Workshop 6/2001 – ICT and Young Learners
18th-22nd September 2001
ECML Graz, Austria

Using the STARS website – notes for project participants

The Stars website is at **stars.ecml.at**. This introductory page lets you choose either the French or the English version – click on the appropriate flag. The website is conceived as a place where children can publish their own writing and participant teachers and project team members hold a forum about the project. The website consists of 3 main sections:

- The **Stars postcard albums**, where postcards sent by children on behalf of each star are displayed;

- The **class profile pages (**called **Our Class)**, where each participating class can post information about themselves; and

- The **teachers' forum**, where participating teachers and project team members can exchange information about the project.

It must be emphasised that the website is still in an experimental stage of development, and feedback is solicited from all project participants regarding problems encountered in using it and suggestions for improvement.

Technical note

Because web browsers DO unfortunately differ in the way they format a page's layout and in the way they interpret program instructions, the website is not guaranteed to work reliably on all browsers. The website has been tested on both Internet Explorer 5.5 and Netscape Navigator 4.7 on a PC, with Internet Explorer giving the better results. I would like to hear about your experiences with using the site with other browsers or different browser versions, and other platforms such as the Macintosh.

The site will not work on any browser which does not support **Javascript**, or in which the Javascript feature has been disabled. If your browser is not Javascript-enabled, you will receive a warning message when you enter the site to let you know of this problem. You will then need to either enable the Javascript feature (in Netscape Navigator you do this by choosing Preferences from the Edit menu - the Javascript option is then in the Advanced section) or upgrade to a newer browser.

The site also needs to use a feature called **cookies** to maintain session identity information. If this feature is disabled in your browser, you will not be able to log in – see the section about logging in and out below. If you are using Internet Explorer, make sure that the security level is set to **Medium-Low** – this feature is accessible from the **Tools** menu, **Internet Options …** item.

The publishing metaphor

Because the chosen theme for this project centres around the story of 4 stars travelling around European countries, it was decided to use the postcard as the primary publishing metaphor. Because of its association with travelling, its ubiquity and familiarity, the brevity and succinctness of its message, and its pictorial nature, the postcard was thought to provide an apt metaphor for presenting the idea of publishing to the children. In this case, using the website children send e-postcards (electronic postcards) on behalf of a visiting star. Each star's postcards are collected in an album, which can be viewed online by anybody browsing the site.

Like real postcards, e-postcards carry a brief message focused on a single event or topic. Unlike real postcards, however, e-postcards may carry any sort of message – a poem, a recipe, a joke, etc. Also, e-postcards need not carry a picture, although it is recommended that most do to enhance the children's publishing experience.

The e-postcard metaphor is also used for the class profiles.

The various website sections

The various sections of the site are accessible via the main menu occupying the left-hand side of all site pages.

The HOME page

The HOME page is the first page of the site, containing the background story to the project theme. It is the page which comes up when you navigate to the site **stars.ecml.at/en** (English version) or **stars.ecml.at/fr** (French version), and is also accessible via the **HOME** option on the main menu.

The postcard albums

The four postcard albums are accessible via the main menu items labelled **'Bouncy Star'**, **'Brainy Star'**, **'Brighty Star'** and **'Nosy Star'**. Each item leads to the front page of the corresponding album, which contains the star's profile and a link to the pages containing the postcards for this star. Clicking on this link displays the first page of the postcard album. Postcards are displayed 3 to a page. If there is more than a single page in an album, **page tabs** appear down the right-hand side of the screen – clicking on a page tab takes you to the corresponding album page. You can also use the **'next page'** and **'previous page'** buttons at the bottom of the page to navigate from one page to another

Each postcard displays the name of the sender together with an envelope icon – to send an email to the postcard writer click the envelope icon. Below the writer's name is the writer's class together with a book icon – clicking the book icon takes you to that class' profile pages. The rest of the postcard contains the date, title, message (story) and (optionally) a picture.

The class profiles

Each participating class is responsible for maintaining its class profile by posting stories and pictures about their class, locality, country, and anything of interest about themselves. The class profiles menu item takes you to a page containing a list of all participating classes together with their teacher. Clicking the book icon beside each class takes you to that class' profile pages.

Login

The login menu item identifies the user as a project participant. More about this in the next section.

Logging in and out of the site

Although anybody may browse the postcard albums and the class profiles, only project participants are allowed to add and edit material to the site. For this purpose, project participants need to identify themselves to the system by logging in using the LOGIN item on the main menu.

Clicking on the **LOGIN** item takes you to the LOGIN page, which requests your **USERNAME** and **PASSWORD**. You should have received your user name and password with these instructions. Enter these into the respective **fields** (boxes) on the login page and then click the login button. Note that you will have to type in your password 'blindly', because the browser will display an * instead of each character you type in – this is to hide your password from anyone who happens to be looking on. The USERNAME and PASSWORD are **case insensitive** – it does not matter whether you use capital letters or small letters.

Assuming you have entered BOTH username and password correctly, you will receive a welcome message and **after a few seconds** you should be returned to the site's HOME page. If instead of a welcome message you receive an error message saying that the username and password you supplied are not known to the system, then probably you mistyped something – reenter the username and password carefully. If you are SURE that you have not mistyped your username or password but the system still won't log you in, then there is probably a technical problem. Contact the webmaster to have the problem resolved.

Once you log in, you will notice that the LOGIN item on the main menu has changed to **LOGOUT**. You will also notice that your name appears in the blue ribbon at the foot of each page. If not, then your browser probably has cookie support disabled – you will need to enable this to log in successfully.

When you have finished using the site you need to LOGOUT. The system will also automatically log you out if you spend more than 30 minutes on the same page.

Users and user rights

The system recognises three types of users, besides casual browsers who may only view the site.

- **Class**. A class user can add new messages to the postcard albums and their own class' profile page. They cannot edit or delete messages from either of these types of pages, and have no access to the teachers' forum.

- **Teacher**. A teacher may edit and delete messages posted to the postcard album pages and the class' profile pages by children from his/her class only, but may not add new messages to the stars' postcard albums. He/She may also participate in the teachers' forum.

- **Observer**. An observer is one of the ECML project team. Observers may participate in the teachers' forum.

The username and password you supply when you log in identify you as one of these three types. Teachers and observers have a personal user name and password. However, all children in a class share one username and password.

Sending e-postcards

Postcards are sent either by children or by the class teacher on behalf of the children. Wherever possible, children should be allowed to send the postcard themselves – remember that the teacher can always edit or delete messages later if necessary.

To send an e-postcard you need to proceed as follows:

- Make sure you are logged in using the class username and password. Check in the blue ribbon at the foot of the page that you are indeed logged in using the class account.

- Go to the album to which you want to add a new postcard.

- You should see a button labelled '**Add new entry**'. Click this button.

- You should now be presented with a blank postcard ready for you to fill in.

- Click in the field labelled '**Your name**' and type in the name of the child sending the message.

- Click in the field labelled '**Message title**' and type in a short title for the message (not exceeding 50 characters).

- Click in the field labelled '**Type your message below**' and type the message. There is no maximum size for a message, but you should try to keep it as brief and to the point as possible.

- If you wish to add a picture to the message, click the **BROWSE** button on the right hand side of the postcard. This lets you choose an image file from your harddisk. How you procure this image file is up to you – it may be a scanned image or drawing, or an image acquired from a digital camera or painted using a painting program. The image MUST be in either **GIF** or **JPG** format, and the file size should NOT exceed **60000 byte**. Although there is no limit on the width or height of the image, to ensure that the image fits neatly in its allotted space on the right hand side of a postcard and allow enough space for the message it should preferably not exceed **300 pixels** in width. See below for some tips about using images on the Web site.

  Note that the image you choose is NOT displayed at this stage – unfortunately this is a limitation of all browsers.

- When you are satisfied with your postcard and are ready to send it, click the **Post Message** button below the postcard. Assuming you have not omitted any of the mandatory sections of your postcard, clicking this button will send all the information to the site. Your postcard will then be displayed, image and all, as a confirmation of receipt. If a problem was encountered with the image you supplied (for example the file size exceeded the maximum allowed of 60000 bytes, or it was not in GIF or JPG format) you will be notified accordingly. Note that in this case the postcard will still be accepted by the system – only the image will be rejected.

- Click the **Continue** option to return to the postcard album. You should find you postcard on the first page of the album – postcards are organised in order with the newest ones first and the oldest at the end of an album.

Adding a message to a class profile page

To add a message to the class' profile, go to the class' profile page and click **Add New Entry**. Proceed as for adding a new postcard to an album. Class profile messages are organised with the oldest message first and the newest last. It is recommended that the first message posted to a class' profile page introduces the class and its teacher.

Editing and deleting postcards

Once a postcard has been sent, children cannot change it. If changes need to be made to a postcard, these must be made by the teacher. To modify a postcard proceed as follows.

- Make sure you are logged in using the class teacher's username and password. Check in the blue ribbon at the foot of the page that you are indeed logged in as the teacher of the class.

- Go to the page containing the postcard which needs modifying. You will notice that all postcards sent by children in your class have **EDIT** and **DELETE** options just below them.

- If you want to delete a postcard, click on the **DELETE** option below it. Since you will NOT be able to undo a deletion, you will be asked to confirm that you want to delete the postcard. If you choose to proceed with the deletion operation you will receive a message confirming that the postcard has been deleted. Clicking on the **CONTINUE** option will take you back to the album.

- To edit a postcard, click on the **EDIT** option below it. This will take you to a screen identical to the one used to create a new postcard, except that the fields contain the original message for you to edit. If the postcard contained an image, you may also choose to delete the image or replace it with a different one. Once you have edited the message as required, click on the **Post Message** button to send it. You will receive confirmation that the postcard has been received. Clicking **Continue** will then return you to the postcard album.

When you've finished editing or deleting postcards remember to **log out**.

Editing and deleting class profile messages

To edit or delete a message from the class' profile, you must be logged in as that class' teacher. Go to the class' profile page containing the message to be deleted or edited and proceed as for editing or deleting postcards.

When you've finished editing or deleting class profile messages remember to **log out**.

Participating in the Teachers' Forum

To participate in the teachers' forum you must be logged in as a teacher or an observer. Once you join the forum you may send a message by clicking the **Add New Entry** button. Adding a new forum message is similar to adding a new postcard to the postcard albums, except that there is no provision for including an image. You are also given the opportunity to **EDIT** and **DELETE** messages you have sent yourself.

When you've finished adding or editing forum message remember to **log out**.

Preparing images for use on the Web site

- Make sure that the graphics/painting software you use can save images in JPG and GIF (sometimes called Compuserve Graphics Interchange) formats.

- The website does not accept Image files larger than 60000 bytes. JPG files are usually smaller than GIF files because the format uses a better compression technique, and so you should as much as possible save images to be uploaded to the website in JPG format.

- When saving an image in JPG format you can choose the amount of compression to be used – higher compression settings result in a smaller image file. However, be aware that at high compression settings the quality of the image deteriorates badly and it starts looking blotchy. A setting of between 15% and 20% is usually adequate and produces images of acceptable quality.

- Because of the way Web browsers format a web page, images wider than say 300 pixels may cause problems – they may extend beyond the right edge of the page, requiring the user to scroll horizontally to see the whole image, or they may extend over, and cover, part of the text on their left. Consequently, avoid images that are much wider than 300 pixels. Keep in mind that some viewers may be using low resolution displays, and a 300 pixel wide image will occupy almost half the width of their screen.

- Because of the relatively small size of images which may be uploaded to the website, it is important to keep images as simple and uncluttered as possible. For example, avoid whole class photos – it would be better to photograph the class in small groups (say 5 or 6 pupils per group) and upload 3 or 4 images instead of a single image in which none of the faces are distinguishable. Similarly, avoid wasted space in a picture by having the subject fill as much of the image area as possible.

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Technical sessions

Session 1 – Tuesday 18th September 11:15 – 12:30

Topics covered during this presentation:
- Background and history of the website.
- Accessing the website. Browser considerations. Design issues.
- The main sections of the site: the postcard albums, the class profiles and the teachers' forum.

Tasks:
- Browse the postcard albums and the class profiles sections of the website. Note any changes you would like to see in the site's design and operation. Send at least ONE email to one of the participating classes or one of the children who contributed a story to a postcard album.

Session 2 – Wednesday 19th September 16:00 – 17:30

Topics covered during this presentation:
- Types of website users.
- User accounts and user rights.
- Logging in and out.
- Posting messages in the teachers' forum and the class profile pages.

Tasks:
- Log in using your teacher account and leave one message in the teachers' forum. In your message you should introduce yourself to your colleagues (the other participants of this workshop). After your message has been posted, note that the forum page offers you the options to edit and delete your message, but not other participants' messages.

- Making sure you are still logged in, access the class profiles (choose Our Class from the main menu). Browse some of the class profiles – note that the 'Add New Entry' button only appears in the page of the class of which you are the teacher. Add a message to your class' profile page – in your message introduce the school you teach in.

Session 3 – Friday 21st September 11:00 – 12:30

Topics covered during this presentation:
- Preparing images for uploading to the site.
- Capturing images using a digital camera and a scanner.
- Editing images in an image processing program.
- Image size and quality considerations.
- Posting a message with an image.

Tasks:
- Post a message to EITHER the class profile page of your class OR one of the postcard albums, which includes an image you prepare yourself.