

The International Writing Exchange at Temasek Polytechnic: a cybercomposition experience

Michael Vallance
Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore
mvallance@mac.com

Abstract

The International Writing Exchange (IWE), managed by Ruth Vilmi of Helsinki University, provided an online platform for developing the writing skills of engineering students studying Technical Communication Skills (TCS) at Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore. Utilising Web Board (a conference, bulletin board and chat application) together with the IWE web site, students were able to post written submissions online for evaluation by fellow learners and instructors from Japan, Korea, Myanmar, Finland, Czech Republic and the USA; the international 'classroom without walls'. This paper details three IWE courses and outlines the experiences gained by the students and the facilitator.

Introduction

In April 1997 Singapore's Minister for Education launched 'The Masterplan for IT in Education' which stipulated that:

- by 1999 all schools in Singapore would be provided with an integrated Information Technology infrastructure,
- within 5 years all pupils would be spending up to 20% of the scheduled curriculum learning with computers,
- instructors would be utilising multimedia and information technology for teaching and learning (Teo, 97).

One technology that has captured the imagination of politicians and educationalists alike, resulting in this re-evaluation of schooling, teaching and learning, is that vast technical repository of information known as the Internet. The subsequent Computer Aided Learning (CAL):

- aims to liberate teachers and learners from the physical boundaries of the classroom, the traditional lectures becoming multimedia experiences with the focus on learners learning rather than teachers teaching,
- local institution materials being supplemented by learning resources available worldwide,
- teachers and students communicating with fellow professionals and learners in an international environment; the 'classroom without walls' (Owston, 97).

The International Writing Exchange

A project undertaken in the School of Engineering, Temasek Polytechnic is the International Writing Exchange (IWE)ⁱ, a unique CAL activity which was started in 1994 by Ruth Vilmi of Helsinki University, Finland with the objective of developing students' writing skills by allowing them to communicate with English language learners worldwide. Students basically submit text via e-mail to an IWE server, which in turn automatically configures the submission and posts on a previously prepared World Wide Web page. Learners worldwide are then encouraged to access the web page read the texts and post commentaries. Later, the students participate in a text-based online chat. Figure 1 illustrates the IWE web page.



Figure 1. IWE web page.

International Writing Exchange at Temasek Polytechnic

In the School of Engineering at Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore it is compulsory for all first year students to participate in the Technical Communication Skills (TCS) course. In addition to the regular TCS classes all Language and Communication lecturers voluntarily offer TCS Plus courses; supplementary courses to further enhance and develop students' communication skills. These TCS Plus courses are optional for students but have proved incredibly popular; examples include Debating Skills, Film Reviews, Business English, Grammar Awareness, Web Page Construction, Collaborative Story Writing, and IWE to name a few. Since August 1998 three IWE courses have been conducted in the Writing Lab; a room of 24 networked computers with Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Office 95 installed, terminals positioned along the periphery with operators facing the direction of the walls when working, and a central table large enough to accommodate 12 students working at any one time for reading, writing, discussing, etc. The courses were held from 3 to 5 p.m. every Wednesday afternoon. Furthermore, as the networked system disallowed access to the student server, hence their personal e-mail accounts, an application called Web Board was utilised for online communication.ⁱⁱ The 4-week schedule is outlined in figure 2.

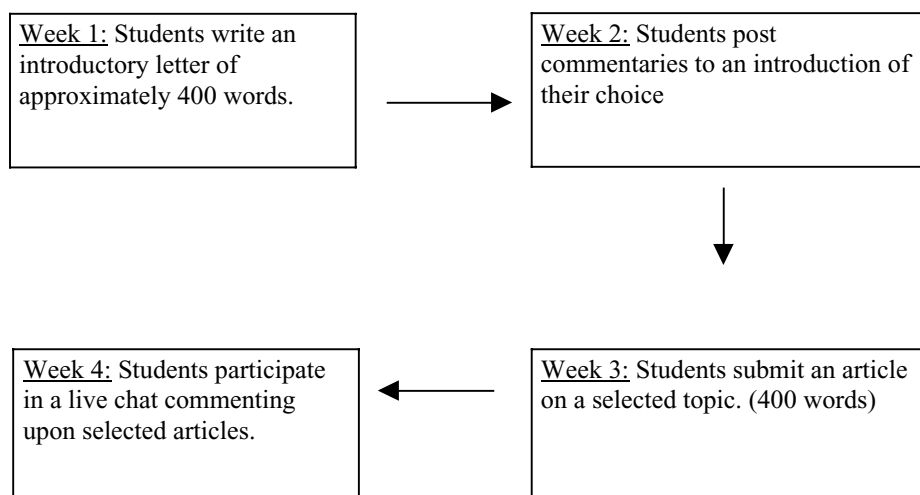


Fig 2: IWE schedule of activities

The objective for the students was to write and post texts on selected topics within the scheduled TCS Plus time. During the lesson my role was that of facilitator, giving guidance when requested. Initially the students were instructed on how to access Web Board and post contributions. Aims and deadlines were provided, and the importance of meeting these were stressed, ie. the course being online and international meant that the IWE students were seen as representatives of Temasek Polytechnic. In the first week students completed the introductory letters and posted on Web Board for fellow Temasek IWE students to read. The first deadline for submission to the web-based IWE at Helsinki University was two days after the first lesson. This allowed students to submit contributions written outside the scheduled lab time either from home or via the Writing Lab computers accessed during the free access hours. It also provided some time for me to check the students' writing focussing on grammar, punctuation, cohesion and readability. Corrected texts were then e-mailed to IWE, which were, in turn, automatically posted on the IWE web page. Additionally, the corrected texts, with commentaries, were re-posted to Web Board for all students to access and view. The internationalisation of IWE was illustrated early on with submissions from Korea, Japan, USA, Australia, Finland and the Czech Republic. The majority of my IWE students were from Myanmar and Singapore.

In the second week students were ecstatic to see their writing on the World Wide Web and some already had commentaries from the overseas participants. The objective of the second week was to demonstrate to students how to forward commentaries and replies directly to the IWE web site. However, as mentioned earlier, students needed to do this via e-mail but the Writing Lab did not have student server access rights. Some students got round this by opening commercialised, free e-mail accounts with Hotmail, Eudora or Yahoo.ⁱⁱⁱ Those who did not wish to do this stored their texts within Web Board and then posted at a later time. Once again my role was guide and facilitator, and I could monitor all the contributions online, consequently posting submissions of my own particularly focussing upon the students' language accuracy and appropriacy. Finally, at the end of week 2 the students had to select a topic from the IWE list for their essay writing task; for example, festivals and celebrations, favourite sports, films, relationships, collaborative stories

In week 3 students wrote their essays but once again I insisted the texts be posted on Web Board for checking and viewing by fellow TCS Plus participants. It was observed that in fact the students were taking more care over their texts at this stage as they realised that the essays would be viewed by the international students or by anyone who accessed the IWE web page; potentially an audience of millions of readers.

The pressure of being an online writer was beginning to be felt. The students asked more questions, re-evaluated their texts, sought advice from colleagues and generally polished up their work continuously during the third week. None of the texts were completed in the scheduled lab time but most students met the deadline by accessing Web Board either from home, from another lab within the campus or during the Writing Lab free access periods.

In the first half of the session of week 4 students accessed the IWE web site to read and discuss the commentaries posted on their articles. Students also began to recognise that posting material online did not necessarily mean that readers would flock to the site. Users needed incentives and exigency: factors many educators and webmasters should seriously bear in mind!

In the second half the students accessed the Java applet chat facility. Initially, I allowed students to chat freely so as to acclimatise new users of IRC^{iv} to the input-reply lag associated with many-user text-based chats; a student would input a question but it would not be answered until 4 or 5 chat lines later by which time another question may have been posted. Although IRC can be quite confusing for first time users, teenage students are mostly familiar with its utilisation and operation; however, there appears to be an original chat language emerging formulated from abbreviations and this was strongly discouraged on the IWE course. During the initial chat lessons students from Japan, Korea and Finland arrived to participate with, at any one time, 12 Temasek students. However, the predominantly male teenage Temasek students' contributions were quite naive (read: sexist) and were not appreciated by the mainly female overseas participants. I and a fellow instructor (Ruth Vilmi) initiated a number of discussions but the chat lacked cohesion and fluidity and soon the overseas users logged out.

At the end of the course the students reflected on their learning via a discussion and by completing an evaluation form. Their IWE accounts were left active on Web Board and 8 of the 30 students returned online to submit further contributions and comment upon later submissions. Most of the students felt that the IWE course was relaxing and a fun way to learn. Supplemental benefits included developing typing skills, learning to access the Internet, manipulating computer files between applications and learning how to make friends.

Each of the three IWE courses were generally successful but too short to objectively determine any long-term improvements in students' writing skills. In the short term students became aware of common grammatical and punctuation errors, and began utilising signal structure words thereby making their texts much more cohesive and coherent. All students wanted the course to last longer and requested more frequent Writing Lab sessions; in fact the TCS plus courses were only scheduled for 3 hours but all my students spent 8 hours participating in IWE and not one complained! Integrative motivation was high as students had a great desire to communicate with learners from other countries and they felt empowered to openly discuss issues they would probably shy away from in verbal communication. Instrumental motivation may be related to the supplementary marks added to their TCS 1 grades for the IWE participation.

Problematic throughout were technical interruptions and the network at one stage became infected with a virus thereby randomly disabling the computers. Technical problems also contributed to negative feedback in week 4, as the chat facility would suddenly crash. In fact the overseas users had great difficulty just accessing Web Board and once connected the downloading was very slow. IWE in Finland now has a conference chat utilising telnet^v so it is anticipated Web Board will only be accessed by the Temasek students for the week 1 to week 3 tasks and activities. However, telnet could not be downloaded in the Writing Lab due to the lack of Windows NT administration rights. Transferring the administration of the local computer network to teachers is therefore highly recommended; previous experience with Apple computers and networking proved less frustrating, more reliable and much simpler to administer than Windows NT.

Conclusion

The IWE course for TCS 1 students was such a success that it is recommended the course be considered as an integral part of a communication skills course in order to develop international communication and cooperation utilising IT, as expressed in the aforementioned Masterplan for IT in Education. It is also recommended that the TCS plus course be extended to 2 hours, twice a week, for the 4 -week duration. IWE could also extend a single course from 4 to 6 weeks; but it is appreciated this may effect many EFL classes worldwide. Finally, technology should be returned to the end users ñ the instructors, the teachers ñ and a computer operating system and network considered for ease of use, ease of maintenance and ease of administration.

Bibliography

Owston, R. (1997) *The World Wide Web: a Technology to Enhance Teaching and Learning?* URL:

<http://www.edu.yorku.ca/~rowston/article.html>

Teo, C.H. (1997) *Opening New Frontiers with Information technology.* URL:

[http://www.moe.edu.sg/iteducation/masterplan/speech\(\).htm](http://www.moe.edu.sg/iteducation/masterplan/speech().htm)

Endnotes

- i Vilmi, R. (1998) *International Writing Exchange.* URL: <http://www.hut.fi/~rvilmi/Project/IWE/>
- ii Web Board is basically an application installed on a Temasek Polytechnic server that allows a manager to construct conferences for bulletin board submissions and online text-based chatting. IWE students were given access rights via specific user names and associated passwords so that they were able to post their contributions at the Web Board conference for fellow students to read. Moreover, it was very convenient for me to access as, Web Board being a web-based application, it was possible to read the texts at any time from any networked computer. URL: <http://www-eng.tp.edu.sg/tcs/netiquette/diss.htm>
- iii Free e-mail available at Hotmail (<http://www.hotmail.com>), Eudora (<http://www.eudora.com>) and Yahoo (<http://www.yahoo.com>).
- iv Internet Relay Chat (IRC) --- real-time text-based communication between at least 2 users via a networked computer.
- v telnet --- an internet protocol that allows users to log in to other computer systems on the network.