

GOING GLOBAL WITH THE WEBHEADS IN ACTION

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From local to global

My online life on a regular basis began in January 2002 when I joined the "Webheads in Action" workshop, coordinated by Vance Stevens and sponsored by TESOL's EVO (Electronic Village Online; see Hanson-Smith and Bauer Ramazani, 2004). It dealt with asynchronous and synchronous Web-based communication tools, a facet of the Internet that I wanted to explore. Communication in real time fascinated me and I wanted to learn more about it, because it meant that I could be in contact with colleagues all over the world and gain knowledge from the shared experience.

What started as an 8-week teacher development workshop has brought us, almost four years later, to our community's first online convergence, [WiAOC 2005](#), "Bridges in Cyberspace". So much has happened and has been accomplished in these years. How did all this come about? How has it affected me at the professional and personal levels? **That** is what I will briefly cover in this paper.

Learn by doing

The spark that ignited my Webheads in Action (WiA) connection was the [Syllabus](#) and its 'hands-on' approach to different communication tools, some of which I had heard of, but had never worked with. The hands-on aspect meant that I would be exploring these tools in collaboration with peers and by manipulating the tools myself, the best way to fully understand them and grasp their applications to language learning. For a language teacher, or any professional, for that matter, to take the fullest advantage of what's out there in cyberspace, s/he must work collaboratively with others, because the online world is not just information. Above all, it is communication. And we need others in order to be able to communicate and interact.

What I learned and how I learned

Web-based communication tools can be asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous tools establish communication that is not live or in real time, such as email, discussion lists, course management systems, Web pages and blogs. Synchronous tools allow for live communication and interaction in real time, as is the case with chat and virtual classrooms.

1. Asynchronous tools

My first contact with the Webhead world was through asynchronous tools when I registered in the [Webheads in Action Yahoo Group](#), got my first message from the moderator welcoming me, posted my intro, and uploaded my photo to the Photos section. It may not seem much at first glance, but it's often daunting for a complete newbie to these tools to engage in a totally new and unknown microworld that needs to be discovered step by step. In fact, these processes often require coaching and collaboration from peers, because they seem insurmountable on one's own, and there's always fear of doing something seriously wrong. Belonging to a community such as Webheads in Action, which spreads worldwide, means that whatever the time of day or night, there is always someone 'just a click away' awake and ready to give a helping hand. It also means that members of a supportive community never feel alone, lost or helpless, and any barrier overcome is praised, resulting in a true sense of accomplishment. This boosts egos and encourages community members to move on to the next hurdle.

The WiA teacher development workshop was set up in a [YahooGroup](#), one of the easiest platforms available for such purposes. Though it has its limitations, it's practical both for beginners and veterans. It isn't an all-inclusive 'do-it-all' platform -- it needs to be complemented by external software such as chat -- but experience has shown that there are advantages to this, namely, getting familiar with other collaboration software and having diversified options.

As a very active member of the Webheads in Action, I learned about the potential of YahooGroups for teacher development workshops and course management through 'hands-on' exploration of its features, on my own and with the help of peers, by using it on a regular basis and learning from mistakes, as well as by giving feedback and exchanging experiences.

We experimented with other asynchronous course management systems (CMSs) available at the time: Blackboard, GEN VirtualU Open Course, WebCT, Nicenet and Delphi. This exploration and comparison showed that certain of these CMSs were more user-friendly than others and more appropriate for the objectives pursued. Dafne Gonzalez (in Spain), Susanne Nyrop (in Denmark), Nigel Caplan (in the USA) and I (in Portugal) carried out a group project, [Team Blackboard](#), to be presented to the Webheads during a Sunday chat. This very basic page is a good example of the type of collaboration that was immediately generated in this community, in tune with the principles of social constructivism (Graduate Student Instructor Teaching Resource Center, n.d.) and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, or ZPD (Morris, 2002).

2. Synchronous tools

It is through synchronous tools that members feel so related and connected to each other in a community, the next best thing to being with them face-to-face (f2f). My first chat experience with the Webheads in Action took place at [Tapped In](#) (TI), which describes itself as "the online workplace of an international community of education professionals, students, and researchers [who] gather here to learn, collaborate, share, and support one another". This happened in Week 1 of the workshop, on a Sunday, the day chosen for the Webheads weekly online synchronous meeting. As I wrote soon afterwards:

For someone who had entered a MOO environment for the first time only the day before and for a very short time, it was like being sent into outer space without ever having set foot in a spaceship before, much less having looked at its commands!... I felt totally lost and out of context,... completely uprooted. Probably like an E. T. would feel had he/it (??!!) just landed on Earth!... Concentrating on anything else was difficult... I felt I was in another galaxy! Alas, there were other people feeling totally lost and dumbfounded, just like me, which felt comforting! But, at the same time, there were very helpful and supportive members trying to guide the newbies, or taking them aside into virtual offices, explaining things, sort of letting them breathe or just get some fresh (virtual) air!... here was a warm group of people who immediately greeted and welcomed everybody as they came in, and tried to make contact. A closely-knit group of people, some going back a few years, who made 'newbies' feel 'at home', and were willing and available to patiently teach them what they had learned before us. That human and affective touch sure felt nice! (Almeida d'Eça, 2002)

This initial experience has helped me to always be very understanding, encouraging and supportive with first timers in any platform. It can be especially discouraging for newcomers to feel 'adrift', so it's absolutely necessary to have a hand reach out.

These weekly Sunday get-togethers at TI to explore new tools or just socialize greatly contributed to our getting to know one another and make lasting bonds and friendships that are part of the glue that hold us together. Another excellent tool for social bonding was Yahoo Messenger (YM), a chat environment much more versatile than TI because of two added features: voice and video. This meant **that** we could not only hear one another's voices for the first time, but also see one another live and in real time. How thrilling it was to start matching a voice to a name and then a face... live! Several participants bought their first webcams for the weekly chat on Sunday, Feb. 10, 2002. I still remember vividly that I saw Dafne Gonzalez (in Spain), Vance Stevens (in the UAE) and Michael Coghlan (in Australia) for the first time on my screen and heard them speak. It was a [memorable day](#)!

Since then I have better grasped the [potential of chat](#) both for teachers and for students through collaborating regularly with other Webheads and their students at TI and YM. I have

seen how **authentic** chat can make language learning, and how much more motivating and enriching this process can become. Chat platforms that have both text and voice modes, what I call the "4 in 1" tool, greatly add value to language learning, because they allow for the practice of the four **basic** skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3. Building a presence online

One of the simplest ways of starting a presence online is by creating your own Web page or blog. Several colleagues set up their first pages in GeoCities, as in the case of [Dafne's Nook](#), and it was interesting to see the different and sometimes 'shy' attempts of colleagues who seemed to have a "Sorry, but this is all I could do!" attitude, as if we were all expecting a professional page right from the outset. Every achievement, big or small, was praised and considered an important hurdle that had been overcome. Any future progress was dealt with in the same way. Praising peers, giving them the boost to carry on and go higher up the ladder, as we do with students, is part of **our** community spirit that comes naturally to teaching professionals.

Though we discussed blogs superficially, we only got hooked on them a year later. I believe it had to do with the fact that Web pages were still more popular then, and people were not yet familiar with the ease and advantages of blog technology.

Community building online

The sense of "belonging to a community of like-minded peers" has always been very strong among us and is one of the essential characteristics of community building online. The starting point to gathering these kindred spirits is an interesting and motivating syllabus that constantly challenges participants to get involved in new adventures through hands-on creation of end products, as the Webheads in Action syllabus did. But a sense of community assumes other features, such as:

- a [members page](#) with intros and photos – they are the first way to relate to a face, a person and his/her work
- a constantly updated syllabus with personal contributions and feedback
- regular synchronous get-togethers, with or without an agenda, a major step in getting to know one another more closely
- an ever-present moderator who replies promptly to mail, answers questions, clarifies doubts, gives moral support or 'a pat on the back' that can make the difference between

giving up or persisting ... in short, a moderator who doesn't leave the participants alone or marooned, but is there for them

- a moderator that promotes horizontal relationships by motivating participants to come to the foreground when they are more knowledgeable and have more expertise in a given area, thus generating valuable results and added value to the community.

Though a moderator is a key element in building a community, there would be no community without participants who accept challenges and feel thrilled with each accomplishment, big or small, be it his/her own or that of a peer. According to Vance Stevens, participants "make or break" a workshop ([Optimal degree of control](#)).

Finally, an effective and productive online community results from the convergence of several elements:

- common goals
- understanding of the objectives and tasks
- high motivation and curiosity
- prompt help and feedback from the moderator and/or peers
- teamwork and collaboration
- learning from one another
- the ability to learn at all times from critique and feedback
- openness to new ideas
- a warm and caring atmosphere and group
- a true sense of belonging, and
- close bonds.

Since joining Webheads in Action, I have experienced all this on a daily basis by involving myself, being committed to the group, feeling highly motivated and enthusiastic, praising and being praised, and making close friendships. And I have long understood that a learning process based on social constructivism and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development - "the distance between the actual level of development as determined by independent problem solving [without guided instruction] and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Morris, 2002) - enhances learning considerably and makes our common knowledge greater than the sum of all the individual knowledge put together.

In the last two weeks of the 2002 Webheads in Action EVO session, after reflecting on how our online community developed, its characteristics, and all that we had accomplished collectively, individually and with our students in only two months, we felt that we couldn't end it all then and there and let each of us go our separate ways. So we asked ourselves, "Where do we go from here?" And we found our way: stay together, pursue our common path, welcome new members, explore new tools, collaborate with one another and our students, give

presentations about our work, conduct online training workshops, and hold our first online conference-convergence.

How this has affected my professional & personal life

The Webheads in Action connection has affected me profoundly both at the professional and personal levels. In 2004 I felt confident enough, with the expertise I had gained, to co-moderate an online teacher development workshop and co-teach an online credited course. In addition to being an online teacher trainer and facilitator, I have since then presented and webcast on a global scale, all thanks to the Webheads in Action phenomenon, without a doubt a "healthy" virus that hasn't stopped "bugging" me!

Together with the Webheads I have explored and used many different types of Web-based communications tools that have led to different collaborative projects which contribute to sustaining a Web presence. Among these are asynchronous tools such as:

- [blogs](#)
- [audioblogs](#)
- [photoblogs](#)
- [wikis](#),
- course management systems (e.g. [Moodle](#)),
- interactive maps
- [Have Fun with English!](#) (Bravenet map)
- [BaW06](#) (Frappr map)
- [video mail](#)
- voice mail ([Tommy's message](#) recorded with HandyBits),

And synchronous tools such as:

- chat
- voice chat ([6F & 6G](#)),
- virtual classrooms
- [Alado](#)
- [Elluminate](#) at Learning Times (need to be a member).

Many of these tools are part of what is currently referred to as Web 2.0, "a second generation of services available on the World Wide Web that lets people collaborate and share information online" ([Wikipedia definition of Web 2.0](#)), to which Webheads were introduced before the tools and their underlying concept became popular.

1. Online Presentations

The impact of a community of practice on an individual participant can be a powerful influence on that member's career, as my own involvement with WiA illustrates. I can trace my development as an experienced online communicator in a series of small steps that increased in ever larger strides made with the constant encouragement and collaboration of other Webheads. My first such collaboration project directed outside the Webhead 'family' at a wider audience of peers was a presentation produced for the summer festival in Tapped In July 2002 where Dafne Gonzalez, Susanne Nyrop and I co-presented [Cooking lesson](#), a set of Web pages about preparing meals in our respective countries, which we discussed with festival participants in text chat.

Meanwhile we were all developing our audio chat skills using Yahoo Messenger and other voice and webcam instant messaging services. This led to my involvement in [Case Study of a Community of Practice](#) (Mar. 2003), our first major attempt at 'webcasting' (broadcasting over the Web) by a group of seven Webheads, some *in loco* at the TESOL 2002 Convention in Baltimore, MD, others online. In Nov. 2004 another group of Webheads in Action prepared different [webcasts](#) for the 6th International BelNATE-IATEFL Conference in Minsk, Belarus, under the theme "Teaching English as a World Language in the Information Age". Barbara Dieu (in Brazil), Buthaina Al-Othman (in Kuwait) and I (in Portugal) presented on blogs and blogging, and guided the participants at a distance in creating their own first blog. (I suggest a visit to our [WiA Index](#) under "Live Events" and "Presentations" for more examples.)

2. Online teacher development

After a year of intense collaboration and very positive role modeling by our coordinator, Vance Stevens, some Webheads felt ready to take their own first steps in e-moderation. That's when Rita Zeinstejer (Argentina), Susanne Nyrop (Denmark) and I (Portugal) got together to plan and co-moderate Week 3 of the Webheads in Action EVO workshop titled [Online communication tools that facilitate interaction of participants in a virtual community and their role in language learning](#) (2003). Our presentation concerned different aspects of e-moderation, namely,

- creating a warm atmosphere where everybody feels at home and confident to ask questions and raise doubts
- replying promptly to mail
- being synchronously available at set times for timely help
- giving guidance
- motivating and praising participants
- holding a collective chat.

The hands-on experience that we acquired that week and in the workshops from other Webhead colleagues gave me the confidence to suggest to Dafne Gonzalez that we **hold** a 'back-

to-basics' workshop of our own the following year. Thus was born [Becoming a Webhead](#), a 6-week online teacher development workshop to introduce newbie participants to Web-based communication tools and make them feel comfortable enough with **these tools** to join our mother community, Webheads in Action. The experience was so enriching and gratifying that two more rounds have followed ([Baw05](#) and [Baw06](#)).

3. Online courses

The intense learning that went on at the individual and collective levels in the six weeks of our first BaW session gave me enough confidence to accept another challenge in the form of a second partnership with Dafne Gonzalez, co-teaching [PP 104: Teaching Vocabulary and Grammar Online](#), a 4-week module that is part of TESOL's "Principles and Practices of Online Teaching Certificate Program". As with *Becoming a Webhead*, the session was successful and was followed by two other rounds in 2005.

4. Blended learning

When community members learn so much and use so many different tools in collaboration with other Webheads, the next step is to blend the new information and communication technologies in their f2f teaching. In my case, I wanted students to freely practice the language they were learning, away from class and from the constraints of the curriculum. A blog seemed like the ideal tool since I would post content that students could comment on and/or add ideas of their own. I started with [Let's Blog!](#) in the 2002-03 school year for three 7th grade classes (3rd year EFLers). However it didn't catch on as I expected because the students seemed to lack the "curiosity" that inevitably leads to discovery and learning. Since participation and collaboration were very slow, I created a graded project to be developed individually, outside of class and on paper, but with all the rules online, in the blog. This way I was sure to have most students, if not all, visit the blog at least once. Participation did increase somewhat, but never to the level that I expected.

The following school year I created the [Have Fun with English!](#) blog for my two 5th grade classes (1st year EFLers). However, I immediately felt that something was missing, since half of the students didn't have a computer or access to the Internet or email at home, and not all of them were using the computers at school during the breaks. And I did want **all students** to have access to this exciting new world. Thus, a month later, I introduced [CALL Lessons 03-04](#) with a different activity in each lesson and all students involved and working hands-on in pairs at the computer. The blog continued the following year and [CALL Lessons 04-05](#) developed at a rapid pace: from interactive exercises to voice mail, video mail, a mystery guest, an interactive map for guests, and two voice chats, we did it all. This success can be attributed in no small part to the fact that I always had the support and participation of Webhead colleague-friends, a

strategy we implemented from the very beginning, which was very relevant to generating interaction with outsiders who became the students' friends. This meant that they were communicating with real people from the real world, beyond the four walls of the classroom, and not just with their teacher. This is one of the major assets of belonging to an online community of like-minded peers.

5. Peer collaboration: giving and taking

Giving and taking are 'must' ingredients in a community of practice. The Webheads in Action are "givers" by nature. **Giving** through collaboration with peers is in the true Webhead spirit at most any time of day or night, and giving time to work with one another's students has been one aspect of such collaboration. We have a long list of such projects in these four years. One of the first was [Food discussion](#) (Dec. 2002) with Webheads talking about "food" with Aiden Yeh's students in Taiwan. Buthaina Al-Othman (in Kuwait) was one of the first to use synchronous voice CMC techniques with students when she had her Kuwaiti-national lady students present their [Final projects](#) (Dec. 2003) online for a Webhead audience at the Alado virtual classroom. [Guest Tutors](#) (Apr.-Jul. 2005) was yet another interesting collaboration with students introduced by Dafne Gonzalez: several Webheads volunteered to give presentations on different bridges all over the world for her "English for Architecture" students in Venezuela. (Many other collaborative projects can be found in the [WiA Index](#) under "Courses".)

From the point of view of individual members, peer collaboration has also involved **taking**, or having friends collaborate with one's own students. Some examples from my own perspective include the [Portugal-Poland exchange](#) (Feb. 2004), in which Agata Zieba-Warcholak, a Polish Webhead, guided her young son and nephew in an email and voice email exchange with my 5th graders. In the [BaW05-students exchange](#) (Feb. 2005) participants in the "Becoming a Webhead" workshop interacted asynchronously with my 6th graders. In [A Mystery Guest](#) (Apr. 2005), Sharon Holdner in Boston collaborated with my students on a project about finding out where in the world she lived and then learning about her city.

6. The face-to-face meetings

This intense collaborative work has inevitably led to f2f meetings that have been equally intense and emotional. And because our bonds are so strong, when we meet for the first time, we have the feeling that we have known each other all our lives.

There are many instances of these meetings, e.g.: [Webheads in Action meet](#) (Apr. 2002) at the annual TESOL conference in Salt Lake City; [Teresa meets Webheads in Action](#) (Mar.

2004) at the TESOL Convention in Long Beach, CA; and [Teresa meets Dafne in Spain](#) (Jun. 2004), a very special moment for me when I flew to Valencia, Spain, to meet Dafne Gonzalez, my online partner-turned-very-close friend, and to be at her Ph.D. dissertation defense. (For more examples, please visit our [WiA Index](#) under "Face-to-face meetings".)

Wrap-up

When new members join the group, the initial "Wow!" factor soon gives way to a "discovery" frenzy, which is healthily addictive and contagious in a stimulating way. Curiosity is constantly aroused through never-ending alerts to new tools and software. There's no better (and often no other) way to explore computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools than with colleagues who quickly become friends. Once they feel comfortable with the tools, participants often apply what they've "learned by doing" in their classes for the benefit of students, so there is constant transfer of knowledge. Involving students with a global audience and having them experience everyday language of the real world makes language learning authentic and the practice very similar to what they will experience in the working world.

Since my personal path has been similar to that of many other Webheads in Action, I hope to have shown through my example how members **can** develop professionally at a distance and what can be achieved in a group of like-minded and active peers for our own benefit, **but** above all, for the benefit of our students. Belonging to this community of practice has been the most exciting and fun way to learn how to work with Web-based communication tools and then apply them to language teaching and learning. In short, it's been the most motivating and fulfilling way imaginable to develop professionally and feel personally enriched. Only a small fraction of these achievements would have been possible without the support of such a group.

The Webheads in Action have infected many peers with a healthy 'virus' in the past four years. We hope to infect many more in years to come. We are very fortunate that as a result something is changing for real and for the better in the Education field on a global scale. I feel very lucky and proud to be a part of this fabulous community and to be a co-agent of change.

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Editor's notes:

This presentation was made as a regular session at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence on November 19, 2005. The session took place in the Alado Webheads presentation room. A recording was made and can be heard at <http://64.71.48.37/teresadeca/papers/wiaoc05/19nov05-alado-wiaoc05.htm> or

<http://www.digibridge.net/webheads/tere.htm>. There is an integrated page with a link to the presentation file and reference links at http://64.71.48.37/teresadeca/papers/wiaoc05/wiaoc05_pr-integrated.htm

A full, but unpublished version of this article can be read at <http://64.71.48.37/teresadeca/papers/wiaoc05/fullarticle.htm>.