributing to it. So learners have the responsibility for its content and its correctness. In wikis, learners and experts correct one another and both language and content are negotiated and developed collaboratively. Writing skills are thus reinforced. Learners can benefit from the contributions of others, but they must also be willing to give – by changing entries and adding to them – which, however, can be a challenge. Thus, yes, it can be meaningful to have users document their work through a wiki if the task is appropriate.

Example: Class Wiki

In 2002, during a pre-service course on the introduction to the teaching of foreign languages, a scratchpad wiki (see Wikia, online) about language learning strategies was developed as a class product. The instructor provided the categories of strategies (strategies to support reading, writing, speaking and listening, classroom management strategies, etc...) and the class was expected to add concrete examples of explicit strategy instruction for young pre-literate and literate English language learners. The idea was a purely task-based, product oriented one, with students having a repertoire of teaching ideas in the form of a wiki that they could save and use in their teaching. Groups of students were expected to be experts in one area (reading strategies, for example) and had to research and put up initial ideas. Every student was expected to contribute, though no concrete rules were set. So, as this was not an obligatory task, students did not contribute as expected. Peer editing did not happen as expected so the instructor spent a lot of time providing feedback on language and content to the few individuals who did participate.

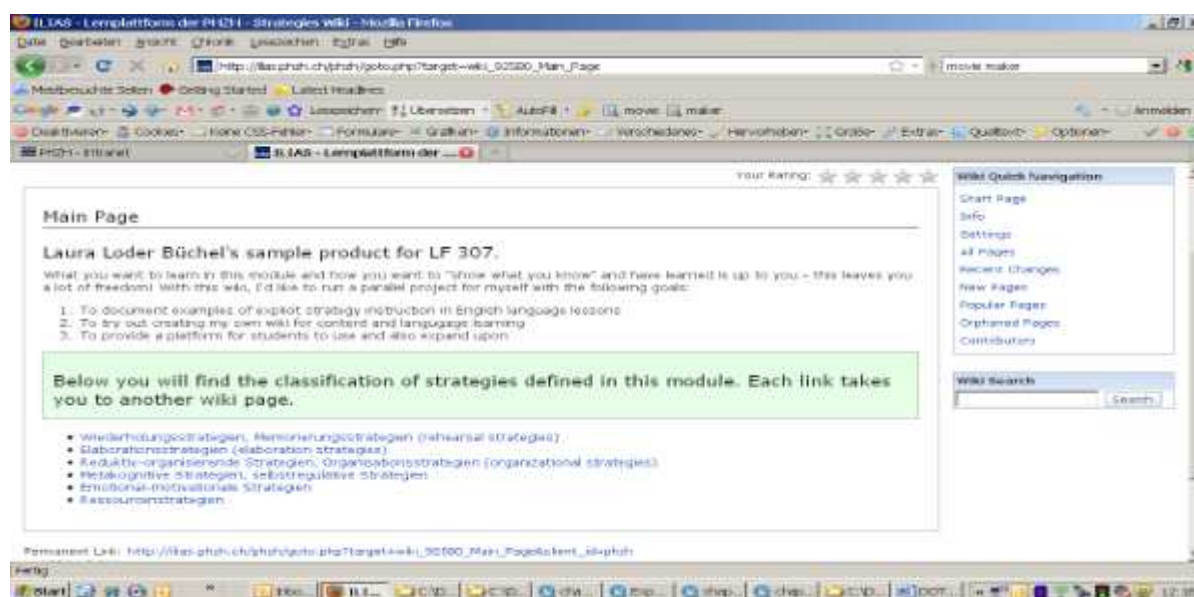


Figure 1. Language learning strategies wiki.

The experience in 2002 led the instructor to adapt the rules for a new try in 2009. With this wiki (Figure 1), students were taken to the computer lab on the first day of class and asked to test it out. Secondly, as it provided concrete examples for them already, a good start had already been created and students were more willing to contribute throughout the course as they discovered more strategies and problems in the classroom. Furthermore, because the instructor explicitly left some words and expressions in German (e.g. Wiederholungstrategien - rehearsal strategies), students were asked to write them in English - thus helping them improve their academic language skills in this area.

Like other computer-based settings, some general guidelines like taking the whole class to the computer lab to test things out and setting a minimal number of contributions are important for making wikis effective. Unlike other tools, however, wikis offer much more potential for peer collaboration and improving writing skills. They offer, as well, students a chance to have a complete product at the end of a course. Moreover, introducing students to wikis and how they work can show them the value of really using, not just taking, information from Wikipedia and Simplewiki (see Wikipedia, online).

2.3 Blogs

Why should students read and post comments to blogs, or even create their own blogs when they know about each other's lives already? Why should instructors have their own blogs? Blogs can be found in different genres (more narrative, explanatory, or academic) and registers, providing good practice for language learners. 'Informal' blogs are a good way to relate to students outside the classroom and to encourage them to read in English. Ducate and Lomicka (2005) provide many good reasons as to why blogs should be used, namely that shy students may feel more comfortable, that students will have time to reflect and analyze, especially on a cultural level, and that blogs can be used as a portfolio for a specific time period for students to display their best artefacts. Blogs encourage autonomous learning but at the same time provide grounds for exchange as they encourage students to formulate their opinions for a specific public.

Example 1: Instructor blog

In this first example, the instructor has her own blog for contact outside of the classroom with the students. She used it in a slightly provocative way to encourage students to respond but

also to lower the affective filter. The sample posting you see below elicited several responses on the blog and also a humorous class discussion.

Hello everybody! I'm looking forward to meeting you ... For those of you who won't have opened this Blog by then, "it was nice to meet you!" or "It was nice meeting you"! Very briefly - as I am convinced that my nice American accent is the best, I hope by the end of the semester you'll be convinced as well and we can get rid of all the British stuff. ...I'm sure we'll find out more about one another during the course of the course, but if you'd like to go ahead and introduce yourself and, oh, perhaps discuss the question

How can a blog support my English language learning?", that would be great!! Look forward to blogging with you! (Büchel, 2008).

The instructor printed out student responses, corrected them, and handed them back to the students. On other occasions, she started class with a review of words and expressions that needed development.

Example 2: Obligatory blog contributions

Over the course of the past ten years, several instructors have given blog assignments using variations of the following procedure:

1. Find a blog (about a topic you are interested in / a topic you know little about / a blog from an English speaking primary/secondary classroom) and follow it for a week or two.
2. Write/prepare a short summary or note down keywords of some interesting insights you gained. Be prepared to share this in class.
3. Post a comment to one contribution where you feel you have something to say.
4. Print out this comment or send it to the instructor.

In class, summaries of these various blogs were shared in guided speaking activities or as jigsaws where group members had to learn about each other's experiences. Written comments left by the students were either corrected by the teacher or peer edited.

Essentially, these two examples show that blogs are useful for lowering the affective filter in a class, for finding information about a subject and for helping to develop subject-specific vocabulary. They are useful means of giving concrete reasons to speak in class and for practicing writing skills in relevant contexts outside of class.

2.4 Activities that make use of previous students' archived work

Why should students have to make their endeavors available to other students? Why should other students use these? Often, students are asked to turn in assignments which are graded by the instructor and given back to the student. This means that the writing audience is the instructor and there is no real knowledge transfer. What happens to this knowledge and this feedback? How is it ever really used? This example takes the idea of archiving information but at the same time turning it into something more dynamic.

Example: Archives for interaction

Students are required to write a paper of five to seven pages in English on a teaching topic of their choice (vocabulary learning strategies for younger learners, integrating the European Language Portfolio, to name a few ideas). This paper is traditionally handed in to the instructor for feedback and is given a grade as part of the course requirements. The instructor felt that the students did not take the paper seriously, did not process-write, and did not do any real research. Therefore, while the end goal remains the same, she has changed the steps and added elements.

1. Students were obliged to upload a draft onto the Learning Management System ILIAS during the semester. Two students with different topics were paired up and were required to give feedback on content and language to one another.
2. A forum was started for questions concerning content (*What do you think about...*) and format (how to correctly cite).
3. The students in the following semester who had the same assignment were required to read one article listed in one person's work from the previous semester, make a summary of it and explain how it was used in the main paper and then share it in class.
4. Students in the following semester were required to cite one person's work from the previous semester in their own work.
5. Throughout the semester, depending on the topic, the instructor pulled out controversial or interesting points from archived student work for discussion in class (correctly cited, of course).

Once students understood that their work would be used for follow-up and discussion, they took their assignment more seriously, performed better research (looked into more academic journals and did not just google terms), and wrote more professionally. Moreover, some students really took the initial knowledge from another student's work and delved a lot deeper.

An essential element of convincing students to participate was showing them the value of peer editing, of learning from one another and also by showing them that their work will be used by others.

2.5 Website activities

Why should students work on the Web during class time when they could do this anyway at home? Website activities, like student-created scavenger hunts (students creating questions for one another) for the purposes of gathering and sharing information and noticing language is an extremely simple way of using computer-mediated learning in the classroom. It obliges the students to read in English and to participate in a short speaking or writing activity in class. It also provides practice in skimming and scanning skills.

Example: Cross-sharing activity

In preparing for a stay abroad and teaching in the state school system in the UK, students were split into two groups. One group got the following instructions: “Go to <http://www.nile-elt.com>. Your task is to find out about any relevant information for your classmates and be prepared to inform them about NILE.” They were then provided a list of questions they had to answer using information found on the site. The second group went to <http://www.visitnorwich.co.uk/> and were required to do the same. Questions were of a content-nature (e.g. what types of courses does NILE offer?) and of a language nature (What are the ‘broads’) that required them to use an online dictionary and to scan through the information on the page. Students were then paired up and had to cross-share the information.

This activity only took about forty-five minutes for the searching and the exchange. It was a good exercise in skimming and scanning and using the Ctrl + F function to search for key words. During the exchange, the instructor went around and gave additional content information and linguistic feedback.

This example can be elaborated upon in many ways. Students can create the questions for one another, they can be given a more concrete language focus to go along with the content search (e.g. write down three phrasal verbs you want to remember). The content focus can also pertain to about anything, from various topics to train reading strategies to teaching methods.

3. Summary

When implementing such activities, it is important to keep in mind that if the instructor is not actively involved, the students will not participate either. Moreover, making a minimal number of computer-based activities an obligatory element of course participation can trigger collaboration and discussion in and outside of class. Furthermore, students are made more accountable for their learning progress and individuals become more accessible to one another through computer-mediated activities. For such activities to be a success, however, defining roles and setting a mandatory number of contributions can be helpful - some students will only do the minimum, but others will take off with such activities.

To help pre-service teachers become technology-proficient teachers, universities and instructors should provide more learning opportunities in a variety of simple ways, create basic policies (e.g. setting a minimal number of assignments or selecting an obligatory tool) within departments, offer workshops to pre-service teachers and instructors, and provide funding for training and projects. Computer-mediated activities cannot replace face-to-face approaches to education, but today's educational system cannot grow and will not succeed without integrating such activities into the curricula in order to tap into a wealth of language and content learning opportunities. Therefore, university instructors and departments should be able to provide good examples for equipping pre-service teachers with relevant abilities and competencies in on-line literacy and communication skills. This will assist pre-service teachers in building a positive attitude towards technology and developing skills for employing computer-mediated activities into their own future classrooms. According to Imus et al. (2004), "students have a positive impression of instructors who integrate high-tech e-learning tools in the classroom". Other researchers (e.g. Kuo 2008, Spodark 2001, Turvey 2008 or Warschauer 1997) have also demonstrated the positive effects of computer-mediated activities.

This article provides a small sample of activities that attempt to meet the content aims of a course and at the same time encourage or force students to develop their English language and computer competence. However, there are many more activities that make good use of web-based activities for foreign language learning. Social networking tools such as Facebook can facilitate many of the ideas above but also give good practice in developing socio-pragmatic competence by e.g. commenting on picture descriptions and chatting. Moreover, asking learners to install virtual post-its to note down difficult words and expressions to share in class can also lead to discussion. Basic course policies like writing emails in the target language can also be an effective means for practicing reading and writing

skills. Students can each be assigned a website and asked to share, in one sentence, the essence of it in class as a peer dictation. Giving homework from a corpus can also connect the wired and the real world. Small computer-mediated activities can thus provide a myriad of reasons to communicate online and in class.

This article also aims at providing justification as to why learners living in geographical proximity to one another should participate in such activities. Its limitations lie in the fact that it does not look further to see if students participating in such activities become more inclined to incorporate such activities into their own teaching in elementary state schools. It does not look at the techniques learners use to pay attention to both content and language or how learners integrate the linguistic features they notice from online communicative tasks. Despite this, it is hoped that these ideas convince students to participate in online activities and provide some small steps for instructors to initiate such activities!

Note

1. Language errors in learners' contributions have not been corrected.

References

- Annenberg Media. (2010). Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://www.learner.org>.
- Büchel, L. (2008). Using technology. Message posted to <http://phshblog.blogspot.com/>.
- Ducate, L. and Lomicka, L. (2005). Exploring the blogosphere: use of web logs in the foreign language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals*, 38(3). 410-421.
- Facebook. (2010). Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://www.facebook.com>.
- Imus, A., Ployhart, R., Ritzer, D., and Sleight, M. (2004). Technology: a boom or a bust? An understanding of students' perceptions of technology use in the classroom. *Inventio: Creative Thinking about Learning and Teaching*, 6(1). Retrieved May 2, 2010 from http://doit.gmu.edu/inventio/issues/Spring_2004/Imus_1.html.
- Jones, J. (2001). CALL and the responsibilities of teachers and administrators. *ELT Journal*, 55(4). 360-367.
- Kuo, M.-M. (2008). Learner to teacher: EFL student teachers' perceptions on Internet-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching. Retrieved from *ERIC Digest* ED502217.
- Norwich Institute for Language Education (NILE). Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://www.nile-elt.com>.
- Schulverlag plus AG, Bern. (2009) *Lingualevel: Instrumente zur Evaluation von Fremdsprachenkompetenzen*. Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://www.lingualevel.ch/>.
- Senior, R. (2006). Class-centred teaching is successful teaching. *English Teaching Professional*. 46, 71.
- Spodark, E. (2001). Integrating online techniques into undergraduate French language instruction. *The French Review*, 74(6), 1206-1217.
- Turvey, K. (2008). Student teachers go online; the need for a focus on human agency and pedagogy in learning about 'e-learning' in initial teacher education (ITE). *Education and Information Technologies*, 13, 317–327.

University of Cologne, Germany. Competence Center E-Learning. ILIAS. Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://www.e-learning.uni-koeln.de/>.

VisitNorwich Ltd. Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://www.visitnorwich.co.uk/>.

Warschauer, Mark. (1997). Computer-Mediated Collaborative Learning: theory and practice. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81(4), 470-481.

Wikia. Scratchpad Wiki Labs. Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://scratchpad.wikia.com>.

Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia (Simple Wiki). Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. Retrieved May 2, 2010 from <http://simple.wikipedia.org/>.