TeachNet: A website created for teachers

Christopher Glick
Rikkyo University

This paper explains TeachNet, a website for Rikkyo University English teachers. It covers the website's goals and development from the start to my term of supervision. Problems and suggestions for such sites are provided along with a brief analysis of actual website usage, as measured with a commercial online web statistics firm.

本論では、立教大学の英語教員向け情報・教材データベースTeachNetについて概説する。このウェブサイトの目標や、開設以降の発展状況も示す。さらに、このようなサイトの問題点を指摘し、提案を行い、オンライン統計会社による利用者のデータ分析結果も提示する。

Welcome to TeachNet!

When I arrived at Rikkyo University in 2006, the English language program had already set up a password-protected website for English teachers that met many of the points found in Kelly (2000), whose article is intended for a different audience. Access to the website is not necessary to explain its purpose, development, and documented use. A similar but separate complementary site, which will not be discussed, exists for students in the English program to provide them with information about and for their English courses. This paper will attempt to outline TeachNet's evolution into a *supportive* website (Serdyukov & Stvan, 2001) so others contemplating setting up their own websites for teachers might benefit from what I have learned. TeachNet is a useful resource, but it is important to note that "extensive planning and a considerable investment of time is required to produce an effective site" (Peterson, 1998, p. 349).

The English teachers' website now known as TeachNet apparently began as a repository of materials for teachers of the English for Cultural Understanding (ECU) course in Rikkyo's large English program, which employs over 100 teachers: tenured, contractual, and part-time. Accordingly, it was decided that TeachNet access would not be restricted to on-campus computers or university IP addresses, which might limit its use. Given the size of the English language program, there are many required courses that demand a high degree of uniform content, such as ECU. Other courses' master syllabi were later added online to guide individual course teachers who have

some leeway in designing their individual course syllabi for such courses as Writing, Media English, and ECU. Since ECU is the only required course to span two terms, it often requires supplementary materials. Accordingly, ECU was the first course with its own directory housing an Excel spreadsheet with two sheets of lists of hyperlinked contributions: original activities and articles. Much time had been spent on compiling contributions and making the spreadsheet as convenient a database as possible by having columns of keywords, courses, student levels, activity types, and contributors' names for each entry. Management of the website was split: a rotating faculty member with one or two contractual teachers as assistants oversaw database contributions; another managed the website itself with an assistant or two.

A year after my arrival, TeachNet became my responsibility, with the former two faculty members' positions rolled into one. As the dedicated website manager, I received a new email address solely for TeachNet purposes. My first decision was to give each required course its own directory for storing files; the various elective courses were given a collective folder of their own. The existing pages used individual CSS formatting files, with the result that all pages related to the Writing course, for example, looked similar but different from the other courses' pages. To streamline design, I created a master CSS file from the old one then worked with my assistant to edit existing files to use the CSS file and meet HTML standards; we also created new HTML files as needed. A key point was to make sure the master course syllabus for each course was put online so it could be read at any time. Finally, I gave the new website a name, TeachNet, to promote it. The existence and use of the remodeled and expanded TeachNet was subsequently announced at the English program's quarterly faculty development sessions and by direct email to all English teachers.

TeachNet began to receive a new round of submissions. One prominent link for each course's top page is for submissions; the mailto link opens a standardized requirement list, which was not followed by all who submitted. The process for vetting submissions was pieced together in a committee:

1. TeachNet head reads prospective submission then directs it to the respective course head.
2. If the course head approves of the submission, it will be submitted for approval at the regular English faculty meetings.
3. Following faculty approval, the TeachNet head adds the submission to the course's directory and provides a means for accessing it.

In practice, most submissions were processed by my assistant and me. I made monthly notices at the English faculty meetings of what changes and additions had been made to TeachNet. Notice of each submission added to TeachNet was emailed to all teachers.

Out of concern for privacy, I could not share teachers' contact information with my assistant. Thus, I was the only one who could email notifications and address responses, which increased my workload. It was at this point that I decided to create a TeachNet RSS feed. It uses the same universal TeachNet login and password, but once a teacher subscribes to the feed in a RSS reader application, the RSS reader will show the TeachNet feed updates automatically. The benefits of RSS are that those who want the latest TeachNet information can get it as they wish, no personal information is compromised, and the updating of content is reduced to just one message per item of interest. The main problem with RSS is that some people are unfamiliar with it and thus might be reluctant to make use of it, although this will likely change over time as the technology proliferates.

Problems

Once TeachNet's web pages were unified in appearance and cleaned of "junk" code, other problems could be addressed. The first was the issue of copyright, a complex topic beyond the scope of this article. However, I suggested at a faculty meeting that all non-original materials on TeachNet (i.e., mainly scanned articles to be used as reading materials) be discarded. My then-assistants and I had read through everything on TeachNet and realized that almost all articles submitted were really for teachers; the requisite reading ability was usually far above that of most students. My suggestion was accepted and most

articles were removed. Those my assistants and I felt were useful needed permission from the copyright holder. A form letter was drafted and mailed to authors and publishers. About half the requests went unanswered, so those articles were deleted. Of those that were answered, roughly half requested money that TeachNet did not have, so those articles were deleted as well. Based on this experience, article submissions were given the requirement that the article be cleared in advance for addition to TeachNet by the copyright holder. A form letter for requesting article use has been linked to on all submission pages. In practice, article submission has dwindled to practically zero from sources other than *Hiragana Times*. I have rejected most articles as too difficult or too time-specific, not useful beyond a year or two. This is a particular concern with online articles at Yahoo!, for example, that disappear within a matter of weeks. It is simply easier to refuse such articles than periodically purge those that have become out-of-date or disappeared.

The second problem was simple updating of content. This could be correcting misspellings or adding a new page at someone's request. As Peterson (1998, p. 358) notes, regarding confirming and updating site links, "This process can be time-consuming." If one's assistants are uncomfortable with website administration, this work cannot be easily delegated.

The third problem was with activity submissions. Only original materials are accepted. Beyond the normal process of sieving submissions is the matter of activities that seem to be textbook prototypes. TeachNet and the university's English language program are not meant to be a test-pilot facility for someone's proposed textbook, so such submissions are given faculty hearings. When the activity submission is so extensive that it threatens to supplant the required course textbook, the submission is rejected. A related problem is document format. Most submissions and English program documentation come in Microsoft Word's .doc format with many fonts I might not have. Some teachers might not even use Word and have document translators that do an imperfect job. I request all submissions come in both .doc and .pdf, the latter preserving all formatting and being platform-independent. For Macintosh users, saving a file as .pdf is easy, since it is built into the OS. However, this

is apparently not the case for Windows users. Accordingly, my assistant and I have spent much time reformatting Word documents to put them online as .pdf files that anyone can use.

A fourth problem is the use of Excel as the database and search tool. Not everyone uses Excel or spreadsheets. However, I have not yet found a substitute that was easy to implement at little or no cost. I have thought about a series of JavaScript pop-up menus that could provide multiple parameters for seeking activities and displaying results (e.g., ECU class, level A, pair activity, and topic involves sports).

Use of TeachNet

In 2008, I purchased a year's worth of website tracking with StatCounter.com. This company provides a snippet of JavaScript that is put on each web page on a site. Whenever a page with that code snippet is loaded into a user's browser, StatCounter collects certain data that is compiled as a spreadsheet in the StatCounter user's account. While StatCounter offers a free service, if your site has many potential users, and activity you wish to track, you will need one of their paid options. A brief discussion of that year's worth of data follows as well as some views of a random week's worth of activity during a semester.

From June 16, 2008, to June 14, 2009, TeachNet had 1,142 page loads, or an average of three per day. The number of unique, first-time, and returning visitors over that same period was 361, 263, and 98, respectively. A unique visitor is either a first-time or returning visitor. Since the first-time visitor number exceeds the number of teaching staff employed, it is possible that others are also accessing the site or deleting the StatCounter cookie(s), the latter a reason for a repeat visitor being counted as a first-time visitor. This data sample is small because it only covers two semesters. However, a few trends can be seen. TeachNet usage is naturally quite low during university breaks. A week before classes begin, activity picks up and remains particularly active for the first four weeks, after which it drops off. Activity tends to pick up again toward the end of term. Perhaps due to scheduling, Wednesdays seem to have the most hits: 286 over the period; Thursdays come close: 96. Otherwise, no other trends stand out.

Taking a random week, the website access pages drew a total of 687 visitors; one must visit those pages to access the others, thus driving up the numbers. After that comes the ECU course top page with 283 visitors, the English Through Video course top page with 174, and the main page with 166 visitors. The only other course to draw a large number was Reading and Listening (R&L); the Writing course's top page drew 34 visitors. Of all the materials on the website, only four were downloaded by more than one person: three documents by two people each for the R&L course and one by three people for the Writing course. Only seven exit links were tracked, three of which went to other pages in the university's system, while the rest seemed to be related to teaching, such as CNN transcripts or a certain performer's lyrics page. Given the approximate 120 teachers, it seems TeachNet has demonstrable value that differs by course and purpose.

A final datum set is "visit length," for which StatCounter provides a warning: "If you only install the StatCounter code on one page of your website and your visitors never reload that one page, then your visit length will always be less than 5 seconds!" Bearing that in mind, the last couple of visits break down as follows: 38, less than 5 seconds; 28, from 5 to 30 seconds; 48, from 30 seconds to 5 minutes; 26, from 5 minutes to 20 minutes; 6, from 20 minutes to an hour; 82, longer than an hour. My interpretation is that most people login, go to what they want, then go elsewhere. The 82 long-term users are an interesting case that I assume, given StatCounter's warning, login and look at pages while looking at other things simultaneously. By multitasking, their login time ends up looking longer than their actual viewing time. Analyzing all the data at my disposal would, however, be beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

TeachNet has come a long way and is currently managed by someone else. It has a clean, unified format. Each course's top page provides links to its own activities, documentation, and submission requirements. Notification of additions and updates can be provided through RSS to those who want the information. A one-for-all login and password policy simplifies things, although a large amount of website management email will be for the easily-forgotten login and password data. As a centralized resource, TeachNet potentially keeps teachers focused on and contributing to Rikkyo University's English language program. Teachers continue to make use of the site.

Creating a teacher-specific website like TeachNet is a good idea. Especially in a large program, it helps ensure new English program announcements reach everyone and that everyone can work from the same template. By providing a repository of activities, course content is possibly channeled with a greater degree of conformity. Once set up, such a site is not difficult to maintain, but it will require a surprising amount of work in direct relation to additions and updates. Moreover, basic web administration skills (i.e., FTP, HTML, and CSS) are necessary.

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Christopher Glick was an associate professor in Rikkyo University's College of Intercultural Communication before returning to the US. He has been teaching ESL and EFL for nearly 20 years. While his main interest is materials design (he has most recently helped design a medical ESP course), he has also written TOEIC® test items, proofread dictionaries, judged English speech contests, and performed sundry other activities.