WEBSITE REVIEWS

SITES FOR ONLINE WRITING INSTRUCTION

Flo-Joe, Purdue Online Writing Lab, International Writing Exchange, Pizzaz, Crayon

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It is often said that the Internet is an enourmous and endless treasure trove of resources and activities for learners of English. However, sometimes it is hard to find the really useful sites among the list of hits received from the search engine query. To answer that question, in this month's Website review I am going to deal with a few sites allowing us to learn and teach writing online.

Flo-Joe, http://www.flo-joe.co.uk/, is a site dedicated to preparation for Cambridge examinations, specifically First Certificate in English and Certificate in Advanced English. It is directed both for teachers and students, and each of these has separate sections of the site. As for writing, *Flo-Joe* features a comprehensive and informative section entitled "FCE/CAE Writing Class," which is a step-by-step instruction on how to prepare for and write a piece conforming to the requirements of a specific genre. It can be accessed by clicking on "Students" either in FCE or CAE section, and then in the menu on the left on "Writing Class." Each class starts with a task imitating the exam one, and students become familiarised with the type of instructions for the exam (genre, length, register, etc.). Then, a student is given a checklist of things to include in the piece, to find out what the examiner is looking for in a good essay. Next, the site gives some ideas for writing a specific piece in the form of questions to answer. Also, a student is provided with interactive exercises on the use of specific writing devices, such as linking words or the expressions of formal style. After having written the work, a learner is given some more questions to answer concerning drafting and proofreading the work. Finally, he/she is invited to submit the essay for correction by email and perhaps have the work published on the Flo-Joe website. The important part of the site is the archive with previous editions of the Writing Class dealing with other genres of writing required for FCE or CAE exams. To sum up, it must be said that the Writing Class of Flo-Joe is really invaluable resource for students preparing for Cambridge exams on their own, providing expert and well-structured advice on each piece of writing.

A somewhat similar type of site is **Purdue Online Writing Lab**, http://owl.english.purdue.edu/, a cyberextension of the Purdue University Writing Lab. The

OWL site contains over 500 pages of handouts, tutorials, and workshops and hundreds of links to other writing resources across the World Wide Web. A first time visitor to OWL can find there, except for the information about the services provided for students and teachers at Purdue University, services accessible for everyone, including a virtual tour, frequently asked questions, contact information, and the fair use policy. Among the many materials found at the site there are handouts for students and teachers dealing with general writing concerns (the writing process), English as a Second Language (e.g., writing for an American audience or help with English conventions), grammar, spelling, punctuation, research and documenting sources (including MLA and APA styles), professional writing (e.g, cover letters or resumes), and writing across the curriculum (incorporating writing into a variety of disciplines). Teachers and students worldwide can benefit from workshops and presentations in a variety of media about various topics, such as PowerPoint presentations (for use in classes or to view on one's own) and hypertext workshops. Finally, visitors to the site are presented with Internet resources for students and teachers, containing information on how to search the Internet, a collection of search engines and starting points, links to online writing resources, other online writing labs and online tutoring websites.

When compared with the previous site, Online Writing Lab has much more writing materials of various kinds, and in this respect it is recommended as exhaustive source of information. On the other hand, it should be used rather by teachers than students on their own, as it lacks such step-by-step guidance in writing as was the case with Flo-Joe.

http://www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/Project/IWE/ is the website of the *International Writing Exchange*, the project created and managed by Ruth Vilmi, professor of English at The Centre of Language and Communication at Helsinki University, Finland. It started as a small experimental e-mail exchange for 80 students in 1993, but now it involves students and teachers from universities in four continents. The project uses mailing lists to facilitate exchanges between international teams of students, as well as a teachers' list to manage the exchange which helps international teachers to plan activities and topics. Assignments, after having been written by students, are exchanged and peer-edited, in this way making writing a collaborative process involving interaction between students and fostering intercultural understanding. The objectives of the Project are to harness the technology on the Internet in order to give students an opportunity to communicate with their peers globally, to practise and improve their writing skills, to encourage intercultural understanding, to evaluate work published on the Internet, to give constructive feedback, to make international contacts and friends, to speak to their peers globally (depending on resources available). The Project is based on a fast to load, easy to use and navigate website, and students only need the Internet browser and a standard Internet connection, as well as an email program to participate in it. *International Writing Exchange* is divided into rounds, and taking part in one round includes the following tasks: writing an introductory letter, reading the introductions written by others and commenting on them, writing an article, reading others' articles, writing short comments or questions about several articles of interest, writing one longer response or reaction to an article, taking part in a virtual conference in the Virtual Language Centre, writing an evaluation of the IWE. The courses are intended for classes of students, with their own teacher, but individual students are also welcome providing that they can follow the handout and do the tasks required by the course.

In conclusion, teachers, especially from universities, whose students have general English background, relatively free access to the Internet and are motivated to interact with other learners, are heartily invited to take part in the exchange, in this way giving students the real

purpose to communicate in English, bringing novelty to the classroom and maximising writing instruction.

Pizzaz, or "People Interested in Zippy and ZAny Zcribbling," (http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~leslieob/pizzaz.html) is a site created by Leslie Opp-Beckman and dedicated to all learners of English (from beginners to advanced). It provides simple creative writing and oral storytelling tasks accompanied with copyable handouts for classroom use with students of all ages. The site contains activities on writing different types and kinds of poetry (e.g., "Cinquaine poems," "Limericks," "Up and Down poems," "Headline poems"), fiction (for instance "Basket stories," "Chain stories," "Message in a Bottle," "Story Boxes"). A part of the site is a "Bag of Tricks," containing such activities as creating individualised tongue twisters, writing captions and fitting wordless cartoons, generating ideas for class topics or breaking the ice in the classroom. Next, the site provides links to other online resources which give students opportunities to write and publish their works (poems focusing on vocabulary or grammar, mystery, science fiction, horror or fantasy stories), as well as other websites with tips and ideas for teachers.

Definitely the core of the site are the handouts with activities teaching writing in different, usually humorous, ways. Each activity at *Pizzaz*! starts with the student level, short description and a sample writing piece. Then teachers are presented with warm-up activities preparing students for writing, which are followed by step-by-step instructions for the writing phase. Next go a few samples created by students. After example pieces there comes a template of the piece, with blanks to be filled with words of one's choice, which is an interesting idea for a smooth start with a particular genre. The lesson plan concludes with follow-up activities with ideas for out-of-class homework or further in-class work. In this way, a teacher is presented with a complete, exhaustive and detailed plan for a lesson, teaching writing in an innovative way, to be copied, distributed and used without breaking the copyright law for in-class and non-profit use only. Thus, *Pizzaz*! site should be strongly recommended to teachers urgently needing ready-to-print-and-use lesson plans with new ways to teach and develop writing skills on all levels of learning.

The final site to be discussed, **Crayon** (http://crayon.net/), allows users to create their own newspapers, test-surf example newspapers, or search for a given headword in the headlines of newspapers on the server. Crayon is a tool for managing news sources on the Internet, a news page customized for a user with the daily information of one's interest. The process of creating a paper is easy: it starts with free registration (to make sure that it is only you who modify your paper). Then a student needs to choose settings such as the title, the page layout, the slogan, the graphics. After that one needs to specify the sources for the news from the ones given, and a newspaper is created within a minute, with a URL to go to next time to read or modify it. The interesting thing about Crayon is that the paper doesn't have to be updated everyday, but it is updated automatically, because the information that the paper is linked to is updated daily. In this way, publishing a newspaper does not demand much work, as the HTML file that contains all the links stays the same. Crayon could be profitably used by a teacher with a class as it gives students the feeling of creating a newspaper, helps them organise the news sources of their choice, provides opportunities for extensive reading in- and out-of-class, lets them practise the language of instructions, at the same time without demanding much writing.

It is hoped that this review of different sites for writing instruction proves the statement that the Web is indeed rich in writing materials of different kinds. The sites reviewed above show