

Avoiding Problems in the Internet Classroom

Word count: 3159 words not including title page, references or appendices.

For referencing quote:

Wilson, R. (2005) *Avoiding Problems in the Internet Classroom*. Unpublished MA Assignment. University of Essex

It has been argued that activities based around the internet are chaotic, frustrating and unstructured. However, chaos and a lack of structure can be easily avoided, requiring only a sound lesson plan and vigilant instructor. There is a greater risk of frustration for all parties and this requires greater attention to detail. This paper demonstrates that the biggest causes of frustration are a lack of learner autonomy and technology-related problems. I argue that traditional lesson planning and technical planning are both vital in avoiding these problems. This paper discusses activities in the internet classroom and how they must be imaginative, varied and culturally appropriate to be successful.

We examine technical issues; implementation issues; student motivation and cultural issues and successful implementation. This is related to our model class, a group of multi-cultural high intermediate/advanced learners of English at a British university. In the appendices 2 and 3, I give sample project and lesson plans.

Warschauer and Meskill (2000) believe, 'the key to successful use of technology in language teaching lies not in hardware or software but in "humanware", our capacity as language teachers to plan, design and implement effective educative activity'. This paper concludes that this approach and fully integrative application of the web is required for the internet classroom to succeed.

Technical Issues

The most obvious cause of the three problems in an internet classroom is technology. Where the students are expected and expecting to use the internet, working technology is vital. Every computer user knows that things can go wrong at any moment. The effective teacher has contingency plans in place, but there is no excuse for poor preparation when implementing technology.

Hardware and Software

When students embark on an EFL course that involves a considerable amount of internet access, they will rightly expect to be provided with fully-functioning hardware and software. A single computer failure can result in a frustrated student, but something more severe, such as network failure, can result in chaos! Kannan & Macknish (2000) experienced a high degree of computer failure, including problems with the server, printer and data loss. Whilst most problems were beyond their control, it still resulted in complaints from unhappy students. If it is practical, both hardware and software should be checked before each lesson. A helpdesk must be available to help should problems arise during a lesson.

Internet connection speed is of considerable importance, especially if the project involves synchronous communication with another country. The 'Siberlink Project' (Braunstein et al, 2000) had problems with the connection speed between students in America and Russia. The American students didn't receive communication from their collaborators rapidly enough, which was frustrating for all concerned.

Even if there is no collaboration with another class, there must be enough bandwidth to cope with the project requirements. This is an important issue that must be explored in the planning stage.

The teacher is responsible for ensuring that any websites the students are directed to function. Reinhard and Isbell (1999) tried to use the previous year's websites in an internet lesson and found at least half were missing. You can only imagine the students' frustration and the teachers' embarrassment.

Students also have assumptions about what a website can do. This comes from the students' exposure to various types of media (Kelly, 1998, cited in Kannan &

Macknish, 2000). This must be considered when selecting websites for the lesson. Uninteresting websites will mean bored and frustrated students.

In our model class the computer technology will be fully tested for these issues in advance of the course (see appendix 1).

Student Knowledge

Knowledge of the internet and computing is vital for CALL to be successful and some students require extra support. Computing ability is not linked to English ability (Jones, 2001). Even though we are in an information age, it is inappropriate to assume that all students are technologically competent. For example, Reinhardt and Isbell (1999) found that some of their students were terrified of computers and were afraid to use them, while others were ‘gung-ho and clicked on everything.’

In their research Kannan & Macknish (2000) found that there was some need for initial training before the course started. One student commented, “First teach some students how to use computers. For my case, I spend so much time to research how to use it.”

We must be certain the students have the skills to complete the tasks and to deal with the vast, unstructured internet. Our model class would take a pre-course test of computing ability, followed by an introductory course for those who require it (see appendix 3). This is a simple and effective way of avoiding the disasters and frustrations that could befall an unprepared class.

For the technophobe, novice or lower-level students it is prudent to provide a list of suitable websites.

Technical Support

Technical support must be available at all times. The teacher must appreciate the students view them as their first contact point. The teacher must have enough knowledge to deal with students' questions that relate to the task being performed. Davey (2001) was fortunate in that, 'At my university in addition to trained teachers, assistants are provided to help with the support of the CALL classes'. This is a lucky utopia; generally a teacher must content themselves with having a helpdesk.

It is imperative that before our model class embarks on an internet-based project or lesson we have clearly defined procedures in place to deal with any technical issues that arise. Most students in a technological learning environment appreciate that things can go wrong, but do expect prompt solutions. If this requirement is ignored there is great risk of at least one of our three problems appearing.

Unacceptable Internet Use

Even a novice internet user is aware of the existence of websites that are wholly inappropriate for the classroom. It is reasonable to expect most educational institutions to have controls in place to prevent access to these websites, but the teacher must be aware that if an inappropriate website is publicly viewed in the classroom all sorts of problems could ensue.

Kung (2004) argues students should be briefed on protocols, 'We cannot assume that students know to behave when they are asked to chat online.' She quotes an occasion where one student continually 'flamed' another in a chat-room and other instances of rudeness online.

Our model class must be fully aware of the standards of behaviour expected in the internet classroom. We would incorporate this into pre-course seminars, which would help alleviate the risk of the chaos that offensive behaviour can cause (see appendix 3).

Implementation Issues

There are three issues vital to the successful implementation of an internet lesson or project.

Planning

Sound planning is vital to avoid chaos, frustration and a lack of structure in the internet classroom. Common sense tells us that if there is no lesson structure or purpose in place the lesson is at the very least likely to be unstructured if not a total failure. Many aspects of planning relate to technology (see above). Trokeloshivili and Jost (1997) believe, 'Essential to any web-based course is thoughtful consideration of student needs and teacher goals.'

One planning issue unique to the internet classroom is computer laboratory time. In an ongoing project the laboratory must be available for the students' own research. Ware (2003, Cited in Kern et al, 2004) found that a lack of available computer time impacted on class communication and resulted in 'missed communication', 'miscommunication' and 'missed opportunities for intercultural learning'.

For the more conventional aspects of planning Harmer (2001, chapter 22) gives us four principles to consider.

(1) *Activities.*

Activities must be suitable for the lesson or project objective.

(2) *Skills*

What skills is the lesson or project intended to develop?

(3) *Language*

What language will we be delivering to the students?

(4) *Content*

The content must be interesting and stimulating.

As the internet is a unique learning environment, let us consider activities in more detail. Warschauer (2000) feels that 'The fact that having an authentic purpose is beneficial for learning is not a dramatic new insight'. He illustrates this by demonstrating that a successful project should have 'strong purpose activities' as opposed to 'weak purpose activities'. He cites the production of a brochure that

wasn't going to be used and repetitive behaviourist exercises as prime examples of the latter. This is well illustrated by one of Kannan & Macknish's (2000) frustrated student's comments, 'Too many similar exercises and some topics are not interesting enough'.

Whereas a project that involved exploration of Hawaiian culture followed by production of a website is an excellent example of the former. The students were highly motivated, empowered and produced successful work (Warschauer, 2000). I believe the activities in our model are 'strong' purpose activities. These activities relate to current affairs and production of a real website (see appendices 2 & 3).

We must also consider how the students are to be grouped in the lesson or project. In our example students will work in small groups, Harmer (2001, chapter 8) suggests creating a sociogram (see appendix 1) based on students preferred collaborators and allocating groups on this basis.

It is clear that for a successful internet lesson or project more planning than normal is required. In appendix 2 I apply Harmer's four principles to our model's project.

Autonomy and Control

Davies (World CALL Conference, 1998, cited in Jones, 2001) said, 'The web is like a library: enter the door and there are all the books – all heaped up on the floor.' The depth and breadth of the internet is truly astounding. There is genuine danger of students, especially those of lesser ability, becoming lost and frustrated in its environs (Jones, 2001). Jones states, 'CALL is ineffective without sufficient supervision'. It is axiomatic that there is sufficient supervision to avoid this.

In a fascinating study of a Christian evangelical college in America, Warschauer (1998) found the opposite situation. The controls in place were so strict the students were utterly disillusioned with the total lack of autonomy. The students were frustrated at the regimented and rigorous nature of the supervision and found many assignments a waste of time and effort. At the college, according to Warschauer, 'Electronic technology was used as a tool to implement and reinforce the rule based function of the class'. The lack of autonomy is beautifully illustrated in one of the teacher instructions, 'The instructor will not give credit for e-mailed keypal letters which have not been submitted in draft form for prior response on the due date'.

The teacher faces a dichotomy between giving the students so much autonomy that they can become lost in the internet jungle and so little autonomy that they become as exasperated as the students in Warschauer's example.

In our model classroom, a high degree of autonomy is available, but additional support is provided if it is required. For example, if a student is an internet novice we should provide them with a list of relevant websites. This is illustrated in appendices 2 and 3.

Teacher Issues

As previously mentioned teachers must have the necessary skills to administer the internet classroom. Lam (2000, cited in lecture notes) found that many teachers did not use computers in the classroom because they felt they lacked the skills required. The potential for chaos is accentuated if the teacher is unable to do the students' tasks!

The teacher must also be enthusiastic about using the internet. Jones (2001) feels many teachers are 'hostile or simply uninterested in CALL'. If the teacher is being forced to administer an internet classroom and is not enthusiastic, failure is likely and at least one of the three problems may appear.

In our model we assume the teacher is both capable of and enthusiastic about participation in an internet project.

Student Motivation

There are many things that can affect student motivation and it is something the teacher must pay close attention to, as a bored, disruptive student could be a catalyst for bringing chaos to the classroom and frustration to their peers.

In his study of a Christian evangelical college, Warschauer (1998) found that motivation falls if the students regard the use of technology as pointless and disruptive. He also found (2000) the happiest and most motivated students, 'saw themselves developing new literacy skills in a new medium of cultural importance for their lives. The fact that they were learning these skills in a second language was to them an expected outcome or a fortuitous turn of events.'

In another study, Warschauer (2001) discovered authentic tasks, such as publishing their own work, had a very positive motivational affect.

In our model classroom, the students are given authentic tasks, e.g. producing web pages and presenting to colleagues (see appendices 2 & 3).

Cultural Issues

In the Classroom

Consideration of the students' cultures is an important issue in avoiding disaster and we must take this into account. Canagarajah (1999, chapter 4) focuses on the ways students resist cultural imposition in the EFL classroom, for example doodling on the pictures in the textbooks. There is no reason to suspect a similar situation would not occur in an internet classroom. The result of resistance could easily be a frustrated teacher and a chaotic classroom. It is important when implementing our model to make sure the material is culturally appropriate. Warschauer (2000) gives an excellent example of how culture can be successfully integrated into the internet classroom. Hawaiian language students investigated their own culture and used this to produce a website. Sensitive integration of culture into the lesson or project can enhance the learning experience and add to the authenticity of the activities.

The culture of the educational institution itself can also affect the students' motivation and cause frustration. This was definitely the case at Miller College, the Christian evangelical college that Warschauer (1998) investigated. He found 'concepts such as learner autonomy, creativity and empowerment are at odds with the overall mission of Miller College...' As discussed above the students at this institution were extremely frustrated and this must be a partial reflection on the college's culture.

The model project (appendix 3) investigates global political issues and should be culturally appropriate for our students. They are able to select a political issue which is both relevant to their culture and of interest to them. For the purposes of our example, we must assume that the institution at which our model class are studying has a less restrictive culture than that of Miller College.

Misunderstanding

There are many examples of cultural misunderstanding causing frustration and difficulties among EFL students in the internet classroom. Kern (2000, cited in Kung, 2004) found that text emotions (e.g. smile ‘☺’) are not inter-culturally consistent. Kung also had an incidence of a student swearing because she was frustrated and didn’t know the word was unacceptable.

Belz (2000, cited in Kern et al, 2004) had cross-cultural problems with American and German students in collaborative project. The Germans felt the Americans were not forthcoming with personal information and the Americans felt the Germans did not contribute effectively.

Shulman (2001) offers a possible solution by suggesting, ‘...the intercultural awareness and competence of the students and teachers should be raised through brief lectures and assigned readings on this topic before beginning the project.’

Although most of the problems of misunderstanding above occurred in inter-class collaboration, in our model classroom, a single multi-cultural class, we must still be aware that frustration and other problems can result from cultural misunderstanding. Therefore, we implement a solution based on Shulman’s, with students giving presentations about their own culture (see appendix 3). This is no guarantee, but the students would at least be aware of potential pitfalls.

Successful Implementation

Many different commentators have put forward solutions to the problems discussed in this paper. Teeler and Gray (2000, chapter 4) give three stages for creating a successful internet classroom.

1 – Planning

This is arrangement and management of the lesson location, the equipment requirements, examining project costs, purchasing of necessary technology, arranging technical support and so on.

2 – Set-up and Configuration

This includes, if necessary, the actual creation of the internet classroom, arranging lesson times, setting up and checking websites and resolution of any training issues.

3 – Maintenance

This is general maintenance of the classroom, reviewing and improving the facility.

Even if the internet classroom is already in place, careful consideration of these factors can help ensure that many of the technical issues discussed above do not cause chaos, frustration or a lack of structure.

Fox (1998) found that for a lesson or project to be successful the web needs to be an integral part of the lesson; the students must possess adequate computer skills and the teacher must act as a guide. But, it is Warschauer and Fawn-Whittaker (1997) who provide us with the most cogent guidelines. *1 – Consider carefully your goals*

The teacher must have a clear idea as what the lesson is designed to achieve so the activities can be tailored to fulfil that purpose.

2 – Think Integration

The internet must be a full part of the lesson and shouldn't be 'disconnected' from the other activities with the class.

3 – Don't underestimate the complexity

Some students even lack basic computer skills. The goals that are set should not be over-ambitious. It is better to start simple and within achievable targets.

4 – Provide necessary support

This is vital in avoiding many of the problems discussed in this paper. It can take various forms, from training in computer skills, to providing a list of suitable websites.

5 – Involve students in decisions

Students should be given an appropriate degree of autonomy. The teacher should be a “guide on the side” and facilitate learning.

It is, of course, impossible to plan for every eventuality. The unpredictable can happen at any time no matter how vigilant the instructor or well planned the lesson. Following the two sets of guidelines above will potentially make frustration, chaos and a lack of structure less likely. In our model classroom we combine both sets of guidelines in the hope of creating a trouble free, interesting and successful internet class (See appendices 2 & 3).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the internet will become increasingly important in ELT. Its influence on our lives increases almost daily and the ELT industry must keep pace. Our responsibility as educators is to ensure students are offered and continue to be offered high quality education. As Kern et al (2004) state clearly, ‘...research suggests that language educators should use the internet not so much to teach the same thing in a different way, but rather to help students enter into a new realm of collaborative inquiry and construction of knowledge; viewing their expanding repertoire of identities and communication strategies as resources in the process’.

If we keep this and the other factors discussed in this paper paramount in our minds, we can go a long way to implementing internet lessons which are free of chaos, frustration and a lack of structure.

References

- Braunstein B, Meloni C & Zolotareva L – The US-Siberlink Project (TESL-EJ, Volume 4/3, May 2000)
- Canagarajah A S – Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching (OUP, 1999)
- Davey I – The use of collaborative web page-design projects for teaching EFL, with a focus on Japanese university students (CALL-EJ Online, Volume 3/1, June 2001)
- Fox G – The Internet: Making it Work in the ESL Classroom (The Internet TESOL Journal, Volume IV/9, September 1998)
- Harmer J – The Practice of English Language Teaching (Longman, 2001)
- Jones JF – CALL and the responsibilities of teachers and administrators (ELT Journal Volume 55/4, October 2001)
- Kannan J & Macknish C – Issues Affecting Online ESL Learning: A Singapore Case Study (The Internet TESOL Journal, Volume VI/11, November 2000)
- Kern R, Ware P & Warschauer M – Crossing Frontiers: New Directions in Online Pedagogy and Research (Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, Volume 24, pp 243-269, CUP 2004)
- Lam Y – Technophilia v Technophobia: a preliminary look at why second-language teachers do or do not use technology in their classrooms. (Canadian Modern Language Review 56(3), pp 390 – 420, 2000, taken from CALL course notes)
- Reinhardt J & Isbell K – Teaching in Cyberspace, Tales from the Trenches (TESOL Matters Volume 9/5, October/November 1999)
- Shiao-Chuan Kung – Synchronous electronic discussions in an EFL reading class (ELT Journal, Volume 58/2, April 2004)
- Shulman M – Developing Global Connection through Computer-Mediated Communication (The Internet TESOL Journal, Volume VII/6, June 2001)
- Teeler D with Gray P – How to Use the Internet in ELT (Longman 2000)
- Trokeloshvili D & Jost N – The Internet and Foreign Language Instruction: Practice and Discussion (The Internet TESOL Journal, Vol III/8, August 1997)
- Warschauer M & Fawn Whittaker P – The Internet for English Teaching: Guidelines for Teachers. (TESL Reporter, 30, 1, pp 27-33, 1997)

- Warschauer M – Online learning in socio-cultural context (*Anthropology Education Quarterly*, 29(1), pp 68-88, 1998)
- Warschauer M – Online Learning in Second Language Classrooms – An ethnographic study. In Warschauer M & Kern R, *Network-based language teaching: concepts & practice* (CUP 2000)
- Warschauer M & Meskill C – Technology and Second Language Learning - In J Rosenthal (ed), *Handbook of undergraduate second language education* (pp 303 – 338, Mahwah, New Jersey, Lawrence Elbaum, 2000)
- Warschauer M, Shetzer H & Meloni C – *Internet for English Teaching* (TESOL Publications 2000)
- Warschauer M – Online Communication – In R Carter & D Nunan (eds), *The Cambridge Guide to TESOL* (pp 207 – 212, CUP, 2001)

Appendix 1 – The Sociogram

Taken from Harmer (2001, p120)

A sociogram is completed as follows:-

1. Students write their name on a piece of paper.
2. They write a list of students, from 1 downwards, who they'd prefer to work with.
3. They write a second list of the students they'd prefer not to work with.
4. Instructor completes a sociogram diagram (shown on Harmer p120) linking students with their preferred collaborators.
5. The teacher then allocates groups on this basis.

Appendix 2 – Project Plan

Learners

High intermediate/ advanced students of English at a British University. The students are from various countries. We assume a class of 12 students. Students without the necessary I.T. skills will be given additional pre-course tuition.

Course Structure

10 x 3hrs.

Lesson plans use Task Based Learning as their basis.

Course Objectives

Skills

1. Improve the students' ability to present arguments and critiques in both written and verbal form.
2. Improve oral presentation skills.
3. Build skills for displaying information on the Internet in English.
4. Improve general electronic literacy.
5. Improve project planning skills.

Language

1. Improve political vocabulary.
2. Gain knowledge of rhetorical language.

Course Content

Each individual class will contain activities designed to improve the skills being taught in this course.

Main Activities

1. Build website based around student selected political topic. The website will illustrate both the global issues that the topic relates to, and how the issue affects their own culture.
2. Create and deliver a group presentation on the issue researched. Answer questions on, and discuss the issue with the rest of the group.

Other Activities include

1. Internet based activities, e.g. Scavenger Hunts.
2. Writing activities, e.g. a short paper on a major political issue.
3. Group discussions.
4. Short presentations.

Content

1. Current political topics. The main topics for the project will be selected by the students themselves.
2. Relevant websites. The instructor will provide a list of useful basic websites, e.g. www.bbc.co.uk or www.cnn.com. The students may research others as required.

Pre-planning Requirements

1. Arrange class times and additional laboratory times.
2. Build links with I.T. helpdesk for support during course.
3. Arrange for hardware and software testing/installing.
4. Check and list suitable websites.
5. Arrange for creation of student IDs.
6. Create discussion board and chat rooms for the course.

Note

Project plan put together with guidance from:-

1. Harmer (2001)
2. Warschauer et al (2000)
3. Teeler & Gray (2000)

Appendix 3 – Basic Lesson Plans

3.0 Pre-course

1. Students take test of internet and pc skills.
2. Students given guidance about how to behave in the internet classroom.
3. Give all students their IDs.
4. Students who require additional training are provided with a one or two day basic computing seminar.

3.1 Lesson 1

1. Introductions. (25mins)

Each student is asked to give a short self-introduction to the rest of the class. The class may ask questions.

2. Activity – Reading and discussion (40mins).

The instructor provides links for 2 or 3 short articles about a current news item.

Students read these individually (15mins)

The students are placed in groups of 4. They log into an online chat system and discuss the articles. The instructor provides questions for discussion. (25mins)

3. Discussion and feedback on activity (25mins)

The class discusses and reviews the activity. The instructor introduces useful language and information about how they can complete the task more effectively (if necessary).

4. Activity – Scavenger Hunt (30mins)

The students are divided into pairs and set an online scavenger hunt. The hunt requires them to look for information which will be useful for the coming weeks of the course (e.g. finding and listening to a famous speech). The instructor provides a useful search engine (e.g. Google).

5. Discussion and feedback on activity (15mins)

Review scavenger hunt and give answers.

6. Activity – Discussion exercise (30mins)

The students are grouped into 4s. The instructor sets discussion questions. Discussion takes place using online chat.

7. Short feedback and closing (15m)

Group gives feedback on exercise. Students are then paired for homework. Pairs are asked to prepare 5 minute presentations about how their cultures differ. If students are from the same culture they compare their culture to British culture.

3.2 Lesson 2

1. Activity – Deliver presentations (40mins).

The students deliver their presentations and answer any questions.

2. Review and discuss presentations (30mins).

The students discuss difficulties in delivering presentations. The class reviews language and presentation techniques used. Instructor provides support and advice.

3. Activity – Short presentation activity (40mins).

The students are grouped into 3s. The groups are given a list of presentation topics related to global political issues and a list of relevant websites. Each group chooses a topic and prepares a 5 minute presentation.

4. Activity – Deliver Presentation (40mins).

The groups deliver their presentations and answer questions.

5. Short review of presentations (10mins).

The students and instructor make comments on presentations.

6. Prepare sociogram (10mins).

The students give lists for sociogram preparation (see appendix 1).

7. Hand out homework.

The students are asked to write a short paper on a political issue of their choice. The instructor provides a list of useful general websites. The students are informed that they will be discussing their papers next lesson. The students are also asked to think about a main research topic for the course.

3.3 Lesson 3

1. Activity – Discussion (45mins).

The students are grouped into 4s. Instructor provides discussion questions on current political issues. The groups discuss the questions using chat. The instructor monitors groups.

2. Review of discussion and follow-up (25mins).

The class discusses the solutions to the problems orally. Any difficulties or issues are addressed. The instructor provides help and useful language if appropriate.

4. Review of written work (40mins).

The students again grouped in 4s. The groups orally discuss what they found in their research and what difficulties they had. They answer peer questions.

The instructor monitors and provides input and feedback.

5. Hand in papers.

6. Introduce main project (15mins)

The instructor allocates groups based on sociogram. The students are provided with possible areas for research and useful websites. The instructor briefs on what is expected from the projects.

7. Activity – Project plan (45mins).

The groups discuss what political topic they want to research. They may choose from given topics or something of their own. The groups should allocate roles and roughly formulate what questions they want to answer. Each group gives feedback to the class.

8. Closing briefing (15mins).

The instructor reviews project and briefs on the format of future lessons. The instructor gives students information on when the laboratories are available and helpdesk information.

3.4 Lessons 4 to 9

Each week has a similar format.

1. A different member of each groups briefs class on their progress.
2. The groups spend time discussing the project and their objectives for the week.
3. Each group gives feedback to class on their objectives for the week.
4. The rest of the lesson is spent on activities designed to build skills needed for website production, delivering presentations and participating in discussions.

These can include:-

Critical evaluation of websites.

‘Parliamentary’ style discussions.

Gap filling exercises.

Groups design scavenger hunts for the class.

Writing exercises

Vocabulary games

3.5 Lesson 10

Each group presents and answers questions. Each group has up to 40 minutes.

The remaining time is spent on anonymous critical evaluation of the other groups’ websites.

The instructor gives a final course wrap-up.

Note

The activities in the lesson plans were designed with the assistance of Warschauer et al (2000).