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The Mixer Language Exchange Community

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The Mixxer Language Exchange Community

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Description

The [Mixxer](#) is a social networking site designed for language learners. Dickinson College places a heavy emphasis on international education, its study abroad programs, and foreign languages. The Mixxer allows us to create real world language use in our classrooms with native speakers using [Skype](#). The site has many of the same functionalities as Facebook with blogs, friend requests, and a messaging system; however, what makes it different is that users search for potential language partners based on their native language and the language they are studying. When they find a potential partner, they send a message proposing times to meet and eventually communicate via Skype. Though not required, the usual arrangement is to meet for an hour with each partner, spending thirty minutes speaking in their native language and thirty minutes in their target language.



The Mixxer also includes functions for foreign language teachers. Teachers can search for other teachers interested in class-to-class exchanges. They can organize and oversee their students' blog posts. In addition, they can organize "events" where native speakers are invited to contact students in their class via Skype at a specific time. With more than 40,000 Mixxer users, it is now possible for any language teacher to organize a language exchange for their students at almost any time. This is especially helpful for less commonly taught languages in Asia and the Middle East where time differences make most traditional class-to-class exchanges very difficult.

Origin

The idea for the project grew from the collaboration of myself, the language technologist at Dickinson College, and a Japanese instructor, Akiko Meguro in 2005. Professor Meguro had heard about text chat exchanges done here at the college via NetMeeting between an intermediate French class and an English class in France. She wanted to do the same for her classes, but there were several obstacles in replicating the project in Japanese. The first was the Japanese writing system. Written Japanese consists of three character sets: hiragana, katakana and kanji. Switching between character sets, in addition to learning kanji (Chinese characters), is significantly more complicated than the Roman alphabetical system. Because of these character sets, typing is not usually taught until the second semester. Language exchanges for first-year courses would have to be audio exchanges done during class to avoid the necessity of typing and to provide help to students who may have trouble understanding or communicating. Unfortunately, the popular audio messengers at the time such as "Yahoo Talk," "MSN Messenger," and "iChat" often had difficulty connecting or maintaining an audio connection due to firewalls and network configurations. The second major hurdle was the thirteen-hour time difference between the east coast of the U.S. and Japan, which made finding potential partners with matching class hours very difficult.

The arrival of Web 2.0 offered some solutions. One of these technologies, [Skype](#), enabled us to have reliable voice communications to Japan. Skype is a voice over IP application, often called an audio messenger, that allows for free calls between computers. We chose Skype over the other audio messengers for several reasons:

1. Skype used what is called p2p technology, or peer-to-peer, meaning there is no central server. This enables it to reliably connect computers on different networks with little regard to the configuration or firewall settings on either network.

2. Skype had a very large and international user base, which meant we had a large pool of native Japanese speakers from which to draw who were already familiar with the technology.
3. Skype could be set to connect over a specific internet port. On a campus network, this meant we were able to reserve bandwidth for the language exchanges by setting the Skype clients in the language labs to use the port that was assigned the highest priority.

With the arrival of Skype, we had a reliable tool for audio communication, but we still needed a way to find partners for our students. I decided to create the Mixxer, a social networking site that would be solely for those interested in language exchanges via Skype. The initial version was extremely simple. It was little more than a searchable database with the front end created using the .NET framework and an Access database on the back end. Users could search profiles that were separated into two categories: individual learners and teachers. Individual learners could search the database by native language and language sought; teachers could search for other classes based on language criteria and student ages.

The initial challenge was garnering publicity for the site in order to populate the database with enough language learners and teachers so as to be useful. Looking back, I could have developed a far more effective marketing strategy by taking advantage of the blogosphere, our own Web site, listservs, and other social media. Instead I haphazardly searched forums for posts of people looking for language partners and offered my site as a suggestion. I was, in effect, recruiting users one at a time. Fortunately I did eventually reach a critical mass and the site was able to grow on its own. Even more importantly, Skype, which was barely out of beta at this point, began receiving a tremendous amount of publicity. Educational blogs began writing about the possibility of using the service as a language learning tool. Because the Mixxer had been created very early on in the development of Skype, it ranked very highly for searches such as “language exchange Skype,” “learn language Skype,” etc. This created a cycle of links for the Mixxer, a high ranking in Google searches, and more users.

Once we had a sizable database of language learners and teachers, we were able to find partner classes for many of our language classes and offer students the possibility of conducting language exchanges outside of class. For one year, Japanese conducted class-to-class exchanges with an English class in Japan. However, maintaining these exchanges was difficult. The time difference meant that our students, myself, and the professor had to meet at 9 p.m. to speak with the class in Japan. In addition, the number of students who would show up on their side and at what time was very unpredictable. At times, we would have students show up in the evening and be unable to speak with anyone for the entire hour. Over time, this proved to be a fairly common experience. Class-to-class exchanges were often difficult to maintain over various semesters due to schedules and time zones, but also because of varying expectations. While it was a required and integral part of our courses, other schools sometimes viewed the exchanges as optional for their students and were unsupervised by their instructors.

Because of these difficulties, Professor Meguro began utilizing a Japanese social networking site, [Mixi](#), to recruit individual native speakers who were interested in practicing their English. Mixi makes this possible through community and event functions that allow users to create groups and organize themselves around a common topic. Professor Meguro started a group focused on English language practice, that she then used to propose an "online meeting" for the community. Our class time would be posted as the time for the online meeting, those interested would send me a message via Skype, and their names would be distributed to our students.

This method worked well, but once the community became very large, we wanted to set up a registration system allowing us to match the number of native speakers with our class size. We set up a registration and event function within the language exchange site, the Mixxer, in order to do this. By adding this functionality to the Mixxer, we were also able to offer the same function to any language class on campus with relatively short notice.

Drupal as a Development Platform

For two years, the site grew at a very good pace. With over 20,000 users in the database, I was able to offer

language exchanges to any foreign language professor at the college interested in connecting their students with native speakers. Last year I began looking at expanding functionality. I wanted users, including our students, to be able to maintain blogs on the site that could be reviewed by their professor or native speakers. I also wanted to allow users to create groups, whether they were peer study groups or classes created by professors for their students. Finally, I wanted teachers and professors outside of Dickinson to be able to arrange language exchange events for their classes. Up until then, I had organized all of the exchanges by running a query on the back end database that sent an email to potential language participants. If I were to open up this process to other institutions, I would need to develop a front end that automated this process.

Because I was the only person working on the site and my time for the project was restricted to summers, creating the additional features in VB.NET was not feasible. Starting over in a different platform seemed daunting as well, but I knew the change would only become more difficult as time passed. I began looking at platforms that would allow for the easy creation of a social networking site and would be fundamentally customizable, since the entire site was oriented around each user's target and native language--not the type of criteria that comes "out of the box" with pre-made sites. I also wanted to use something that was open source and had an active user base. This would ensure that I could obtain the software for free, be able to make any necessary changes, and hopefully be able to rely on future upgrades and avoid having to switch platforms in the immediate future.

I looked at ELGG and Joomla, but I finally settled on Drupal. Both Drupal and Joomla have an active user base and are module based, which allows the creator of the site to customize the site by adding functions created by the community. When I made a list of the additional functions I needed to recreate my current site along with the groups, blogs, and event creation, I felt Drupal provided the best collection of modules. And since we already had a previous version of Drupal running on campus, there was the possibility of help from colleagues if I ran into trouble.

The transition of the .NET site to Drupal, including content and the additional functions, took me about two months, which was better than I had expected. Until this point, not only was I unfamiliar with Drupal, but I had also never written any code in PHP, used MySQL, or worked with Linux. Most of my time was spent sifting through possible modules and testing their functionality along with configuration settings. In the end, I added less than ten lines of custom coding to the site. The rest of the changes were made by uploading modules and selecting configuration settings on a form. It would have taken at least twice as long for me to have created the additional functionality from scratch in .NET on the old site, and now with my understanding of Drupal and its parts, additional changes will come much faster. Once I had created the new site, I was also able to find modules that allowed me to import the content from the old site. When the new site went live, I had some performance issues since I was unfamiliar with PHP caching or diagnosing slow queries in MySQL, but these proved to be relatively minor issues. Both have since been resolved as our server group has learned more about LINUX, and I have gained additional experience working with a MySQL database.

The new Mixxer site in Drupal has been a great success. Traffic is up 66% from this same time a year ago and we doubled our user base. Because professors can now organize events on their own, we greatly increased the number of classes that integrate exchanges into their classes from a handful each semester to fifteen or twenty classes. At the same time, I've been able to reduce the time I spend organizing and starting each exchange. I would recommend Drupal to anyone looking for a system that allows users to organize themselves and collaborate on a given subject.



Foreign Language Instructors Interested in Using the Mixxer

The Mixxer is open to any language learner or teachers. Teachers are asked to create an account at www.language-exchanges.org and then send me an email requesting a teacher account. Once registered, they can search for other classes interested in having an exchange or to set up an event for their own class by inviting individual students to contact their students during the class hour. The process for doing so is simple. The instructor creates a page describing the time and topic of the exchanges, and then invites Mixxer users who match the language profile. It is recommended that these invitations are sent at least one week in advance. In the message, a link is included where the native speakers can register using their username, Skype name and e-mail address. When enough native speakers have registered, the teacher closes the registration. An email is automatically sent to those who have signed up one day before the event to confirm the exchange and instruct participants to send a Skype text message five minutes before the event to the instructor's Skype address. On the day of the exchange, these Skype names are collected and distributed to the students as they enter the computer lab. In case that the number of students and native speakers do not match perfectly, students can participate in a Skype conference call, that may include two students and one native speaker. More detailed instructions about setting up an exchange are posted on the site.

I also recommend that the students produce something from these exchanges such as a summary of their exchange. One option is to have students send their reports directly to the instructor; however, it is also possible to have them report on their exchanges via the blogs within the Mixxer. Students and their partners are then able to read each of the reports and provide comments that frequently encourage further interaction outside of class. In order to encourage this interaction, students may write a "thank you" message to their partner as well, so that the partner can find the student's profile within the site. Once they've made this initial contact on the site and become Mixxer "friends," they will each be notified when the other posts additional content. After several exchanges, the students become members of this virtual community and their relationships will extend beyond the classroom. We have had students maintain contact with their language partners over several semesters, or even a couple of years until a semester abroad, when they were finally able to meet in person.

Some professors also have their more advanced students conduct content-based interviews with native speakers. In this case, students sign up as individual learners on the Mixxer. They then contact native speakers about doing an exchange and set up a time to meet. It is important that students contact more than one native speaker and do so well in advance of the actual due date of their project, and that they also fulfill their promise to give their partner equal time practicing their target language.

Conclusion

Our principal goal in having the language exchanges was to increase the amount of verbal practice in the target language. This was clearly a success with students fully immersed in the target language for roughly twenty-five

minutes each class. But we were also interested in additional benefits provided by the exchange, particularly on student motivation in the classroom and their interest in study abroad opportunities. In fall 2008, we surveyed eight classes and 103 students who had used the Mixxer for language exchanges. Results were quite positive. Roughly 90% of students stated that they enjoyed the exchanges and found them useful. Equally encouraging was the 89% positive response rate to the question whether their confidence in speaking had increased. Finally, and somewhat of a surprise, 30% of students said the exchanges made them more likely to decide to study abroad; 70% said the exchanges had no effect and 0% indicated a negative response. Professors also reported anecdotal evidence that students using Mixxer were more motivated, knowing they would be applying what they learned in the classroom to a “real-life” situation. Several students in each class maintained contact with their partner outside of class. In some cases, these additional exchanges amounted to several additional hours of practice within the target language each week. Also of note, we had two students this year who reconnected with their former Skype language partners while studying abroad.

The effect these exchanges have on the format of the instruction of the classes depends mostly on their frequency. For the Japanese department, these exchanges form the communicative goal for each chapter. They have a language exchange every two weeks with questions and conversational topics drawn from the material they've learned in a given chapter. Other languages such as Spanish and German will only have two or three language exchanges per semester and the exchanges are often used as supplemental cultural components for the course.

This coming year I hope to extend the language exchanges from roughly fifteen to twenty intermediate courses to include more beginning level courses. We organized exchanges for second-semester Spanish students this year and the professors were surprised not only by how well the students did, but also by their reactions to the exchanges. The faculty had feared some of the students would feel overwhelmed and frustrated by the experience; instead the students asked immediately afterward about future exchanges.

I am also hoping to increase the number of professors from other institutions involved in exchanges. Outside of Dickinson, several colleges and universities have used the system to find partner classes, but only Oberlin College, Franklin and Marshall and Illinois Wesleyan use the site regularly. This is partly due to lack of awareness, but an improved interface and better description for setting up the language exchange events--improvements planned this summer--would also help. Anyone interested in connecting their language students with native speakers should feel free to contact me at bryantt@dickinson.edu.

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