Recommended websites

MIT-UPV WEB-BASED COLLABORATIVE EXCHANGE PROJECT

http://mitupv.mit.edu

A web-based collaboration project between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the School of Design Engineering (ETSID) at the Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV).

Current Project Partners:
- MIT (USA)
- ETSID at UPV (Spain)
- The University of Texas at Austin (USA)
- University of Valencia (Spain)
- University of Cambridge (UK)

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the School of Design Engineering at the Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV) in Spain, have been working together since 2000 on a web-based project whereby undergraduate and graduate students, as well as teaching staff on both sides, exchange multimedia documents (graphics, video, etc), messages and ideas via the World Wide Web. The project has a website maintained by MIT, and the UPV has been working for one year in the development of a sister website. Multimedia documents including video files and messages are posted onto the website by the participants.

Some key features of the project are:
- It is student-centred. Made by students for students, all the website contents (video, graphics, links, presentations...) are developed, created and chosen by the students themselves with the help of university staff.
- It is open to many different people (under- and postgraduate students, university staff, professionals,...) all over the world.
- It includes the exchange of digital video and images made jointly by students and staff and updated in real time.
- It is open to new developments and content depending on the students' own interests, ideas and needs.
- It acts as a store of knowledge and expertise which has been submitted to the websites over time.
- It is multifaceted and organises the information to be submitted in different thematic sections.

The main objectives of the project are:
- To learn and practice languages in a communicative and authentic way.
- To address the concepts underlying an ideal university system by reflecting on how universities are now and how they should be according to the students themselves, rather than according to the institutional governing bodies.
- To exchange first-hand information on curricular and extracurricular matters (traditions, culture, current affairs, etc).
- To learn how to handle new technologies via the Internet and the World Wide Web (multimedia editing, digital video, up and downloading, etc).
- To make international friends and establish links between institutions.
This collaborative project website has two major characteristics that make it ideal for the practice of CALL in a contextualized and natural way: it is highly interactive and it is updated in real time whenever there are new uploads. Moreover, it includes a significant cultural and social element, and can integrate multimedia objects, i.e. the possibility of working with oral as well as written discourse. But the purpose of MIT-UPV Exchange is not merely to practise language, but to communicate in the broadest sense. Students choose the content of what they upload or download with no censorship. Since many different student backgrounds and ideas are gathered together, the website is also seen as a way to reflect upon one's own culture, university system, etc., as well as those of the people at the partner institutions. This reflecting on university systems carried out by the students themselves - as opposed to accepting a given curriculum or given values - is seen as a tool for accomplishing one of the ultimate aims of the project, namely the student-centred construction of the ideal university system, which for the moment is still "virtual".

The homepage of the project presents a Flash animation with pictures from MIT and UPV together with a window to type in the user e-mail address. There are two ways of visiting the project website. The first one is as a guest, for which no password is needed since guests are not allowed to upload content onto the website. The second option is the really active one and is password protected. Members of the virtual learning community, once logged in, can upload and download any kind of content on the page, including multimedia objects such as video fragments, graphics and web links. Videos and pictures are normally homemade by the students and staff themselves, combining audio in English and Spanish so as to make language practice possible both ways. Text messages also show this free alternation of languages, even within a given individual message.

When the user has logged in, (s)he has all the interactive sections at hand. The structure of the website is clearly displayed from the very first page and comprises the following sections:

- **Spotlight.** A discussion topic that changes from time to time according to the results of a built-in voting device open for use to all registered students and staff. There is a bulletin board, a place to contribute web links and a multimedia section.

- **Teach Me.** It is the place to see and make multimedia presentations by using an online authoring software called WimpyPoint, similar to Microsoft PowerPoint, which allows the learner to create presentations with slides, texts and graphics. Instructions are sometimes tricky to follow, but on the whole it provides a quite stable and reliable creative platform.

- **People.** This is the section displaying the hyperlinked names of all members that have taken an active part in the project since it started. The highlighted names, also to be found all over the site, are links to the individual's "workplace", where information about the person, together with the corresponding electronic mail, is available.

- **Cities.** A two-column screen -with Cambridge (USA) and Valencia (Spain) at either side- again gives access to a thematic bulletin board, WWW links and multimedia sections about both cities.

- **Chat.** Another built-in facility to enable connected people to chat in real time.

- **Calendar.** This part is also fully interactive for registered users, who can consult as well as submit important dates, together with detailed information on forthcoming events and their personal comments.

- **What's New.** This section records the latest contributions to the website, the newest users’ information, in a thematically organised fashion, thus allowing the user to locate these submissions on the website with ease.

- **University.** This can be regarded as the bulk of the site, and its most interactive section. It is a discussion forum whose first page displays the topics on which the learners can locate and retrieve information, objects, multimedia files, and, most importantly, they can also contribute content if previously registered.
These topics are: academics, extracurricular activities, sports, majors, residences, social life and traditions. Each one of these sections has the same structure, with a bulletin board, a place for WWW links and a multimedia uploading and downloading area.

Technically speaking, the website is a robust platform for exchange where manipulating, up- and downloading and retrieving information is not too difficult, given the problems usually associated to this kind of multimedia exchange environments in real time. Nevertheless, the system presents some understandable bugs every now and then and also experiences Internet access and net traffic issues. Graphic design is not among its most outstanding virtues, but the quality of information exchange makes up for this. On the other hand, some sections on the website seem at first sight chaotic spaces where information and files are piled in a disorganised list-like way. Nevertheless, this should be clarified by saying that the organizing principle within each category of uploaded objects, whether they are text messages or multimedia files and commentaries, is simple "time": the lists are based on the time of the upload. Moreover, there is a democratic, free and open philosophy underpinning the whole project, where it is totally up to students to shape and manipulate content at their discretion. This is, as a matter of fact, a strong point for the website, as far as the communicative language learning methodology is concerned. Another positive key feature is the originality of the proposal from a cultural and social standpoint, as well as the fact that both graduate, postgraduate students, teaching staff and, in the case of UPV, also technical staff, are at liberty to interact in a free and organic way. In so doing, institutional, professional and personal links can appear quite naturally. Students can also benefit from some kind of serendipity learning when "playing" with the multimedia content, especially the video sequences, which are exchanged easily and naturally. However, one of the most remarkable innovations will be seen when the project authors request students to jointly work towards the idea of the "ideal university system". This will emerge from the students themselves as they reflect on their own university experiences and the role of higher education in today's societies.

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