

Nicenet: Internet Classroom Assistant

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Introduction

At the workshop conducted at Dillingen (Bavaria, Sept 2003), the Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) Nicenet was introduced. Nicenet offers an ICT approach to communication among class groups or for subjects and topics. It works entirely via the internet browser without making any further software demands on teachers or students. Nicenet is free to use and free of advertisements. As a web site, it is very reliable. Teachers can provide their students with reading materials and information, annotated links to selected and categorised websites, information about scheduled events such as assignments and excursions. Students can also enter documents, submit homework, and add links to the web. Everyone enrolled can participate in discussion forums. The physical proximity of the students is not an issue. They can be in the same room performing tasks in real time, or working at computers in a geographical region and coming together regularly as a physical class, or perhaps they will never meet because the participants don't live in the same city or even country.

*) This is an updated version of a paper that was originally published in the Materials Development Association 2004 portfolio ed.

LMSs and Getting Started in Nicenet

Nicenet is one of many web-based learning management systems (LMS) through which teachers can work with students, whether in distance mode or as a supplement to face-to-face teaching. Some others include Blackboard, WebCT and Moodle. Whenever I start teaching a course, whether a short intensive, a semester course or an open-ended course, I **Create a New Class** in Nicenet, unless the course is held at Masaryk University (Czech Republic) where I work, in which case I use Moodle. Whereas Moodle has a much richer palette of facilities than Nicenet, it needs to be installed on a local server and requires considerable maintenance. The advantage of Nicenet is that anyone online anywhere can type

<http://nicenet.org/>

into their browser and get started with Nicenet. At the top right of the screen, you are invited to **Join a Class**. Click it. The first thing students need in order to join Nicenet is a **Class Key** which the teacher supplies to the students. The Class Key for my *Using Nicenet* demonstration course is G54586T79 and publishing it like this requires monitoring the site for unwelcome participants, who can be deleted in **Class Administration**. Once registered, the student is taken to the course homepage which is admirable for the simple clarity of its layout and its professional look. Its lack of bold colours, fancy fonts and dancing icons bestow an integrity on a course. There are even



very few buttons — most navigation requires clicking on plain text. This compares very favourably with YahooGroups, for example, another web-based facility, which is sometimes used for class/group communication and resource sharing.

Using Nicenet to Share Links

Regardless of the course you are teaching, the internet abounds with relevant sites. For language teachers, for example, there are literally thousands of interactive grammar and vocabulary exercises on the web that can be made available to our students. Links to these can be easily inserted into your Nicenet class under topic headings you determine. For example, you might have a set of links to dictionaries and thesauri, another heading for links to your institution and homepage, and an array of headings representing your subject, as can be seen in my *Using Nicenet* class. Students can add links *if* you grant them this right: this and other controls are set in **Class Administration**.

Granting students this option is, in the words of Dr. Elaine Kleiner, “akin to giving every student in a class thousands of dollars to buy supplementary textbooks for a course”. Providing the students with some training in assessing the quality of webpages before handing over those dollars can obviate certain problems. And it may even happen that students add links with no relevance to the course at all! While students cannot see the name of the person who added a link, course administrators can — they can also delete offending links, and students if necessary. Your **Link Topics** appear in alphabetical order and unfortunately cannot be annotated. Each link, however, can be annotated and this is where students can justify their choice of the site

*) http://old.ihets.org/learntech/distance_ed/fdpapers/1998/13.html

they are linking, and this can become a meaningful writing task. Links appear under each Link Topic in the order that they are added and cannot be sorted. Although I was using Moodle with my ICT4ELT course at Masaryk University, I introduced them to Nicenet for their own use outside the university. During the semester, they created a variety of exercises, activities, worksheets and presentations which they uploaded to free webspace. Their final assignment was to create a Nicenet class themselves and provide structured links to their uploaded creations, as well as to other things pertaining to the course they were devising.

Adding Documents

Course administrators and students can add documents into Nicenet, an option which cannot be turned off, although if necessary, the administrators can delete or edit any document that is added. The documents appear in the reverse order in which they were added and cannot be sorted. Since even a small number of students in a short course can produce many documents, it is best if they appear in logical sets. In **Class Schedule** the teacher can create **Assignment Topics** under which documents can be added. Documents cannot be uploaded: they can only be entered as text documents. Nicenet recommends “that you type your document in another program and then copy-and-paste it here.” If you don’t save your work by clicking the Edit Document button at the bottom, you will lose it if you go to another part of the program, using the Back–Forward buttons, or even bump the mouse. **Documents** can be used in a number of ways. Teachers can post reading material for the students to read and then ask them to comment on it in an asynchronous discussion — see below. Students might also be asked to summarise or translate it. Students and teachers can read any



posted document and send a message to the author. Using this facility, students can react to each other's work and provide additional information that the author might consider incorporating in another version. Unlike a live seminar discussion, there is no demand for an immediate response, which means that the contributions can be well-considered and information sources can be consulted. It has been observed by many instructors using asynchronous discussions, that students who might be inhibited to contribute in a class discussion tend to contribute freely in writing. The teacher also becomes a participant in these discussions, and ultimately has a written record of all the discussions. These are important features of this mode of class communication. One aspect of this writing that alarms some teachers is the amount of reading required of them, let alone the time spent responding. On one hand, it is not necessary to respond to everything especially when students are responding to each other. On the other hand, while this might be the price we pay for being members of such a communicating community, it does allow us to give individual attention where needed. It may be more efficient for the teacher to write one single document summarising a class' strengths and weaknesses in a particular task. Furthermore, Nicenet allows **teacher's assistants** who can be granted different privileges: this can be set in Class Administration.

Formatting Documents

A disadvantage that some Nicenet users complain of is the lack of formatting possibilities in uploaded documents. This is not strictly true as can be seen in the "Young Adam" document that can be seen in the *Using Nicenet* site: go to Film Reviews in Documents.

Here you will see that:

- » some text is bold and in italics, and the "HTML in Nicenet" link is right aligned
- » the names which are underlined are hyperlinks: click on them to open selected webpages about that person
- » pages have pictures linked from their original source on the web
- » you can click on the pictures to open the source document from which they come
- » the pictures have text beside them

Another example of formatting in *Using Nicenet* is called Three Columns, which has text in three columns.

All of this formatting is achieved using HTML tags and it is not restricted to Documents. In **Class Schedule**, the three films mentioned are in bold. When in edit mode, it looks like this: After reading the review of **Young Adam**, write your own review of **Young Frankenstein** or of **Young Einstein**. As can be seen, making text bold involves writing it between these codes: . In Link Sharing, there are several sites which are recommended as entry points into HTML. I recently taught a face-to-face short intensive course, mediated via Nicenet. The young students knew no HTML and were producing richly formatted documents in Nicenet in their first HTML lesson. They then went on to create full webpages using HTML in Notepad.



Conferencing

This facility allows threaded discussions. The teacher creates a topic setting the task. Setting a good task with clear instructions is obviously tantamount. The *Spidla navrhujte* topic in Conferencing illustrates how a series of teacher–student interactions appear — they are discussing a translation. At first it is the student and teacher, and later another student joins in. In order for everyone to be able to read the exchange, a little caution must be exercised: it is important to click on Reply, not Send a Personal Message to the author. From a language teaching point of view, Conferencing can be used for a variety of activities. For example, a group of students resolve a quandary set by the teacher — the groups have to “talk” it through. Conferencing can also be used for brainstorming, which can serve as a preparatory activity for a piece of writing. And a third task consists of online interviews in which a number of students can ask one person multiple questions. This could be in the form of role play. These interactive exchanges through which students develop, often with each other’s help, exemplify the value of the process in learning. Arriving at a product is the learning experience, not the product itself.

Class Schedule

This is a chronological listing of class events. You might post here details of excursions, reminders about upcoming events and administrative matters. It is also the part of Nicenet where you set assignments. **Assignments** are given a name and dates due, and details about the requirements. There are then the options to create an associated **Conferencing topic**, which allows for group

collaboration, and there is even the option of having a reminder automatically sent some days before the date due. Finally, there are options for the students to submit it through Nicenet, to allow editing after submission, and to grant access to each other’s assignment.

Messages

This facility is simple and effective. Anyone can send a message to a whole class or selected individuals. And when you have more than one class, all students can be messaged. For administrative purposes, this is very useful. For academic work, it is better to use the Conferencing threads where possible, partly to keep administrative and academic aspects of a class separate, partly to keep records of the written work intact. Although it is possible to delete a class, all of its work and its students, I have found that in never doing so, past students keep in touch, sometimes for advice, sometimes to contribute something to an issue previously discussed.

Nothing’s Perfect

Before I conclude, there is one shortcoming worth mentioning. Each time I Create a New Class, I have to enter all the links that I like my students to use — there is no way to clone a course. I know of two workarounds. One is to create Nicenet courses that are content or topic based in which any student can enrol. A team of teachers could create these courses. In this scenario, the students enrol in their class course as well as in the topic based one(s). When someone is in more than one course, Nicenet provides a button to move smoothly from one



to another. The second workaround, which I now use, is to create a webpage of topic-based links and link the Nicenet class to it, as can be seen in the links section of Using Nicenet called *Language Resources*. As mentioned earlier, reading and responding to all the conferencing contributions by a large class is not practical, not for the teachers and certainly not for the students. In Moodle, for example, it possible to form groups within a class and this even allows teaching two or more classes the same course at the same time. Even a group of five students, which is quite active in their discussions, can produce a lot of text, and as they develop their own community, they tend to write a lot of *off-topic*, often personal and reflective text.

On the other hand, enrolment in a Nicenet class is forever. Some of the other LMSs force a finishing date or a maximum enrolment period, after which participants cannot access the *library* of links that the course provided, nor even their own contributions! Nicenet's open-endedness is clearly a reason why some participants are still in touch with each other via Nicenet years after the course for which it was opened, ended.

Conclusion

I have described and demonstrated the major features of Nicenet and some of their pedagogical and practical applications. A little investigation and experimentation will reveal even more of what Nicenet has to offer, as it has for thousands of people in its five years of existence. According to Nicenet's homepage, since January 1998 a total of 826,674 users have used the ICA (by March 2005). Nicenet remains under development, and we are invited to contact them with suggestions, but not before we have read the FAQs (see below). In closing, I would like to thank past students who remain enrolled

in my Nicenet mediated courses for their continued interaction, and to those who responded to my Message requesting information about how they use Nicenet. Special thanks go to Jurate Zdanyte (Lithuania) who first introduced me to Nicenet, and to Maite San Roman (Spain) and Jarmila Fictumová (Czech Republic) for their contributions. Some of their ideas are incorporated above.

Further Reading

On Nicenet's homepage, before you log in, you will see *Our Philosophy and About the ICA*, which provide an insight from the creators' point of view. At the bottom of the green margin in your class(es), you will see ICA FAQ, which contains answers to frequently asked questions.