

***Nicenet*: A Free On-line Classroom that Works**

NANCY A. MCKEAND, ST. JOSEPH SEMINARY COLLEGE, ST. BENEDICT, LOUISIANA

As an instructor in a small college with limited resources, I look for economical ways to include more technology in my ESL classes. Two years ago, I started using an on-line classroom called *Nicenet*. I implemented it into my classes gradually. Student reactions were mixed at first, but as I became more knowledgeable about the site and more creative in use of it, students began to use it more willingly. While there have been some problems in our use of *Nicenet*,—it is a valuable tool for anyone to consider who would like to try a readily-available, free on-line classroom management tool.

In this paper, I provide background about the selection and features of *Nicenet*, explain my early efforts to use it with my advanced writing students and gradual expansion of use, and offer recommendations about choosing and using this kind of classroom tool.

Background

Several years ago, the Academic Dean at my college asked whether any ESL instructors were regularly using any Internet technology other than computer software in their classes. I had to answer No. While we had actually just begun to use the computer lab and its software effectively, we were not using other Internet tools. The Dean's question was the impetus that led me to search for and begin to use an on-line classroom tool to help my students learn English.

Several factors were important. I knew of a professor in the college who required his students to log on to a site that he maintains through a textbook publisher. While I knew nothing about the site, I realized my students would eventually need to know how to navigate sites for other courses. Also, as our college is very small and does not have the infrastructure or financial resources to support our posting course materials on an intranet, whatever I did would have to be web-based. With that in mind, I began by conducting a search on Yahoo for free on-line classrooms. One of the first sources listed was Kameron (2003), a review of various free on-line classroom management systems. The first tool mentioned was one I had tried before without much success: Yahoo! Groups. I had not been confident about how to use it effectively, and at the time, access to Yahoo! Groups had been blocked by my campus Internet Service Provider.. I had decided then not to pursue an on-line component for my classes because of the frequency of our face-to-face meetings coupled with the uncertainty of access to the site. The other options reviewed by Kameron seemed either too complicated or not suitable for my needs.

Sparked by the Dean's question, I continued to look for the "perfect" tool. Another listing in the web search for a free on-line classroom tool was *Nicenet* (www.Nicenet.org). It seemed easy to use and yet had many features, allowing me to expand my use of the site as I grew more comfortable with it. As a writing teacher, I saw immediate applications for my classes for exchanging information

and posting assignments, though at that time I did not know how I might use it beyond those initial features.

Brief Description

The Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) offered by Nicenet is a free resource designed primarily for high school and college classrooms but available to anyone who would like to use it. It requires only an Internet connection and a web browser. There is no software to download or complicated setup. It is not specific to any one operating system. The main resources offered by Nicenet are threaded conferencing, scheduling, document sharing, personal messaging and link sharing. See the Nicenet website for more information about Nicenet and the ICA (Nicenet Releases a New Internet Classroom Assistant, 1998),.

First Use

I began with my most advanced students, introducing *Nicenet* mid-semester, when students were about to begin writing research papers. As I had divided the overall assignment into several smaller chunks, I used the Class Schedule section of the on-line classroom to post those assignments and due dates. I also set up some of the assignments (including topic choice and the preliminary bibliography) to be turned in on *Nicenet* by selecting that option as I posted the assignment. Students were then able to submit the assignment by pasting it into a box provided for that purpose.

Not everything went smoothly in that first experiment, for example, bibliographies lost their formatting when posted into *Nicenet*. Also, some students did not embrace use of the on-line classroom to the extent I would have liked. One reason was that students did not use it enough or meaningfully enough to gain real familiarity with it. Furthermore, I made limited use of the site, as I was unfamiliar with it and its capabilities. At that time, *Nicenet* was merely an adjunct to my class, not a key part of it. . Despite the early problems, I was certain that this was a tool I wanted to continue to exploit.

Expanded Use for Assignments

The following semester I expanded my use of *Nicenet* in my advanced writing class. I included *Nicenet* in the course syllabus and awarded points to students for using it. Also, I posted the course syllabus to *Nicenet* at the beginning of the semester and made sure all the students were signed up for the "class" within the first two weeks. Once again, we primarily used it as students worked on research papers. When I assigned the research paper, I took the class to the computer lab and showed them the assignments and the links. I explained that I expected them to use *Nicenet* on a regular basis throughout the research and writing stages of the assignment. I posted links that I thought students might find helpful when they began doing research for their papers.

One way that I got students more involved in using *Nicenet* was to require them to post additional links related to the research topic. Since everyone was arguing either for or against the same issue (the death penalty), each student's links could contribute to the body of knowledge available to the entire class. That process also allowed me to monitor some of the web sites students were using

and to direct a student who needed additional support for an argument to a link posted by a classmate. As students saw the value of using *Nicenet*, they were much more willing to use it.

Use for Peer Response

In the summer of 2004, as a fellow of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, I set up a *Nicenet* "class" for our group so that we could easily read and respond to each other's writing. That experience led me to another application of *Nicenet* for my ESL advanced writing classes in the fall of 2004, using the ICA for peer response. My students had always been reluctant to participate in this important step in the writing process. My hope was that by removing the face-to-face element and allowing them to think more about their responses and about how to express them well, students would be less reluctant to respond to each other. I also hoped that they would learn to accept the responses of others as valid.

First I changed the way in which I have my students keep journals. I gave them a topic each day and stressed that this was free-writing, that they are not expected to turn out a coherent piece of writing at this point. After two weeks I gave students time in class to read over all their free-writes up to that point, looking for a piece or a portion of a piece to expand and develop into a personal essay. Students then posted their essays to *Nicenet* and responded to the writings of their classmates. Students were asked to identify the portions of the essay that were confusing, those that were especially good, and could also comment on overall organization and effectiveness.

I chose to have students send their responses as personal messages to the writer rather than posting them to a more public forum, the conference. This allowed responders to deal directly with the writer and freed them from worry about how others would perceive their responses. Since I also submitted a piece of writing when my students did and expected them to comment on my pieces, I was able to monitor the kinds of responses that were made. I also used their responses to my work as an opportunity to guide them in the art of responding to the writing of others. Overall, students found the on-line response group to be less threatening than responding and being responded to in person. Students reported receiving more constructive comments on their writing and expressed overall enthusiasm for the process.

Posting Multiple Drafts

After seeing the ease with which my students adapted to posting their writing on *Nicenet* for peer response, I decided to have them post all their work online. This facilitated work for all of us. Previously, as we worked on multiple drafts of two or more essays at the same time, it was easy to get confused as to which draft we were on with which paper. By posting each of the individual drafts for each essay as a separate assignment, students were able to turn in their essays in the appropriate place and therefore were better able to see where they were in the process with each essay. For these more academic essays, I decided not to use peer response. This was in part a time-saving measure and in part a conscious decision to distinguish these assignments from the journal-inspired pieces

for which we used peer response . With these essays, I made use of the option in *Nicenet* that allows some documents to be visible to all members of the class and others to be available only to the instructor. I made early drafts visible only to me, allowing for greater confidentiality for the student when his or her work was in its early stages. All final drafts were available to everyone, however, at the request of the students themselves.

There was some initial confusion about where to post individual pieces of writing when there were multiple drafts of various essays in process, but that confusion lessened as students became more familiar with the web site. To encourage them in this adjustment period, I assigned a process essay outlining the steps required for students to post an assignment on *Nicenet*. This forced them to analyze what they were doing on the site, and it reduced the number of essays subsequently posted in the wrong place. I continue to learn, too. For example, I have realized that I need to refine my own skill in structuring assignments. I have explained this to my students, and they accept that we are learning together how to use the site effectively.

Projected Use with Other Classes

I have also developed plans for extending my use of *Nicenet* to my other classes. I envision using *Nicenet* with intermediate-level reading students, having them turn in certain assignments on-line, and post weekly summaries of their outside reading, allowing me to monitor their progress without taking up valuable class time. I also plan to use *Nicenet* with these students to post links for additional information on topics studied in class. As this would be the first exposure of these students to *Nicenet*, I anticipate the need for orientation and encouragement, as was the case with the advanced students. The main difference now is that I have learned a great deal about the site and how to use it. I feel confident that *Nicenet* will be useful for my intermediate students as well.

Recommendations

I would encourage any teacher interested in using this type of on-line classroom to do so. Depending on your purposes and needs, *Nicenet* may or may not be the best option. After you choose an on-line classroom tool, you need to use it multiple times to become familiar with and truly comfortable with the site and what it has to offer. I would recommend the following:

Take time to get to know the site. Set up a test classroom and see what happens when you post documents. Alternatively, you might set up the class you want to use and try different features before you have your students sign up. You can always delete practice materials later;

Be aware of what you cannot do with a tool. For example, if the formatting of documents is of particular importance, you may want to look for a site other than *Nicenet*;

Start small. It is better to begin with something manageable, perhaps one class and a limited number of assignments with that class, and gradually make it a regular part of all your classes. Don't overwhelm yourself or your students.

Conclusion

While I have continued to expand my use of *Nicenet's* Internet Classroom Assistant, I do not feel that I have begun to utilize it to its full potential. Yes, there are problems, but the drawbacks seem inconsequential when compared to the benefits of the site. I look forward to each new semester with the goal of finding more ways to use this valuable free on-line classroom tool.

REFERENCES

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