

# **BECOMING A WEBHEAD: FIRST STEPS IN BLENDED AND ONLINE EFL/ESL TEACHING**

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## **Abstract**

"Becoming a Webhead" (BaW) is an online teacher training workshop about Web-based communication tools with the aim of introducing EFL/ESL teachers worldwide to this fascinating new world so that they can start blending them in their daily practice. In two years, 358 teachers around the world have joined the BaW online sessions and are now using technologies in their teaching practices. In this paper, we will unveil part of what went on before, during and after the BaW 2005 online workshop.

## **Introduction**

"Becoming a Webhead" had its first edition in January 2004 (see González, 2004) and the second in January 2005. It came about two years after we had joined the Webheads in Action workshop, at a moment when we felt the need to "go back to basics" and do for others what had been done for us. The aim of this workshop is to give participants hands-on train in different Web-based communication tools so that they feel comfortable to start incorporating one or more of them in their face-to-face practice. The work of the moderators is divided into three distinct phases: before (planning), during (implementing) and after the session (reflecting), with a greater and constant workload on the first two, but a special relevance on the last, where lessons are learned.

## **Planning**

Planning started well in advance, around mid-September. Ideas were jotted down as they came to mind and were exchanged by email. There were regular meetings every two weeks with a pre-set

agenda that was sent out in advance by email, so that we had time to reflect on those aspects. The meetings were generally held in one of our offices at Tapped In.

At each meeting ideas and topics for the syllabus were discussed, decisions made, items postponed and/or defined for the following meeting, and tasks assigned: setting up the Yahoo Group (YG), working on the content of the syllabus and weekly lesson plans, writing the welcome message and mini-tutorials on certain features of Yahoo Groups, creating a discussion forum and a blog, contacting guest speakers for each week, creating a template for our Website (<http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/index.html>), which would include all the relevant materials from the 6 weeks, and inserting the pre-workshop content as it was ready. As the weeks went by, the workshop seemed to take on a nice and motivating shape, as had been the case with our first session in 2004, and the original "Webheads in Action" session back in 2002, coordinated by Vance Stevens ([http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002\\_webheads/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/))

## **Registration**

Registration started 3 weeks in advance and, two weeks prior to the official beginning of the session, it was impossible not to launch the interaction, though on an unofficial basis. It was intense from the very first minute. Participants seemed very avid for this type of training. Several sent their intros and photos at once, started exploring the different features of YG, downloaded Yahoo Messenger and, together with the moderators, were part of the welcoming committee. In effect, this meant that we had an eight-week session, and not the planned six weeks, with a total of 208 participants while in 2004 we had 150. It was very hard work and quite exhausting, but very gratifying.

## **Syllabus**

The syllabus consisted of 6 topics (Yahoo Groups; Text and voice synchronous communication tools; Blogs and Web pages; Virtual classrooms and voice email; Online class materials; and Blended learning), one a week. The expression "hands-on" in the title was there on purpose for two reasons: that it is exactly how we wanted participants to work, by using their hands to do things, explore and experiment with tools, create end products, and generate action; and to reinforce the idea that this was a practical, not a theoretical workshop. How else can things be done in the online world but with the hands? However, besides exploring different tools, participants also had the opportunity to reflect on readings related to the topics we suggested in our weekly lesson plans. These reflections took place in the forum we created for that purpose (<http://pub34.bravenet.com/forum/2849384074>).

## **The role of the moderators and the implementation phase**

The role of the moderators is essential from the very beginning, first and foremost in setting the atmosphere, but also in setting the pace. We welcome participants one by one and his/her intro and photo, when there is one, are included in the Participants page. This has a two-fold effect: not only does it give members an immediate sense of belonging and feeling at home, but it's also a pleasant way of relating a name to a face and of having a reference about each member all along the workshop. (Not everyone who registers ever sends an introduction or even a message. However, if they have an urgent request, they will jump right in without the slightest intro. As happens in real life, good manners or netiquette are essential.)

With few exceptions, moderators reply to every message within 24 hours, generally on an individual basis, sometimes collectively. It's very important to answer questions or make a comment on a timely basis. Curiously, as the days go by, participants feel more familiarized and at ease, and begin collaborating in this task, which not only lightens the load of the moderators, but also gets the participants playing a gradually larger role, as is desirable. Thus, social scaffolding - "A collaborative learning arrangement in which more competent users respond to the learners by providing information to help them move to more advanced levels of knowledge" (BaW2005 Glossary) - surfaces in a very natural way, because in a large group such as this one, there are inevitably different levels of expertise, even among newbies. To wrap up all this interaction, there is a weekly threads page that was put together by the moderators and participants on a rotational basis. Though a very time-consuming task, it is worthwhile, because it represents a repository of invaluable information that isn't lost if the YG is deleted, and the information can be found more easily than in the messages section of the YG. Moderators also need to be constantly alert to keep the interaction going and lively whether by reminding participants of the tasks to be carried out, suggesting additional timely activities, or bringing up more challenges.

We also coordinate daily and weekly events, send out Calendar reminders before each special event, and make sure that participants unable to take part in live presentations due to professional or time-zone constraints have access to the recording in the shortest period of time. We not only post the link to the mailing list, but also publish an integrated Web page with everything related to the event.

Giving online synchronous help for several hours a week at Yahoo Messenger or MSN Messenger is also part of our duties during the session. This is a popular element, because participants can get timely help in real time and then carry on with their work. In brief, moderators are to online courses what teachers are to face-to-face lessons: the mediators, the guides, the facilitators, the liaisons or linking elements between participants and content. We intervene "to taste", more at the beginning in order to get the action going, then progressively and subtly let go and step back as much as possible, but are always ready to intervene. In short,

we try to make this workshop a warm, friendly, responsive, helpful, clarifying, motivating and satisfying place that will generate constant interaction and action.

### **The venues**

There are four main venues for synchronous meetings along the six weeks: Yahoo Messenger, Tapped In, the Alado.net Webheads Room and the Learning Times Elluminate Webheads Room.

**Yahoo! Messenger (YM)** (<http://messenger.yahoo.com>) is free software for instant messaging, text and voice chat, that allows for secure one-on-one and group conferencing in real time. YM is part of the Yahoo! tools family, so participants often download it during the first week when they're getting familiar with other features. This is the place where the moderators are available to give real-time help. It is also the place where our live presentations can take place. However, additional tools, such as Total Recorder or Audacity, are necessary to record the session and then make it available online with the chatlog.

**MSN Messenger** (<http://messenger.msn.com/>), which is very similar to the previous platform, is an alternative, though used on a much smaller scale.

**Tapped In** (<http://tappedin.org/tappedin/>) is "the online workplace of an international community of education professionals... who gather [t]here to learn, collaborate, share, and support one another" (Stevens, 2005). Towards the end of the first week there is always a tour of this online facility so that participants familiarize themselves with the most useful and relevant synchronous and asynchronous features available. Membership is free and all members get a log by email of each session they participate in. This can be particularly useful when multiple threads go on and several URLs are referred. On the other hand, the logs of all special events are archived online.

The **Alado.net room** (<http://www.alado.net/webheads>), managed by Andrew Pincon, is a basic virtual classroom with text and voice features, as well as a whiteboard where presentations are projected or Web pages are pushed and shown. Events can be recorded by any participant with Windows Media Player.

The **Learning Times** (<http://home.learningtimes.net/learningtimes?go=273662>), managed by Jonathan Finkelstein, is the final venue where we take our participants. It's a very comprehensive virtual classroom with a multi-feature interactive whiteboard that allows for projections of Power Point presentations and webpages, insertion of photos and text, keyboarded or handwritten, video and webcam webcasts, on-the-spot surveys, among others (see Stevens, 2005, for more details on these venues).

During the guest speaker events at these different venues, participants are introduced to new ideas and tools while they become familiar with the platforms. It is essential that registration (which is free) and any necessary downloads be done in advance. In addition, participants are always requested to show up half an hour in advance of the event so that timely help can be

given and sound be tested by everyone. Prior to and during the presentations, there is always friendly help from more experienced Webheads to guide participants having difficulties, which is part of the community's very special collaborative spirit.

## **Drawbacks**

As happens with most things in real life in the online world, not everything is "a sea of roses". There are negative aspects both for the participants and moderators. On the participants' side, there is work overload in keeping up with both online and offline responsibilities, adapting to the pace and the volume of message flow, and coping with different time zones. On the moderators' side, there is a drawback that stands out: the overwhelming workload in order to keep up with different fronts, first and foremost, the constant and intense message flow. When a workshop has 200 participants, as happened this year, even if only one-fifth interacts on a more or less daily basis, there is still a significant volume of messages going back and forth, including replies and comments. Our advice for participants is to work at their own pace and select from the syllabus the aspects they have more interest in, and later go back and work on the others. There will always be helping hands reaching out to offer help when the time comes, as has been happening in the Webheads in Action community since 2002.

## **Curiosities**

The ease and speed with which interaction develops and increases has to do with different aspects. First, participants feel at home as soon as they are welcomed and immediately start interacting. Then they feel an instant urge to comment on the variety of professional backgrounds they are faced with, which results from the broad spectrum of the participants from every corner of the world, thus generating diversified and interesting interaction about the different professional experiences. Last, they feel that they are among like-minded people who share the same curiosities, needs and interests: technology-enhanced EFL/ESL.

This initial atmosphere generates a sense of belonging and a feeling of security and comfort to interact at one's will, free of constraints, in the privacy of the newly-formed community. On the other hand, knowing that help is on the way as soon as the "Send" button is clicked helps avoid the feelings of helplessness, frustration and isolation so often referred to as negative characteristics of online learning.

Participants also rapidly understand that, though they may have little technological know-how, there is always something that they can teach others. This makes them feel helpful and generates an environment where caring, sharing and collaboration are key-words.

## Conclusion

Joining a workshop such as "Becoming a Webhead" is a significant advantage and enrichment at the professional and personal levels. It is a pleasant and useful way to learn about and start using different Web-based communication tools, gradually introduce them in your teaching-learning process and, last but not least, meet colleagues from all over the world and thus enhance your professional horizons in unprecedented ways.

## Note

Even though BaW is a TESOL Electronic Village Online session, it is open to TESOL members and non-members as well.

## References

González, D. (2004). "Bringing Colleagues into Web-Based Learning and Teaching". *TESOL Essential Teacher. esl/efl.reflection.practice*, vol. 1, no. 4, pp- 22-25.

Stevens, V. (2005). "The future is now: How CMC tools for professional development enhance learning environments for students." 2005 TESOL CALL Interest Session Academic Session: Future Visions of CALL. Available at: [http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/papers/tesol/2005/gvs\\_pres.htm](http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/papers/tesol/2005/gvs_pres.htm)

## Sites mentioned in the paper

Alado: <http://www.alado.net/>

"Becoming a Webhead" Portal: <http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/>

"Becoming a Webhead" Glossary: <http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/glossary.html>

Learning Times: <http://www.learningtimes.net/index.shtml>

Tapped In: <http://tappedin.org/tappedin/>

TESOL Electronic Online Village 2005:  
<http://www.geocities.com/ehansonsmi/evo2005/announce.html>

Yahoo Messenger: <http://messenger.yahoo.com/>

Webheads in Action: [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002\\_webheads/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/)

## **Software referred**

Audacity: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Total Recorder: <http://www.totalrecorder.com/>