

Tools of the Trade:

Teaching EFL in the Gulf

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Editors



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Tools of the trade
Teaching EFL in the Gulf

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Appendix A

Names and frequency of application programs used

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Netscape (97)	RealPlayer(4)	Explorer(8)	GroupWise(8)	TurboNote(13)	GroupWise (6)
	Explorer (34)	Explorer(4)	MsWord(7)	YahooPager(6)	GroupWise(12)	MsWord(4)
	Realplayer (19)	RealPlayer(4)	GroupWise (5)	Explorer(6)	Winamp(10)	Explorer(4)
	GroupWise(12)	PowerPoint(2)	RealPlayer (1)	MsWord(5)	MsWord(10)	Winamp(3)
	MsWord(7)	GroupWise(2)	PowerPoint (1)	PowerPoint(3)	Neoplanet(9)	ICQ(3)
	WinZip(7)	Excel(2)	Excel(1)	FileManager(2)	FileManager(9)	Game(1)
	YahooMsngr(5)	ICQ(2)		RealPlayer(1)	Netscape(7)	Excel(1)
	RealJukebox(5)	YahooPager(1)		Screensaver(1)	Explorer(5)	Screensaver (1)
	Logo(1)	Screensaver(1)		Netscape(1)	ICQ(5)	
	StickyNote(1)	Calculator(1)			DialUp Access(4)	
	MoviePlayer(1)	PictureViewer (1)			Excel(3)	
	ICQ(1)	Solitaire(1)			Calculator(3)	
	PaintShop(1)				CDplayer(2)	
	ControlPanel (1)				MulitiMedia(1)	
	Calculator(1)				MasterOut(1)	
	Iguana(1)				IrfanView(1)	
					PaintShop(1)	
					MoviePlayer(1)	
Total # of programs	16	12	6	9	18	8

Bold items indicate programs that transcend the classroom walls (i.e., require contact with people or websites on the Internet).

Developing a Community in Online Language Learning

Vance Stevens

Amideast UAE/MLI Project

Abstract

This paper reports on an experiment in community development online which had been in progress for almost two years at the time of its presentation at the international conference held at the MLI in Abu Dhabi in May, 2000. At that time, the community was in the process of branching out from one of language learners and facilitators to include the wider sphere of language teaching professionals interested not only in the ramifications of the experiment but also in participating in it themselves. The paper examines what we were discovering about community formation online in the context of the event staged at the conference.

Introducing 'Webheads'

'Webheads' is a community of online language teachers and learners who have been meeting in various cyber-venues since 1998. The community stemmed from a writing class conducted entirely by email in 1996 under the auspices of English for Internet (EFI) (<http://www.study.com>), which served as a clearinghouse bringing together students with volunteer (but qualified) instructors for free ESL courses proposed and created by the instructors. In my "writing and grammar" course, it proved difficult at the time to achieve substantive interaction among students solely via email, but one of the students was inspired sufficiently to create a web page for the course (at a time when this was novel, before I had acquired web-building skills).

In 1997 a reincarnation of the online class included the option of meeting synchronously online at the Palace, an avatar-based chat room where the EFI had arranged to use a "Virtual Schoolhouse". In the course of experiments with synchronous communications tools potentially useful for language learning, I occasionally encountered Dave Winet, coordinator of the EFI, in one chat client or another, and it was he who coined the term "webheads" in the course of an

online discussion on ICQ about where I was going with my EFI course (Dave was in California and I had by then moved to Abu Dhabi). By now I had learned enough about web page design to create a space where students could display their writing, thus adding a third dimension to our existing synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication.

Writing for Webheads became established in its latest form when it became an 'egroup' (now called YahooGroups, a free email list service managed through a listserv) (<http://www.yahooglegroups.com>). By this time, students could get together for regular weekly synchronous meetings online in chat rooms such as the Palace, or communicate through the listserv in what we called the 'eclass', or post their writing to our web pages, accessible from our main page at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/webheads.htm>).

Although conceived as a 'writing' class, WFW was never a class in the traditional sense of the word. That is, there has never been a syllabus beyond an awareness of the steps in the process of writing, and encouragement of students to communicate (most often through writing) in whatever ways they could be inspired to do so. Since it is difficult and possibly de-motivating to attempt to steer people who are meeting online regularly and of their own free will, and with as many agendas as there are people, into a course of study following one person's agenda, I often suggest that online 'teaching' (on a voluntary basis) has more in common with herding cats (<http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/cyprus2001/plenary/gvs30a.html>) than with conducting classes at a brick-and-mortar institute. Thus the class - or more accurately, the community - has always revolved around real and authentic communication, in whatever form that might take. Indeed, the community dynamics have been of equal if not surpassing interest to the writing aspects, beyond the extent to which the two are inextricably interlinked. In this respect, what is most remarkable about the community would not be revealed in a traditional study of language improvement outcomes; rather its value is more connected with the phenomenon of the community's perseverance in its cohesiveness over the years of its existence.

At the time of the Teacher-to-Teacher conference held at the MLI in Abu Dhabi in May, 2000, the class had branched into two significant directions. First, we were experimenting with synchronous online voice chat, particularly HearMe, a now defunct voice and text chat client whose code was freely disseminated and could be copied to any web page. And secondly, and largely because we realized we were onto something revolutionary with the HearMe voice chat, we had started bringing applied linguistics professionals into our chat sessions. We had already appeared at several live and online conferences, and for the latter, we had begun issuing invitations on language teaching professional lists for wider peer participation in our conference appearances, and we were meeting with some success in engendering interest in and support of our projects. In this respect, the event staged by Webheads at the Abu Dhabi T2T conference was a part of a series of community-wide professional appearances we were engaged in giving at the time.

Touring the Webheads community

Here is a parable of continuing education in the 21st century. Pon is in his late 40's. He's a government worker in Thailand. He wants to practice English in his spare time and he has access to the Internet. Somehow, he comes across the site of English for Internet and he decides to apply for a class there. He fills out a form online and clicks on Submit.

David Winet, who has been channeling students through (<http://www.study.com/>) into online classes of volunteer teachers' devising since around 1995, passed Pon's email over to me along with numerous others, and I sent each an email explaining how anyone can join Writing for Webheads simply by subscribing to our listserv (email to: efiwebheads-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) or by dropping by our online class. I often receive such queries and out of ten, perhaps one replies to my follow-on invitation. In this case, it was Pon who responded with gratitude for his acceptance in our

class. Despite his limited English skills, he visited the Java-enabled text chat site at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens>) at noon GMT the next Sunday, the time the class has met each week since 1998.

Pon must have enjoyed the experience because during the week he sent the list a picture of himself which I added to a web page containing what little Pon had told us about himself. Next Sunday when Pon came online at noon GMT, other people in the synchronous chat were able to see his picture by viewing his web page at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/pon.htm>). In fact, since it was a voice chat, we could talk to Pon and hear his family chatter in the background. One of the people in the chat, Rif from Turkey, himself a drop-in newcomer, was so impressed with being able to relate so closely with Pon as well as others in the chat that he sent a picture of himself by email attachment while we were all chatting. I checked my email and quickly put the picture at our website and invited the others in the chat to have a look at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/rif.jpg>). John, a professor in the chat studying our group interaction as a part of his dissertation, then invited us to meet his family at (<http://www.jhsteele.com>) and I pointed everyone to my own family photo at (<http://www.vancestevens.com>). Rif then sent in the email making him a member of our listserv and quickly followed this with an introduction, which I combined with his picture into his own 'Webheads webpage', which anyone can now see at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/rif.htm>).

Anyone can also see a transcript of the chat where all of this took place by visiting

(<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/ch001126.htm>).

There you can read the Homestead text chat log and the HearMe voice chat text chat log where Pon, Rif, and the others all interacted with one another on that day. At the top of that page you can see a picture of each person in the chat. If you click on a picture you are taken to that person's Webheads webpage, where you can find out a

little more about each person. The effect is to bring each person in the chat closer together through greater familiarity through as many senses as feasible online: aural and visual, plus the cognitive and affective aspects of the psyche as far as is possible through text.

If you want to meet all the students at once, you can do that as well. A visit to

(<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/students.htm>) will introduce all of the facilitators and students in the class. The list is sorted by when each person last got in touch with the class, so you can see who is active and who is not. Best of all, you can again see the pictures that the students have sent linked to each one's website through a click on the picture. From each individual website, you can link to articles the students have written and threads they have participated in. On a page where students have exchanged ideas, you can see a picture of each participating student and, from the picture, link back to his or her web page. There is a main page as well at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/webheads.htm>) where all the students can be seen together in a gallery, each picture again linkable to each individual page.

On their web pages, students have provided varying degrees of information about themselves and their interests. In the case of Ying Lan, a student from Taiwan who has been with us for as long as we have been conducting the class, if you click on her picture, you can find out about her travels and interests (http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/efw_ying.htm).

Everything she (and any student, including Pon) has written for Webheads has been corrected before being placed on that person's web page, and the writer has been invited to compare what he or she originally wrote with what is posted to the page (and some let us know that they do that and appreciate the feedback, while others repeat the same mistakes time and time again, as is to be expected). This plus occasional feedback in the synchronous chats addresses the accuracy aspect of Writing for Webheads, while fluency is promoted in live chat and listserv interaction. The emphasis is on

fluency in the Webheads class, as is evidenced by the body of materials generated by students over the past couple of years. Webheads have openly discussed this dichotomy, and recorded the debate at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/methods.htm>). In one of my contributions to this debate, I said, about the way we teach writing:

"We give you opportunities to use and practice your English skills. Language is communication, so we also give you real reasons to communicate. All of us in this community, the teachers and the learners, give you an audience. We are interested in what you have to say and we encourage you to say it. Eventually you come to like the others in the community, and it's interesting to get to know them. You want to communicate with them and you want them to communicate with you. So you have real reasons to write and speak to them."

Since the students and teachers in Webheads have never met, putting faces to names and written accomplishments is an important part of the Webheads ethos. "Faces" is one of the things that helps make our class a community that constantly attracts newcomers like Pon and Rif while suffering very little attrition (class size doubled in the year before this conference, with the loss of only half a dozen students). Voice and video can be propagated over the web and also serve to help individual Webheads become familiar with each other and become aware that they are part of a living community of sentient souls, and not as some would believe, disembodied fingers relating only through tapping on keyboards.

There are other ways that Webheads demonstrate that they are a community. One such indication came in a manifestation of trust from one of our original students. Bahia joined us in 1998 and got to know us in live chat week after week, but persisted in using his pseudonym while suggesting that there were ways people on the Internet could hack your identity. The better he got to know us the more he dropped his guard. Eventually he gave us his complete name, and invited us to visit him in Bahia, which is where he lives

(Felix, his real name - or so he tells us - remains a frequent participant in Webheads: (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/efwbahia.htm>).

Another indication of trust has been the submission of pictures. I requested students early in our relationship to send their pictures but at first we had only pictures of the three teachers and two or three students. It took months before the next picture came in and perhaps a month for the next one, but as trust developed, pictures began coming at a much faster rate, culminating in Rif's sending us his on the spur of the moment in our recent chat. Some have gone further, sending pictures of their houses, neighborhoods, and schools, and even experimenting with mounting real media videos of themselves on their web pages; for example, (http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/felix_see.htm).

Other aspects of the Webheads community are consistency and support. It continues to amaze the teachers in the class that some students have not only chosen to remain with us since 1998, but that they continue to turn up in live classes week after week. Ying Lan is almost always there, as a glance at our logged chats will show (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chatlogs.htm>). Others come for a few weeks in a row and then disappear for a while, but sometimes resurface later. One student, Deden from Indonesia, rejoined us after a hiatus of several months. He used to write on most of our topics, but then dropped out of communication after a move to Taiwan. Suddenly he has written again, but in a way that suggests he has gone to our web site and dug out (and read) our old writing topics. We have had a flurry of emails from him now, each with the title of a different topic from our website.

Conference participation by Webheads

We as education professionals naturally want to demonstrate our techniques and explain our success as a language learning community to our peers through conference presentations. Our first

presentation was a modest showing at TESOL 1999 as part of the Internet Web Fare (<http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/english/TESOL99/presenters.html>), where teachers show web sites they have developed to facilitate language learning. Our presentation was unique because I had arranged to have a live Internet connection with my co-teachers Michael Coghlan and Margaret Ann Doty joining me from Australia and Germany, respectively, and via the Palace client, where they chatted with visitors physically present with me in New York. I had meanwhile signed us up for the 4th annual Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference, April 7-9, 1999 (<http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/tcc99>). Here we produced a paper (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/hawaii99.html>) which presents a chat log showing considerable interest in what we were doing.

Some students indicated that they might like to be more involved in our conference presentations. The next opportunity was again a "face to face" conference held locally at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi. In a workshop setting, I configured a number of computers for the conference attendees to make them honorary class members, which enabled Michael and student Ming to interact with them from their respective locations in Australia and Oregon, though they could have been anywhere in cyberspace. The handout and report are at (<http://lightning.prohosting.com/~vstevens/papers/tesol2000/zu2000tesol.htm>).

Our next big event was at TESOL 2000 in Vancouver, where I presented at several sessions on topics relating to Webheads. Most were discussion sessions and cameo appearances at other people's presentations, but as part of a special session at which I had been invited to present on the community building aspects of the class, we mounted a demonstration at which Michael, Maggi, Ying Lan, and Moral performed live online from Australia, Germany, Taiwan, and China before an audience of around 100 who viewed their interactions on two screens at the front of the room and listened to

the voice chat over the P.A. system. It was a stimulating performance whose handouts and reports can be found at (<http://lightning.prohosting.com/~vstevens/papers/tesol2000/tesol2000.htm>).

With several of our students now comfortable with the idea of chatting with language learning professionals at conferences, we participated next in the Fifth Annual Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference, April 12-14, 2000 (<http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/tcon2k>). Unlike at our previous 'live' conference appearances, the attendees at this conference were themselves all online, and interaction between Webheads and the conference-goers was therefore more intimate for all concerned. This time we had all three teachers present (Michael, Maggi, and I) as well as students Gloria from Paraguay and Ying Lan from Taiwan, plus Maggie and Dave Kees, a student and teacher from China. Michael's report on the conference is at: (<http://www.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/TCC2000.htm>) and the log of the chat can be found at (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/tcc2klog.htm>).

Keeping in mind that these are non-native speakers being treated as experts in interactions with language professionals at internationally held conferences, you can imagine how motivating and truly communicative it was for the students, and how keen their sense of audience.

Webheads list member (and EFL teacher in China) Dave Kees had been making a point on professional lists at around this time that there was something spurious about CALL conferences being held solely in fixed locations when there existed the means to broadcast them interactively to the world-at-large on the Internet. After our experience with the entirely online conference in April, I thought Webheads were becoming well-positioned to be proactive in rectifying this state of affairs, so I began experimenting with opening the Webheads concept up to remotely situated professionals. I started a Teaching for Webheads professional group with an egroup and a web site based at (<http://lightning>

prohosting.com/~vstevens/tfw/index.html). I modeled the web site on the Writing for Webheads concept and encouraged participants to send in pictures and join us in chats online. I geared these chats toward our next scheduled presentation, to which I had invited not only the WFW students as before, but also the field-at large via invitations sent out on various professional lists.

At the MLI Teacher-to-Teacher Conference

This presentation was the one forming the subject of this paper, the Webheads' online (and my physical) presence at the Military Language Institute's Teacher-to-Teacher Conference 2000 "Tools of the Trade" held May 3-4, 2000 at Al-Nahyan Base, Abu Dhabi, UAE (<http://t2t2000.cjb.net/>). Participating were Webheads students Maggie and Moral (both in China) at the Palace, and students Maggie as well as Nicia from Brazil along with teaching professionals Shabana from Dubai, Claudia from Austria, Jason at ESADE in Spain, and Chi-Chin in Illinois, all at the voice chat site. The handout for this presentation is at (http://lightning.prohosting.com/~vstevens/t2t2000/gvs_t2t.htm).

I was careful to stage a practice session exactly one week before the actual conference (and at exactly the same time, to allow those wishing to practice to fit the session into their routine the following week), and I announced this on the lists. At first I was concerned about the capacity of our voice chat client, but it proved robust enough to handle the dozen communicants who answered the call to join us. In fact, the client proved adequate to handle a chat elsewhere during the MLI conference, with dozens of conference delegates engaging in live chat with Randall Davis, presenting online from his workplace in the USA (<http://www.esl-lab.com/>).

At each conference where several students and teachers were slated to appear, there was always a professional risk. What if, at a promised presentation, no students appeared? What if the chat clients suddenly shut down? After all, we had experienced frequent difficulties with the Palace servers during our regular Sunday classes,

and the HearMe server was not always available (in fact, it had been down for two whole days just before our Vancouver TESOL presentation). Given such instabilities, my professional integrity was at stake each time I promised that my students would interact with conference participants on a given date and time.

I had met none of these people in 'real life', yet they always appeared when summoned. We were by then becoming a true community, truly supportive of one another, with real commitments being made and kept. The students apparently found that what we did improved their English or gratified them in some interpersonal way, and they were helping us with our professional development. And now we were expanding into a parallel community of interconnected teachers and associated professionals, and arranging intersections between the communities of language learners, language professionals, and conference goers, and bringing these all together at one place in time, from many places in cyberspace.

What happens during presentations?

A typical conference session (or regular online class for that matter) starts out with the participants finding each other online. To 'find each other online' we use a client that detects the presence of 'buddies' online. We normally use ICQ, available free from (<http://www.mirabilis.com/>). Other clients that can also tell us when our buddies are online include: Yahoo Messenger (<http://www.yahoo.com/>), MSN Messenger Service (<http://www.msn.com/>), and AOL Messenger (<http://www.aol.com/>).

ICQ is the best of these (for text chat) for several reasons. One, it keeps records of your ICQ interactions on your computer and allows you to transfer these to other computers. It time stamps your interactions, which is useful if you sit down at your computer and find a message and wonder if it was there from a minute ago or an hour ago. It allows you to easily set up conference chats, and during chats, it lets you see what people are writing as they write it (and as

they erase, etc. - this can be itself communicative and can also save time when you can anticipate what someone is about to write). Finally it buffers your conversations and chats and lets you save them as log files (you can do this with the other applications, but you have to cut and paste your logs to a separate application).

At around the time of an appointed chat, buddies will start showing up online on each other's computers and as they appear, they ask each other where everyone is meeting. I myself will have gone to all our chat areas, which I'll be watching in different windows on my screen. At the time of the conference in Abu Dhabi, these were our Homestead text chat, our HearMe voice chat site, and our Virtual Schoolhouse at the Palace.

Homestead text chat

The most convenient chat available to us at the time of the T2T conference was our Java-based Homestead text chat client at (<http://www.homestead.com/vstevens/>). This is a Java applet that I put on our site in minutes using the Homestead SiteBuilder. All that is necessary to set up such a chat facility is to open a Homestead account, build a page using the SiteBuilder, and drag the icons (for chat, guest book, etc.) onto the page where you wish them to appear.

One advantage to our using Homestead is that it has not been blocked in China (whereas Tripod and Geocities are both restricted there) so our site is accessible to the widest range of students. In addition, it is simple to use. All that is required is that users enable Java and visit our URL; there is nothing to download or install. A disadvantage is that it doesn't buffer much chat or automatically log any chat at all, so to keep a chat log, someone has to copy frequently from the chat window and paste to another location. This is sometimes difficult to do if there are frequent interactions in the chat, and consequently some of our Homestead chat has been lost. Furthermore, although Homestead still provides the chat 'element' on its SiteBuilder, use of Homestead is no longer free as of September 30, 2001.

The HearMe Voice Creator

Our HearMe site simply comprised a few lines of code provided us by email which, when pasted into a normal web page, displayed a listening console and gave participants the ability to speak to one another via the Voice Creator plug-in as well as to write interactively in text chat mode. We didn't need to know what the code meant; only that when we put it in a webpage it worked on the web. The HearMe Voice Creator was a plug-in to a browser that allowed us to use it in simplex voice transmission by pressing the F9 key and speaking, as you would over a cb-radio. The code connected all users through HearMe's central server, and made it possible for them to communicate with each other using microphones and sound cards.

There was also a chat text option for those without sound cards or with comprehension or network difficulties, and it was this feature that made it particularly appropriate to second language learners. I used to call the text chat window the "edgewise window" since it's where you typed to get a word in edgewise, in case you couldn't get the floor in the simplex voice chat. Another great advantage of the text chat window was that it tended, at the end of a session, to contain the entire chat (other text chats seem to work in limited buffer areas, so that the first part of the chat can be lost if it's crowded out by the most recent lines of chat recorded). Thus we were able to save whatever had been written in the text chat log after each HearMe session, and during periods of Internet instability, or when the voice chat had too many participants, or when someone in the chat couldn't hear the others, the text chat window would often contain connected prose and make good reading.

Sadly, the Voice Creator ceased to function from December, 2000. But for as long as we were able to use it, HearMe gave us the opportunity to do what we had not been able to do before, hear each other's voices. It helped us to enhance our community by adding a vital human dimension to it, and to do this in a convenient, spontaneous, and easily implementable way. Hopefully,

we will find a replacement which will let us continue this aspect of our interactions.

(Later on, we temporarily set up a voice chat room at Excite, but this chat had fewer features than HearMe, and in May, 2001, voice chat rooms at Excite also ceased to function. Currently - September, 2001 - we are using voice-activated Yahoo Messenger.)

The Palace avatar-based text chat

The other client that we often used at the time was the Palace, a compelling and versatile avatar-based chat environment. We have almost entirely avoided problems reported by others at the Palace by using the EFI's Virtual Schoolhouse provided by Coterie, (<http://www.coterie.com/>) (this site has also ceased to be supported, although there are other Palaces still running suitable for use as playgrounds for language learners). The Palace required that a special browser be downloaded and installed, but we liked it because it gave us many options for projecting our personalities paralinguistically. Many Palace users enjoy creating their own avatars, and I have shown students how to make them easily from their own 44 x 44 pixel photos (creating a 44 square pixel photo is the hard part). There are many objects you can 'wear' on your avatar and bring into the chat (Michael likes to leave parrots laying around), and you can whisper secretly behind people's backs. In the chat itself, people talk in cartoon bubbles, so students aren't overwhelmed with text, and you can easily see who's talking at a given time. The chats are logged in a separate window, so students can recap anything they missed, and we would cut and paste the logs, though the chat buffer had to be cleared every half hour or so or it would overflow. Of all our text-chat clients, we liked the Palace best, though because of the browser download and installation, not all those present at a given session would necessarily have taken the trouble, so we often ended up using one of the other clients.

Combinations

Most often we use our chat clients in combination. Each has its advantages and its own unique atmosphere, and one of them will turn out to be more useful for us on a given day, depending on the participants in the chat and what they are able to reach, or we might use them in combination with one another. We have also played a little with Active Worlds and various PC to PC phone clients, but Active Worlds is resource hungry due to constant 3D modeling, and the phone clients never worked as well or as simply as HearMe.

A particularly engaging experience for example is to meet other Webheads in Active worlds while talking to them in a voice chat client. Since Active Worlds allows you to move around a 3D space, having voice communications available is handy because there is a lot of explanation of how you jump from one world to another, fly, land, select an avatar, and so on.

What we are learning about online communities

Two questions I am frequently asked when I give presentations are: How do you handle evaluation? Where do you get your funding?

I realize that the first question is directed at most people's concern for how students should be assessed for matriculation through a curriculum, but I always turn the question as if it meant student evaluation of our program. I like to say that our class size continues to grow and most of our students are still with us year after year, some very actively and others passively, but they must like what we are doing or they wouldn't continue to accept our email, and even the less active ones occasionally feed back their satisfaction with our program. So, I say, evidence shows that we teachers are being evaluated fairly well. (See the student testimonials at (http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/join_wfw.htm#testimonials).

This does however call into question traditional institutional values in education and their relevance to online education. Traditional education is geared to being time and space-bound. In most institutions, students have to compete for seats in physical classrooms and get through courses paced by terms and semesters. Whereas this is important for situations where resources are constrained by physical plant and internalized systems, the concept of online learning leaves the barn door wide open (and lets the fresh air in as it frees students to graze in the fields).

Webheads is only loosely a 'course'. It grants no certificates, though it might bestow knowledge enabling someone to go on to gain a certificate. Its participants are motivated only by interest, and they work completely at their pace and whim. The interesting thing however, is that the students stay with the course even if they only return to active participation from time to time, and that they occasionally express their appreciation for whatever it is they are gaining from the course. In other words, they act as if they are at home on the Web, and their home exists within our community. They spend a lot of time at home, but now and then they go out into the community for whatever reasons to take advantage of resources conveniently found there. Webheads is a part of their community. Like parts of your own community, it is not here now and gone at the end of the term. It's always there and can be visited when the mood strikes, and this is what we are seeing with Webheads as the experiment continues into its 3rd year.

The question is, what relevance does this have to education? The direct connection is tenuous in cases where programs are judged on what they produce according to parameters that can be measured conveniently. Where students are prepared to accept more affective measures, such as pleasure derived in the course of improving one's proficiency in a language, and to the extent teachers are prepared to lay them on, courses like Webheads can provide a viable option. Or, such courses could create motivating and communicative learning environments as adjuncts for more traditional courses.

Regarding the second FAQ, Webheads requires no funding. It has never taken any money from students and the teachers are all volunteers who participate because they enjoy developing their skills in Internet-based tools that they think are useful for language learning. The tools are themselves freely downloadable from the Internet and can be used without charge. In fact, the special environment for students created for Writing for Webheads has all been done with readily available Internet downloads plus the software you would expect to find on a standard PC; e.g. a word processor that will also create HTML documents. To these ingredients we add the empathy and creativity that would be normally found in a dedicated teacher of languages, and the result is a web-based community.

Conclusion

Webheads is at the very least a phenomenon in online language learning and at best becoming an institution. We have shown through example how a community can not only form on the Web, but sustain itself there. We have also shown that funding is not necessarily required to form or maintain such a community. Furthermore we have expanded the Webheads concept to encompass not only language learners but the wider community of language learning and teaching stakeholders and professionals. This paper documents stages in that process, of which the presentation concerning these proceeds was a part.

We continue to meet online each Sunday noon GMT, and anyone is welcome to join us. Point your browser to (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/webheads.htm>) to find where we are.