Fall '05/Winter '06 ### The OLRC News

Distance Tutoring using NetMeeting

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Background

Phil is now 35 years old and his last full grade completed was eleventh; he left school in 1987 for personal reasons. He has sole custody of a precocious and charming 9-year-old daughter. He lives in the Southwestern United States and works full-time for a shipping company in the IT department; his employers were aware of his educational status at hiring. He is like many students who come to ABLE – he's smart, well-employed, balancing work and home responsibilities, and determined to make the most out of his life.

How I got involved

As the OLRC doesn't provide direct service to ABLE students, many of us don't get a chance to come into regular contact with the actual end users of the OLRC's programs and projects. We often meet students through events like the Writers' Conference or GED Scholars events, but rarely do we meet students before they have successfully entered and gone through ABLE or other education programs.

Phil and I were friends from 3rd grade through high school before he moved away in 10th grade and we lost contact. He found me six years ago during an Internet search and emailed me. After catching up on the last ten years, he told me that he was intrigued that I worked in the adult literacy field because he hadn't graduated from high school and was interested in getting his GED. We had emailed back and forth about educational and non-educational topics for several years. We had talked about GED classes and the test, and I had sent him a few informational sites and strongly suggested that he attend a local program.

During the Fall of 2002, our elementary school had a reunion which we both attended; he was in town for a week, so we were able to spend a great deal of time together. He even came to visit the OLRC and see the office, including the newly-started GED Scholars Initiative (he's always wanted to go to college). We had time to talk that week, and I was able to harangue him about getting his GED. He said that he had tried to do some studying on his own, but thought that he would need some tutoring. The programs that were nearby his home were not able to accommodate his scheduling needs as a worker and parent, so he needed to seek alternative methods of assistance. I told him that I could try to tutor him via the Internet and see if and how that would work.

Hardware and Software

Phil and I are both advanced Internet and computer users, but had rarely used a variety of online collaboration tools for extended periods of time. Due to the amount of time we expected to spend communicating, we agreed to avoid using the telephone to save on telephone charges. We had spent a great deal of time chatting online using AOL Instant Messenger and were comfortable communicating non-traditionally. We decided to try and use Microsoft NetMeeting, a free collaboration tool that combines voice, text chat, online whiteboard, application- and file-sharing capabilities. We both have high-speed Internet connections; I use a cable modem and he uses DSL. I have used the NetMeeting voice feature on modem connections and find that it's generally pretty good, although not as clear as a telephone. The quality and reliability is similar to that of a cell phone.

Technology needs

Software
· AOL Instant Messenger (AIM)
· Microsoft NetMeeting

We used AOL Instant Messenger, which is included with AOL software and is available to non-AOL users as a free download from <www.aim.com>. Other instant messaging programs are widely available and the OLRC has an excellent Tech Talk publication by Kimberly McCoy on using Instant Messenger (http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/techtalk8-2.pdf).NetMeeting has its own chat feature, but it doesn't have as many features as other standalone programs, so we generally didn't use it.

NetMeeting comes standard with most Microsoft operating systems (Windows 98 and higher). It is usually located through Start -> Programs -> Accessories -> Communication. If you're unable to locate it through the Start menu, go to Start -> Run and type conf.exe and click "Ok." If NetMeeting is installed, it will start, prompting you to run through the installation if necessary. It is also available as a free download from Microsoft's site www.microsoft.com/downloads and select "NetMeeting" from the drop-down menu. Links to instructions for using and tutorials on NetMeeting are available in Appendix A.

Hardware
· Computer with Internet connection, preferably a high-speed connection
· Speakers and microphone (first used)
· Computer headset with attached microphone (switched to)
· Telephone (alternate method if connection was spotty)

A computer headset is preferred because the speaker/microphone combination will usually create some feedback. As Phil's voice would come over the speakers, it would get picked up by my microphone and transmit it back to his speakers, which would get picked up by *his* microphone, and so on. This caused a fairly annoying echo effect which was remedied by using a headset with an attached microphone; there wasn't an echo because the received sound went directly to the ear phones and wasn't picked up by the microphone.

Initial assessment

If Phil had attended a program in either Ohio or his home state, he would have been given an approved assessment instrument to place him in an entry level. However, this was not a traditional tutoring situation, and distance learning was and is still in its early infancy for adult education. At the time I figured it was doubtful that Phil's hours and achievements could officially be "counted" in either state, not to mention the fact that I didn't have any idea at the time that I'd be writing all this down for public scrutiny!

Phil and I spent the first session chatting via AIM about his educational history, strengths, and concerns. As with most students, he was very concerned about his math skills and wanted to concentrate most of his time in making sure he was up to speed. He was very confident in his reading comprehension and writing ability, and fairly confident in his science and social studies knowledge. I suggested that he purchase a GED preparation book that I also had so that we could use some of the assessments and also so that he could go through some sections on his own between tutoring sessions.

In addition to a printed assessment, Phil also used some assessments available online and tracked his progress. He would note questions that he got wrong so that we would be sure to cover them later. In all initial formal and informal assessments, Phil demonstrated Low to High Adult Secondary-level skills. He was weakest in higher-level math and strongest in reading and writing, exactly what he thought during our initial conversation. We decided to start with math as the initial topic.

Books
We used a common GED preparation book from a major publisher; most programs have them available at the program.

Websites
· gedpractice.com (free registration)
  Steck-Vaughn's site; contains a wide variety of subject assessments
· 4tests.com (free registration) provides four separate practice tests; one each for Literature and Art (Reading), Math, Social Studies, and Science

Scheduling and time

In addition to our own work and personal schedules, the two-hour time difference posed a challenge that will not be encountered if tutoring a student within the same general geographic area. The fact that I am a "night person" helped with the scheduling; we would usually meet at 10:00 p.m. Eastern/8:00 p.m. Mountain, which gave him enough time to prepare dinner, spend time with and work with his daughter on schoolwork. We would occasionally break for ten or fifteen minutes so that he could put her to bed if she was up later than usual. We would generally end the session around midnight Eastern/10:00 p.m. Mountain, as we found that 1½ to 2 hours was the most productive length of time; any more and we degenerated into chatting and any less wasn't long enough to cover content in-depth. This is generally consistent with most in-person tutoring timeframes.

We met once a week, generally Wednesdays, from 10:00 p.m. through 12:00 midnight, allowing for flexibility if either of us had meetings or other commitments. If I was staying in a hotel for a meeting or conference, we would often maintain the same schedule and use regular AIM or cellphones instead of the headset if the modem connection on my laptop wasn't reliable for voice use.

Procedure

After the initial few tutoring sessions, we developed a process that worked very well for us. With adjustments made for distance tutoring, our process was very similar to in-person tutoring sessions.

Preparation for a typical session
1 to 3 days prior
· Phil would email any specific questions or areas that he wanted to address
· I would find or create scenarios or questions that addressed the concerns

12 to 24 hours prior
· email confirmation about the session – if Phil didn't hear from me by Tuesday morning, he would email me to confirm

Session
15 minutes prior to scheduled meeting time
· I would log into AIM from my home computer and wait for Phil to login

10 minutes prior to scheduled meeting time
· Phil logs in to AIM and IM's me to let me know he's ready
· Off-topic chat
· Phil sends me his IP address

Meeting time
· I enter the IP that Phil sent me into NetMeeting and connect to his computer

15 minutes
· Review of areas covered and questions sent earlier
· Review of areas still needing to be covered

75 minutes
· Discussion about new topics, examples, and practice questions using NetMeeting whiteboard

15 minutes
· Outstanding questions or areas that need clarification
· Review of topics covered and topics still to needing to be covered
· Scheduling next session

15 minutes
· Off-topic chat
· Logoff

Collaborative Tutoring Online

Whiteboard

The whiteboard is one of the best collaboration features of NetMeeting and other similar programs. It really is an online whiteboard, which allows all participants to see what is being "written" in real time. This is much more helpful than relying on the powers of verbal description over the phone, sending email examples, or trying to match up similar pages in a workbook.

For example, when we were discussing percentages and charts, I drew a simple pie chart on the whiteboard with approximate percentages for each category and added a total dollar figure that the chart represented. Phil was able to watch me draw the pie chart and add text to it.
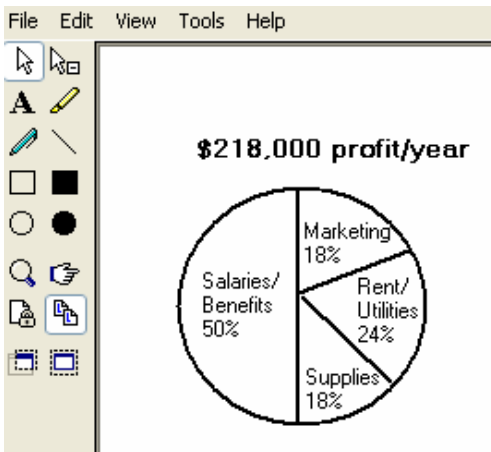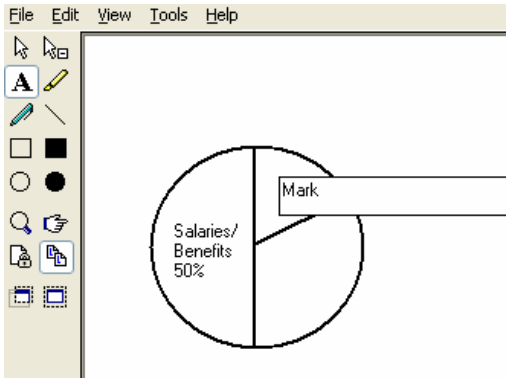
Because the whiteboard is a shared tool, Phil was also able to add items to the whiteboard and, in this instance, added the dollar figures that each pie piece represented.
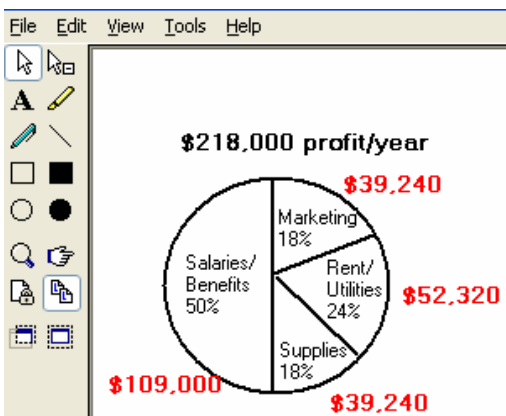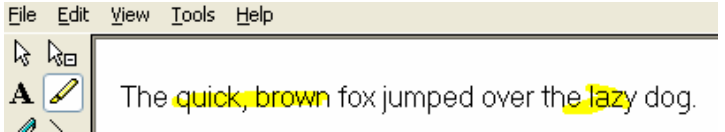
The whiteboard can also be used for text-based tutoring.

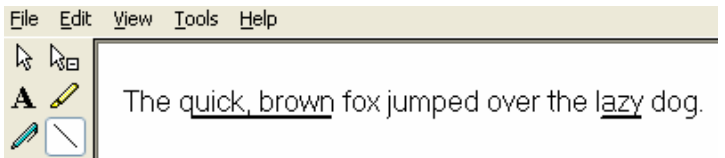In this instance, I typed a simple phrase (and Phil was able to see the typing in real time):
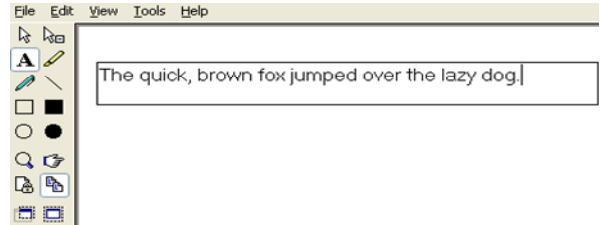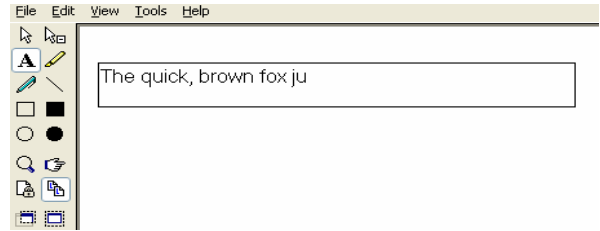
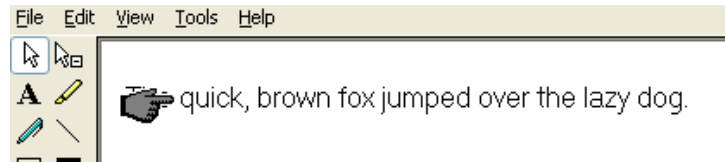There are a number of things that this could be used for.

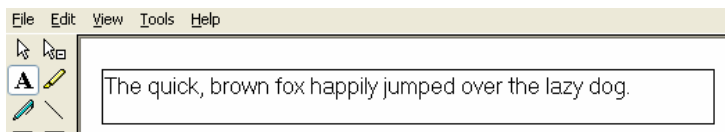Using the highlighter, highlight the adjectives in the sentence:

Using the line tool, underline the adjectives in the sentence:

Using the "hand" tool, move the hand to point out the adjectives in the sentence (the hand tool is usually used for pointing out or highlights objects in the whiteboard):

Using the text tool, insert an adverb into the sentence:

Program sharing

One neat feature of collaboration tools is the ability to "share" programs; this works very well as an instructional, training, or technical support tool. Essentially, one person enables program sharing and chooses which programs can be shared (the entire computer isn't available for sharing, just the chosen programs). The person on the other end is then able

to see the program, for example a web browser, including screen changes, cursor movements, and scrolling. Either person can request control of the program and is able to edit, change, and move around in the program or document. In addition to being a great option for tutoring and instruction, this allows two people to work on the same document without having to crowd around a single machine or hunch over a paper document. Word processors, spreadsheet programs, email clients, and all other programs can all be shared

Program sharing is a little slower, especially with a dialup connection, but it is a very viable option for tutoring and collaboration and is limited only by the creativity of the users. We used program sharing primarily for typed information, assessments, and discussion.

For example, in practicing for the essay or for working on writing skills, sharing a word processing program can be extremely beneficial. Phil would type a few paragraphs based on a set theme (in this case, the theme would be "Plagiarizing the Gettysburg Address"):
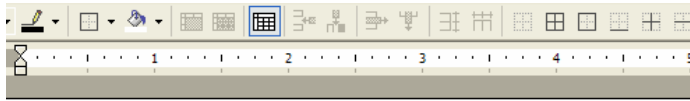
And I could provide suggestions for grammar, content, or spelling (apologies to President Lincoln):

And the reasons for the suggestions and changes could be discussed.

<u>Other tools</u>

NetMeeting and other collaboration tools have additional features which are optional. These features include:

- video (if one or both people have cameras, the video will load automatically);
- chat (which can be used if other chat software isn't available);
- file-sharing (for sending files back and forth)

Results

After 2 months of averaging once-a-week tutoring, Phil had taken a couple of practice tests online and out of a GED preparation book and passed with flying colors. He decided that he was ready to take the official test, although scheduling was proving challenging again. He opted to take the test over two days and after he was done, told me that he thought he did well.

A month or so later I came home from work and my husband said "Phil called, he wants you to call him back." I grabbed the phone and called him back immediately; when he answered I said "Did you pass?" and he said "Hello, I'm fine, thanks, how are you?" He always was a devil… To make a long story short, he not only passed, but he passed with three perfect scores; he was pretty amused by all of my "woohoooo"-ing.

Since then he has enrolled in college and has taken a course, actually an online course, in which he got an A.

Check Out These Websites!

A Celebration of Women Writers
http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/
This site promotes awareness of women's literary contributions in all genres through an easy to use listing of links to biographical and bibliographical information about women writers, as well as a regularly updated list of published books by women (both recent and classic). The most exciting feature, however, is the collection of rare works available free right on the website. These works can be browsed by author name, ethnicity, and country, as well as the century they were written in.

Literacy and Social Change: From a Woman's Perspective
http://www.literacy.org/products/ili/pdf/ilprocus.pdf
Here you'll find a thorough analysis of two literacy projects in Bombay. The first was entirely coordinated by the women living in the slums of Prakashnagar and Shantinigar with the goal of using literacy to help end domestic abuse relating to alcohol and dowries. The second focused on the communities of Kherwadi and Khernagar, participants in a project called "Each One Teach One," organized by a local college of social work. This program aimed for higher adult literacy as a result of children teaching their parents how to read. The site explains both the projects' outcomes and the background information needed to understand the participants' motivation and perspective; including background information about the communities and their members, relevant cultural values, and application of critics' theories about literacy to the projects.

WE LEARN
http://www.litwomen.org/lwritings.html
The Women Expanding/Literacy Action Resource Network's website features links including recordings of book discussion circles, books and websites pertaining to women as learners, and research articles about women's literacy. Good site for women learners seeking connection through other groups and publications.

U.S. Department of Labor– Women's Bureau
http://www.dol.gov/wb/welcome.html
The Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor is "devoted to promoting better working conditions for women, increasing women's earnings, and advancing women's opportunities for profitable employment." Their website includes links to Department of Labor programs and resources by state; reports and fact sheets about women in the workforce, statistics, and the latest issues and conferences relating to women's employment; as well as locations of regional offices and a short history of the Women's Bureau.

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing Adult Literacy

Check Us Out!
http://literacy.kent.edu

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