

# Comics, crowdsourcing and up-votes: EFL on the front page of the Internet

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*The social-media news website “Reddit” boasts a huge readership with over 35 million unique visitors for December 2011 alone. Content is generated by users, who submit links from other websites to the various sub-forums. Users also have the ability to comment on links, providing the means for a community to be developed. Both content and comments can be promoted or demoted based on a voting system. This paper focuses on the creation of a sub-forum on Reddit for the purpose of submitting the work of **EFL** learners, the notion being that other Reddit users, primarily native English speakers, may be crowd-sourced in order to provide feedback, comments, or corrections for students to read, and provide grounds for cross-cultural communication. Firstly we provide a detailed overview of what Reddit is. Following this, we introduce a particular type of comic that has an enormous popularity on Reddit: rage comics. Literature regarding electronic literacy, the use of comics in language learning, and computer-mediated communication is then covered. We then detail the methodology used to introduce, create and submit such comics with our learners. Lastly, we share the results of a questionnaire designed to reveal student perceptions of the project, and discuss possible considerations for future implementations.*

## Introduction

One common challenge amongst language educators is finding enjoyable activities that allow students to creatively express themselves and have meaningful interactions in an L2. Considering this challenge, we decided to harness our students’ creativity in a way that would allow them to share

their work with a much larger audience in order to receive real feedback. This was accomplished by having them create and submit a popular form of comic in English to the social news website dubbed, “the front page of the internet,” Reddit.com. What resulted greatly surpassed our expectations. Within one month of submission, the students’ work had received hundreds of thousands of views and more than a thousand comments overall. In addition, we created an enthusiastic community approximately 7500 subscribers eager to correct their English and comment on their work.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we will begin by providing background details regarding social news websites and the popular style of comic we had the students create and submit, known as “rage comics”. We will then cover relevant literature concerning electronic literacy, comics in language education, and computer mediated communication. From there we will detail the methodology used to implement the activities in a lesson format. Lastly, we will share the results of a questionnaire which gauges student perceptions of the activity followed by a discussion of issues for consideration when implementing such an activity.

### Social news websites

Social news websites are aggregators of user submitted links to a wide variety of content. Depending on the site, the means by which the content is organized differs greatly. For this paper we used the most popular of these websites, Reddit.com (see Figure 1 for a screenshot). In December of 2011 alone, Reddit boasted more than 2 billion page views with nearly 35 million unique visitors (Martin, 2012). “Reddit” organizes content via having its registered user base promote content via what is known as an “up-vote” or demote content via a “down-vote”. In addition, underneath each submitted link is an option to comment and read discussion regarding the content. It is also common for users to post text based links known as “self-posts” which appear alongside submitted content but are simply links to statements or questions above the usual comment section. The content is divided into sub-communities, known as “sub-reddits”, of which there are currently more than 100,000 (of which only 8,400 have over 100 subscribers) (Martin, 2012).

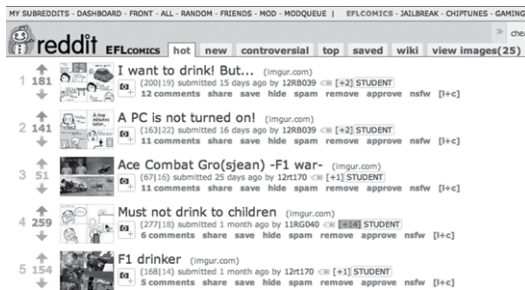


Figure 1. Our forum on reddit.com

## Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing can be defined as taking advantage of the talents and the efforts of the general public to accomplish an information-gathering task or to educate the masses (Howe, 2006). One of the best modern examples of this is the immensely popular online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, whose content is comprised solely by contributions from its global public user base. In regards to this paper, the comment section of Reddit allows for users to contribute additional knowledge to a topic, or in an **EFL** learning context, it allows for users to correct students' English and work to improve their language skills via further social interaction.

## Rage comics

The most common kind of user-created original content on Reddit is a form of comic known as "rage comics". Originally used to portray situations that irritate or infuriate the author (thus the "rage" namesake), the comics have evolved into an easy-to-make way to humorously depict a wide variety of life experiences. The basis of these comics are a number of well-known illustrations of faces or people, known as "memes", each depicting a certain emotional state or personality type. Below are some examples of the most popular memes and a short description of their intended depiction.



Figure 2. Common 'rage comic' faces.

- Rage face: The original "rage face" used to illustrate great anger or frustration to the point of using cathartic language.
- Troll face: Used to portray a malicious joker. Often used to illustrate individuals who make inflammatory statements solely to garner an emotional response.
- Okay face: Used to portray submission or subordination against one's will.
- Do-not-want face: A variation on a popular meme featuring Chinese **NBA** player Yao Ming. This face is generally used to indicate revulsion.

## Literature Review

### *Electronic literacy*

During the last decade the concept of computer literacy has evolved to what we now know as electronic literacy or multi-literacy (Pegrum, 2009) which sees a shift from merely mastering the computer as a machine to understanding how people use computers to express themselves in the digital domain (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000). With the continued development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the opportunity **101**

for language learners to communicate with an authentic audience is constantly increasing. Consequently, interaction via ICT has been prevalent since the 1980s, both from a socio-cultural and cognitive view of language learning (Hampel, 2010). Indeed, cultivating learners' multi-literacies as a part of their L2 acquisition is considered a central goal of twenty-first century education (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). The current project, then, attempts to foster language acquisition and improve student digital literacy simultaneously. From a task-based language teaching (TBLT) perspective, the current study supports meaningful production through the use of technology and provides students with the means to communicate with native speakers in the second language (L2).

## Comics in the EFL classroom

The use of comics as a source of language learning is by no means a new concept. One of the primary benefits of using graphic novels or comics can be attributed to the unique type of prose students are exposed to through comics. Although comics themselves are a written medium, they can be used to introduce learners to spoken language presented in written form. Cary writes that comics introduce language learners to 'ellipsis, blends, non-words, vague lexis, confirmation checks, contrastive stress, new topic signals, nonverbal language, mitigators, [and] routine/ritual phrases' (2004, p. 33). Additionally, comics, and in particular comic strips, frequently deal with humorous situations that are often culturally specific thus promoting learner cultural competence (see Hymes, 1972). In the case of the popular internet-based meme *rage comics*, content is almost entirely humorous, and in a number of cases relate to situations that transcend the language barrier, or in other words relate to universal themes that all humans, regardless of social or ethnic background may have experienced. Moreover, it is these comics that tend to receive the most recognition from the community they are shared with. In this way, as well as being a useful tool to introduce learners to English culture and humor, beginner learners may not be deterred by unknown or colloquial English, as they may understand contextual ideas based on their preexisting experiences.

Another benefit of using comics as a learning tool can be attributed to psycholinguistic theories of language learning where research has shown that multi-modal input such as the use of visual cues found in comic books can aid learner comprehension of texts, and facilitate schema formation (Kalyuga, Chandler, & Sweller, 1999; Leahy, Chandler, & Sweller, 2003 and Moreno & Mayer, 1999). Such benefits of contextual information have been shown to be of particular importance to low-ability learners (Clark, Nguyen, & Sweller, 2006).

Another benefit of using comics in the EFL classroom relates to the apparent lack of motivation that learners have towards the task of acquiring reading proficiency (Day & Bamford, 1998; Hitosugi & Day, 2004) when assigned reading material that is unsuitable to their level and often not engaging. Extensive reading courses aim to avoid such demotivation by giving students a choice of reading material; however, lower-level students "often complain of the tedium of reading graded readers and the need to constantly refer to dictionaries" (Jones, 2010 p. 228). The use of comic books however has been shown to improve the motivation of such low-level learners in a similar context to the one presented here. A study by Jones (2010) suggests that Japanese university students preferred to read comic-style books over graded readers when the choice was given. One reason given is that illustrations may have helped them understand context when they encountered unknown

vocabulary. Alternatively, student familiarity with the format of comics may have increased their engagement, particularly in the case of Japanese students (Jones, 2010).

### *Computer-mediated communication*

Computer-mediated communication (**CMC**) is considered “the prevalent concept of technology use in the language classroom” (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Ditfurth, 2010, p. 20). **CMC** has also been described as an ideal environment for promoting language learning (Beauvois, 1992) where studies have shown that more complex structures are produced in the target language when using electronic rather than face-to-face environments (Salaberry, 2000). One of the principal arguments for including **CMC** in a language course is that it can improve student involvement (Fotos & Iwabuchi, 1999). In an experimental study comparing the interactions of small group discussion sessions held face-to-face and online, Warschauer (1996) found that the online discussion groups were twice more balanced due to an increased participation from ‘silent students’. The use of **CMC** therefore seems to help enable silent students to find their voices within a classroom setting.

The current study employs a type of **CMC** known as asynchronous **CMC** (**ACMC**). This refers to communication where participants reply to messages they receive in their own time; in other words, they do not need to be online at the same time to communicate. Examples include email, discussion boards, and blogs. Such tools have long been used to promote language learning (Fitze, 2006; Ware, 2005) **ACMC** may also help students develop their writing skills. In a computer-aided classroom discussion, Peyton (1990) reports that students became better writers by having an authentic audience. Studies such as this suggest that students are more inclined to focus on linguistic accuracy when they know that an audience will see their work. The audience in Peyton’s study was comprised only of students’ classroom peers, however, in the current study the audience is potentially anybody in the world. Therefore, we can predict that students may become better writers as a result of completing this project.

The learners in this project may receive comments on their comics, containing evaluations, corrections, or requests for clarifications. The section of reddit devised for this closely resembles the structure of discussion forums. This section thus presents students with the opportunity to interact with an international audience and native English speakers. In other words, students will have the opportunity to learn more about English culture through the comments they receive, and share insights on their own culture. Through this **ACMC** channel, student interlanguage may be improved based on Long’s (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, i.e. the negotiation of meaning in instances of cultural or linguistic misunderstandings.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants consisted of 180 students divided between 8 classes of first year **EFL** students at two Japanese universities. The majority of the students were Japanese nationals, alongside 8 study abroad students from Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The average age of the students was 19. The majority of the students were male (85%). The study was conducted over three 90-minute classes.

## Implementation

**Class 1: Emotions.** The first lesson focused on vocabulary and expressions regarding emotions. This included meta-discussion on the cross-cultural variance of language to describe emotions and the usage and meaning of emoticons to express emotion within domains in which one’s facial expression cannot express nuances. The students were then introduced to popular Internet “memes”, i.e., images which have an agreed upon meaning within a community, known as *rage faces*. Finally, the students participated in an activity to explain what emotion the *rage faces* were portraying and compare them to the agreed upon meaning of the Internet community.

**Class 2: Community registration and comic creation.** Students were introduced to common phenomenon encountered within online community discussions, such as *trolling* (purposely making inflammatory statements to garner a reaction). Alongside this, we guided students through the process of registering on reddit.com and creating a *rage comic* using a website designed specifically to create such comics.<sup>2</sup> The website features 1) All common rage faces categorised into emotions, 2) A freehand drawing tool, 3) A tool for inserting text, and 4) a tool for importing images from the internet or your local computer.

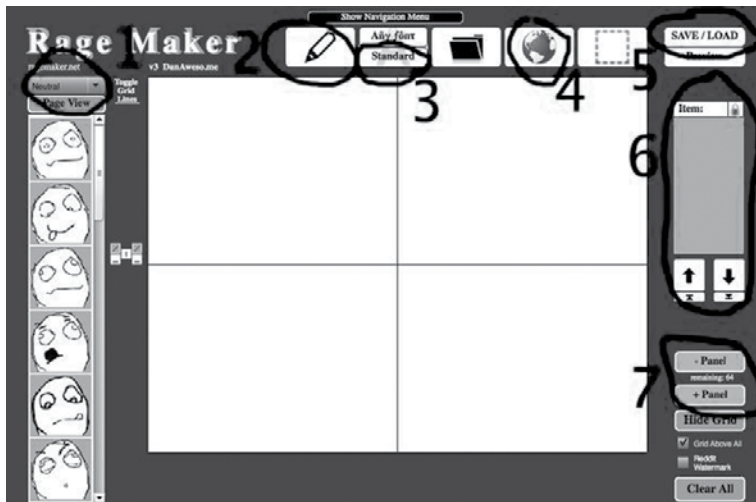


Figure 3. ragemaker.net tools for comic making

Lastly, upon completion of their comics, we guided them through the submission process so that their comics would appear on the subsection of Reddit we created: *EFLcomics*. Presentation slides used to aid the students can be found at the author’s blog.<sup>3</sup>

**Class 3: Replying to comments and reading other comics.** In the third and final class, students were told to log in and check their submissions for comments. They were asked to reply to any comments they received. Upon completion of this task, they were directed to read new comics created by other users and leave 10 comments of their own. Following this,

they were asked to make a new comic. Finally, students were told that they could receive additional points towards their final grade by continuing the creation of comics and replying to comments in their own time.

### *Questionnaire*

A questionnaire featuring open and closed questions was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding student perceptions of the project. Closed questions were designed to assess how appropriate the project was for the learners based on level of engagement with the task, the perceived difficulty of the task, and how stimulating the task was. A number of questions relating to researcher observations were also included such as a question to measure student technical proficiency, preference for writing or typing in English, and whether this project represented students first foray into an English class using the Internet. All closed questions used a Likert scale ranging from 1–5 or 1–6 based on the question. Where possible, 1–6 was preferred based on the observation that Asian learners often favour the mid-point on Likert scales (Chen & Lee, 1995). Open questions were employed to gather qualitative data regarding what elements of the project students liked and disliked. The final open question asked for student opinions on how the course could be improved. The questionnaire was originally written in English and then translated into Japanese before being given to the students with the help of a native Japanese teacher. A full list of the questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **Results**

Responses to the closed questions on the questionnaire were collected and calculated to find the mean score and standard deviation (**SD**) values. Similarly, open question responses were read, translated, and grouped based on the nature of the comment; for instance: technological issues, improvements, international exchange etc.

#### *Project enjoyment*

The first question asked of students was whether this project was the first time they had used the Internet in English class. Of 180 responses, 124 stated that this was the first time they had used the Internet (69%). This figure may relate to the next question: “Did you enjoy this project,” where a mean score of 4.56 (**SD**: 1.01) was recorded. Indeed, this figure was the highest mean value recorded with a relatively low **SD** value, suggesting that participants somewhat universally enjoyed the project.

We again see a moderately high mean score (4.38) in student responses to the question regarding future use of the Internet. This helps back up the notion that participants generally enjoyed using the Internet in their English class. However, after coding student responses to the questionnaire’s equivalent open question, of 106 responses, only 3 students mentioned that using technology was the reason they enjoyed the project. The most frequently seen response was that the project was fun (38 responses (36%)). Additional comments included: it was useful for their future studies (33 responses (31%)), they were motivated by having a genuine, receptive audience (32 responses (30%)), and it allowed them to be creative (12 responses (11%)).

## Perceived difficulties

Two questions were designed to measure how difficult students found the process of creating the comics, and replying to any comments that they received. Based on student responses, reducing the cognitive demands of these elements may effect student enjoyment in future implementations.

When asked what they thought was difficult about the comic creation activity, 11 respondents posited that general technological issues caused a problem. A further 11 wrote that submitting the comic was difficult. However, overwhelmingly, the biggest problem participants seemed to face related more to creative issues: 52 respondents indicated that they had difficulty thinking up comic contents. Additionally, referencing the responses to the open question section of the questionnaire, three individual comments were recorded expressing the feeling of being rushed to create comics: "*Motto jikan wo totte hoshii* [It would be better if we had more time [to make the comics]]" (11RU F1).

Such may be rectified in further instances of the project by allowing students to prepare their comic contents before coming to class. 16 comments were also recorded expressing difficulties with the submission process. Indeed, when designing the project, we anticipated such, and created a submission guide to support students. It may be useful to add support materials such as a video guide in future instances.

Another cognitively challenging element of this project was replying to comments with 38 students writing no comments at all and only 11 writing over 10 comments. The mean score for the question, "How difficult was it to reply to comments?" was 3.08, the lowest mean score recorded. 56 respondents indicated that the use of slang, idioms, and colloquialisms was the major attributing factor to their inability to formulate appropriate responses to comments. In the open question section of the questionnaire we again saw comments backing up this notion: "*Komento no kaeshikata no rei wo ikutuka agete hoshikatta (suran-guna eigo mo tukattemitai* [It would be good if we had some instruction on how to reply to comments (I want to use some English slang)])" (11RD M1).

The level of English used by commenters was higher than the participants' level, but coupled with a substantial amount of Internet jargon, slang and colloquialisms, their ability to not only respond to comments, but comprehend the meaning of comments was inhibited. Based on 11RD M1's comments and the researchers' observations then, an additional lesson that focuses on "Internet English" could be implemented to allow students to participate in communications further.

The third element of the project that we feared students would struggle with was typing in English. This belief was based on observations of students writing simple words incorrectly such as the "realy" in Figure 4. The results of the questionnaire however reveal no disparity between the perceived difficulty of typing or writing (mean score 3.03, SD 0.96).

## Discussion

### Implementation issues

There were several difficulties we encountered when attempting to implement the lesson. Firstly, due to all computers in the computer lab sharing a similar IP address, as a defense against a denial-of-service attack, reddit.com would force students to wait ten minutes each before being allowed to submit their work. This resulted in rather large delays for some



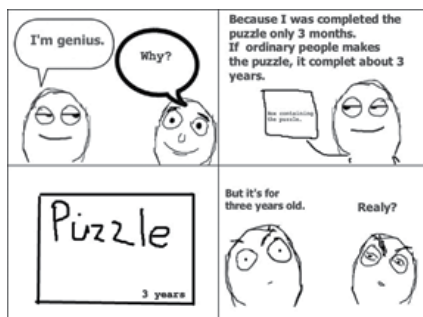


Figure 4. An example of a student spelling mistake

classes. However, this was fixed by adding student usernames to an “approved submitter” list, which the teachers control. Secondly, to confront the issue of knowing which student submitted which comic without using their real name, we had students create unique usernames with a number after them to indicate who they are or assigned them specific usernames designated by they teacher. Lastly, being that the user community mediates the content on reddit.com, students have easy access to content that would be considered inappropriate for a school environment. Thus we strongly recommend warning the students about the existence of such material as well as the terminology **NSFW** (not safe for work) that denotes links containing inappropriate content.

## Community participation

Upon completion of their comics, we attempted to crowd-source the Reddit community by making an announcement via linking the **EFL**comics “sub-reddit,” which contains the students’ work, to the largest “rage comic” sub-reddit (having over 200,000 subscribers). Within 12 hours of submission, the announcement of our activity, as well as nearly 15 of the students’ comics had received thousands of “upvotes,” enough to boost them to the top of the site’s submissions rankings, which appears as the websites default page, also known as the “front page.”

Due to the significant attention garnered, some participants in the community began questioning of the authenticity of the students submitting the comics. Thus, in order to clarify who was a legitimate student we added color boxes indicating such next to their usernames, known as “flair tags”. Also, in the comments section we encountered the occasional inappropriate or abusive remark, which due to us having moderation powers over the community, we were able to delete immediately. Thus, we found it necessary to regularly monitor comments on students’ work. However, more often than not members of the community would report such comments to us directly before we had a chance to discover them.

Lastly, seeing that the students averaged about 18 comments per comic (while some received up to 99), we assigned a follow up lesson in which we had the students read and reply to their commenters. Alongside this, we also instructed them to read their peers comics and comment on them as well (see Figure 5 and 6 for examples)

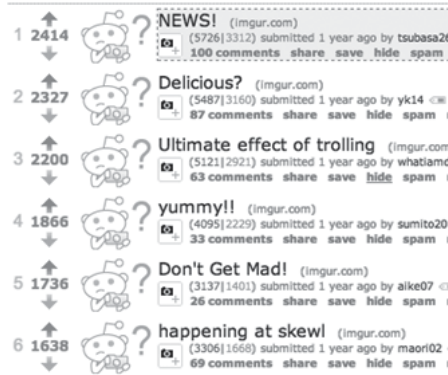


Figure 5. Example of comment counts on comics



Figure 6. Examples of NNS (with highlight) and NS exchanges

### Methodological improvements/considerations

The value of this project is that students are exposed to an authentic English-speaking audience; students get the opportunity to express themselves creatively in English, and to participate in intercultural communication. For teachers the project can be seen as crowd-sourcing native English speakers to voluntarily correct student mistakes, comment on their work (in effect praising them for their efforts) and generally communicate with them. Therefore, as a result of doing this project, students are able to receive detailed, individual feedback to a much greater extent than what a teacher may be able to provide on their own.

Students were motivated by this project for a number of reasons.

108 1. From an extrinsic motivation perspective, the 'upvote' system in place on Reddit

(essentially: voting for something that increases a cumulative tally of popularity) meant that students could compare the popularity of their comics with each other and would want to outdo each other with better comics.

2. Students were motivated in knowing that a native speaking audience would see their comics. This is because the activity had a genuine purpose and outcome, much different to classroom-based language practice activities, which are often tedious, and, in some cases, pointless.
3. The project increased students' language usage where they were told to reply to any comments they received. In a few cases the meaning of students' comics was a little difficult to grasp by native speakers due to cultural references or incorrect English usage. In these cases, students were told to reply to commenters explaining what their comic meant. Thus, the project not only encouraged students to use English, but promoted intercultural communication and understanding.
4. According to students, computers had been rarely used in their English classes before this project, thus, being *digital natives*, they were very keen to use the technology that they know and love.

## Conclusion

When planning this activity, one apprehension we had was whether or not the students would find it to be an enjoyable way to practice their language skills. However, looking at the feedback we have received from the students, it appears that the majority not only found it to be enjoyable, but also strongly indicated a desire to participate in such activities in the future.

While the implementation of the activity went fairly smoothly, it also had its fair share of challenges to confront. Primarily, getting classes of sometimes more than 30 students to stay focused and follow login, comic-creation and submission directions was difficult at times. In response to this difficulty, we created a YouTube video walking the students through the registration process<sup>4</sup> and a webpage for the whole project so that they could learn at their own pace. It also functions as a refresher when continuing their work outside of class.<sup>5</sup> In addition, despite the website having limits on "NSFW" (Not Safe For Work) content by default, similar to any search engine or social website, there is content on reddit.com which is inappropriate for an academic setting and we had to remain vigilant about the students "exploring" the website beyond our intentions.

Lastly, although we only had small expectations for this project, the enthusiasm and sheer number of Reddit community members willing to read, comment and correct the students' work was by far the most overwhelming aspect. Most recently, the **EFL**comics community has a membership well over 7000 members and was recently nominated for "small sub-reddit" community of the year. And thus it is because of the support we received that we feel the item of greatest value discovered from our efforts was not so much the comic making activity itself, but rather the vast amount of enthusiastic and helpful support available from the Reddit community.

## Notes

1. <http://www.reddit.com/r/EFLcomics>

2. <http://www.ragemaker.net>
3. <http://blog.minecraftacademy.org>
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWzDjIFc3xM>
5. <http://dendaienglish.wikispaces.com/EFLcomics>

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

- ☾ Sex (M/F)
- ☾ Was this the first time you have used the Internet in an English class? (Y/N)
- ☾ How proficient are you with computers? (1-6)
- ☾ Did you enjoy making the comics? (1-6)
- ☾ ☞How difficult was making the comic? (1-6)
  - ☛ Why?
    - ☛ Technically difficult
    - ☛ Hard to think of a story
    - ☛ Difficult to submit
    - ☛ other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☾ How difficult was it to reply to comments? (1-6)
  - ☛ Why?
    - ☛ Level of English used by audience
    - ☛ Colloquialisms
    - ☛ Difficult to follow comments/conversation
    - ☛ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- ☾ How much effort did you put into your comic? (1-6)
- ☾ How much effort did you put into replying to comments? (1-6)
- ☾ How much effort did you put into this lesson compared to normal lessons? (1-6)
- ☾ Which is more difficult, typing or writing English? (typing – writing 1-6)
- ☾ How interested are you in English Internet culture? (1-6)
- ☾ Would you like to use computers in English class more often? (1-6)
- ☾ What did you like about the project? (open)
- ☾ What didn't you like? (open)
- ☾ How could we improve this project? (open)