

THE USE OF A WEB-BASED VIRTUAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT FOR LANGUAGE-TEACHING PURPOSES

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SUMMARY

In this article the author describes the blended teaching approach adopted by the Training Section of the United Nations (Geneva) for its English administrative writing courses taught in the framework of its language training program.

He also discusses how the use of a virtual collaboration tool such as Learnline could enable teams of experts in the field of water to work effectively together to prepare collaborative articles and written reports in real time via the Web.

RESUME

L'auteur de cet article a décrit l'approche hybride (synchrone/asynchrone) adoptée par la Section de la Formation des Nations Unies (Genève) dans le cadre de l'enseignement des langues étrangères et plus particulièrement dans celui de la rédaction administrative anglaise.

Il traite également de l'utilisation du système de collaboration en ligne "Learnline" permettant aux équipes d'experts travaillant dans le domaine de l'eau de collaborer de manière efficace en temps réel à la préparation des communications et rapports écrits.

KEY WORDS

Application-sharing, blended approach, cost, distance learning, environment, teacher training, synchronous collaboration tool, virtual classroom, water

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INTRODUCTION

Following a successful pilot project during July-September 2002, in which a blended approach involving paper-based self-training materials and a synchronous collaboration tool was used to provide training by a trainer located in Rochester, Massachusetts, to several groups of beginner IT students located in Geneva, Switzerland, the Training Section of the United Nations Office in Geneva decided to apply a similar approach to its Administrative & Report Writing Skills course.

The aim of this is to complement paper documents, materials contained in a resource center and an asynchronous teaching environment (Blackboard) with a synchronous collaboration tool (Learnlinc) so as to provide effective real-time group training and individual coaching to staff wishing to improve their English writing skills from the convenience of their office. It is the application-sharing feature of Learnlinc, in particular, which makes it a useful tool for teachers and students located on and off campus without their having to be physically present at the same place at the same time.

We have found the use of a virtual classroom to be a cost-effective solution² to the problem of students being unable - due to their office workload - to come to our training facility for traditional face-to-face training.

I. BLENDED APPROACH

The *Administrative & Report Writing Skills* course is given three times a year during a period of twelve weeks. In previous years the course was taught using paper-based materials only; recently, however, it was restructured to also include an asynchronous and synchronous teaching component, as well as the use of multimedia teaching materials contained in a resource center open both during and after office hours.

II. BLACKBOARD

The Blackboard asynchronous teaching environment is used to post weekly assignments for students to complete. These are either in the form of paper documents, located in our resource center, or in the form of external Web sites (usually freely accessible university sites) presenting exercises that deal with the writing topic for a particular week. The Blackboard environment also provides a Discussion Board feature, and students are encouraged to use the Discussion Board to share with other members of the group--and, hopefully, to resolve--any problems they might be having with their weekly writing assignment.

III. RESOURCE CENTER

Students are also encouraged to spend time, at their convenience, in the Training Section's resource center, where they have self-access to a wide range of videos and CD-ROMs dealing with various writing issues, as well as to useful paper-based documents such as the *U.N. Correspondence Manual*.

² Since there are a variety of factors involved in determining the exact pricing of such a system (among these: the number of participants involved, whether or not an institution has at its disposal an Internet-connected server, the amount of usage envisaged, etc.) it is impossible to provide meaningful cost estimates here. Anyone interested in discussing the pricing issue in detail should feel free to contact the author of this article for assistance in this area.

IV. VIRTUAL CLASSROOM – GROUP SESSIONS

Until recently, in addition to e-mailing to their teacher at least one weekly writing assignment, students were required to participate in eight hours of face-to-face classroom time during the trimester. However, with the introduction of the Learnline virtual classroom, six of those hours have been replaced by an equal number of synchronous online training hours.

The initial two-hour face-to-face meeting has been maintained to allow students to get to know one another and their teacher (and vice versa) and to allow them to familiarize themselves with the Learnline system. The familiarization session takes place in the resource center, where several computers are located.

The teacher logs in to the Instructor's interface as the teacher and the students log in to the Student's interface with their names and a common password (which have been entered by the teacher in the system's Administrator area prior to the start of the course).

Taking advantage of the fact that the teacher and students are located for this first meeting in the same room, the teacher explains how the students should use the system's feedback feature to answer Yes/No questions, to enter comments or questions in the text-based chat area, to use the "hand-raising" feature to request the floor and especially to use the system's collaborative whiteboard tool to highlight or modify a portion of a document displayed on the students' screens.

This familiarization session requires approximately forty-five minutes on average.

Since it is necessary, before students can participate from their office in a virtual class session, for a small client module to be downloaded via the Internet and installed on their machines, this first meeting also enables the teacher to introduce to participants the computer technician who will carry out this operation and who will serve as their main contact point if they should have any technical problems during the trimester.

Students participate in a live virtual classroom session once every two weeks. For each two-hour session, the teacher chooses several texts from among those received each week from the students containing writing problems whose real-time correction he/she feels will benefit the majority of the others.

A copy of the text is made and this text is pasted into the Learnline whiteboard so that all modifications can be performed on the copy rather than on the student's original submission. Students' names are deleted from their texts to ensure that all writing samples remain anonymous. Also, if a student happens to submit a job-related text containing the names of other U.N. staff, those names are also deleted.

The teacher displays his/her whiteboard to all remotely located participants in the course. Not only can participants view the text on the whiteboard, but when given the floor by the teacher they can use their mouse to highlight passages, as if they were using a physical highlighter, or make modifications to them. Each time a student suggests a modification, the teacher first asks the class if they agree with the student's suggestion.

If so, and if the teacher also agrees, the text is updated with the student's suggestion. By the end of the two-hour session, the students themselves, encouraged and assisted by their teacher, are able to produce much-improved versions of the original texts. Finally, the teacher cuts and pastes the contents of each whiteboard into separate Word documents and sends them as e-mail attachments to the participants along with the originals for the purpose of comparison.

V. RECORDING ON DEMAND

Thanks to the system's recording feature, a student who is unable to participate in a live group session can always access a special area via the Web containing visual/audio recordings of all group sessions. This means that whenever students are absent due to illness, they can always access the server to follow the session(s) they might have missed.

Moreover, as the server is accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, even in the case of staff members on mission to countries with a considerable time-zone difference, they can always connect to the system at their convenience and follow the group session(s) they might have missed owing to their duties away from Geneva.

VI. VIRTUAL CLASSROOM – INDIVIDUAL WORK

In addition to six hours of group work in the virtual classroom environment, students are required, as mentioned earlier, to submit at least one writing assignment per week to their teacher. This can be either a writing assignment the teacher has suggested to them in the Blackboard assignments area or it can be a “real-world” piece they happen to be working on in the context of their job.

Previously, students would send their teacher their writing assignments either by e-mailing them in as Word attachments or by uploading their documents directly to the Blackboard Dropbox area for teacher suggestions and corrections.

These the teacher would provide using Word's tracking feature and the piece would be sent back to the student. That procedure has now been replaced by one that encourages a far greater degree of student involvement in the correction process; rather than simply perusing their returned assignment and comparing it with the original, students must now participate actively, even strenuously, in their document's correction.

Rather than serving as an all-knowing guru to be emulated, the teacher has a radically changed role in the context of this new coaching approach. Instead of “pushing” suggestions and corrections at the student off line, the teacher now plays a much more subtle role. Rather than filling the student's text with evidence of the *teacher's* writing skill, the new role of the writing teacher should be to probe students to determine if they are able to correct *their own mistakes*.

And with the right sort of probing, we find that students are often capable of producing on line and in real time a far better version of what they had produced--often a bit hurriedly--off.

VII. TELECOMMUTING

One of the possibilities the virtual classroom offers teachers is that of telecommuting--at least for a portion of the course (i.e., for the group and individual sessions). Until now, teachers at the U.N. in Geneva have limited themselves--both for technical as well as administrative reasons--to using the Learnlinc system from within campus to work with their students in the group and individual writing sessions.

However, in future we hope to be able to provide writing teachers with a call-back facility enabling them to carry out this part of their job from the comfort of their homes--exactly as if they were sitting at the keyboard of their office computer at the Training Section.

VIII. REMOTE STUDENT ACCESS

Another possibility offered by the system is for students who happen to be away on mission, but who have access to a computer connected to the Internet, to log in and participate in a group or individual session from practically anywhere in the world. The two main limiting factors in this case being time-zone differences and student telecom costs--unless, of course, they are fortunate enough to be located at a duty station with access to a computer connected directly to the Internet rather than via a dial-up connection.

IX. TEACHER TRAINING

Clearly, teachers, trainers and experts in the field of water will not be willing to embrace real-time virtual collaboration via the Web as a viable alternative to face-to-face contact or more traditional forms of collaboration (fax, e-mail attachments, videoconferencing, etc.) unless they are properly trained. For technical and pedagogical reasons such training can only be carried out in a face-to-face environment.

In our experience, the most effective way to achieve this is to group participants together in one computer training room with Internet connectivity and to provide them with hands-on experience working collaboratively on a real-life project -as if they were located at hundreds or thousands of kilometres from one another.

The role of the trainer in such a training environment is, first of all, to give an overall introduction to the various features of the Learnlinc user interface and, in the second part of the course, to answer any individual questions they might have as they work (silently) with one another. Generally, a half-day course is sufficient to enable participants to become familiar with the system and feel confident enough to use it on their own.

X. BEYOND THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

The above article describes how a virtual classroom environment can be used to replace face-to-face teacher-student interaction in the field of distance education. However, another practical use of such a system is as an effective real-time virtual collaboration tool enabling teams of experts in the field of water, for example, to display, discuss and modify written documents in their areas of expertise from the convenience of their office (or home) computer--even when they happen to be located at a vast distance from one another.

Following discussions with the President of Scientific Committee ³ of the *Colloque International on Water* in June 2003 in Cogolin (France), we realized that rather than transmitting numerous e-mail attachments to an fro between potential presenters and the scientific committee during the preparatory phase of the conference, use of a synchronous collaboration tool would have enabled the committee to form a clearer idea of the quality and relevance of certain proposals or to suggest ways of improving them during virtual meetings with potential presenters in real time via the Web.

Similarly, it was realized that the use of such a tool would have made it possible at the conference's close for organizers to work effectively with the heads of workshops and presenters in finalizing their post-conference documents for publication.

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As a result of our discussions, it was decided that in future a significant portion of pre- and post-conference work should be carried out using this new method of virtual collaboration; it was also decided that an awareness-building and training effort should be made to encourage teams of experts working in the field of water to embrace Web-based synchronous collaboration as an effective way of working together on their projects.

CONCLUSION⁴

While there is no doubt that writing courses combining a blend of traditional classroom sessions, individual writing correction, an asynchronous learning tool and multimedia and paper materials contained in a resource center can be an effective approach to helping students improve their writing skills, one that incorporates a synchronous collaboration tool has the advantage of enhancing the students' learning process while considerably reducing the amount of time they waste getting to and from the classroom.

Of course, introducing such a tool does require not only that writing teachers take the time necessary to master its use, but, more importantly, that they be willing to re-think their role as writing teachers.

Similarly, it not suggested that teams of experts working together on projects in the field of water should abandon traditional collaboration tools (fax, e-mail attachments, conference calls, videoconferencing, etc.), but rather that they should complement these, whenever real-time collaboration is necessary, with a synchronous collaboration tool such as Learnline.

Of course, technical innovations will never totally replace face-to-face collaboration; however, with the proper training they can serve as the next best thing.

⁴ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations