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From the Editor:

Portals sprouting links into virtual online educational resources abound. Why then reinvent this particular wheel? As with many such projects, I was put in the position of having to seriously consider how visitors to the web-based portal of a resource center I was setting up could possibly make sense of the wealth of material available to them online. This article traces my thinking on the subject and points to links in the portal site I eventually produced.

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## A Virtual Learning Resource Center

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I conceived my version of a "Virtual Learning Resource Center", or VLRC, as an extension of an actual Learning Resource Center which I had been planning in my capacity as CALL Coordinator at the [Military Language Institute](#) in Abu Dhabi before my departure from there in June 2003. The VLRC was meant to have the following characteristics:

- **A virtual mock-up:** In immediate terms, the VLRC that I created at the MLI was meant as a demonstration of what the actual LRC might look like and what its capabilities might be. As such it was meant to enable others involved in planning the LRC to visualize my conception of where our plans were heading through a clear graphic representation of the appearance of the center and the look and feel of its virtual portal.
- **Perspective:** Through the VLRC I meant to explore how others with similar agendas had approached the problem of compiling links to resources available online, and to take my own tentative steps toward compiling and categorizing the many resources available online that might be useful to visitors to our LRC.
- **On site portal:** Once the LRC was finally built at the MLI, the VLRC would act as portal for the physical facility, where visitors to the center could start searching and accessing information concerning resources available both physically in and reachable online from the LRC. In this capacity it might have a map of the center where physical areas when clicked on would reveal resources located in that area as well as links to related items available online. [-1-]
- **Outreach:** The portal would also be available from anywhere on the LAN at the MLI in Abu Dhabi and by extension from its outreach sites being planned for other cities throughout the UAE. The outreach centers were to have their own resource centers but I envisaged the main LRC at the MLI in Abu Dhabi to be the central location where resources could be most assiduously assembled and maintained. Many of

these resources could be made virtually available. By further extension, the VLRC would be accessible from anywhere in the world and was thus conceived as a resource that might be useful to anyone working or studying in the field.

- **Non commercial:** A further stipulation was that sites indicated here should be free. This is not to suggest that work on the Internet should be devoid of compensation, but only that sites useful at this stage of my investigation would have to be free ones so as to avoid any financial hindrance in accessing them (except that I might give an example of a paid site for a particular reason, noted on my web pages). There may be sites indicated here that are only partially free, or that have started charging for their services since I included them in my survey.
- **Representative samples:** Finally, I have made no attempt in my listings to be comprehensive. For example, I have made no effort to list every library in the world or in any geographical area with an online library. For comprehensive listings there are sites that sort the Internet into categories such as Yahoo, or sites specializing in library access such as <http://www.libraryspot.com/>, or subscription services such as <http://www.questia.com>. In my site I have cast about and found samples of what appears to be available, and I've tried to link to sites that can help you drill into more detailed information on aspects of a VLRC that interest you.

## Why Learning Resource Center?

The name of the center was carefully chosen to reflect its purpose and underlying philosophy. I conceived the facility to be a place where learning resources could be accumulated, maintained, and made accessible. These resources might be of interest to teachers as well as to students. The physical LRC would be a place where teachers and students alike could come to find resources appropriate to their projects (and hopefully the distinction between teacher and student would blur a bit as each helped the other work with the tools most appropriate to the task at hand). The scope was therefore intended to be wide-ranging and not focused only on the clients suggested in names such as 'student resource' center, or 'independent learning' center.

The same approach is reflected in the choice of materials for the VLRC. I am often asked "Who is it for?" and this is indeed a fair question, especially considering the expectation that a center operating from a language institute would focus on materials for students. Of course, pinpointing resources for teachers *does* lead to materials for students, and teachers often express a preference for producing materials particular to their students while complaining of the pitfalls inherent in too much reliance in 'off the shelf' materials. Reality lies somewhere between. Teachers appreciate directing their students to resources ready made, which frees them to further appreciate sites where they can find materials to re-purpose as they see fit, and the training to accomplish the repurposing. My portal attempts to touch on all these needs.

Accordingly my links can be seen as falling into the two broad categories of (1) teachers' and (2) students' resource libraries as well as (3) a category encompassing sites (a) promoting professional development through fostering of communities of practice of language learners and practitioners, (b) where the tools for online community formation can be obtained and explored, and (c) those offering training in use of online communications and web development tools. [-2-]

Tending as it does toward entropy, the Internet defies attempts to so grossly categorize its contents so we find that sites often overlap categories or are classified summarily. The categories of links (1-3) are grouped here color coded yellow, grey, and green respectively: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/start.htm>.

## Perspective: How have others approached the problem?

The first task of a site such as this one was to overview how others had approached the task of setting up such resource centers. Of particular interest would be interface used, how the links are categorized, and the scope of such sites (given that each caters to its own perceived constituency). As can be imagined a wide range of resource portals already exist, ranging in scope from library sites with institutional backing, to other resource

center portals, and on down to some excellent efforts by individuals to create portals for their students. The project reported here, by the way, is maintained as an individual effort with no institutional support whatsoever.

One obvious category of resource is the numerous libraries online. I mentioned above some resources for locating huge numbers of these libraries, but many of these simply list their holdings online. More useful as extensions of a LRC are libraries that share their holdings over the Internet: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/libraries.htm>. One example of such a library is the US Library of Congress, and an example of a page where resources are shared at its site is the Links, Databases and Resources page at <http://international.loc.gov/intldl/intldlhome.html>. In general I like the layout of the LOC pages, with topics designed to appeal and lure. For example, at the portal, explore the Galleries and Exhibitions, or click on Kids and Families and then JUMP back in time, MEET amazing Americans, or See, Hear, and Sing.

Once into a library, most readers of this article will know what to do there. This is because we were taught how to conduct research in a library, and accordingly, many readers of this article are in the position of teaching these skills to their students. Links at this page can help with that: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/lrskills.htm>. The [Bedford/St. Martin's "Hone Your Research Skills" page](#) teaches essential Internet and library search skills, while the [University of Auckland's English Language Self-Access Centre](#) had at one point a virtual Flash tour of its ELE or electronic learning environment (*and as happens on the Internet, at this particular moment of writing, links from that site are not working, but when and if they are it provides a good example of how a portal to a brick and mortar facility can be introduced through an online preview*). Another kind of interface to a virtual resource page is Barbara Dieu's spider web mind map at [http://members.tripod.com/the\\_english\\_dept/Inspiration/sitemap.html](http://members.tripod.com/the_english_dept/Inspiration/sitemap.html) [-3-]

Continuing our overview of what is already online in the way of virtual learning centers, we find at <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/portals.htm> that our choices range from institutional to individual efforts. One of my favorite institutional portals is the [Hong Kong Virtual Language Center](#) which has a modest collection of student activities and teacher tools, but which has for years pioneered in providing a facility for fast and easy online concordances. Also listed on this page is Michael Krauss's [Independent Study Lab](#), which has received favorable reviews on the Neteach and TESLCA-L lists lately. I maintain my own list of ["Web sites for ESL learning and discovery"](#) which points to dozens of other teachers' sites I've become aware of over the years. These sites vary in quality from remarkable to cursory, but they are usually worth exploring to see what links have attracted the attention of other teachers on the hunt for practical virtual resources.

## The Stacks

So now we've found the virtual libraries, where are the books? These days, finding a LOT to read on the Internet is about as hard as falling off a log. So many websites, so little time! A major force (since 1971) in digitizing whatever literature exists that is no longer copyrighted is [Project Gutenberg](#). The texts churned out can be used as raw material in all manner of data-driven activities, as well as in reading for pleasure. Project Gutenberg focuses on digitizing the material, but a site such as <http://www.literature.org> displays selected texts attractively for reading (and for any other re-purposing teachers can imagine).

Literature is only one genre of text available. What library would be complete without a newspaper rack? (There's a virtual one at <http://www.onlinenewspapers.com/>). A wide variety of periodicals are available online; the one in which you have found this article for example. Besides professional and training materials, there are also periodicals for ESL students. A favorite of mine is [The Learning Edge](#) (3 issues so far), while more advanced language learners might enjoy [New Internationalist Magazine](#) or [Global Issues for Learners of English](#). For students, and the rest of us, who need an occasional boost from the reference section, there are dozens of dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopedias, and any other kind of reference imaginable available online. A good portal for reference sites is <http://www.libraryspot.com/>, and for having a librarian virtually at your fingertips, the [Librarians' Index to the Internet](#). An eye-catching concept in thesauri can be found here: <http://thesaurus.plumbdesign.com/index.jsp>.

At my VLRC, you link to the books from these pages:

- <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/bookshelves.htm> [-4-]
- <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/periodicals.htm>
- <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/references.htm>

## Activities for Students

We've already touched on areas where teachers can help students find things to do in the VLRC, but activities more directly geared to students are listed at <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/elearning.htm>. Here can be found links to sites such as the [Tower of English](#), with its wealth of activities to be pursued on the Internet, and the prolific output of Charles Kelly's <http://www.manythings.org>. There are more links to pages at my [ESL Home](#) site and [Speaking Phonetics from the University of Iowa](#), a great site for teaching pronunciation through illustrations of all aspects of phonology.

The Internet is particularly suited to multimedia . Of particular note is [Randall Davis's media-rich ESL-Lab](#). Randall's site is unique not only for its prolific output but also because Randall produces all the material on his site with the help of friends and family members in Utah. A similar effort is made with video by Mike Marzio and Elizabeth Hanson-Smith at [Real English Online](#). This site fronts a community of practice which aims to bring teachers up to speed in producing materials from Mike's royalty-free video footage, and in so doing, material is created and linked here for students. Another site of note here is [ESL Notes, The English Learner Movie Guides](#), which provides materials allowing teachers to exploit popular cinema. Teachers who enjoy movies and Internet probably know that many film and TV scripts are available online. The same goes for music lyrics, and the music itself can be streamed into the classroom (or office) over Internet radio. In the VLRC, sites for language learning utilizing video and sound are listed here: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/multimedia.htm>

## Communities of Practice

This brings us to what I think is the most important aspect of a VLRC, and by this I mean the people who go there. People who go anywhere to further a particular aim or develop a skill form what we call a 'community of practice'. Communities of practice embody the notion that learning is a social phenomenon and that individuals learn through interaction with others in their zone of proximal development. High on the list of the most important work of a VLRC therefore should be to put people in touch with others trying to learn skills similar to what they have come to the VLRC to learn.

- Sites where people can go to meet others of a similar bent are listed here: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/communities.htm>
- The tools they can use to access these sites are listed here: [http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/cmc\\_tools.htm](http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/cmc_tools.htm) [-5-]
- Sites where teachers can learn more about training available for developing web and community building skills: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/vlrc/profdev.htm>

## Conclusion

A VLRC or Virtual Learning Resource Center exists on the Internet where students and their teachers can go to pursue their goal of lifelong learning. This article has discussed sites chosen for this portal.

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**Editor's Note:** Dashed numbers in square brackets indicate the end of each page for purposes of citation.

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