# The Virtual Class Project 1999 - 2000

The Virtual Class Project (VCP) was originally started in 1997 with a class of electrician's apprentices at the Odense Tekniske Skole (Odense Technical College). Actually, it was the predecessor of The Web Page Project in 1998, a project which was awarded the European Label in 1999. Originally (1997) the VPC comprised a home page for the class with description of each of the students in the class, curriculum plan, and a discussion area. Currently (1999 and 2000) the VPC is to use the Internet and other communication technologies in a very versatile way with the following objectives:

- Integration between different subjects
- To facilitate different learning styles
- To enable distance learning
- To prepare students for a visit in another EU country

Like the Web Page Project (1998) the VCP is the result of "ordinary" teacher's preparation for a class. I.e. the VCP has neither received funding from the college nor from any external parties (like the EU). The pedagogical ideas and results from the VCP will in future be used for learners who have decided to acquire a high school level exam during their apprenticeships.

## About the students:

The electrician's apprentices have English as one of their subjects during their $5^{th}$ school period, which is a 10 weeks period. They have approximately 75 English lessons followed by an exam. The language level is comparable to level B2 according to "The common European Framework of reference", published by the Council of Europe.

When the apprentices reach the $5^{th}$ school period they have been apprenticed for nearly three years and have had 40 weeks of school stay. In their previous school periods they have learned about Information Technology and know how to use the Internet for getting information, also they have had Danish lessons where they have learned about different media like e-mail and web pages.

In the beginning of their 3 rd or at latest in the beginning of their $4^{th}$ school period the students receive information on an optional visit to an English speaking country as part of their $5^{th}$ school period. Those students who choose to participate in the excursion to an English speaking country can substitute part of their English studies with the excursion. However, as the excursion is a one-week stay and because the English language learning during that week probably does not quite match one week's lessons it is necessary to cover up the missed lessons by involving the students in a distance learning scheme. The remaining 35 lessons are traditional learning centred lessons. All these items lead to the 1999 innovated version of The Virtual Class Project.

## *Preparing for The Virtual Class Project 1999*

To cater for the differences in learning styles and possible lack of perseverance I researched different media and their strengths and weaknesses. I needed an electronic home place for the class, which should be an improved version of my original virtual class, which was more or less a collection of students' Web pages with the teacher's plan etc. In 1997 my student's used an e-mail list to contact each other, but for the 1999 version I wanted a calendar and also much better communication facilities than the original discussion web could offer. I had noticed that Open University, UK used audio conferences in their long distance learning classes so I definitely wanted something like that. Also, I had decided that an electronic whiteboard would be desirable for many types of simulations.

## *The Virtual Class Components*

For my next class of electrician's apprentices I have decided on the following components:

- Web site: I have created a web area for the class with individual folders for the students using an Internet Information Server with FrontPage extensions. As the students have worked with FrontPage in their previous school periods it should be "straight forward" for them to make their personal web pages. From the main web page there is a link to an "Electronic Group"

- Electronic Group. I have decided on using "eGroups" as the main working area during the students' distance learning. eGroups can be reached at the address www.egroups.com eGroups is a "free" service, i.e. with a lot of advertising, however, there is an option for no-advertising priced 4.94$ a month. eGroups provides The Virtual Class with the following components:
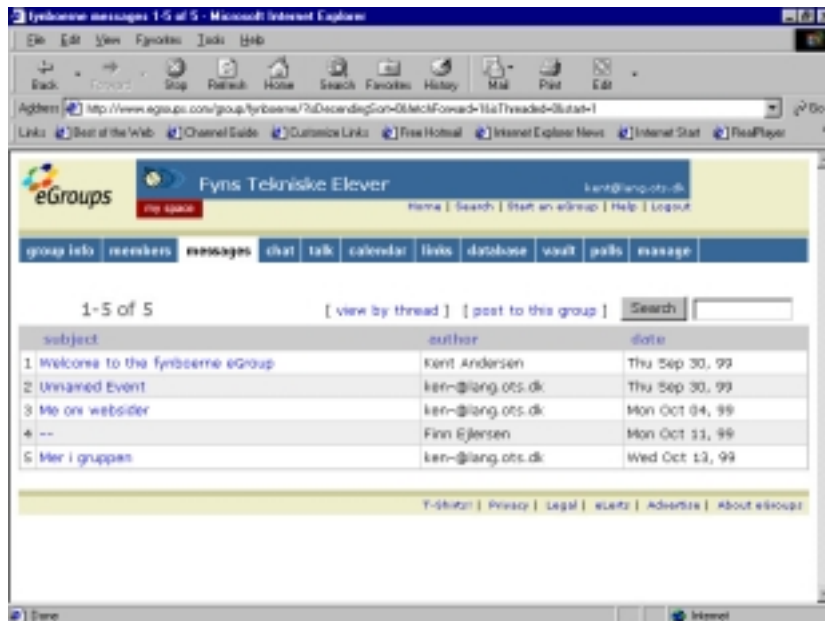


1. Calendars, i.e. personal calendars, group calendars and class calendars that can be compared and run together,

2. A message area where the students can exchange views, a chat box where students can write in real time to one another.

3. A talk feature which is used for real time audio conferences where the students can talk with one another and with the teacher.
4. A vault which can be used for common files.
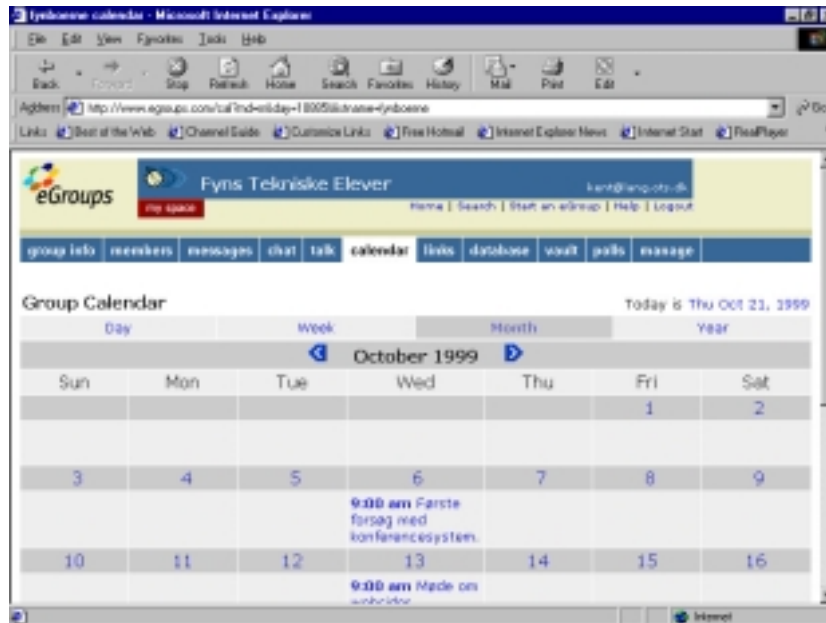
5. A list server. When a student writes to the electronic group the e-mail is automatically sent to the rest of the class. The teacher can take full control of the messages sent if necessary, which means he is a moderator that decides if an e-mail may pass to other members of the class, and he can ban a member from the class. Of course the electronic class is a closed class where only members with the right passwords can enter.

- Electronic Whiteboard. I decided that the electronic whiteboard, which is part of the Microsoft NetMeeting is ideal for my purposes. Also the Microsoft NetMeeting makes it possible to pass files from one student to another student or to all the students. The electronic whiteboard has many nice features. It is possible to place graphics on the board, to print out the board at any time, to save the content of the board at any time so it's possible to go back to a previous stage. All participants can draw and write on the whiteboard in real time and simultaneously tkae part in discussion using either the NetMeeting talk feature or the Talk feature from eGroups.
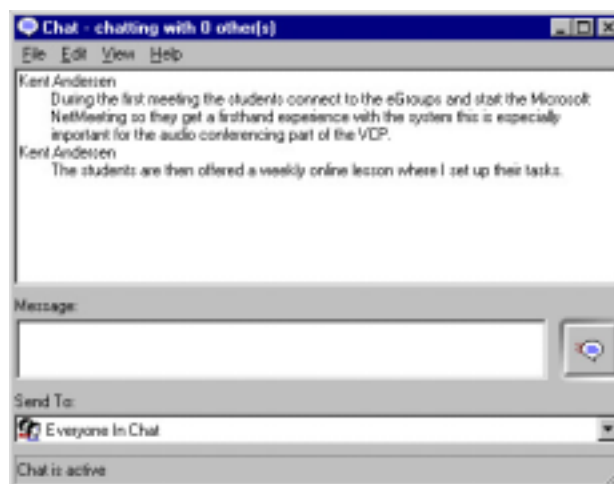


- E-mail. In order to communicate with the students and also needed in order to access NetMeeting and eGroups each of the students must have an individual e-mail account. I have a choice of using college based accounts or accounts from other parties like Hotmail, Fiberia etc.

## *Virtual Class Considerations*

**Social community**: My worst fear when dealing with distance learning has always been the social aspect. I used to imagine that the computer mediated community would imply some lack of social relations. However, several presentations at the recent EUROCAL convention in Besancon, France revealed that distance learning classes using audio conferencing actually developed a strong sense of social community. (E.g. "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Teacher: The Role of Social Presence in the Online Classroom." by Tammelin Maija from the Helsinki School of Economics, Helsinki, Finland and another presentation "Fostering (pro)active language learning through MOO" by Lesley Shield, Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom). In the case of the Virtual Class Project 99 all the students know one another from previous classes.

**The four language skills**: Traditionally computer mediated language learning has not been able to help student improve their speaking skills. In the VCP the audio conference system helps students get over their "proven" shyness, this is only the case, of course, when they have something REAL to communicate. In other words the success of the VPC depends on the situations and tasks given to the students.



**Access to ICT** (Information and Communication Technology): In the case of the present VCP the students have a choice of working at home using their own computers with an Internet connection to the college or they can access the Internet from the College "Internet Homework Cafe". All the programs used in the VCP can work with a standard (28.8 Baud) modem connection.

**Content**:   After careful analysis of the curriculum I have tried to strip out the items from the curriculum that do not demand a simultaneous student-teacher presence. This means that most of the student's written work has been moved to the VCP together with some grammar exercises and text reading (technical English). Having said this I still put much emphasis on simulations and task based teaching using the audio conferencing system. I do not want to replicate the traditional distance learning systems based on mail and written reports!

## *Running the Virtual Class*

As soon as the students have enrolled for the VCP they are summoned to a meeting where they receive information on how to work with the software, the schedules and they are given the materials to be used during the period. Each student receive a  CD-ROM which contains videos, audio recording, texts and exercises together with a text compendium.

During the first meeting the students connect to the eGroups and start the Microsoft NetMeeting so they get a firsthand experience with the system this is especially important for the audio conferencing part of the VCP.

Each student is then told to write a personal profile. The profile is sent to me for correction (attached to an e-mail). The profiles will later be placed in the students' web. I correct the profiles using an online commenting system I have written in html. This means that the student receives her profile formatted with html links to each of the errors in the profile (see example at the address http://www.languages.dk/dozen.html or see my present comments at the address http://lang.ots.dk/grammar/ )
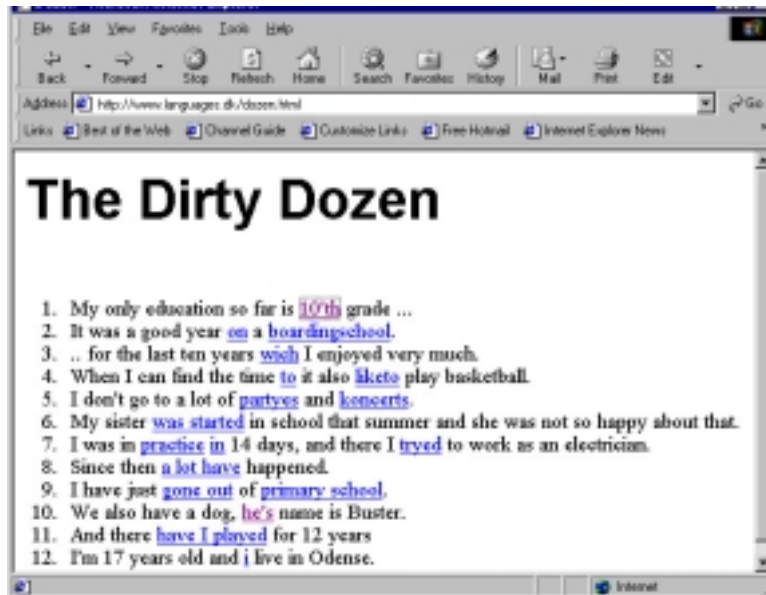


The students are then offered a weekly online lesson where I set up their tasks. They are also encouraged to arrange online group meetings without my presence, e.g. to work with group related tasks this is the case in at least one of the simulations.

The simulations / tasks used in the VPC are (at the present):

- Choice of an English speaking country: This is the first task the students work with. They are highly motivated for this task as it is probably the very reason for enrolling in the VCP. There is a set price for the VPC including the one-week excursion at 1.500 DKK the college then adds 1.000 DKK so the total budget must not exceed 2.500DKK During the first online lesson I let the students suggest different places to go. For this activity they use both the Chat facility and the Talk facility of the VCP. Later on I suggest they use the whiteboard for pasting in pictures they have found on the Internet. I finish the first online lesson with giving the students different assignments like visiting http://www.scotland.org , http://www.nwi.co.uk, http://www.ireland.org and http://www.s-h-systems.co.uk/46.html

    The simulation continues for two to three weeks with one weekly online class lesson used for putting things together. Between the online lessons the students have tasks like suggesting places to visit, finding means of transport, locating budget hotels or B&B etc. In the eGroup the students can arrange a poll to help them reach a decision.
    When the first task has been completed and the class has decided which country to visit I give the students their next piece of written homework: Write a short description of the area you are going to visit next term. The description should include geographical information like number of inhabitants, known places to visit in the area, companies that might accept us as visitors etc.

- Town Planning: The second major online task is a simulation where the class is divided into two groups. The students in group A are town planners who have the task to prepare a suggestion for building a new neighbourhood at the Odense Fjord. Group B are ecologists who prefer the area preserved as a natural reserve, however, they have to accept that there is a need for a new neighbourhood. Each group have their own online sessions with me where

they start preparing their suggestions to the other group. When ready they invite the other group to an online conference, during that conference (which actually is a number of conferences) the students negotiate and give suggestions using both online audio and the electronic whiteboard system.
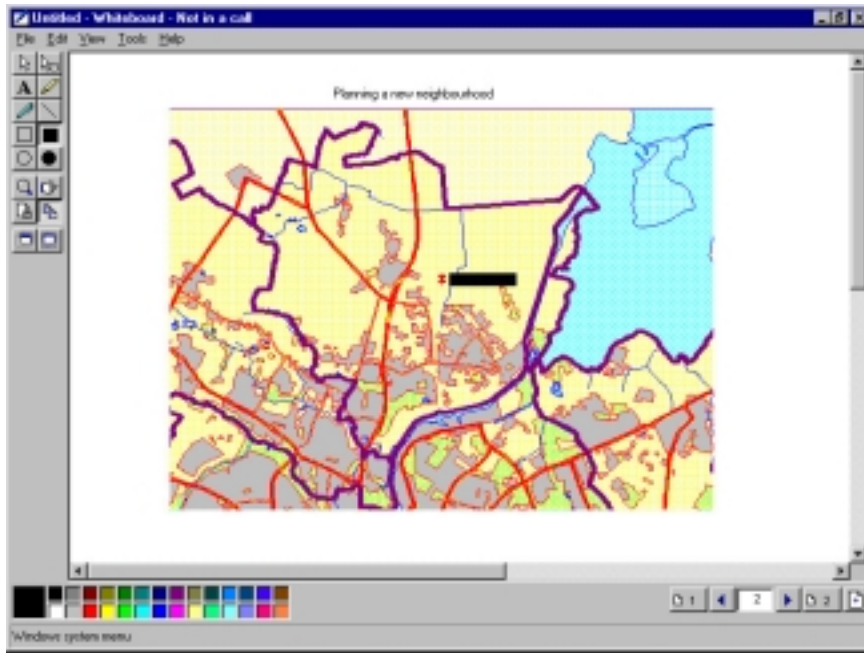


- Strike: Strike is the last planned simulation in the VCP. In the Strike simulation the students have individual roles. The simulation takes place at ADAMENT (a machine works) where a clash of opinions causes a strike.

  The scenario is: One of the electricians who is always late for work is sacked after an argument with the foreman. The shop steward summons a meeting where the employees decide to strike. They claim the machine works is a nineteenth century sweatshop with a very bad working environment. They also claim the electrician has been victimised by the foreman due to the many conflicts in the machine works. None of the parties seems willing to budge an inch, however, ADAMENT is pressed by one of the customers who is in urgent need of a specific supply. The customer threatens to take the order elsewhere ...



The students are placed in two main groups according to their roles. Group one - Employer, managers, foreman etc. Group B - The shop steward, the electrician, different workers. Each group can meet online to prepare for meetings between the two groups. My own role is to ensure that the simulation stays "alive", i.e. if needed I can send the

managers an e-mail from their costumer, or I could send the Employees an e-mail from the trade union stating that the strike is illegal and must come to an end. The simulation is finished when the two parts come to an agreement.

## *Self instructional work*

Simultaneously with the VCP each student works through selected programmes on the CD-ROM supplied to the



students when they started the VCP period. The CD-ROM contains materials like Computers 1-7 where the student watch a video telling about different computer parts. After the student has watched the video there are a number of exercises that check the understanding of the information in the video. During the video the student can click on any word to get explanations and glosary.

After the exercises the student can work with a vocabulary trainer where all the words the student has clicked on are trained. When the words have been learned the student continues with gap filling exercises.



As an alternative to using the CD-ROM I have also placed the Computer 1-7 units on the Internet where they can be reached at the address: www.languages.dk/online. Like the CD-ROM the Internet version of the units has live video and all words can be clicked on to get explanations and access to the glossary.

After each online lesson I tell the students what to do till next lesson. E.g. a student is told to work with Unit 7 on the CD-ROM and she is given some questions to answer through e-mail to me.

## Learning is done by learners

To help the students get good language learning strategies they are given a vocabulary training program in which they can store words they need to learn. I call the system the WIN method (Words I Need). They also have the WordWeb dictionary/thesaurus on their CD-ROM which can be used to get English explanations for words.



## After the VCP

When the students have worked through the Virtual Class Project they are ready for the excursion to an English speaking country. The excursion has been planned during the VCP and the students have made arrangements for visiting institutions and companies in the area. After the excursion the students continue their English studies at the college. The remaining 35 lessons deal with communication practice where the students learn to follow and give instructions in English. E.g. they instruct one another to wire different circuits or describe how an apparatus works.



For further information please contact:

Kent Andersen                           E-mail kent@lang.ots.dk
Bygge & Anlæg                           Tel. +45 6312 6500
Odense Tekniske Skole                   Fax. +45 6312 6629
Risingsvej 60                           Web. www.languages.dk
DK 5000 Odense C