2 The Mixxer:
Connecting Students
with Native Speakers via Skype

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Abstract

The Mixxer was created at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, USA as a way to connect language students with native speakers as part of a mutual language exchange. The site began as a potential solution for one instructor who had difficulty finding a reliable class-to-class partnership for her Japanese course and has since grown to include over 100,000 users representing more than 100 languages and is used by a number of academic and government institutions around the world. Built using Drupal and integrated with Skype, the site allows for individuals and instructors to connect in a variety of ways including individual exchanges between language learners, class to class exchanges, and events. Events are invitations organized by an instructor inviting potential language partners to sign up to speak with their students at a given day and time. For writing practice, the site provides a blog function allowing learners to post and ask the community for feedback. For instructors who would like to keep track of language exchanges completed by their students as homework, there is also a confirmation function. The student can send their partner a form asking that they confirm the exchange after which a summary then appears on their confirmation page.

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1.   Context

Dickinson College is a small liberal arts college located in a rural part of the United States. Like many institutions, Dickinson wanted to connect students studying a second language with native speakers interested in improving their English skills, an invaluable cultural as well as linguistic experience.

About ten years ago, one of the first goals for using technology in the languages was to take advantage of new chat clients with added voice capability. Exchanges via text chat at Dickinson were already somewhat established, including a class in the French department which did regular exchanges with a high school in France. A teacher in the Japanese department became interested in doing the same for Japanese, though she required that the exchange be verbal, since the beginning and intermediate students would not be able to type at a speed that would make text chatting feasible.

Finding and maintaining a synchronous voice exchange with a class in Japan proved very difficult. However, after several weeks of leaving posts on forums, writing to various listservs, and trying to leverage institutional partnerships abroad, a teacher of English interested in an exchange was eventually found. The exchanges were still very time-consuming to organize, due to different expectations from each side, academic calendars, and the thirteen-hour time difference.

The Mixxer, as seen in Figure 1, was originally envisioned as a way for teachers to find each other and connect for class-to-class exchanges. Potential teachers could provide information about the type of exchanges they were seeking, available times, and technical capabilities in order that a more productive partnership could be found. While creating the site, the decision was also made to allow individual learners to sign up, although there was no foreseen use for these accounts at the time. As the site grew, however, this pool of independent language learners allowed us to schedule "events", an invitation to users sent via email using their profile information from the site to contact Dickinson students, at a given time via Skype.

Figure 1.   The Mixxer homepage
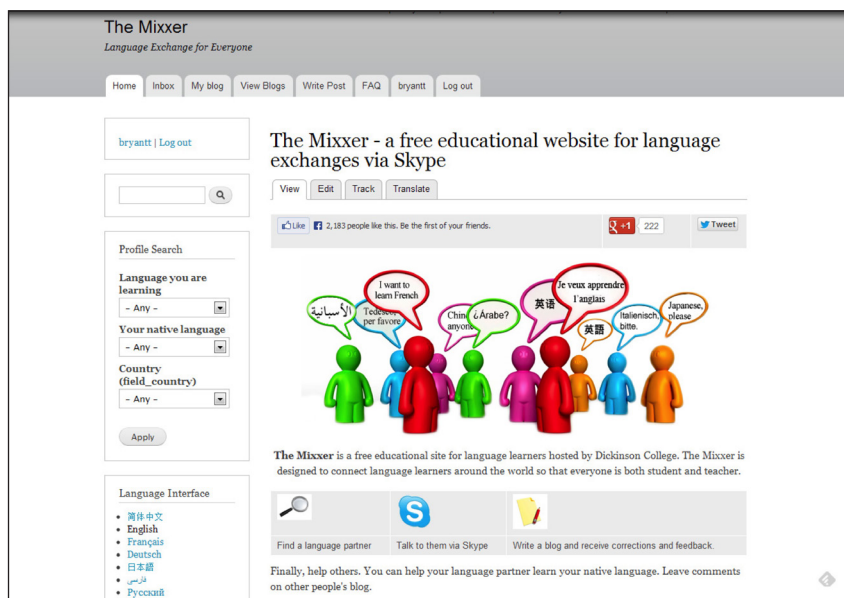
Using the Mixxer, it became possible to provide exchanges to almost any class, regardless of language and time with only a few days' notice from the teacher.

2.   Intended outcomes

When creating the Mixxer, there were two principal goals. The first was to make the process for organizing these interactions as easy and flexible as possible. By doing so, student verbal competence was expected to improve along with an increase in authentic cultural interactions.

In 2006 there had already been many studies that demonstrated the benefits of synchronous computer mediated communication, although at the time they had focused almost entirely on text chats.The expectation of the project was that by creating a system that allowed for the ability to organize verbal exchanges for

Dickinson students on short notice, and with a format flexible enough to support conversations by students from the beginning to intermediate levels, teachers would see the value not only in the increased time dedicated to each student's speaking and listening, but as a source of motivation and positive reinforcement as well.

The steady increase in new users to the site, currently roughly 100 per day, and a system "event" function, whereby native speakers are invited to sign up to speak with Dickinson students one on one, allows any teacher on the site, whether from Dickinson or another institution, to organize an exchange for their students with only 3 to 4 days' notice. This is true for any foreign language at virtually any time of day. As a result, there has been a steady rise in the number of teachers who have added language exchanges as a regular part of the course at Dickinson College. In 2004, there were one or two courses in French and Japanese which interacted with native speakers. For the spring of 2013, 22 courses are scheduled in Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Arabic and Russian and several more are expected before the beginning of the semester.

The exchanges have proven to be popular with students as well. In the fall of 2008, teachers added four questions to the course evaluations about the exchanges via Skype. Roughly 90% of the students from the five Spanish courses, two Italian courses and one German course enjoyed the exchanges and thought they were beneficial to their language learning. A survey of Japanese students in 2007 demonstrated similar results with students giving an average rating of 4.9 on a scale of one to six from strongly disagree to strongly agree on questions about their enjoyment and perceived effectiveness of the exchanges.

3.   Nuts and bolts

The Mixxer began and still is almost exclusively an individual project, although faculty from a number of departments use the system and have at times requested

a feature. The most important example being the request from a Japanese teacher to build the "event" function, which has since been modified to make it easier for any teacher on the site to more easily organize events and have learners seamlessly connect via Skype.

Because a single person develops the site in addition to organizing most of the exchanges, it was important to find a system that made development as easy as possible, could scale to a large number of users, and would be free for the college. The original site was created from scratch using Microsoft's .NET framework; however, the project moved to Drupal when it became clear that a significant amount of programming effort would be saved by changing platforms and using Drupal's modules to add social networking functions such as messaging, contacts, and blogs. Instead of having to write extensive code for each of these functions as is done with .NET, Drupal already has modules that only need to be configured and occasionally modified with a few lines of php. Drupal has also become increasingly popular in education, and they've released distributions with modules already installed for many common uses in education including department websites, digital humanities, and courses.

4.   In practice

There are three principal ways that instructors use the Mixxer web site to connect their students with native speakers. The most common is to have the students register on their own, find a partner using the search function as seen in Figure 2, and complete the exchanges as homework. It's best to instruct students to have a topic and questions before the exchange. This is especially true for beginner and low-intermediate students. Because this does involve coordinating times with a stranger, one should be as flexible as possible concerning due dates. By assigning a certain number of exchanges per month or semester instead of per week, students with some planning can still complete the assignment even if their first partner has technical difficulties or is otherwise unreliable. Even if a student has difficulty connecting with their

first partner, native English speakers should never have any difficulty finding another partner rather quickly with whom they can exchange on a regular basis.

Figure 2. An individual search in the Mixxer
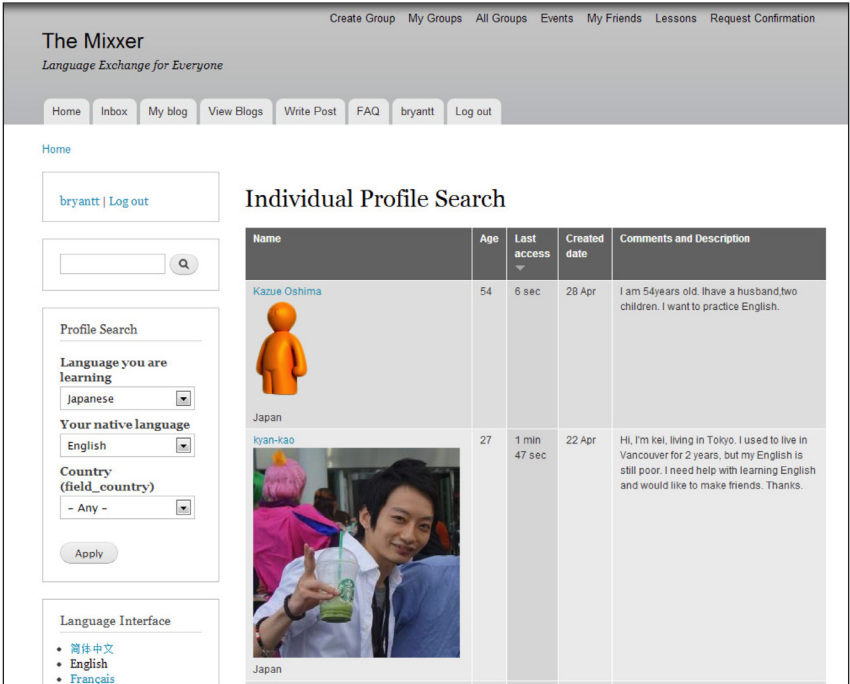
At Dickinson College, the most frequently used function to connect students is by using the "events". For the event, either the technologist or a teacher at the college announce the day and time on the website. Users who match the language profile then receive an invitation with a link where they can sign up. The instructor who organized the event can then see a list of users who signed up along with contact information as seen in Figure 3. On the day of the event, students meet in the computer lab. A text chat is sent via Skype to all of the native speakers who had signed up to take attendance. These Skype names are distributed among students who then initiate the call. For instructors interested in how the events work, a video is available on YouTube.

Figure 3.   Scheduling an event in the Mixxer

The disadvantage of the event format is that class time is required. The major benefit is that every student is able to connect every time, making for a more positive experience for the students as well as the teacher. Because there is a pool of individual users already connected on Skype, it is possible to match those connected with Dickinson students one-to-one using any extras to create group calls of three people. It is also less stressful for the students knowing their teacher is available for help. For this reason even if a teacher plans to assign exchanges outside of class, it is recommended to have one in-class event in order

for students to gain some confidence and at least one contact. This function is available to any user on the site with teacher permission. Any professional educator is welcome to create an account on the site and then email bryantt@ dickinson.edu to gain this additional access along with more detailed instructions.

The final and original method for connecting students is the class search. This function is also only available to teachers and allows them to search for partner classes. As mentioned earlier, differing schedules, expectations and technical capabilities can make class to class partnerships very challenging. When successful, however, the benefits can make the additional planning time worthwhile, allowing students to develop relationships and work together on long-term projects. To minimize the difficulties and take advantage of the positive aspects of these exchanges, it is vital that teachers from both sides have a clear understanding of each other's class goals and expectations, and that they clearly communicate these specifics with their students.

5.   Conclusion

When thinking of open resources available to educators, one usually thinks of content. There certainly has been an explosion of excellent digital items available to educators ranging from YouTube clips of everyday language to high quality maps, images and 3D representations from the world's top museums. Indeed, they have become so numerous that the principal challenge has shifted from the creation of these individual resources to the creation and development of multiple interlinked databases that allow these resources to be found and presented in useful ways for teaching and research. However as more language instructors focus on communication, the ability to connect easily and reliably, asynchronously or in real time, and via text or audio is the most important advance in web-based technology over the past ten years. Students certainly benefit from the increased exposure to one-on-one communication with a native speaker linguistically, but it is at least as important as a way of providing students with an immediate practical use for their study and as a personal introduction to a culture with which they will hopefully engage for the rest of their lives.

Useful links

Drupal: https://drupal.org/node/1237536

The Mixxer: http://www.language-exchanges.org

Video of creating a Mixxer event: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwM2_sktNSo

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