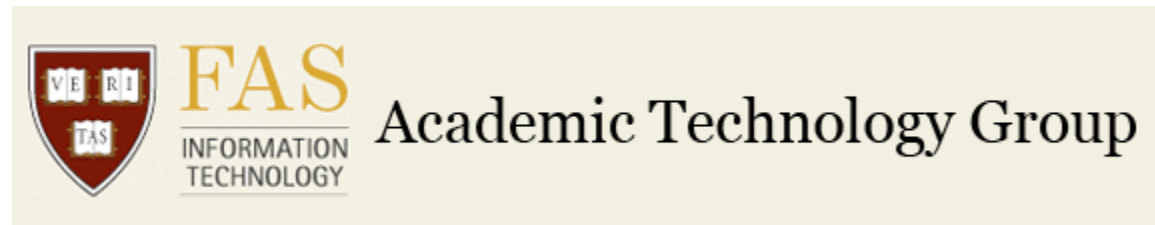# *Best Practices Essays*

A Gallery of Best Practices Essays

Web Pedagogies and the Urdu-Hindi Program at Harvard University

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One of the greatest poets of Urdu-Hindi, Mirza Dagh, once penned the following couplet:

O Dagh: Tell all your friends that it is not merely a matter of play
The acquisition of Urdu is a slow and arduous process!

Clearly, Dagh was unfamiliar with the Urdu-Hindi program at Harvard. With the help of the Web, we have been taking steps to transform this "slow and arduous process" of language acquisition into an exciting adventure for students.

Over the past several years, class enrollments have been increasing dramatically, putting immense pressure on the teaching staff. This year, for the first time, all five levels of the course had to be offered simultaneously in order to satisfy demand. While the burgeoning interest in the program is extremely encouraging, it raises the dilemma that the instructors cannot give students as much individual attention as we would like to. While reading and writing have not suffered, students have less opportunity to develop their oral and aural skills by interaction with a native speaker.

Enter Web Pedagogies. What better way to help compensate for decreased one-on-one interaction than to use the multimedia resources of the Web? Fortunately, Urdu-Hindi has a wealth of "raw" resources that can be used for pedagogical purposes. The film industry, known as "Bollywood," produces even more movies per year than Hollywood. Many of these can be used with great effect in teaching, whether we wish the students to learn a grammatical construction, an aspect of culture or simply to develop listening comprehension skills.

Over the year, I've selected short passages from popular Urdu-Hindi films that are useful to these ends. For example, when we studied the "relative/co-relative construction," something students often find very difficult, I used a 3-minute clip from an award-winning film to illustrate this usage. The clip was extremely popular among the students and they watched it over and over at

home in order to complete the exercise that I had assigned them. For the first time in my years of teaching, this construction was taught with no pain whatsoever! Rather than the usual two weeks that I generally dedicate to teaching the relative/co-relative construction, the unit was finished in half the time.

The film digitization project is just one aspect of our revamped Urdu-Hindi Website. In my eyes, though, it is the most exciting. However, the experience of this year has been an eye-opener. Preparing "virtual teaching tools" is extremely time consuming. My initial plan with the film digitization project was to use it jointly with the Collaborative Annotation Tool (CAT) so that students could practice their transcription and other skills right on the Web. It simply didn't happen. The time required was simply too great to accomplish everything this year. However, I look upon this as a multi-year project to continually improve the teaching of Urdu-Hindi at Harvard.

Perhaps, witnessing our efforts, the poet Dagh would have revised his earlier couplet to read:

O Dagh: Tell all your friends that it is not merely a matter of play
The preparation of the Urdu-Hindi Website is a slow and arduous process!

Slow and arduous, indeed, but rewarding, definitely.

URL:
http://icg.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=atg&panel=icb.pagecontent391790%3Ar%241%3Fname%3Dwp_virani.html&pageid=icb.page199235&pageContentId=icb.pagecontent391790&state=maximize