

Tearing down walls and building up a collaborative learning community

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No one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, men educate one another, mediated by the world.—Paulo Freire

This paper presents a reflection upon the learning of EFL in an electronic environment. The data come from a group of Brazilian students learning English in a community network, which tears down the walls of the traditional school and challenges the students to surf the net to acquire communicative competence and to make connections with people outside the classroom. Freire's idea that people, mediated by the world, educate themselves, and Vygotsky's concept of learning as a social process make up the theoretical framework for that experience. A discussion list is the meeting point where the students interact, express opinions, exchange information, collaborate and ask for help. Students are also supposed to interact with partners outside the virtual classroom using either e-mail or chat rooms. The teacher is no longer the only source of knowledge, but the one who provides opportunities for learners to solve problems and take responsibility for their own learning.

The context and the participants

Since 1997, when a computer laboratory with Internet access was installed in the Language Arts College of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG, in Brazil), I have been utilizing Internet resources—e-mail, chat, the World Wide Web—to help with the teaching of an English language course designed to develop reading and writing skills.

It is a sixty-hour course, divided into four hours a week, 15 weeks per semester. The objective of the course is to offer authentic input and non-artificial opportunities for students to practice the English language. Our students are prospective English teachers and it is difficult for them to find opportunities to use the language outside the classroom, so the Internet has been a useful tool to bridge that gap.

The university offers English language courses for future language teachers in the morning and in the evening. Those attending the evening classes usually come from an impoverished environment and only a few have opportunities to travel abroad. In addition, they usually do not have the opportunity to be in contact with their peers in the morning, as most of them work all day.

The course was developed for undergraduate students, but was part of a major project of our university which aimed at giving graduate students the op-

¹ This is a refereed article.

portunity to work as teaching assistants (TAs) supervised by experienced teachers.

Until the second semester of 1998, the course was face-to-face, i.e., the teacher, TA and students were all required to be present in the laboratory for the biweekly meetings representing the four weekly class-hours which were offered in the morning. As of the first semester of 1999, the classes have been entirely on-line, allowing for the demolition of the walls of the traditional day and evening classrooms, creating a learning community that integrates the day time and evening groups of students, who can now interact with their peers regardless of their different timetables.

As our classroom has neither walls nor fixed time for meetings, there is a demand from non-enrolled students to join our group when they get to know about the course. In order to cope with the needs of our community, the content is open to anyone who wishes to receive the assignments and messages of the group. However, only those students actually enrolled in the course have permission to interact. This restriction is necessary to limit the number of messages to a quantity the students can deal with within the time limit they have set aside to participate in the course. Depending on the size of the enrolled group, people from the community can also join our classes ².

Sometimes the students themselves invite friends, who will be regarded as listeners, into the virtual community or send friends the information sent through the discussion list. In the following excerpt, a student explains that his friend would like to participate in the course.

The exercises of the ninth task were very, very interesting. Maybe they were the most amazing of all. I use to print the tasks that are suggested and this one I have not only printed but also recommended to many of my friends that study English too. One of them even asked me if he could take part on our Internet classes. But unfortunately, he is not an UFMG student. Anyway, I will keep on making good suggestions to him.

It is my contention that the students share the tasks with their friends because the activities involve the real use of the English language in meaningful situations.

The syllabus

To promote on-line interaction among students, our syllabus is designed to integrate technological and communicative functions to the maximum extent possible. Here are some examples of the activities:

- Write introductions which will also be used when interacting by e-mail with pen pals,
- Learn how transition between ideas is operated as awareness of this process is very important or both readers and writers,

² It is worth mentioning that one group had a participant from Caruaru, which is hundreds of miles away from our university. That would never have been possible before as our university does not offer distance education programs.

- Use search engines to find out interesting information about favorite singer/actor and share the best with the group,
- Find a pen pal through sites offering “key pal” services,
- Interact in chat rooms,
- Visit greeting card sites and send a card to a classmate,
- Choose a site where people put messages in real or virtual bottles and throw them into the real or virtual sea, and from there send a message to humanity,
- Learn to make a simple homepage with personal information and list of favorite sites with your own critiques of them,
- Choose a magazine or newspaper of any country in the world and read about the most prominent news item in the media at that moment and share impressions with classmates about the way the same news is spread in various countries,
- Find and choose sites that show resources for learning and teaching English and make a critique to send to the group.

The course is organized around a discussion list where all the interaction among the virtual community—students, TA and teacher—takes place. The discussion list is hosted on the Yahoo!Groups site (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) at no cost, but with the proviso that advertisements come together with the message. All the messages exchanged during the course are filed away on a page created by the software. Figure 1 shows the appearance of the course homepage and Figure 2 the discussion list homepage as generated by Yahoo!Groups.

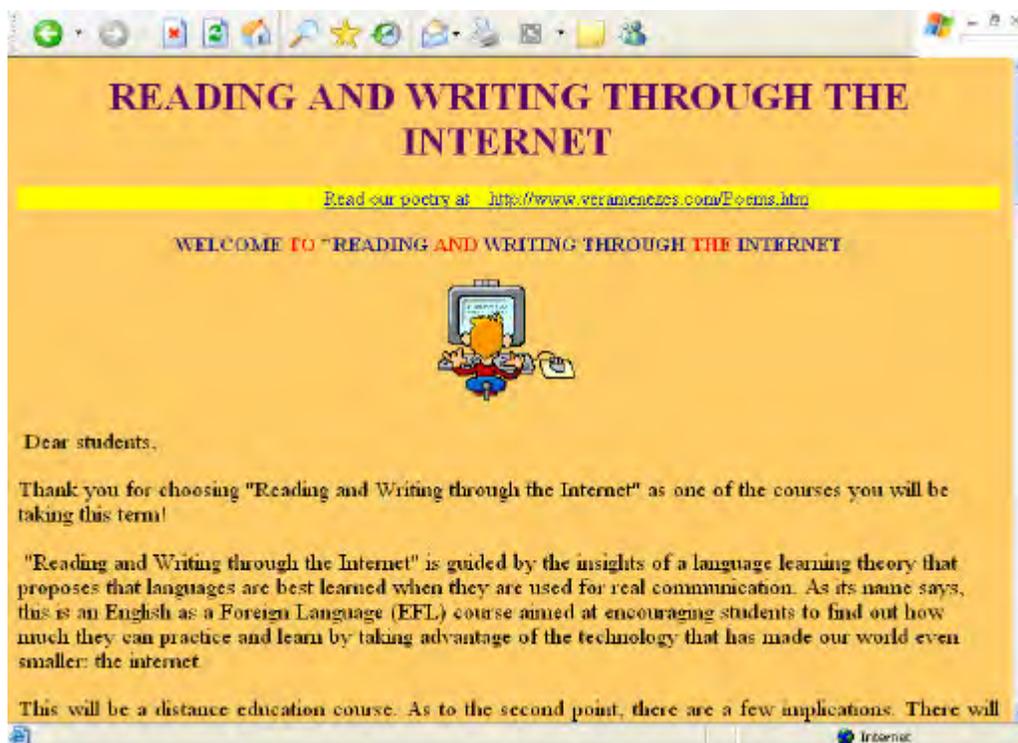


Figure 1. Reading and writing course homepage

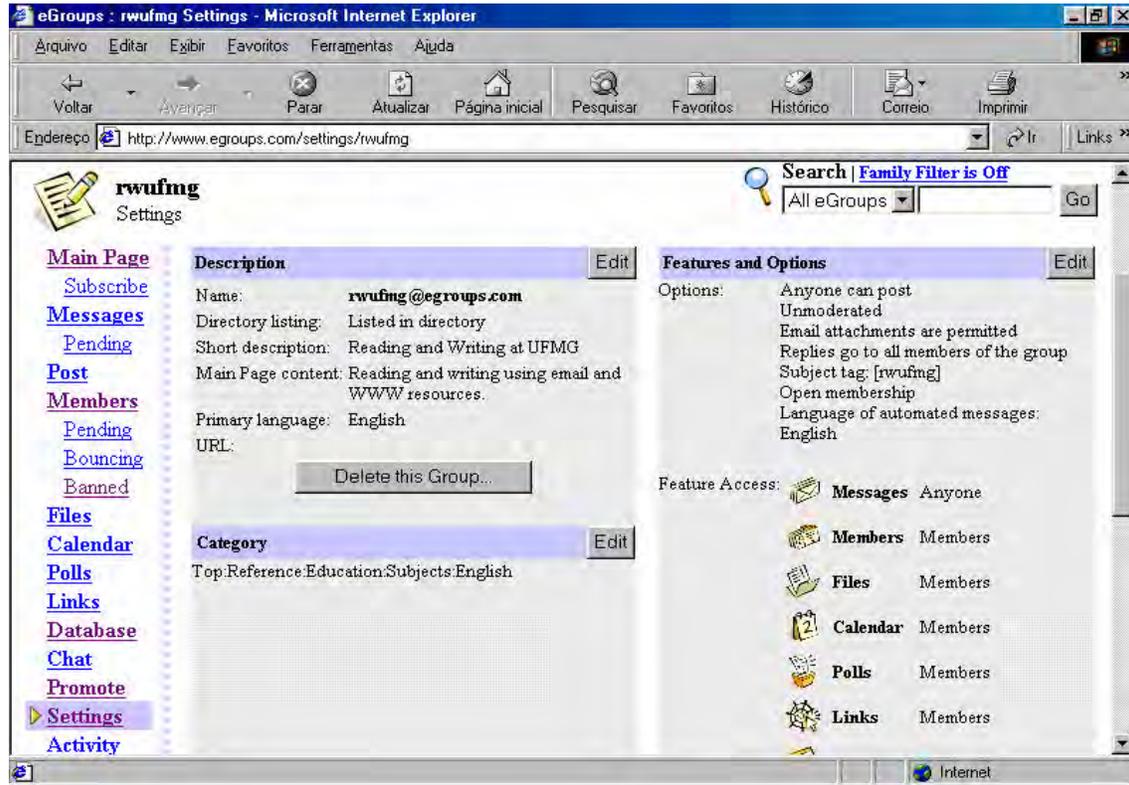


Fig. 2. Reading and writing discussion list homepage

Besides taking part in interactions, students also communicate through e-mail or chat with native speakers of English or English language learners in other parts of the world.

Evaluation

Students are assigned two tasks each week and they must post them by Wednesday. Course attendance is only registered if tasks have been posted on time. As the objective is to produce meaning, feedback focuses on the content and not on the form of the task output.³ Students are expected to keep a copy of each task and choose, at the end of the semester, ten of their best tasks to be graded by the teacher (5 points each). They are told to keep in mind that it is the process rather than the product which will be analyzed for assessment and that there is no reason to be afraid of making mistakes.

Another ten points is assigned to the "Making Contact" activity. The students are asked to hand in copies of selected e-mail messages exchanged with their foreign key pals or samples of their Internet chat sessions, as they can choose between e-mail and chat. The final task is a homepage (thirty points), where they

³ By focusing on the content, I do not mean that the form is not important. The program offers the students different kinds of courses and they have the opportunity to study the form as well.

can talk about themselves and post some of their tasks. In addition, students evaluate themselves (ten points), as well as the teacher and the course.

The theoretical support

The theoretical basis for our course is anchored in the assumptions of the communicative approach; of the socio-cultural theory—which assumes human learning to be necessarily socially constructed; and in studies on computer assisted learning and collaborative learning.

Regarding the communicative approach, the course follows the strong version of the approach as described by Howatt (1985):

The 'strong' version of communicative teaching (...) advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. (p. 279)

For Howatt, the weak version could be described as "learn to use English" versus the strong version's "using English to learn it." In choosing the strong version, that is, using the language to acquire it, one must emphasize the following aspects: student-centered teaching, with the teacher as mediator; focus on the content with an emphasis on interaction; the concept of language as an instrument of communication and not as a formal system; use of authentic material; and total tolerance of errors.

Interaction through discussion groups encourages participants to work in a cooperative way and at the same time allows the students to preserve their individuality. As Littlewood (1981) says:

The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them. It therefore requires a learning atmosphere which gives them a sense of security and value as individuals. (p.93)

The sociocultural theory is of paramount importance in the design of the course. First, it sees learning as a cultural phenomenon and second, it includes the notion of a zone of proximal development which Vygotsky (1978) defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through the problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers"(p. 86). Although the concept was developed to describe how children learn, it has been applied to adult learning as well (see Lantolf, 2000). I would like to add to Vygotsky's ideas, Freire's notion of collaboration, with dialogue as the basis for his pedagogical proposal. Although Freire does not ignore the role of leadership, he sees dialogue as the means by which educational actors meet to transform the world collaboratively (Freire, 1970).

Another important concept is scaffolding as developed by Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976). Scaffolding is the process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would otherwise be beyond his unassisted efforts. In our course, teachers are aware of their functions as tutors getting the students interested in the tasks, giving feedback, controlling students' frustration, making instructions clear, etc.

Finally, studies on computer assisted learning, such as those by Azevedo (2000), Kelm (1996), and Debski (1997), have enlightened us in the design and tutoring of the course.

The corpus

Samples of chats and electronic messages exchanged among students, teachers and people outside the course form a rich corpus which is stored for research. Those data have been analyzed in several MA and PhD studies. Souza (2000) used samples of chats provided by students to describe oral discourse markers in the texts produced synchronously in computer-mediated interactions; Sabariz (2004) identified learning strategies employed by the students to solve their reading and writing tasks, and Parreiras (2005) analyzed the virtual classroom as a complex system. Articles have also been written by the TAs; an example is Silva (1999), who reports the first experience in our lab.

In this paper, I will present some excerpts from messages in a course which was taught together with the TA, Ricardo Souza, in the first semester of 1999. This is representative of a period when students were not as comfortable with the technology as they are now.

The data analysis

The stimulating atmosphere is in great part reached by total tolerance of errors and by the appreciation of individual contributions through constant positive feedback. As one example:

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>By the way I continue changing e-mail with my penpal.  
  
Good job Paula!4 I hope so does everybody else!  
Cheers,  
Ricardo.
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We can observe that the TA does not correct 'changing.' Instead, he compliments the student for interacting with a pen pal as requested.

Although some students demand, at the beginning of the course, to have all their errors corrected, little by little even the most insistent ones end up adapting to the new model of a course built around the exchange of ideas and spontaneous interaction. Many times the students are encouraged by their own colleagues to adapt to the new learning framework, as the following excerpt of one of the messages demonstrates:

⁴ Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names.

I am so happy with this course. I think we'll have a great time. I hope we always keep in touch with everybody.

Don't worry with the mistakes. When we are doing something wrong, it's good because we can learn with the mistakes. And I am sure that we'll never forget what we did wrong again.

I hope we enjoy this course.
Bye,
Eduarda

Similar experiences, which prioritize communication and have a high degree of tolerance for linguistic deviations, are being carried out in other countries. For example, Kelm (1996), in describing an experiment in computer-mediated communication among learners of Portuguese as a foreign language, emphasizes the importance of focus on meaning and not on form. He says that "[t]he conversations that students have during CMCs⁵ become the source of the language environment. CMCs create a natural language environment in that the conversations focus almost entirely on content" (p.21). He adds that "[t]he fact that the student has gained enough confidence to express these thoughts to other peers in Portuguese is far more important, as related to the language acquisition, than the mere accuracy to the grammar" (p.24).

Following the Vygotskyian presupposition that views learning as a profoundly social process, virtual interaction breaks down the walls of the classroom and allows new agents to play a part in the educational environment, benefiting each member, including the teacher, with an experience that is both collective and individual. As Debski (1997) reminds us, "using language no longer means pure transfer of information from person A to person B, but involves a social relationship between people" (p. 44). In this type of interaction, students increase their linguistic repertoire while they reflect upon their roles as future teachers. Teachers and students become partners in the exchange of information about the use of the Internet in teaching/learning English, as in the example below:

> At CNN, I had a great idea. I'll get some copies of the >news and I'll give to my students at CENEX. They will
> practice reading and they'll learn lots of new words.

Hi Elaine,
I'm so glad you're enjoying the course! Your idea is great. I also use a lot of stuff I find on the net as classroom material, and usually my students enjoy them a lot. Thanks for sharing this idea. I'm sure other people will like it too. You're perfectly right in what you said about the mistakes, I mean, you shouldn't worry about them. Later on we'll give you chances to revise them, and we'll also suggest sites where you can work directly on language improvement.
Cheers,
Ricardo

The actions of each of the actors in this process contribute to the construction of a learning environment that is both flexible and democratic, enabling the

⁵ Computer mediated communications

teacher to generate opportunities to solve real problems that arise in real situations. In this new universe of virtual communities of collaborative learning, teachers and students exchange experiences and scaffolding. The students are expected to have a certain degree of autonomy and the ability to manage their time to dedicate to the course and to share information and interact with the group. On the part of the teachers, besides the course content, they should have a capacity to lead a discussion without monopolizing it, and a working knowledge of the technology involved. This kind of course generates a lot of messages during the whole week and in order to assist the students the teacher and the TA share the responsibility of reading and giving feedback whenever needed.

Administration and management of this course are highly demanding, not just to fulfill the students' needs, but also to take care of outsiders' interest in the course. At first, there are always some students who are not used to interacting with classmates. They still believe that the teacher is the only source of knowledge and the only one able to help them. That kind of student tries to establish a personal dialogue with the teacher, parallel to that going on within the group, but they are always urged to share their ideas and doubts with the whole group. We always insist that one student's doubt might be the same as other students' doubts and that we also collaborate when we share our problems.

Other students with weaker computer skills need more help. More experienced students usually offer to meet those classmates in the lab in order to help them. The teachers also have appointment periods in their offices to offer personal assistance. However, little by little the group consolidates into a virtual learning community where knowledge is gathered and built up collectively and many doubts are solved in the discussion list.

The participants in this process, including the teachers, experience a process of learning that is simultaneously individual and collective and that occurs through their interaction, scaffolding and negotiation of meaning both with each other and with the curriculum content. The following is an example of negotiation of meaning between two students. At first, Fabio, sends a message to the list and one student, Silvia, does not understand one word (*dunno*). Then, there is negotiation between the two students while the others remain as observers. This excerpt presents only the second part of the interaction:

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Hi Fabio,  
  
My name is Maria Celia and I read one message that you wrote the word  
"dunno" what does it mean?  
  
Thanks  
  
Silvia.
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Subject: [rwatufmg] Re: Fabio
Date: Thu, 15 Apr 1999 00:00:15 -0300
From: Fabio
To: Silvia <rwatufmg@egroups.com>

Dear Silvia,
First of all, WELCOME ABOARD!!!

That is to answer your question about the expression "dunno". That's a famous reduction of *****don't know*****. As you wish, it's regarded as a nonstandard word, that is to say, a word regarded as incorrect by most educated speakers. Here come other examples: gotta, gonna, coulda, wanna, etc.

That's all for now. I HAFTA GO NOW.

Happiness,
Fábio

That example, besides showing negotiation of meaning between two participants, is also proof of the collaborative learning environment. The colleague, in addition to providing the meaning of "dunno", gives his classmate other examples of the phenomenon. Dialogue among participants, collaboration, orientation and support characterize an environment with countless opportunities for learning. Learning outstrips the plans laid by the teacher and allows each student to establish his/her own priorities. Beyond the role of the teacher, students can act as coaches for their classmates, giving feedback, scaffolding, and inspiring curiosity in their partners. The course dynamics leads each student to venture out independently into virtual places which offer learning opportunities. Any message sent to the group can trigger a learning experience.

In the next excerpt, one of the students confesses to having learned something from another's message and the TA takes advantage of the opportunity to refer to the theory, applying the example to the concept of collaborative learning:

By reading Elias's e-mail I concluded that I just had to write something about what I've seen and done in Module 2. So, let me say a little about it.

Jerusalem seems to be an interesting place but, despite being a christian, I wouldn't like to visit it. Utah seems to be a beautiful state although it can be very dry in summer and cold in winter. On the other hand, those mountains must be one of the most beautiful things on this planet. I say this because I just love mountains!

Is that all I should do?

Bye, because I'm tired of staying in front of this computer for about 2 hours.

Subject: [rwatufmg] Re: On second thought
 Date: Sat, 10 Apr 1999 21:45:18 -0300
 From: Ricardo Augusto de Souza <ricardod@unix.horizontes.com.br>
 To: Raimundo

That's it Raimundo!

You see? This is the collaborative work component we talked about. Now after resting a bit (long hours in front of a computer can be really tiring), don't forget to visit DAVE'S ESL CAFE, VIRTUAL LANGUAGE CENTER and CNN from module 2. Specifications of what exactly you should send us about them will be found in module 2, Ok?

Congratulations on the hard work!

Cheers,
 Ricardo.

Debski (1997) in describing the main aspects of what we could call the strong version of the communicative approach, says that "language learners abandon the role of diligent acquirers of knowledge, and become responsible, reflective and creative agents, taking over some responsibility for the outcome of the course" (p.48). The following messages provide concrete examples of the concept Debski outlines above. Several features of the social construction of knowledge in a virtual learning community can be pointed out in the messages below. First, the student Kátia asks for help (addresses of sites) from somebody and not from the teachers, showing the lack of association of the teacher as the only source of knowledge. Second, the participant judges the work of a classmate, Fábio, to be really good, and suggests that he share his expertise with the rest of the group. Kátia wants to learn how to insert images into her messages, a skill that the teachers had not foreseen.

I was wondering if somebody could send me the links to visit "Dave's ESL center", "Virtual language center" and "CNN". I deleted the messages with these addresses and I didn't visit those sites yet.

Fábio is really good working with INTERNET isn't he? I Would like to learn how to attach fotos in my answers as he did. So Fábio, what about a free lesson to those students that are starting their experiences at virtual space?

That's it for now, I'll be back after lunch and CENEX class, and will try to visit these sites.

Cheers,

Kátia.

The TA, Ricardo, is the first to respond to the message. He teaches a method for finding out addresses of sites, instead of simply providing the URLs to the student, by giving an umbrella address that lists many sites. In addition, he encourages Fábio to help his classmates.

At 07:09 14/04/99 PDT, Kátia wrote:
>Hi classmates and teachers!
>
>I was wondering if somebody could send me the links to >visit "Dave's
ESL center", "Virtual language center" and >"CNN".

Hi Kátia,

Just go to this site: <http://mofetsrv.mofet.macam98.ac.il/~elaine//eti/>

Once there, enter Module 2.

> So Fábio, what about a free lesson to those students that > are start-
ing their experiences at virtual space?

Great idea! How about that Fábio?

Cheers,
Ricardo.

Upon receiving this, Fábio sends a reply, not to Kátia, but to the TA, in which he offers to meet other students with technical difficulties in the computer lab at the language arts college.

Dear Ricardo,
How's everything?
That's about your proposal. I think I can cope with those students that are starting their experiences at virtual space. I'd say it's OK for me. I think we could fix up a time for the free lesson. Perhaps, One Monday at night (FALE's computer facilities).

With a taste for adventure and the outdoors, we all would plunge into the web sea. Okey-dokey!

I'll talk to you later. I'm in a hurry cause it's getting late and it's time to go to bed now. Drop me a line anytime you want.

Regards,
Fabio

Within this new modality of teaching/learning, students and teachers take on new roles. According to Azevedo (2000):

Being an on-line student is much more than learning to surf the Internet or use electronic mail. It is being capable of seeing oneself as part of a virtual community of collaborative learning and performing in the new role specifically reserved for such a student in that community.

Azevedo (2000) further states:

[T]he on-line teacher needs more than anything else to be a convert of the new pedagogical precepts. It's not simply a new medium in which he must learn to act, but a new pedagogical proposal that he must help to create with his educational practices. Assuming the role of comrade, leader, cultivator of community spirit is something very different from what had been his main activities in conventional education. His great talent should not be focused exclusively on the content or didactic techniques, but also on the ability to mobilize a community of apprentices around his own training; to incite the debate; to maintain a climate of

mutual help, and to motivate each person to become responsible for the motivation of all.

Drawbacks

So far I have focused only on the positive side of the experience. However, the problems must also be discussed. When the course changed to completely on-line, the number of registered students doubled, but the drop-out rate also increased quite a lot. In the first semester of 2000, for example, 45 students enrolled, but 12 never appeared, and of the 33 left, only 22 reached the end of the course. There was around a 50% drop-out rate ⁶. The reason alleged is always the same—the insurmountable obstacle of having to stay hours and hours in front of a computer. The students who use free e-mail services like hotmail™ have to read each message on its own webpage, which can involve a large amount of connection time. A slow Internet connection makes such students frustrated and tired. The same is true of the delay in opening pages on some of the sites the students have to visit. Some of the participants also complained about reading texts on websites. The following is a student complaint about the problem of slowness and of reading texts on the web:

Hi there, people,

(...) reading lots of text on the net, in my opinion is quite tiring and boring; so, I only read what is really necessary and interesting. On the other hand, the activities which make me think and work give me a lot of fun (I fortunately found them in Module 2). When I say I don't like reading text on the screen it is especially true as far as waiting for the new page to load is concerned. Even when I am at a very fast computer I don't have the nerve to wait for the pages to load. That's why I give up sometimes.

I don't want you to think I'm a grouch, I'm just telling the truth about what I think of the net. However, I know I'll get used to it and enjoy surfing on the net a little bit more. I think the activities are interesting and we do learn from them. I also find this activity of exchanging e-mail in English very interesting.

I'm sorry if I sounded so rude but I'm really pissed off today (sorry for the cursing). To be quite frank, I've been enjoying the activities suggested; the only problem is the time some pages take to be loaded and the downloading of some pictures and programs just take forever.

See you on the web,

Raimundo

Another problem that can occur is that a site can be recommended and then later be temporarily inaccessible. Students immediately run to their teachers for help, as in the following example:

⁶ Of course, it should be mentioned that some of the students re-registered the following semester. It is a rare case that someone gives up on the course due to inability to adapt to the new style.

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> if it's my computer problem or the "servidor" problem or > because it's  
too full of people at this time..I'm trying > to do the xercise later.  
> Mércia
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Mércia,
There might have been a problem with the server. Try it again.
Cheers,
Vera

Students opinions

Despite the obstacles, student evaluations of the project have been very positive, as illustrated by some commentaries:

I visited the site suggested by Vera and I thought it was great. These exercises are improving my English and helping me to improve my vocabulary more and more. I didn't think that the tests weren't so easy but my score wasn't so bad. They really needed us to pay attention to do them.

I'm really enjoying this subject (English through Internet).

I guess all kind of exercises are great, and this 9th task wasn't different. it's a little hard work but it's great.

By the way, I am suggesting these wonderful English sites to my friends and students. Everyone around me is in love with them.

Dear Vera & Ricardo,

Thanks for everything. The course was great. It was a fantastic experience. I never had made a whole course through Internet. You, teachers, had great ideas and the tasks were very important exercises for everybody.

One more time, THANKS A LOT.

Health, Peace, Freedom and Work.

I hope you continue with it, it's important.

Hugs,
Afonso

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the title of this paper, tearing down walls and building up learning communities, to discuss a new concept of "class". In defining what a class is, Ur (1996) says:

Lessons in different places may vary in topic, time, place, atmosphere, methodology and materials, but they all, essentially, are concerned with learning as their main objective, involve the participation of learner(s) and teacher(s), and are limited and pre-scheduled as regards time, place and membership (p. 213)

In the virtual model we have adopted, time, space, and even the participants stop being predetermined. The walls and the barriers of time are metaphorically broken down, as neither an hour nor a place is predefined. In some

ways we have also left open the possibility of a certain indirect participation in the "class." As we placed no restrictions on accessing the homepage where our messages are filed, anyone could benefit from the information exchange among the visible participants in the process—students, TA, and teacher.

Countless invisible participants—key pals or partners in chat interactions—also indirectly participated in the individual learning community, enabling the social construction of knowledge. As van Lier (2000) reminds us, "the learner can learn best from negotiating with a native speaker or a more competent interlocutor, presumably because knowledge has to come from one who knows or can do more" (p. 248).

Finally, as an epigraph to this paper, I bring back the voice of Paulo Freire (1970), who warns us that "no one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, men educate each other, mediated by the world" (p. 68). I would say that, in on-line courses, we can create an environment in which no one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, we educate each other, mediated by the computer.

What we are doing in our on-line courses is facilitating mediation among our students and the whole community made up of diverse participants—English speakers and learners. We enable our students to have more contact among themselves (students of day time and evening classes) and with the world, tearing down the walls of the traditional classroom in order to build up an environment in which everyone is mutually educated, including the teacher.

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