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The Mixxer

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The Mixxer

 by **Todd Bryant**  Sunday, October 6, 2013

Key Takeaways

- **Modern languages and global education** are strengths of Dickinson College, making new and more effective **tools for teaching language of vital interest** to the faculty.
- To provide **verbal interaction** between students on campus and students in classes in other countries, the college created the Mixxer, a **social networking site for language learners** interested in chatting via Skype.
- Roughly **600 U.S. institutions** have at least one user with an e-mail address on the Mixxer site, demonstrating the program's **successful and widespread adoption** in language departments whose faculty value its support of verbal communication between students.

Todd Bryant is a language technology specialist at Dickinson College.

Dickinson College is a small (just over 2,300 full-time students), highly selective liberal arts college in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, founded with **the goal of** providing "a useful education in the arts and sciences that will prepare [students] for lives as engaged citizens and leaders." This philosophy extends throughout the curriculum, with an emphasis on international studies. The college offers modern languages including

Russian, Arabic, Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese alongside the more traditional Greek and Latin. Modern languages and the global education program continue to be strengths of the college, with courses in 13 languages and over half of students participating in one of the college's more than 40 study-abroad programs.

Innovation in Foreign Language Learning

In 2005 Professor Meguro requested a way for her students to practice speaking Japanese with native speakers via a chat client. Computer-mediated communication was fairly well established as a tool in foreign language teaching at the time, although almost exclusively as text chat. The Japanese instructors wanted the interaction to be verbal, but we could not successfully coordinate class-to-class exchanges due to the time difference. The solution was to create the **Mixer**, which at its core is a social networking site for language learners interested in exchanges via Skype.

Explanation of Mixer (1:57 minutes)

The Mixer site has many of the same functions as a social networking site, including blogs, friend requests, and a messaging system; however, the profiles include users' native languages and the languages they are studying. Users can find a potential language partner by viewing other learners with a corresponding language profile. For example, a native English speaker studying Spanish would contact a native Spanish

speaker learning English. Once a potential partner is found, the user can either write a private message on the website or contact the person directly via Skype. While there are no rules governing exchanges, the general format is for each user to spend 30 minutes offering conversational practice in their native language. For learners at the beginning or lower intermediate level, it is also recommended that they prepare questions in their target language beforehand to help them with their conversation. Along with conversational practice, language learners can write blog posts to practice their writing. The Mixer is a message board, but many users also post journal entries or translations and then ask for feedback from native speakers. While the native

speakers can provide helpful corrections, it's important to remember they are rarely able to give grammatical explanations for correct usage and common errors.

The Mixer includes functions for instructors as well. Teachers can search for other teachers interested in doing a class-to-class exchange, or they can organize an "event." An event is an invitation for native speakers to sign up to be matched with one of the students in the class for a language exchange at a specific day and time. Of course, the instructor will need access to a computer lab where each student can receive a call via Skype. Instructors interested in having students do a language exchange outside of class time can have their students use the "request confirmation" function to send a message to their partners requesting that they confirm an exchange along with a summary of what was discussed and the date. The relevant information is then displayed on each student's profile page (see figure 1).

Building on Success

The Mixer is well established, although the site continues to evolve. At Dickinson the event function is used on a regular basis to connect students in Japanese, Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, and Arabic with native speakers during their lab hour. There are over 100,000 language learners registered on the site. Most other institutions that use the Mixer as part of a course have their students register and contact their partners outside class. They are usually given a topic and/or questions beforehand and then asked to provide a written summary of the exchange afterward.

The next goal for the Mixer is to begin adding open content for lessons that provide a structure and progression to the exchanges. English and Spanish will be first using content from the BBC, Voice of America, Instituto Cervantes, Fundación de la Lengua Española, and COERLL at the University of Texas. This summer I offered an open course along the lines of a cMOOC. There were no video lectures or quizzes; instead, learners were presented with a logical series of structured lessons created for different levels and matched with a native speaker who can provide practice and feedback as part of an exchange. Overall, I would consider the course a success. Learners reported that they enjoyed the structure provided by the lessons. One difficulty, however, was balancing the number of native Spanish and English speakers. Because we had a significantly larger number of native Spanish speakers, many were unable to have exchanges as frequently as they had hoped.

Challenges and Resolutions

As
with
any

ArabicStudent

[View](#) [Bookmarks](#) [Edit](#) [Manage IP addresses](#) [Messages](#) [Relationships](#) [Track page visits](#)

[Signups](#)

Contact This User

[Send this user a private message](#)

Relationships

Relationship actions

- [Become ArabicStudent's Friend](#)

Main profile

Profile Picture:



First Name:
ArabicStudent

Language Sought:
Arabic

Native Language:
English

Class Name:

Exchange History

Introduction

We introduced ourselves and discussed where we are from, where we live, and what we study. We talked a little bit about the cities we live in. He is from Syria, from Hama, but now he lives in Dubai because he is going to dental school. He has two more years of dental school. I told him I study history (he helped me to pronounce it much better than I have been!) I also told him I think Lansing is a bit boring, and I like Detroit better. I told him I am from Pennsylvania originally.

Your partner's Mixer username:
[ha_mood92](#)

Date of exchange: 02/07/2013 - 17:00
Confirmation date: 22 May
[Delete Confirmation](#)

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Figure 1. Sample student profile page

digital project, both pedagogical and technical questions required answers before Mixxer could be used effectively. The pedagogical questions were fairly simple. The concepts behind tandem learning and language exchanges were already well known among the faculty, so convincing them to use the system was only a matter of scheduling and format. Professor Meguro also created the basic format of the exchanges that would then be largely copied by the other departments. Students work on questions for their partners the day before the exchange on topics that match their current course work. After the exchange, students submit the answers to the

questions or a summary, depending on their level of expertise. It's a simple process, but important. Without the preparation, students at the beginning and lower intermediate levels have difficulty maintaining an open-ended conversation for the set period of time.

There were two principal technical hurdles to overcome. The first problem was trying to reach a critical mass of language learners for the site to be useful. At the beginning, there is a catch-22 with any social networking site as it tries to attract users to join. Fortunately, this was when Skype was just starting to become recognized as a potentially disruptive application for language teaching. Because the Mixxer was one of the oldest, if not the oldest, language site to integrate Skype, it appeared high in the Google search results for "learn language Skype," "language exchange Skype," "language partner Skype," etc.

The other challenge came with growth. After a few years, it was no longer possible to maintain the site as .NET site with an Access database. The user base was too large, and it took too long to create functions people expected with any networking site. Switching to Drupal greatly alleviated these issues with the use of modules that only need to be configured and occasionally customized slightly. The MySQL database, which Drupal uses, has handled the increased traffic of the site with minimal maintenance and configuration. The initial move to Drupal and major upgrades can be quite time consuming, especially if modules that were used are not available in the new base Drupal installation. Overall, however, it has been a significant time saver, without which the site would not have been sustainable.

The Mixxer's Impact

Impact at Dickinson has been tremendous, with the number of courses integrating language exchanges increasing each semester. In the fall of 2013 we had 24 courses at the beginning or intermediate level in Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Italian, German, Spanish, and Portuguese that used the site to find language partners for their students. Professors have used the exchanges as practice for oral exams, content for class presentations, and research projects. They have also mentioned a positive impact in student engagement leading up to and following the exchanges. In the fall of 2008, professors in German, Spanish and Italian added four questions to the course evaluations about the exchanges via Skype. Roughly 90 percent of the students from the seven courses surveyed that year said they enjoyed the exchanges and thought they were beneficial. A survey of Japanese students from four courses in 2007

demonstrated similar results, with students giving an average rating of 4.9 on a scale of one to six on questions about their enjoyment and perceived effectiveness of the exchanges.

The impact of the Mixxer at other institutions is more difficult to measure. Only a handful of schools use the event function in same manner as Dickinson, although anyone is welcome to do so. Most professors at other schools instruct their students to find their own partners on the site and then report back to the class. I have been in touch with a few of these professors at Oberlin, Grinnell, and Bryn Mawr, but for the other schools I can only tell based on the use of .edu addresses in the database, and of course many students use their private e-mail accounts when registering on outside websites. Roughly 600 U.S. institutions have at least one user with an e-mail address on the site, although only 50 have 10 .edu accounts or more registered. The institutions themselves are a mix of large universities including Wisconsin, Boston College, and Michigan State, along with smaller schools such as Oberlin, Knox College, and Willamette University.

Moving forward, I hope to add additional functionality and content that will make it easier to integrate the exchanges with language courses at our institution and others. On the technical side, I plan to add the ability for learners to see and track revisions of their blog posts. This would allow native speakers to correct their texts, and if they are participating in a traditional course, to have these changes visible to their instructor as well. For content, I hope to continue using materials from other open-access sites. First among these would be **COERLL** (Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning), which has a large number of language resources that they have created and then released under a Creative Commons license. While still in the early planning stages, COERLL has expressed their willingness to have their materials used within the Mixxer as well as an interest in other areas of possible collaboration.

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