

Virtual Communities in Teaching of English Language

a) Why should we create virtual communities?

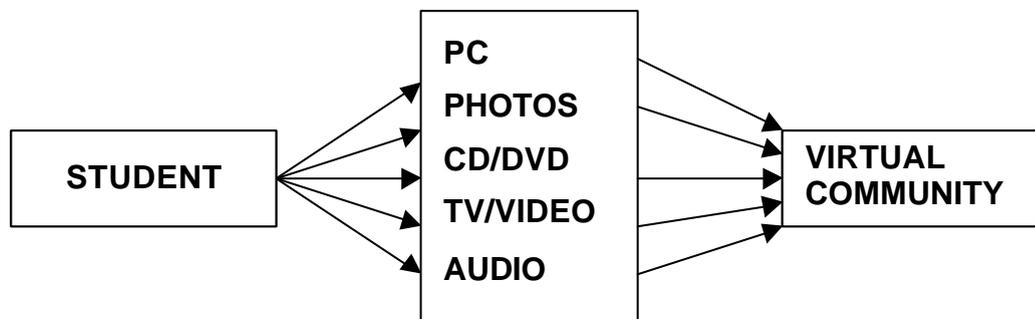
In order to learn a foreign language it is not enough to take up a textbook and start reading. The learning process incorporates reading, listening, writing and speaking and learners have to combine these skills if they aim to achieve proficiency in any foreign language. It is not surprising that teachers and students of languages were among the first to embrace new technologies which were supposed to help them in attaining their goals.

Not too long ago audio and video cassettes were the height of new technologies used in our classrooms, but the past decade has brought significant changes in the way foreign languages are taught. The development of personal computers and the Internet

in particular facilitate the introduction of new comprehensive methods for language teaching. Multimedia CD-ROMs with language courses, the World Wide Web with its multitude of foreign language documents and other content including on-line language courses, grammars, music and video, as well as other emerging technologies, enable a modern English language teacher to use the full potential of the new media in order to transfer his or her knowledge and prepare students and pupils to use their language skills in interaction with other people.

One of the ways to fully and interactively include the students and pupils into the language learning process is by creating, developing and maintaining of virtual communities. In the pre-Internet period teachers and students/pupils used a variety of technological aids (video-cameras, photographic cameras, TV, audio cassettes/records/CDs and even PCs), but these aids did not allow a higher level of interactivity. With the development of the Internet all the above mentioned aids can

be combined with the new technologies which now enables maximum interactivity among numerous students and even teachers themselves.



All multimedia aids previously used by English teachers are combined in the creation of a virtual community.

A virtual community is a gathering place of people who may live in different distant parts of the world. They are connected through the Internet on the basis of common interest. This can range from serious problems, to usual everyday issues, and there are even completely absurd communities such as the so-called Republic of Mars (www.marsgov.net). In order to become a member of that community you need to apply for an «immigration permit». The Republic has its own prime minister, government and political parties. Parliamentary elections are held on a regular basis, there is a constitution, supreme court, official news agency and other «institutions» which give this community the aspect of being real.

b) Stages in the creation of a virtual community

There are several preconditions for simple web pages to be transformed into a virtual community. The authors/creators/designers need to suggest a gathering of people on the basis of some mutual interests; all members of the community need to have a possibility to contact each other or at least to leave messages; the community pages should not be created and then forgotten – new content should constantly be added.

Since English is the predominant Web language it is only natural that English teachers will find the opportunities of the Internet very interesting and appropriate for language classes. Pupils of each class can create their own special community. Since we are discussing an English language class, the whole procedure presupposes a certain level of the pupils' knowledge previously attained in Computer Science lessons. The language teacher must take into consideration the proficiency level of his/her pupils and adapt the lessons according to their abilities and skills.

The creative process can be divided into several stages:

1. Choosing the topic and content
2. Finding the provider
3. Applying for web space
4. Creating the frame
5. Including all the necessary services and tools
6. Uploading process
7. Community maintenance

1. Choosing the topic/content

The first stage in the creation of a virtual community is rather non-technological. The teacher explains what such a community should contain and gives a few examples. The pupils are then divided in groups of 3-5 and their task is to discuss various possibilities and ideas which lead towards appropriate content of their future Internet community. They decide on the title, the topic, the aim and the content of the community. The decisions of each group are then presented to the entire class. The discussion continues with each group trying to convince the others that their idea is the best. The teacher may suggest a compromise and thus the best ideas from each group are incorporated into the final decision.

2. Finding the provider (homesteading site)

The next stage is looking for the appropriate homesteading site, i.e. Internet space for the new community. The pupils are now situated in the school's computer science

classroom. The teacher directs the pupils as to the best ways of searching for a provider or asks them to suggest the way such a provider might be found. The most natural procedure would be through any of numerous search engines such as Google (www.google.com) or AltaVista (www.altavista.digital.com). Since some of the search engines offer the possibility of searching in Croatian, the teacher should disable this option or prevent the pupils from using it.

Depending on the number of available PCs, the pupils are divided in groups or pairs. They search for the provider and then explain why they decided on that particular provider, pointing out good and bad sides (quantity of free web space, free features such as visit counters, guest books, e-mail etc.). If necessary the teacher explains new vocabulary.

Today there is a large number of providers who offer free web space and it is relatively easy to establish a virtual community without too much technical knowledge. Among the best providers are NBCi (www.NBCi.com), Geocities (www.geocities.com), Angelfire (www.angelfire.com), but myriads of others appear on a daily basis.

3. Applying for Web-space

When applying for web-space it is usually necessary to fill in some forms. This is an excellent exercise for the pupils who will be faced with such tasks many times in future. Apart from the most common information (name, address, country, E-mail etc.) the forms sometimes include a more detailed questionnaire which is then completed with the help of the teacher.

4. Creating the frame

The pupils now create the first or index page of their future community and decide how the community will be organized, who will be invited to participate, how many levels it will contain and in this way they constitute the frame of the community. English is, of course, the «official» language of their new community.

The creation of the first page and its sub pages can be executed with several tools and programs and the teacher has to decide on the most appropriate software depending on the age and knowledge of pupils. For beginners the most appropriate application would be the MS Word 2000 – the pupils certainly dealt with it in computer science classes and it is very simple to create a simple web page with it. More advanced pupil may choose FrontPage or other applications.

This stage is also concluded with discussions regarding the above-mentioned points. When the actual creating and designing process start each of the pupils should get a chance to go through all the procedures leading to the eventual completion of the community.

5. Including all the necessary services and tools

What is created by now is a simple web site which is far away from the virtual community we are aiming at. The pupils now have to decide which services and communicating opportunities they want to offer to the visitors and potential members of the community. Social interaction is the key characteristic of a successful virtual community.

A wide variety of possibilities are offered: Chat, instant messaging, discussion forums, message boards, Internet radio stations, etc. Some providers offer at least some of these services, and the pupils will have to incorporate them into their community site.

Chat enables the pupils to communicate directly with one another by keying in messages which are immediately visible on the screen of everybody connected to the so-called *chat-room*.

Since not everybody is connected at all times, a *discussion forum* needs to be included as well. Here a pupil sends a message containing an inquiry or a suggestion and other pupils can post an answer if they wish – all messages are visible to everyone; similarly, a *message board* can be used to post messages, but the

answers to questions and inquiries need not be visible, but can be sent directly to someone's E-mail.

Another interesting service is the *guest book*. Visitors of our web site can sign the guest book and include a comment or a suggestion. All other visitors can view the guest book entries as well.

6. Uploading process

The uploading process is very simple once it has been properly configured. The pupils have to read through the instructions and with the help of their teacher upload their community. Again the teacher has to pay special attention to new vocabulary which is certain to arise.

7. Community maintenance

Setting up a community may be a good exercise in information technology but in an English class the pupils will earn most profit from their work in this last stage. We have already stated that English is the official language of communication of the pupils' community. They invite other pupils from other schools and other countries to join their community and participate in their discussions or other activities. They are now completely immersed into the process of communication and cooperation with each other and with their peers and teachers.

All community services need their own administrators or moderators that are appointed among the pupils on a temporary basis – after a certain period of time the pupils are rotated in their duties and are thus able to take part in all aspects of the community operation. The moderators are important because members and visitors might, for example, start a new topic merely by responding to an old posting, which would fragment the discussions and topics.

The pupils can now include photographs, short video-clips, an Internet radio station, they can communicate using web-cameras etc. The possibilities are endless.

c) Teacher-student cooperation

Throughout all the above-explained stages the teacher remains in the background, not taking the lead, but only directing the pupils towards certain problems and making proper suggestions if the discussion among pupils takes the wrong turn.

After the virtual community has been set up it can be used in a variety of ways connected to the school curriculum. For example, it can be a focal point of pupils' discussion regarding school problems, textbooks and homework.

The communication between the teacher and the pupils/students is no longer restricted only to the classroom but is partially transferred to the Internet, either through E-mail, or the community's message-board or chat-room. The teachers monitor the activity of their students and are able to interfere if such need should arise. The teacher can pose various problems to the pupils, which they have to solve, and he/she can stimulate them to invent their own which are then presented to their peers. For example, a rock-concert in their town may be a good opportunity for the pupils to create a report including photographs and post it to their community site. They can do their homework and send it to their teacher to be evaluated without having to embarrass themselves at school. Through a message board or discussion forum they can ask other pupils for advice regarding other school subjects.

This kind of teaching process activates all the potentials of students and pupils who have to employ all their basic skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening) and combine them with their ability to cooperate and exchange ideas and suggestions in order to make their virtual community work.

d) Problems and suggestions of solutions

There are, however, some serious problems connected with the above described teaching process. It is not so much the lack of equipment, although there are still many schools that are severely underequipped in terms of information technology,

but the lack of properly trained teachers of English. There are very few higher education courses in Croatia that offer at least the basic training for the language teachers in usage of multimedia equipment and computers and the Internet in particular. This means that teachers are left to their own devices and enthusiasm if they want to introduce new methods of teaching.

Another problem is the proverbial fear from new technology, especially fear from personal computers. Among some teachers, such novelties are regarded as unnecessary fashion, suitable only for playing. Also, some schools do not allow teachers to use the information technology classrooms for anything else but information technology lessons.

The first problem is being dealt with and very soon all schools will have Internet access; the second problem should be recognized and new methods of teaching should be introduced in all higher education institutions that train future teachers of languages (but not only them); the third problem is the hardest to overcome because it is deeply embedded in the psyche of many people. They will never deal with the problem of their own accord and therefore it is necessary to organize seminars and workshops where teachers who had no previous experience with new technologies can learn and get acquainted with modern equipment. The fourth problem presupposes a process of rethinking of the role new emerging technologies have and will continue to have in our lives; people have to understand that computers and the Internet are not merely part of one of the school subject's curriculum, but that they can and should be used in the teaching process of other subjects as well.

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