Year 7 English At ELTHAM College Of Education.
Students Creating E-Books: Text And Images, Themes And Templates.

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The paper details the inspiration for a project in which year seven students would create e-books, the development process, and the end result. The e-book project was conceived by Marie O'Brien, Teacher-Librarian, managed by Melinda Scash, English teacher, and produced by year 7 students. Ana Tuckerman, a Multi-media expert, designed the template and installed it, ready for every student to use.

ELTHAM and its strategic directions: a brief introduction.

ELTHAM College of Education is a fairly affluent school situated in Melbourne's Green Wedge, outer north-eastern suburb of Research. It is perched on a parcel of land high on a hillside, with views over the surrounding suburbs: the distant Macedon Ranges to the north, the You Yangs ranges to the distant west, and to the Melbourne Central Business District some 30 km distant, to the south-west, where the school's Year 9 City campus is located.

ELTHAM has an expansionist policy. The school's local demographic is changing, and the area has limited long-term growth opportunity due to both State Government and Local government land use policies and decisions, so much so that the school must look to Asia and other countries for a solid and secure student base. Although the school has a sizeable number of students who come to the college daily to study, a growing number are overseas students, mainly from China. Future growth is likely to be centred on online learning, which has potential for a far wider reach than locally delivered, on-site educational services. This is more attractive in terms of cost and level of convenience to the consumer than is travel to and residence in Australia, or in the case of non-local Australian students, moving to suburban Melbourne

For some years now, the working environment at ELTHAM, for all aspects of school life from business management to teaching, has been digital. Its capacity in this area is expanding rapidly. It has a well-developed, live, online Student Learning Management System (SLMS), which holds curriculum content for all year levels above year three, and which is the basis for online reporting for all students. This operates in tandem with a well-used email system. SLMS is combined with traditional face-to-face teaching methods for most of the core curriculum, but gradually, the school will be making available whole courses to students online, to provide for them a more flexible and enriched learning environment within which there are many options to be had. These courses will comply with the

requirements of the State of Victoria's Department of Education and Training regulations and will be accredited for recognition by all major Australian institutions of higher learning. Some courses will be linked to particular institutions whereby the college's students gain higher standing and sometimes guaranteed entry to courses, on the attainment of a satisfactory result for examinations and other assessment.

Much of what ELTHAM's teachers do when teaching, and the information supplied to its community relies on a strong and robust network. ELTHAM's network is both well developed and, as networks go, reliable. Teachers, students and their parents are able to access the ELTHAM network and thus, student work requirements, from any Internet connection in the world. There are regular teacher and student visits to and from China, France, Indonesia and Korea during the school year. It is usually necessary for the school's teachers to continue with their work whilst away, and many students do not want to fall behind either, so logging into the College's Intranet can alleviate the pressures of what would otherwise become accumulated work. Also, a survey conducted several years ago revealed that at any one time, about one third of the parent population is out of the country. Being able to log into the College Intranet is an ideal way for these people to keep track of their child's progress while they are overseas.

ELTHAM's central and guiding philosophy is that of releasing and enhancing the talents of the individual and about creating a desire for successful, lifelong learning. (ELTHAM College of Education, 2002). The school prides itself on the fact that during it brief thirty-year history it has always been at the forefront of innovation in education. Those innovative practices continue today in many areas of the school, from the early years right through to the final three years of secondary education in Australia. For example, the History Centre has operated in the grades 3 to 4 sector for a number of years now. Based on a particular period in Australia's history, role-play is used to teach many aspects of the curriculum, in a way that totally engages and immerses students in their learning. At the other end of the spectrum, for years 11 and 12 the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is offered to students in a way that allows them to choose their own mix of subjects, based on their interests, aspirations and abilities. Traditional academic streams can be followed, academic subjects may be combined with subjects from non-academic streams in order to give breadth to students' experiences, or students may wish to undertake courses of a more practical nature. Alternative, non-academic courses are offered in recognition of the fact that not all students will or can follow an academic path in life. Courses offered vary from Horticulture and Viticulture, to Landscape Architecture, Hospitality, Horse Studies, Fashion Design, and a host of others, whilst some first year university level subjects are also undertaken by students, most notably, in History, Chemistry and Hospitality.

Students are offered many choices during the course of their younger, formative years at the school too. They follow a common core curriculum, but can choose extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that suit their individual interests. These range from music and art, to horse riding and other more common sports such as soccer, Australian Rules football, and hockey. At all levels there are many opportunities for developing leadership skills, and the College encourages all of its students to become involved with groups that extend social and communication skills.

The e-book. A visitor: the seeds for an idea are sown.

In term two of 2003 I received a lunchtime visit from a student who had completed year 12, at the end of 2002. Rhys is now studying engineering at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). He and I have had many conversations over a period of two or so years, usually at times when he was at a loose end and looking for amusement. These did not necessarily correspond to my own loose-end moments, but in the interests of good student-teacher relations I gave him my ear anyway.

These chats ranged from things political to things incredibly abstract, inane and insane. Ramblings often concluded in the language of "Cat". This did attract some rather odd looks from passers-by, and not a few unkind comments from Rhys' friends, who were well accustomed to his odd ways and who knew I would always participate in an oddity too. Both of us being long-time cat lovers and acute observers of cat behaviour meant that we understood each other purrfectly. This weird association has paid dividends in the form of the highly successful completion of the College's first e-books. If Rhys knew he had been the inspiration for the project, he would be more than a little pleased.

The purpose of Rhys' visit was to tell me about an e-book he was involved in producing and which he hoped I would purchase on behalf of the school library. I listened with interest as he proceeded to give me a guided tour of a website, providing snippets of information along the way. The project involved a group of people from various places around the world meeting online to contribute text, ideas and images to create an online story which was based on a particular theme. The cartoon styled book was created after the Japanese Manga form of graphic art (see Figure 1). The participants chose a starting-point and the plot and characters developed themselves over time. Each contributor would build upon the writings and thoughts of the other contributors and all writers were free to comment on the development of characters, plot, style, motivation, intent etc of another's work. For this purpose there was a discussion forum in the form of a bulletin board.
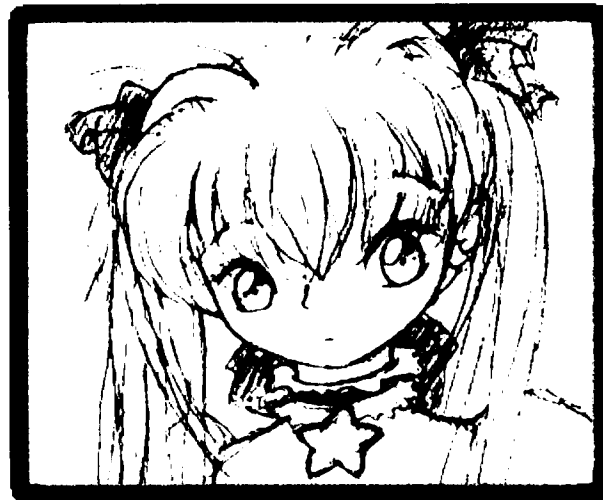
Figure 1: An example of Manga. (Megatokyo, 2003)

I listened with interest, looked at the work in its then entirety, noted a number of web addresses in a file named "Rhys", none of which now link to the site, then put the whole thing

221

to the back of my mind, as Rhys said he would return in a fortnight. Disappointingly, he never did.

Some six months later, whilst struggling to wake, in the wee hours, from the grip of a deep winter sleep, aided by that first caffeine kick for the day, I came to pondering the matter again wondering how such a project could be applied to lower secondary students, and how Library could be an initiator for it. I was beginning to get excited as visions of possible outcomes began to reveal themselves in the shimmering haze of that steaming cup of rich dark brown liquid.

The fact that I was not a classroom teacher meant that any project that evolved as a result of these musings would need to have the co-operation of a subject teacher. There was a possibility in the form of an English teacher named Melinda Scash. In passing one day, I hastily broached the idea with her, and the rest, as they say, is history.

For a number of years now, Melinda has worked with years 7 and 8 classes, producing small books and A4 sized magazines using Microsoft Word and Publisher. The finished items have always been aimed at a particular audience, so the students producing them have a target to aim for right from the outset of their projects. The full colour covers of the publications are laminated, and put on display in the Library where they attract widespread attention from students, teachers and other passers-by.

Melinda was initially also quite excited by the e-book idea, although she didn't like the notion of a co-operative class effort towards one final publication. To her way of thinking it was too loose a concept for children of that age (twelve to thirteen years) to take on board. They need fairly tight parameters within which to work and in this case each student needed to produce his or her own work in order to feel pride of ownership, and the satisfaction of knowing that they alone, as individuals, had created them. The question was how to do this as simply as possible?

Making it workable: Using the lowest common denominator.

Ana Tuckerman, a multi-media designer and the Library Webmaster was the next person to approach for some assistance. I told her what it was I thought could be achieved and she put her interpretation onto the project by explaining how the "book" could be structured. At this point she offered to provide a template, but I thought this was probably too premature, as Melinda had not yet committed to the project. Ana too was now excited by the prospect of working on a multi-media task with the younger students. She has an interest in encouraging those with an aptitude for working in the medium to take it up as an option in the senior years of schooling.

Ana and I then went back to Melinda with our re-assembled thoughts. At this stage, she was still to be convinced of the feasibility of the idea. She was beginning to have grave reservations about how students would cope with the technological aspects of the project, given that many of them had never used FrontPage before, and that the level of ICT skills varied widely amongst the students of each group.

After assurances from Ana and myself that we would each spend time in the classroom with her, her mind was partially put at ease. She eventually decided to go with a proven formula, and based the project on a small books project that she had done with year 7

222

students the previous year. These books were aimed at a grade 2/3 audience, and consisted of twelve pages of text with a limit on the word count per page, and an accompanying image on the opposing page to the text. The pages were placed inside laminated covers and presented as booklets to the Peacebuilders® programme. Since this project was a proven success, using it as a springboard for the e-book was, in hindsight, a very good idea.

Choosing the topic: A negotiation process.

Initially, the theme for the project was to have been *ELTHAM College of Education*, whereby each student was to report on an aspect of school life that appealed to him or her personally. When each of the classes was first given the assignment brief, many of the students complained, as they felt it was to be a publicity project for the school, rather than something they could create with feeling.

After some negotiation amongst the two groups doing the project, a further two themes were added, thus increasing the number of options to three. The two new topics were *Growing Up* and *Friendship*. Students felt that these additions at least allowed for some personality to be injected into what they perceived could otherwise become a very dry and boring piece of work.

The *ELTHAM College of Education* stories were to be aimed at a Year 6 audience, specifically, those students coming to the school for Orientation for Year 7. The *Growing Up* and *Friendship* themes were to be for students in Year 7 as part of their personal development work. Stories written by peers about some common experiences of young people who are beginning to experiment with life, as they embark upon the sometimes bumpy journey into the adult world have some attraction.

Designing the project: Marrying the vision to the reality.

It was decided that each student involved in the project would produce his or her own e-book. An e-book was to consist of twelve blocks of text with not more than thirty words of text per block. Each block (or chapter) was to have an accompanying illustration. Each chapter was to be a separate web page, with the pages linking to each other, quite possibly in a random fashion, such as in a "Choose Your Own Adventure" style novel. There was also to be a title page with an illustration, and a short biography of the author was to be included as the last page of the book. In total, there would be fourteen pages.

The final look for the project was a simplified version of the original vision, much less ambitious in its structure and almost foolproof for the students. Ana Tuckerman has a strong background in caring for and teaching people with physical and intellectual disabilities, so was very experienced at creating tasks and tools, using the simplest structures to maximum effect.

As Melinda had already decided she would limit the task to twelve images and thirty words of text per image, Ana created the template accordingly. Each image would be 200 pixels square with a resolution of 75dpi. The border of the page would be twenty pixels, and the font restricted to Verdana 10 regular, in order to keep the overall appearance of the final product more or less uniform. The width of the text column was not to exceed the width of the image. Figure 2 is a representation of the dimensions just described.
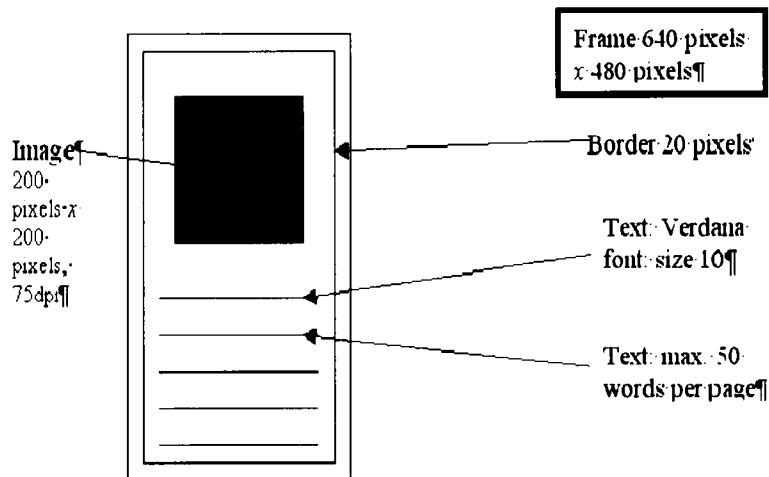
223

Frame 640 pixels
x 480 pixels¶

Image¶
200·
pixels·x
200·
pixels,·
75dpi¶

Border 20 pixels·

Text: Verdana
font: size 10¶

Text: max. 50
words per page¶

Figure 2. The structure of each column on the template.

Planning the tasks: How to keep the students on track.

Students had a degree of choice as to which of the three themes each of them would address, but the overall plan was to ensure that in each class group doing the project, there was an even one third distribution between themes. Some students were undecided as to which theme to write about, so Melinda allocated each of these students to a theme. In this way she could even out that the balance and fill in any gaps.

The project was given a finite life span of five to six weeks. There were three, one hour lessons each week, thus fifteen to eighteen hours of class time in which to complete the e-book. The work was divided into a set of three tasks. Each task was allocated a completion deadline and each class negotiated these dates with Melinda according to its commitments. If a student went beyond the stated deadline, except for a valid and reasonable excuse, there was to be a penalty in the form of a downgraded assessment for that section of the project. The downgraded assessment was to be a fraction of half the possible marks for that section: the later the submission, the greater the mark downgrade. Each phase of the project was to be complete before the next could be started. Each deadline had to be met. Students who missed class time would have to make it up in their own time in order to meet the deadlines.

The tasks were timetabled as follows:

By the end of week three: completion of a final and corrected draft of the text, with a written description of the proposed images to accompany the text. The choice of images was to be assessed by the teacher and approved for suitability. Text editing of the first draft was to be done in private conference with each student during class time.

By the end of week five: the final twelve images, in digital format, were to be compiled. Images were to be transferred to the commonly accessible network drive for editing by the teacher. Editing entailed ensuring that images were suitable for web publication, i.e. crop to a square, reduce image resolution to 72 dpi, resize to 200 x 200 pixels. Finalised images were moved to each person's network drive ready for uploading into the e-book template.

224

By the end of week six: The final product was collated. The template was to be transferred to individual students' folders. Text and images were to be copied from the draft to the template. The appearance of individual pages could be edited by the authoring student, if he or she chose to do so, in order to lend some variety to the overall appearance and appeal of the project. The title of each work and the author's name (the student) was to be inserted into the top left corner of the template. The best image from each e-book was selected for display on the overall project's index page. Each image on the index page was linked back to the e-book to which it belonged. Figure 3 shows a representative portion of the structure of the final template.
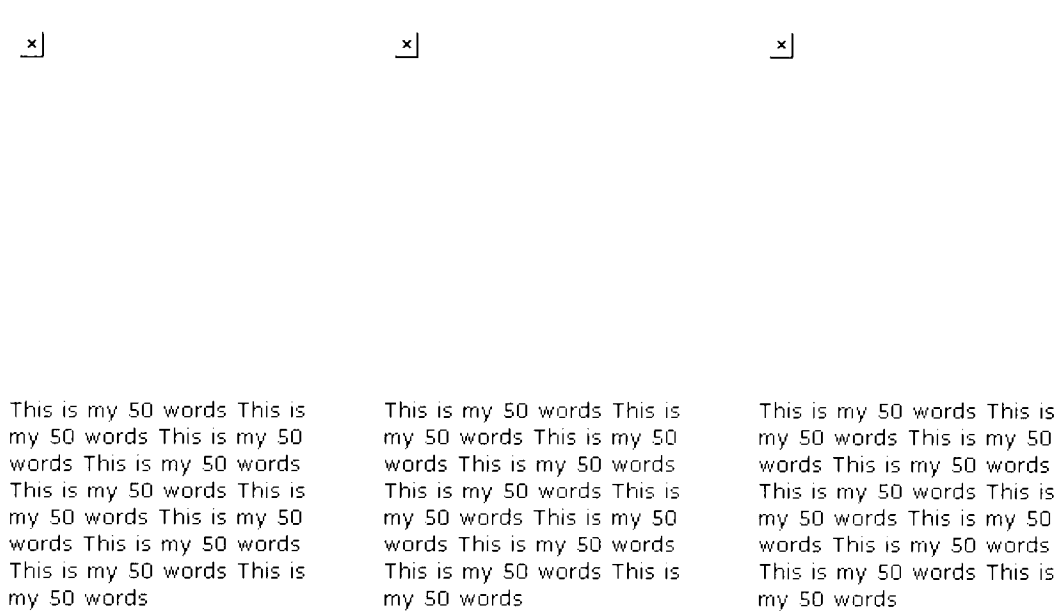
x]	x]	x]
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Figure 3: The first three columns of the template

Assessment for the project: Making sure they stay on track.

As mentioned in the previous section, the project was divided into three stages. The apportioning of marks to each section was commensurate with the importance of that task and was meant to act as an incentive for the student to achieve the best result possible for that particular section. The weighting of task results was also intended to be a built-in reward for those students who managed themselves well and stayed on track. The total possible mark was 100. Since the curriculum subject was English, it was the text that had the most relevance to the outcomes for this task. Text was given forty percent of the marks.

Images received a rating of thirty percent. Visual communication is a major part of our understanding of today's world and is even more important to our students than we of the older generations can perhaps fully appreciate. The ability to match the image, and all the messages that it conveys to the viewer, together with the meaning of the words in the text is

important. Images also assist in achieving impact, enhancing the storyline, and conveying emotions contained within the story that words may not be able to express. The images were also important because of the limitation on the number of words that the student was allowed to use.

The finished web page was allocated thirty percent of the marks. A completed project indicated that the student had mastered the art of transferring information from one programme to another. It also showed that he or she could make some basic decisions about the overall look of their work by applying personal touches that were still within the guidelines and restrictions of the design and content brief originally given.

Doing it: Putting the theory into practice.

The students in Year 7 at ELTHAM have a wide range of abilities with regard to the use of computer hardware and software. Those students who completed their primary years at ELTHAM are generally fairly competent users of technology. There are a few exceptions to this rule though. In the secondary sector of the school, teachers can safely assume that the standard of ICT skills is average to very good amongst this group. On the other hand, we have no knowledge of what students who are new to the school might have been exposed to in previous years with regard to instruction in ICT. Some appear to struggle, even at a basic level. This is partly why Melinda decided to manage the process in stages.

The first instruction for the students was to create a grid using Microsoft Word, two columns wide and thirteen rows deep. The left column was for entering the block of thirty words of text for each part of the story, and the right column was for a description of the intended image to accompany that text. The first row was for the title and its accompanying image. The remaining twelve rows were for the story. After they had begun work on the text, and after some negotiation, the number of word for each image was revised upwards to fifty words. Many students were having difficulty with keeping the language succinct as well as interesting and meaningful.

Once this grid was finished to the student's own satisfaction, it was submitted to the teacher for text editing and approval of image choice. The editing was always done in conference with each student individually. Students like the personal attention given to them during this process. Verbal clarification of a point will often ensure that the same mistake is not repeated later. Suggested changes were discussed in depth, with some students requiring more assistance than others. A number of students had difficulty with being succinct, as their English language skills and knowledge of vocabulary were limited. The types of things we were looking for in the editing process were spelling, sentence structure, word usage, credible story lines, word count, story flow etc. We also checked the text against the choice of image for that section to ensure that the image to word relationship was a sensible and coherent one. Figure 4 illustrates part of a completed grid.

The images: Many ways of achieving an end.

The majority of students found this section of the project to be the most enjoyable. Only a few struggled, but those that did struggle accounted for the largest portion of those who did not reach completion.

At the outset, Melinda had outlined how each group should organise the collection of images. The group who chose to do the *ELTHAM College of Education* theme had the easiest task. The College Intranet hosts an image bank where members of the college community can submit digital images of events associated with school activities. These can be viewed and then a request made to have them released for projects such as this. Melinda has access to these files so was able to make them available to her students for the e-book project.

1	¶ Peace·Builders®·is·a·program·run·by·the·school·to·stop·things·like·Bullying·and·mental·and·physical·PAINE!·Today·I·am·going·to·talk·to·you·about·Peace·Builders®	
2	NOT·EXCLUDING·PEOPLE¶ ¶ At·Eltham·we·do·not·exclude·people·from·the·group·activities.·If·some·one·new·asks·if·they·can·play·with·you,·you·	

Figure 4. Sample of a correct and complete story grid.

The students who chose to do the *Growing Up,* and *Friendship* themes had to find or create their own images. Some decided to use the Google and Yahoo image banks as a source of images. The challenge with this method was that students had to check that if the image was originally small when downloaded from the internet, it would not become pixilated when expanded to the required 200 x 200 pixels size stipulated for the project. A few images that students had selected had to be rejected on this basis.

Other students decided to make their own images. Some took digital photos of choreographed scenes. Most of these involved photographing friends in a set up scene. Some went to quite a lot of trouble and used animals (household pets), setting them up in shots that corresponded with the storylines that had been written. Students using digital photography to produce their images were instructed to take the photos at the lowest digital resolution.

Some students wanted to draw their images. These had to be square and the colouring vivid enough to still be clear once they were scanned. Several students cut out shapes from coloured paper or card, and glued them to a square piece of backing paper. These visual compositions were later scanned at 72dpi and stored on the student's network drive, as were the photographed images.

Regardless of the method used to produce the images, there were several stipulations about the properties of the final image to be use in the e-book. Firstly, since the final image

227

was to be square, then the image contents had to be centred or at least in a position where nothing of the meaning would be lost once the image was cropped square. Secondly, the images were to be in JPEG format only.

Editing the images: A time-consuming task.

When each student had finalised his or her images and these were stored on the students' network space, they were asked to make sure that the file names and extensions were correct. The files were then to be copied to another folder where Melinda could check and edit them. Those that required cropping were cropped and then each image was reduced to 200 *x* 200 dpi, ready for the students to insert into their e-books.

The result: Just stunning!

While the students were creating their images, Ana Tuckerman had placed the FrontPage template into each of their network folders. When each student had rewritten the edited text into a final presentation copy, and the images had been completed, all that was left for them to do was copy the text and the images from the Word document and the image folder into the FrontPage template and make personal alterations to the template, such as title and author details and background colour. The original idea of making the first frame of each student's e-book the title frame had been amended to the format shown in Figure 2. The transfer and touch-up process had been earmarked for the final 3 lessons.

At the outset of the project, a particular student had been selected to compose the index page for the final presentation of the collective works. He was well known to the other year 7 students as an accomplished FrontPage user. He did not however get the chance to showcase his particular talent, as the school experienced a major network outage that lasted for several weeks. The author was left to integrate the project after the students had finished classes for the year. The outage meant that several students did not to complete their work, and in fact, the entire project was jeopardised. Instead of spanning six weeks it ran into almost an entire term (nine or ten weeks). The students from the two classes involved did not get to see the finished project until mid way through term one of this year (2004). (In Australia the school year ends just before Christmas to take a six-week summer break.)

For technical reasons it was not possible to include an image of the "index" page of the project in this paper. Instead, a description will replace it. The Title of the page reads simply "Year 7 English e-book". The most appealing image from each student's work was selected to act as the image link to that student's own e-book. The selected images were thumb-nailed and arranged horizontally across the screen according to their theme, thus there were three rows of images. Each student's name accompanied his / her selected image in a row beneath the images. The text was either white on grey or grey on white, while the images remained brightly coloured. The page background colour was left as white. The result is a simple visual grid with 28 images that link to the 28 individual life stories or experiences that our students have decided to share with their school community. The result is stunning and has made at least three teachers very proud of their students' achievements, despite the number of difficulties that were encountered along the way.

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