Using EXE eLearning XHTML Editor:
A Case Study

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This paper deals with the use of third generation Internet activities and WebQuests in ESL classrooms. The paper outlines the history of WebQuests and the essential steps and elements of WebQuests. Suggestions for how to divide students up into groups and assign roles to develop cooperative teaching and learning are provided. The author describes the use of EXE a homepage building software program developed specifically for educators. The paper offers an example of the author's own WebQuest and shows how the information the students gathered during the WebQuest can be used to construct blogs and wiki pages. The paper provides links to various web sites that will be useful to teachers looking for software or web pages to help them develop their own Internet activities.

1. Introduction

For the past ten years the potential of IT has promised to revolutionize education. This promise has been the Holy Grail for teachers. IT promised individual attention, personally level adjusted materials, an answer to the problems of large classes and little face-to-face teaching time. Many teachers find that the reality of the potential of IT is ten years in the future and always will be.

Initially, IT focused on drill type activities with self-correcting vocabulary and grammar activities. Recently these prescriptive type

activities have been supplemented by new developments in IT. Blogs, wikis and discussion boards offer the promise of more productive activities where students can express themselves rather than simply answering drill questions. In this paper, I would like to discuss a WebQuest project that used online materials. Especially I would like to discuss the use of a program for the development of online materials called EXE and how the use of these online materials helped to solve the problems of large class size, different levels of language ability in a single classroom,

2. WebQuests and EXE

The term WebQuest was coined by Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University in 1995 and means "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet (Dodge, 1995). Dodge and others have defined the critical attributes of WebQuest as containing at least the following parts:

1. An introduction that sets the stage and provides some background information.
2. A task that is doable and interesting.
3. A set of information sources needed to complete the task. Many (though not necessarily all) of the resources are embedded in the WebQuest document itself as anchors pointing to information on the World Wide Web. Information sources might include web documents, experts available via e-mail or real time conferencing, searchable databases on the net, and books and other documents physically available in the learner's setting. Because pointers to resources are included, the learner is not left to wander through web space completely adrift.
4. A description of the process the learners should go through in accomplishing the task. The process should be broken out into clearly described steps.
5. Some guidance on how to organize the information acquired. This can take the form of guiding questions, or directions to

complete organizational frameworks such as timelines, concept maps, or cause-and-effect diagrams as described by Marzano (1988, 1992) and Clarke (1990).

6. A conclusion that brings closure to the quest, reminds the learners about what they've learned, and perhaps encourages them to extend the experience into other domains (Dodge, 1997).

Creating web pages to fulfill these criteria can be a daunting task for teachers with limited HTML skills. Even recent web page software programs such as Macromedia's Dreamweaver or Microsoft's Front Page can be intimidating for casual users. This is where EXE comes in.

EXE is an open source web-authoring tool specifically designed for teachers and educators to publish web materials that fulfill the needs of educators. EXE is an open source HTML editing program developed by a consortium of New Zealand universities. EXE is available for free download from www.exelearning.org
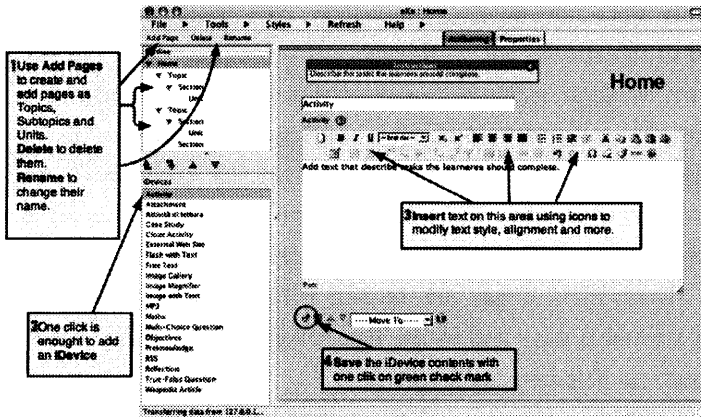
(Used with permission of exelearning.org)

As the above screen shot shows, one of the chief features of the EXE program is its ease of use. Simply by selecting "add page" from the menu bar, teachers can create pages for each of the essential parts of a WebQuest - introduction, description, task, etc. All of these pages are

automatically linked, thus eliminating the burden of adding hyper-links to a number of separate pages. Similarly, EXE offers a number of tools that can be added to any page. Images, true and false quizzes, video, even wikis can be added simply by selecting the appropriate button from the itool menu. The teacher does not have to spend time learning Java or Perl scripts, but can instead focus on the activity itself. One of the chief attractions of EXE is the free text tool. This allows teachers to enter text simply by typing as they would in any word processing program. Teachers can also cut and paste text from Microsoft word. This allows them to use the layout, fonts, and even Word's Word Art tool to add color and design elements without having to bother with HTML.

3. The WebQuest

The WebQuest described here was created to fulfill one of the requirements of the Graduate Certificate in Online Teaching and Learning offered by The University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Unfortunately, at the end of the course, the web pages were removed from the server and so are not available online at this time. However, the wiki page created by the students can be viewed at: http://rocknroll.wikispaces.com

This page and the pages of others in the class were hosted by wikispaces.com a free wiki page service provided for teachers. Any teacher interested in using wikis in class would benefit from a visit to the above URL. Pages are hosted without charge, signing up and getting started is easy and in the true wiki tradition, there is a dedicated community to help people along.

The students who trialed these materials were English majors in a university in Nagoya and the class I was teaching was an American history and culture course called American BUNKA. The WebQuest focused on 20th century music as a way to learn about the current events of the period when the music was popular.

The task of the WebQuest was for students to imagine themselves as members of the Music Hall of Fame. They were directed to a National

Public Radio site, The NPR 100: The Most Important American Musical Works of the 20th Century (http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/vote/100list.html). They had to select one artist or group to profile. Students were divided into teams with four members and the role of each member is outlined below:

Biographer	Musicologist
• studies the life of the artist or group members. • answers the questions of when and where the artists were born and raised. • describes the family situation for the artists in their early years.	• studies the groups or artists that influenced the group. • discusses the music which was popular at the time of the group or artist? Puts the artist in the context of his time musically. • discusses how the artist influenced music that came after him.
Historian	Poet
• discusses what was happening in the country or world at the time of the artist. • discusses what the important current or social events were at the artists time. • discusses how these events effected the artist.	• analyzes the lyrics. • chooses one representative song and explains the significance and meaning of the lyrics.

Using the materials from the NPR homepage and their own research, the students were instructed to make a wiki page for the artist or group.

The students studied English - grammar, vocabulary, etc. - for about 12 class hours a week. My class is intended to be a content course more than a language class and was intended, as much as possible, to use authentic sources. There is an element of the emperor's new clothes to the use of authentic materials. Despite the number of class hours that they study, many of the students had a very low English ability - almost all were below TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) 500 which is considered to be the lowest level for communication and a number, perhaps as many as a third are around 300

4. Goals

There were three main goals for this project. Much of the class content focused on post World War II history. We had studied the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement in the US during the 1950s, and the 1960s up until present day. One goal I had was that by using music students could flesh out their understanding of the different periods we had studied. Music is a very evocative medium and students were already familiar with a number of songs from the different eras although unaware of the context of the songs. By choosing and analyzing a song students could learn what was happening when the song they chose was popular.

The second goal was a language goal. It was hoped that by using authentic materials, in the form of sound and video files in addition to reading practice, students would gain reading and listening practice. This was especially true for the listening. Japanese students of English are often able to read or more accurately decode even quite high level English texts, but because until quite recently the opportunity to hear authentic English was quite limited, their listening skills were not developed to the level of their reading. Recent sound files and pod casts on the web help fill this gap.

The final goal was to give students the opportunity to express themselves in front of others. Often in language study, students can parrot or repeat textbook drills and I wanted to tap into their creativity through this project.

Creating teams or groups to complete online activities lets me reduce class size and I like to make groups of students that include students who are strong in English with students who are less interested. Students, who are less interested, can be motivated by their peers more effectively than the teacher. According to Glasser (1986) students with different skills can act as mentors on projects.

This is especially true in language classes for non-majors. Students who are good in the English classes are not necessarily the strongest in their major subjects. By putting together teams, students can use their

different skills to complement and help one another. Similarly, by reducing the class by a factor of four, I am able to give more time and attention to the groups. This increases the personal attention that I can give to students. I get to learn more about them as individuals and can help them make choices about their futures by talking about the things that they are interested in. It has been my experience that students' ties to their group will increase their motivation. It has been obvious that compared to other homework assignments, the time and effort expended on group projects is much higher.

5. Evaluating the Project

The main link to content is the National Public Radio list of the 100 most important songs. This web page contains interviews with performers and clips of the songs that the authors consider important. The content of the site is audio and as mentioned earlier, one of the goals was to give students the opportunity to hear authentic English. The site contains information on 100 songs from classical to Jazz to contemporary Rock, with Hip Hop and Punk styles all represented.

Students were able to find an artist or group that they were interested in, but I most confess that the content of this site was beyond the language ability of most of the students. The speech was too fast and required too much background knowledge for the students to comprehend. Still students were able to pick up an artist that they were already familiar which perked their interest and they were able to use the other sites on the resource page to compete the project. I had hoped that the site would introduce students to new artists, but it seems that they used the site to research artists with whom they were already familiar.

In a standardized curriculum, teachers are making choices about what and how students study. Online projects give students the opportunity to choose which subjects they are most interested in or what aspects of the topic they are interested. Choice increases students' motivation and sense of empowerment. In this project, students were able to choose the artist

or group they were interested in. Students can choose which of the roles they are interested in and by negotiating with the other members of the group they can match their skills with the roles. One criticism of group work is that it reduces individual accountability.

This objection can be overcome by creating a post-test that makes each member of the team responsible for all of the information of the group. This also eliminates the problem of one student doing all of the work. A final advantage of online activities is that it puts tools in the students' hands that they are familiar with. Most of the students at university are familiar with computers and the Internet and letting them use these tools to complete language projects encourages students. They feel empowered to use previously developed skills in a new field. This also mirrors how they will work in the future.

Online activities bring realia to the foreign language classroom. Previously, teachers overseas were dependent on print and text, but with the Internet, sound, video and up to date information is available for students and teachers

6. Evaluating the Process

Students understood the different roles described on the process page. While doing their Power Point presentations, a certain unbalance appeared with the Biographer and the Historian providing much more information than the Poet or the Musicologist. For example in one student presentation on Little Richard, the students mentioned the policy of segregation that was in place in the US while he was a musician. This was done by the Biographer and not the Historian. Of course, to a certain extent, overlap is natural and cannot be avoided. Still the amount of material provided by the musicologist and poet was less than the other two. Actually, I now recall, that the Little Richard students did a nice job of putting his work in the context of the Jazz, Country and Blues and Gospel music that were current at the time. But the student who had to provide interpretation for, "*Ba babalooba ba la bamboo*" had a difficult row to hoe.

The students I deal with are intelligent and have a history of academic success. If they have any weakness it is that their interpersonal skills are often weak. This is true in their first language as well as English. As mentioned earlier, one of the advantages of group work is that it encourages students to communicate with their peers in a non-threatening environment. In the future, students will have to work in teams and group work in class lets students experiment with this process.

Still, by far my greatest goal is to help students articulate their ideas in a foreign language. This is a very intimidating thing. By increasing students' choice and offering the safety nets of groups, I can encourage them to have a go at expressing themselves. When students have choices, and the opportunity to prepare material on topics of interest to them, they will make greater efforts and say things that are more sincere than just saying what they think the teacher wants them to say. In particular, programs such as Power Point help students scaffold their ideas. They can pick up key words to frame ideas that help them speak at length on subjects. Speaking in front of others is intimidating, especially in a foreign language. Computers help students mentally map what they are going to say, organize their ideas, and anticipate problems.

7. Evaluating the Students

The evaluation forms were clear and understood by students. They were a little uncomfortable evaluating each other as this is culturally just not done in Japan. Also, the students tended to grade themselves more critically than I did. Again there is a cultural element at work here. There were a couple of students who were not up to the rest of the groups' standards but still evaluated themselves highly in an attempt to raise their grades.

While the students were making their presentations, I made notes and then used the notes to give students a quiz on the contents of all of the groups' presentations and wiki page contents. I wrote up a number of short-answer content questions that students should have learned from

the other presentations. This was pretty much a failure. When asked questions taken directly from the presentations, students did very badly with scores averaging below 50%. More interesting was the fact students often did not remember information from their own presentations and wiki pages.

8. Conclusion

Despite the low scores on their comprehensive quizzes, the wiki experiment was a success. The amount of time and effort that the students put into this project far exceeded more individually focused work. On the other hand, teachers looking for an easy way to set up projects that don't require a lot of supervision from the teacher will have to look elsewhere. The questions about resources and how to organize the material were more than usual and some students were uncomfortable with freedom that the wiki project presented.

References

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