

Concrete Applications of Web Messengers: Exploiting Msn Messenger in Teaching ICTE

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Résumé

Cette communication est le feedback d'une expérience d'enseignement des TICE a distance. L'utilisation des messageries Web tel que MSN Messenger semble être un terrain d'application de formes plus ou moins formelles de E-learning. L'expérience fut conduite sur un groupe d'étudiants de première année LMD, pour le module de TICE.

Introduction

The sudden appeal to ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in education is relatively recent. In the Western countries, where computer based habits; including data processing, internet surfing and other are quite wide spread, ICTE is seen basically as the future of education. Besides online structured pedagogical platforms and other distance learning institutions, ICT is seen as a learner assisting tool. A pedagogical set of instruments meant for facilitating research, exchange and learning.

In Algeria, the integration of ICT at the level of the university is more recent. Therefore, there's a certain awkwardness in handling this new issue. The double problem which emerges is: First, the training of trainers as to their aptitude to handle the new technologies and adopt the adequate pedagogies. Second, the question of the readiness of the Algerian learners: to what extent are they ready and able to adopt new learning strategies involving the use of computer and internet?

To the previously asked questions, one issue specifies sharply the application field. As far as the teaching of foreign languages is concerned, all computer-assisted teaching forms appear to be troublesome. Beyond the traditional logistic problems, remains the question of cultural resistance: are the protagonists of the teaching enterprise (Instructors and learners) able to accept a new form of education involving technology use. Obviously, any resistance would simply vanish if confronted with persuasive and concrete responses.

The present work details the happenings of an experiment conducted on first year students of English. The attempt of setting a distance learning device seemed possible and feasible. Consequently, we decided to exploit web messengers as primary tools to distance learning/teaching.

The Problematic

Freshmen, more than any layer in the university population, need constant guidance and regular monitoring. However, the constant-actual presence of the teacher added to the geographical distance may handicap such a tutorship. The ICT course is a field of practice, where distancial learning is a central issue. One possible teaching situation, is the impartment of ICT-related knowledge through distancial schemes.

The Hypothesis

The use of Msn Messenger (or any other web messengers) Maintains effective communication and helps enhancing the instruction and set up mechanisms of distance learning and consequently learning autonomy

Methodology

We opted for a quasi- experimental design, whereby a descriptive observation is incorporated.

The experimental design obeys to the following restrictions:

- A restricted group size
- A 20 hours credit
- Exclusive ICT content

The Population

The learners are 1st year students of English. Besides their great number, a pre-test questionnaire revealed the quasi ignorance of ICT related issues and a poor contact with Internet. The table below illustrates some sample questions/answers¹:

	Yes		No	
	%	N	%	N
Are you a regular web consumer?	15%	15	85%	85
Do you know what a CD Rom is?	30%	30	70%	70
Are you a regular computer user?	07%	07	93%	93

¹ A study conducted on a representative sample of 100 first year students at the University of Batna, Bejaia and Setif in 2005.

The results manifestly show a huge ICT illiteracy among first year students. The challenge would be bringing them to develop habits of ICT practices. Involving Internet regular use, handling DVDs, CD ROMs, MP3 players...etc.

The advantages when working with this type of population is certain freshness which is likely to encourage discovery and innovation as far as education matters are concerned.

The Sample

We randomly selected a sample of 20 students (with balanced gender representation proportions: 10 boys and 10 girls; age ranging from 18 to 20). The selected sample would serve a practical basis for the distance learning communication scheme we have elaborated.

Teaching ICT

The ICTE course remains new and unusual for freshmen and others. Teaching ICT using ICT tools remains the best way to put into practice the content of the course. The condition of Algerian students, who have irregular access to computers and Internet, imposes clear choices some of which are:

- Avoiding technical density in order not mislead learners
- Proposing a simplified pragmatic Internet-based syllabus to encourage personal initiative.
- Enhancing practice outside the class through task-based and project-based requirements. (E.g. Webpage construction, online meetings and forums, various downloading activities....)

Course Objectives

The Objectives of the course are the following:

- Introducing students to current ICT tools including internet and digital technology (CD ROMs, DVDs ...)
- Setting a distance learning platform out of which communication and instruction could be effective and operational
- Evaluating the potential of ICT and distance learning at the university level

Course Contents

The content of the course was heavily axed on Internet and electronic resources. Courses were developed with the help of data-processing experts. Given that students already benefit from a computer-discovery course, there was no insistent need to reproduce what they already have. Instead our ICT course propose effective and guided activities involving the use of computers.

Defining our approach

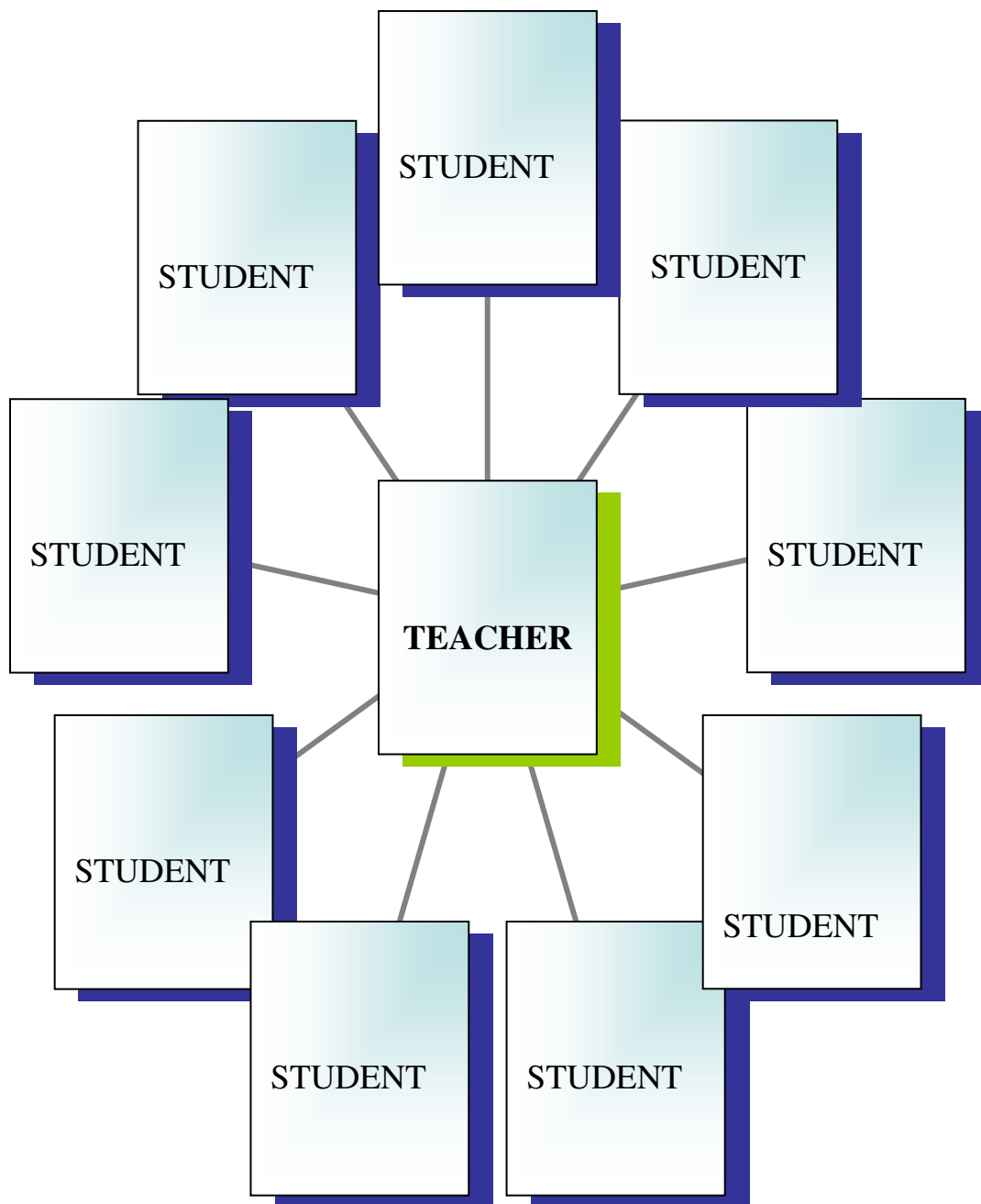
Far from the current e-learning institutions, we have chosen Msn Messenger a web designed messenger which remains relatively easy to handle for novice students. The messenger is rather utilized as a communication channel rather than a technically structured pedagogical platform. Students would access it either in cybercafés or in university web centres. Msn Messenger Version 7.0 is one of the most popular communication tool installed almost everywhere. Its most noticeable advantages are

- Live instant written, video and audio conversation
- Availability of emotion Icons for non verbal communication
- Possible collective chat



The Communication scheme

The teacher is placed at the centre of the communication scheme. Students meet virtually on individual channels with the instructors. Students are asked to use the webcam for facial identification and microphone for voice chat.



The students are expected to communicate with the teacher at fixed times.

Evaluation

Great attention was given to practical/ field evaluation. Students are evaluated on pre-identified criteria related to ICT tools mastery. The parameters of evaluation are the following:

- *Online assiduity: the frequency of logging in 25%*
- *Task execution: the success / failure of students to achieve tasks 50%*

- Personal initiative: Students personal contribution 25%

The Procedures

The 20 hours of the experiment were distributed on 5 major units. Each unit allows evaluation and permits the recording of any progression or regression as far as the students' level is concerned.

Unit one: Using Search Engines (4 hours):

This unit contains a set of activities intended to help students correctly use such Search engines as: Yahoo, Google, Msn, AltaVista and Lycos.

Unit two: Creating email accounts (4 hours):

This unit initiates students to an advanced use of e mails: including sending attachments, copying addresses, joining mailing lists and writing correct e mail with correct English, using whatever specific jargon such as abbreviations.

Unit three: Communicating and chatting (4 hours):

Here, students are initiated to chat. The double aim is encouraging communication with English language speakers, and prompts web social interactions. Apart from Msn or Yahoo Messenger to about which students are familiar, we introduced students to more sophisticated and specialized web messengers and chat groups: Net meeting, Paltalk, ICQ

Unit four: Downloading music and ring tones (4 hours):

In this unit, students are guided to specialized websites which offer legal downloading of music (ranging from rock to techno, covering rap and oriental music too) and ring tones, for a majority of them possess cell phones .Beyond the entertaining aspect, students are initiated to the use of soft wares such as: Nero, Kaza and Flashget.

Unit Five: Creating a Homepage (4 hours):

In this final unit, students are guided to the creation of a web page. Hosted by such sites as Yahoo Geocities, students' homepages would include whatever related to them, their tastes, their aspirations or their hobbies. Some of them were encourage the publication of their diaries.

Once the program established, the students were given elaborated web meetings, generally in the afternoon, after the end of classes. The following is the result of the experiment.

Results

The experiment revealed noticeable positive results:

Units	Online assiduity		Field practice		Personal initiative	
		18	90%	18	90%	03
Unit one	+++	+++	+++	+++	---	---

The Experiment revealed the following

Students showed

- Vivid enthusiasm
- Punctual Presence
- Weak than Significant involvement
- Prompt assimilation

The hypothesis was partly confirmed. A longer and a more elaborate scheme would push further the results and reveal other aspects.

Conclusion

Our research, though small-scaled, proved the huge possibilities offered by online instruction. Msn Messenger, as a casual means of communication, could be tamed and used in field teaching. Basic ICT tools (including web messengers) are more than helpful for a rudimentary initiation of learners to futur education.

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