

continuously updated class “blog” in Irish that keeps class members informed of local events, artistic happenings, and other sites of interest, all while building students’ confidence in writing.

Because of the usefulness of collaborative editing in the business world, there are a number of websites that provide a host for wiki projects. For our project, we were also interested in privacy and security—as relative beginners, students preferred to keep this a class-only scheme—as well as reliability, compatibility with Irish-language orthographic conventions, and simplicity of use. In the end, the project was created on Clearwiki, a site that hosts up to ten users and unlimited page space virtually for free (cost being paid by accepting advertising), has password protection, and, so far, has been easy to use and reliable. *Moodle.org*, another popular online teaching-support site, has similar capabilities. Students have responded positively to the project, and I’ve noted increased confidence in their writing.

Although this project has largely functioned as an all-class online journal or blog, it is obvious that this format could be easily adapted to other uses in the classroom. Indeed, perhaps its greatest virtue is that it enables student-teacher interaction to take place without proximity—a significant asset for less-commonly taught language instruction which may include a lot of online or email instruction. A collaborative writing project in which students collectively write a single piece, or even the ability to post class materials online without technology expenses might certainly provide further possibilities for a “wiki”-based course.

## Ciancheardlann: A Writing Workshop At A Distance

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In recent presentations at NAACLT conferences I have reported on a set of 8-month long classes (September–April) teaching writing in Irish via email.

The most recent approach, “*Ó Lámbacán go Siúl go Rith*”, a composite report on which has been published in *JCLI*, (volume 10, page 26) was based on initially permitting only the simplest of sentences, which were then allowed, month by month, to increase in complexity. This was coupled with intensive drilling of grammar and syntax.

Recognizing that a certain jadedness had infected the students, beginning in April 2005 a different approach was tried, one that attempted to mimic, via email, the Writing-in-Irish workshops that are so popular in Ireland. I should note, in passing, that I have never attended one of these workshops, something I intend to correct when the opportunity presents itself. Advice was solicited from Pádraig Mac Fhearghusa, the editor of the literary review *Feasta*, and one of the conveners of a very successful series of workshops. His advice was invaluable, although he himself doubted the transferability of his experience to an email-based system.

Briefly he offered the following advice:

- ◆ Class members are there to help each other.
- ◆ Fault can be found but must be expressed in a positive manner.

“I didn’t like..., can you explain?”

“I couldn’t understand why...”

“I was puzzled by the abrupt change in direction.”

- ◆ Criticism need not be accepted but should cause the

author to reflect on his or her own work.

- ◆ Often what is crystal clear to the author is anything but clear to the reader. (Personal experience, upbringing, personal values, religion.)
- ◆ The goal is communication, accepting that it may be shrouded in the author's own lack of awareness of what he or she is trying to express.
- ◆ A group of writers working together is "a holy company" (the Irish term, "cuallacht naofa", suggests a small monastic settlement) whose aim is to encourage and help each other to improve and to overcome individual difficulties. (A bit over the top, I thought, but by the end of the course, it was clear that this goal was within reach.)
- ◆ Saint Patrick is reported to have said to Caoilte Mac Rónáin, "Victory and Heaven to him who tells a good story."

### Organization

A total of 6 students were recruited. Two declined when the structure and restrictions were explained to them, one because of time constraints, the other because she wanted her Irish-American Feminist novel to be central to her class work. A third, a high-maintenance student, was expelled for flouting the rules.

There were four modules, each of two months duration.

### Writing

Initially students were required to elaborate, in 300–500 words, a simple visual description.

1. "A cliff, a shingle strand, a boat out from the shore, a disturbance on the boat?"
2. "From that day on I started rejecting the world, pulling away and retreating from it until I was nothing more than

an old wizened apple forgotten in the back end of an old sack in a barn."

3, 4. The final two modules concentrated on writing dialog.

One month was scheduled for the writing and submission of the work to the teacher, who then corrected the writing (grammar, syntax, suggestions as to style, idioms) and returned it to the author. Monthly notes were sent out commenting on commonly occurring errors and occasionally attempting to connect aspects of Modern Irish with the broader fields of Old Irish and Indo-European linguistics.

### Critiquing

When all work had been corrected and returned, the combined uncorrected submissions were distributed to all class members with the instruction that a review be written on the work of each of the other two students. Two weeks were allotted to this, followed by a further two weeks during which the authors replied in writing to the critiques of their own work.

Initially, the critiques lacked teeth and were the blandest of bland, but as time passed the critiques became more focused, more full of suggestions, more directive and, at times a bit querulous, as in "Why did you feel you had to write it like that?" or "Why leave the story hanging as you did?" Without a shadow of doubt, there was palpable improvement in the students' writing, more so than in previous classes.

My general impression is that the class was more enjoyable than previous ones and that it should continue next year. I still need two or three more students to broaden the range of backgrounds that the writers represent. Volunteers?

For a list of requirements for admission to the class, please contact me at [soconn1@comcast.net](mailto:soconn1@comcast.net).