The Virtual Independent Learning Centre - Online for the rest of us

Chris Corbel

Literacy Link

April 2000

The Virtual Independent Learning Centre (ILC) is a service offered by AMES Online Services to assist teachers to make the most of the emerging online environment. Its basic goal is to make Internet use easy to integrate into teachers' everyday work. It offers a realistic way for every teacher to be online, not just those prepared to commit substantial time and effort. It's intended to be, in the words of a best-selling series of computer books "for the rest of us".

VILC currently contains five "strands" - Realweb, Easynews, Workcom, Downunder and 510 hours. Easynews is a weekly collection of language learning task based on the previous week's SBS Radio News. Users can choose to hear the item, hear it and see the transcript, and/or hear it and do an learning activity. There are up to ten items each week, and previous weeks' items remain available if a user wanted to follow a particular story over time. There are about half a dozen exercise types, and answers are available immediately. Workcom is a collection of learning tasks similar to those in Realweb, but based on industry training needs. The tasks are created by AMES Workcom teachers. At present it is not available via public subscription. Downunder is a piece of hypertext fiction aimed at language learners. It provides alternative pathways through a story about an alien invasion of a future Earth which is semi-submerged due to the greenhouse effect. It contains suggestions to teachers for use, but does not offer tasks to learners. 510 Hours is a collection of stories from AMEP learners about how they used their 510 hours of language learning in the AMEP. Tasks for learners are provided.

The heart of the Virtual ILC is Realweb. Realweb is a collection of over 400 language learning tasks created by more than 60 language teachers from around Australia, based on the Certificates in Spoken and Written English. What makes Realweb unusual is that the teachers create the tasks, but not the content of the task. A paper-based equivalent of this would be a teacher creating a worksheet to accompany a chapter from a textbook, or some other piece of realia. The teacher doesn't have to write the book or create the realia, just "frame" their content for a particular curriculum goal. In Realweb the tasks are all based on websites that teachers have discovered, but not created themselves. For example, one teacher has created a series of tasks based on the Immigration Museum of Melbourne's site. Teachers are able to create tasks without having to learn html (hypertext markup language) though if they wish they can use html in their task creation. Realweb is proof that a very simple idea can be very effective - it went from 5 logins in February 1999 to over 21,000 in December!

Realweb was originally developed with funding from the then Office of Training and further Education, now the Office of Post-compulsory Education, Training and

Employment, in Victoria. The funding was part of an extensive strategy, TAFE Online 2001, which is encouraging TAFE providers in Victoria to explore the options in online learning through the development of an online learning environment (the TAFE Virtual Campus), online content, professional development and research.

From the outset, our goal was to work in a way that would be within the capabilities of any teacher, within the constraints of their existing work conditions. Much of the talk about teachers going online involves teachers creating websites and learning html. We felt that that was rather like asking them to build the classroom and publish the text book before starting to teach. Clearly the online environment does make it easier to build a site and publish content, but it still isn't *easy*, something the enthusiasts often forget.

By distinguishing between task creation and content creation we were able to come up with a model that allowed teachers to add value online, just as they do in person and on paper, by intermediating between a resource and a learner to shape the way the learner engages with the resource for an educational goal. In our view this is no different to what happens in a paper-based environment.

Some people have felt that this approach is inconsistent with the freedom of the individual to surf the Internet and discover resources and engage with them in whatever way they seem fit. Perhaps (though even this is debatable) such an arrangement would be appropriate where access and resources are unlimited. However where teachers and learners have limited access to the Internet and curriculum goals have to be met within a certain timeframe, we believe a service that offers a range of activities focused on those goals is a choice that teachers and learners should be allowed to have. By allowing many teachers each to focus on their own area of interest, we ensure that a wide range of topics is provided to learners, far beyond what any individual teacher could provide, and perhaps beyond what learners could find on their own. Note that we are not saying that learners shouldn't learn to search, only that it shouldn't be the only option available.

Another of our key concerns in the original project was sustainability. We were aware that a very small proportion of projects that receive funding result in products that have a life after the project funding has finished. Websites in particular are often treated as products that are finished when the project is over, whereas they are in fact more like services which need to be maintained and continuously developed. The sites that are successful often rely on the efforts of one enthusiastic individual, who may ultimately burn out: even the famous Dave of Dave's ESL Cafe seems to have reached this point - last year his site was for sale!

We were therefore as concerned with our business plan as well as our educational plan. We offered access to the tasks developed with the original funding free of charge for the first year after the project finished. At the same time we continued to develop new tasks, but these were made available to educational providers for a low subscription fee that offered unlimited access for a year for their teachers and learners. This was a very simple mechanism that made it easy for potential users to decide to take up the offer. In 1999 the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs sponsored access to Realweb by paying the annual fee of all Adult Migrant English Program providers. This sponsorship is continuing in 2000, and includes Easynews as well.

The subscription fees enable us to pay the staff members who manage the maintenance and development of new tasks for all the strands. Although we don't currently pay teachers directly for tasks in Realweb, we encourage their employers to support the process and to see task development as professional development in online learning. We offer our training services at cost to assist in this process. All those involved - task writers, the providers that support them, the organisations that sponsor access, and the organisations that provide development funds, are clearly acknowledged throughout the Virtual ILC.

Not everything has to be paid for - only Realweb, Easynews and Workcom. Downunder and 510 hours are free material, since they do not need maintenance. We are currently working on a new strand to accompany Victoria's Curriculum Standards Framework, as well as one oriented towards literacy curriculums. We'd be very happy to talk to anyone interested in the current offerings or future developments. Further information is available at the Virtual ILC site - www.virtualilc.com. For further information about the ideas behind the Virtual ILC see the references below.

Corbel, C. (1999) *ESL Teaching in the Global Hypermedia Environment*. ACTA Background Paper No. 4.

Corbel, C. (1999) *Task as Tamagotchi*. Prospect Vol. 14 No. 3.