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practices and programs

Leaver & Willis

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Betty Lou Leaver & Jane R. Willis editors

WEBHEAD COMMUNITIES: WRITING TASKS INTERLEAVED WITH SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND WEB PAGE DEVELOPMENT

Vance Stevens

EDITORS' NOTE: In this chapter, Vance Stevens continues the discussion of learning beyond the classroom walls, thanks to Internet technology. He describes groups of voluntary participants in writing tasks; the community that has evolved he calls Webheads. The kinds of learning that take place are highly unpredictable, the kinds of interactions quite stochastic, and the amount of freedom for self-directed learning quite high. The tasks take place outside of the classroom, are very much "real" in the sense that individuals have real-life reasons for accomplishing them, and are not graded or reviewed in any traditional manner. Nevertheless, high-quality learning does appear to take place, with participants improving their written language skills. Further, much motivation is built to continue e-learning (learning in an electronic environment).

Webheads is an umbrella term for an online community of language learners and teachers that has developed in two distinct directions. The first, *Writing for Webheads* (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/webheads.htm>), started in 1998 as a synchronous reincarnation of an e-mail-based online writing course. Meeting in text- and *avatar*-based chat areas, a community of students and teachers gradually formed online.¹ The community was based at a Web site that served not only as a platform for displaying corrected student writings but as a focal point for community members to get to know each other's faces, voices, and stories. Although much of the interaction is done in writing (hence, *Writing for Webheads*), a community of practice has formed where improvement in writing has always been a secondary goal of the course, if indeed this could be called a course in any traditional sense. Rather, community members seem to be motivated primarily to interact for interpersonal reasons. In so doing, they learn as much as they can about the synchronous online multimedia computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools that make this possible and enhance the experience, with development in writing being a secondary focus of the program.

The community has also attracted interest within the wider community of educators who use technology in language learning, seeding the formation of a second group, *Webheads in Action* (<http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/webheads.htm>, or <http://www.webheads.info/>), a community

that started life early in 2002 as an online workshop program in community building using CMC tools. So why this growing interest in online community building? Proponents of participation in such communities feel that they encourage scaffolding among members. Bonk and Cunningham (1998) felt that learning is best accomplished when learners are able to construct knowledge from elements that they have internalized in a meaningful fashion and in a highly social environment where learners interact and learn from others in their immediate surroundings. More recently, there has been increased interest among educators using CMC in how these principles mediate the formation and functioning of communities of practice, a construct articulated particularly well by Wenger (1998) (see Snyder, n.d., for a simplified overview of how communities of practice aid professional development). Essentially, communities of practice are groups of people who meet to discuss a topic (or *domain*) of such interest to community members that they are strongly motivated to enhance their understanding of the topic through frequent interaction in order to further their work or interest in the field to which the topic pertains. Thus, it comes as no surprise that CMC tools should promote the development of communities of practice over distances.

To achieve their aims, the two flourishing Webheads groups have explored and successfully exploited the potential of a great variety of free Internet text, voice, and video CMC tools. Members' skills in utilizing these Web-based tools have been developed through direct interaction. We feel that the Webheads projects model the benefits to e-learning of adopting a pedagogical stance that is much more flexible and interactive than teacher-directed models, which are being widely supplanted in any event in both physical and virtual classroom environments. Given that there is a trend toward learner-centered, constructivist approaches to learning, it is convenient and more than coincidental that the greater empowerment that personal computing has brought us all should be a strong factor in this development, especially the ability of computers to facilitate exploration and communication in any target language.

Writing for Webheads

The Webheads group was a natural product of constructivist approaches to learning facilitated by wider connectivity, making it possible for like-minded people to come together in worldwide distributed communities of practice. What follows is a consideration of how these ingredients translate through Webheads into pedagogy.

WRITING TASKS FOR PURPOSEFUL INTERACTION

How do our CMC tools facilitate task-based approaches to writing? According to the report of the Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong (1999, 47) every learning task should include the following features, which the subsequent paragraph elucidates:

- A task should have a purpose. It involves learners in using language for the kinds of purposes that are described in the Learning Targets and Objectives.
- A task should have a context from which the purpose for using language emerges.
- A task should involve learners in a mode of thinking and doing.
- The purposeful activity in which learners engage while carrying out a task should lead toward a product.
- A task should require the learners to draw upon their framework of knowledge and skills.

The Writing for Webheads course engages learners in purposeful tasks. Its targets and objectives are geared toward developing proficiency in English by getting a heterogeneous group of language learners communicating at a distance with other group members. Although Writing for Webheads is composed of a unique target group of students (non-fee-paying, highly heterogeneous, self-motivated) in a distinct setting (completely online, tasks spontaneously undertaken, students not evaluated), elements of the model can be applied to curricula in contexts in which there are other specific targets. In our case, much of the language used revolves around the vagaries of online communication (exchange of URLs, logistics of broadcasting Web cams, adjusting microphones, developing Web pages, etc.). Clearly, such language emerges from within a purposeful context, where all involved (learners and teachers) have to constantly invent novel ways to use the available tools and then give directions and explain processes to one another. Thus, all participants draw upon their respective frameworks of prior knowledge and skills (with skills so distributed that students often help teachers over technical hurdles, as well as visa versa). Our successes are often documented in Web pages, which facilitate the production of further products in the form of student writings and chat logs.

TECHNOLOGY AND E-LEARNING

It is important to clarify that technology does not drive the process. Technology is a vehicle through which the most viable pedagogical principles can be delivered so as to optimize their impact and success. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the pedagogical models underlying e-learning courses be compatible with the uses envisaged for the technology. In the case of language learning, technology not only serves to provide a framework for discourse but also leads students to a limitless source of relevant, authentic, and communicative target language by putting information and interactants literally at the learner's fingertips and then helps the learners take meaningful advantage of these language resources.

Support for Webhead Communities

The Webheads projects have developed through the efforts of numerous individuals, online support sites, and teachers. Let us look briefly at each in turn.

ONLINE LEARNING SUPPORT SITES

Three entities have provided supportive frameworks in which Webheads have operated. All have, in one way or another, had roles in funneling newcomers into our programs and contributing to the robust and varied nature of our community.

Study dot Com, or English for Internet (<http://www.study.com>), offers free courses for language learners, which are taught by founder David Winet and qualified instructors volunteering to teach online. Features include an always-busy Chatterbox voice chat room and a prominent link on its Web page to Writing for Webheads. Tapped In (<http://www.tappedin.org>) is a well-funded, virtual space dedicated to educators that hosts regular weekly synchronous Webheads meetings and promotes them on its periodical announcements and e-mail lists. Finally, TESOL, the largest international professional organization for teachers of English, has often hosted Webheads presentations at its annual conferences, as well as special events such as Webheads in Action participation in annual EVOnline² sessions.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Webheads thrives and is managed through the interest of a growing community of teachers and students who find they benefit intrinsically from involvement with each other. To maintain its appeal to as wide a range of users as possible, Webheads relies entirely on free software and free Web sites. There has never been any institutional backing for the Webheads projects other than that available to individual community members. No funding for these communities has ever been requested or granted (except in the form of occasional offers of beta-test software), nor is there any budget whatsoever. No fees have ever been charged students nor is any expenditure required from them other than access to a computer and the Internet.

To maintain broad appeal, the Webheads communities have utilized freely available CMC tools, and incidental expenses (cost of internet and Web hosting, often free) have been borne by the individuals involved as part of normal expenses for professional development and continuing education. All concerned must feel that return on investment is high, as many have remained actively involved in these communities (from as long ago as 1998).

The Evolution of the Webheads

Webheads have shown themselves over time to be capable of maintaining high levels of professionalism and sophistication through community support without the need for fees or funding. It is instructive to examine the early development of these communities in order that others can initiate their own successful grass-roots programs.

HOW WEBHEADS GOT STARTED

The Webheads projects reach back to 1996 when I started to conduct an online e-mail writing and grammar course: English for Internet. Students who signed up

for the course received my directives by e-mail. I encouraged them to write to each other, but they exchanged e-mails mainly with me, the teacher, and almost never with each other. Once I had sent around "assignments" motivation dropped. "Work" (e.g., homework) was not what they had bargained for, and the word *assignment* carried connotations of obligation. They were far more interested in exploring options on the Internet in hopes they might have fun using it constructively.

The course was not entirely without merit, however, and one of my students voluntarily prepared a Web page for it. Now, this was fun! Just collaborating on the project was enjoyable, and the activities we came up with were interactive and graphically attractive. I was so impressed with the potential of Web documents to serve as a class focal point that I quickly learned HTML myself, registered with a free Web host, and started to put up pages to anchor all my online materials. I went on to set up Web pages to both introduce the students to each other and publish their writing, changing the name of the course to English for Webheads. Meanwhile, I was dabbling in synchronous communication tools and when I began work at a language institute in Abu Dhabi with a fast Internet connection accessible through its LAN, I was able to "hang out" in these chatrooms and meet others interested in online learning, as both students and teachers.

Then, in late 1998, I restructured the course yet again so that participation in the course and distribution of e-mails could be managed through eGroups, a free *listserv*.³ In order to do this, I had to close down English for Webheads (where I was forced to maintain class rolls and manage distribution lists for class e-mails myself) and resurrect it under the name Writing for Webheads (where eGroups kept tabs). I invited all involved to enroll in the new system, and most (around 50 participants) made the changeover.

Self-enrollment (and unenrollment, and a whole host of learner-managed features) was a strong appeal of the move to eGroups, now Yahoo! Groups, not only as a means of relieving the moderator of mundane record-keeping duties, but also in allowing learners to come and go in the community as they pleased. In fact, participation increased and now the low rate of attrition in the Writing for Webheads course (or, more correctly, community) is interpreted as positive feedback by the community's facilitators.

By May 2003, approximately 250 students and teaching peers had enrolled. However, active participation occurs between 10 and 20 percent of the group members, the others (known as "boundary members") hardly ever contribute to our discussions. Many seem to stay on the list because they appreciate what they learn from our list traffic. As one such member put it, she was a silent participant but a "loud" reader. As our popularity increases by word of mouth (or its Internet equivalent) and links to us on other people's Web pages proliferate, we have a constant influx of new members. The new members sometimes simply "lurk" on the sidelines, sometimes join us in a flurry of e-mails and then lapse into boundary member status, and sometimes become active participating members. It is the latter group of newcomers who constantly rejuvenate our communities.

Development of the Student Community

The student community was slow to develop, but after an initial period where gaining trust became crucial to course success, a threshold was crossed as students gradually sent in photos and shared personal vignettes, and numbers grew steadily. As Writing for Webheads accumulated students and, not insignificantly, their pictures and/or enough writing to reveal personality, its online presence continued to grow in the form of Web pages and in synchronous meetings at the Palace (an early avatar-based chat environment) and in other chat areas each week at Sunday noon Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). The effect was the formation of a community whose members, despite never having met, felt they were getting to know one another, and thus a climate favoring trust and sharing of knowledge through scaffolding was fostered.⁴

Learning from Communities, Conferences, and Real-World Interaction

The thrust of the Writing for Webheads project has been to help students develop English skills by completing tasks in a communicative exploration of free online CMC tools. Learning takes place through a two-way channel between native and nonnative speakers of English in a flourishing online community, where all concerned experiment with and share their knowledge of the technology, with language development taking place incidentally, on demand, and as a secondary focus of activities.

As this approach to language development gradually proved itself successful (in terms of learner enthusiasm for the program, as evidenced through growth in numbers and almost negligible attrition), it attracted the attention of teaching practitioners, especially when we started to use synchronous voice communication and announced our chats on listservs. Voice chat being a novelty at the time, our events proved quite popular.

We had already been involving our students in live online demonstrations of our use of CMC in language learning at both face-to-face and purely online professional conferences, but at the turn of the century our innovations with voice chatting resulted in our being invited to demonstrate our skill with voice and avatar-enabled chat at several international conferences, including Vancouver, Barcelona, Cyprus, Dubai, California, and Salt Lake City. We also participated in a number of purely online conferences, where our students had the opportunity to interact meaningfully in authentic communication with conference-goers. When the task is to prepare for and participate in an online conference, these purely online venues have proven to be a highly appropriate medium because all participants start out on an equal footing. The old joke (a *New Yorker* cartoon showing a mutt at a computer), "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog," works well at online conferences, where interactants tend to take each other at face value, and students find to their pleasant surprise that they can hold their own in real conversations with native speakers who make no effort to patronize them.

Students and Other Community Members

One reason that "real-world" tasks work well with Webheads is that they are real-world people. That is, it is difficult to conceive of activities that could be contrived (not concerned with real-world tasks) for such a diverse audience, and therefore it seems logical to introduce tasks with intrinsic appeal to individuals in the group. We now take a look at who the Webheads are, and how they interact in such a way that task-based instruction is appropriate to their various learning objectives.

WRITING FOR WEBHEADS

The students in Writing for Webheads range in age from early teens to septuagenarians, and come from all over the world. The most typical students are looking for ways to augment language skills, either after work or, if they are students, as an adjunct to more formal classes. Some of our "students" are nonnative-English-speaking teachers of English in their own countries, and their proficiency in English varies, with some frequently requesting help from the group on matters of translation or nuance, while others in this category are almost indistinguishable from native speakers. Thus, their distinction blurs with members of a third group of Webheads: native English speakers wishing to learn about CMC tools in order to gain experience of using them with students and then implement them in ways that will foster community development in their own teaching situations.

Teachers and students coexist in symbiotic relationship in Writing for Webheads. The teachers all volunteer, and students sign on without concern for fees. Essentially the teachers gain through firsthand experience with CMC tools while using these to facilitate language learning in a live community of learners online. Students appreciate the opportunity to develop their language skills in conjunction with learning the same computer skills favored by instructors. Table 10.1 shows how teachers and students interact and what they gain from their part in the process.

WEBHEADS IN ACTION

More recently, teaching professionals have joined our groups in such numbers that student participation has waned as that of teachers predominated. A way of introducing practitioners to methods of promoting community formation in online language learning was needed without diluting the integrity of student participation in the original project.

Webheads in Action, whose students are teaching professionals, began as part of the Electronic Village program of online sessions that have preceded each TESOL conference since 2001. Sessions are offered on any topic that contributes to the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages. They last six to eight weeks, are taught on a volunteer basis, and are open to anyone without fee. I offered to conduct a session on community building online. The plan was to bring the techniques that had worked so well in developing a community of stu-

TABLE 10.1. Webheads in Action

Aspect	Teaching Practitioners	Students
Motivation	Volunteer	Take advantage of opportunities for free English development in a communicative, supportive environment
Skills	Learn how to use CMC tools to teach	Develop language skills according to inclination
Tasks	Use CMC tools to facilitate language learning through maintenance of communities online	Learn how to use CMC tools for communicative and personal purposes
Outcomes	Teachers learn how to use CMC tools for personal, professional, and pedagogical purposes, and to correct what students write for their Web pages	

dents and teachers to bear on a community of teaching professionals who would learn not through being "taught" in a lecture environment but by working with a model that was set up to enable them to experiment with the concepts under consideration. Webheads in Action was thus a laboratory for creating communities so construed as to develop into the real thing. Accordingly the community did not disband in March 2002, as did every other session at the end of eight weeks, but continued to function organically until one year later when the experimental community embarked on its second EVOnline session on the topic of a principled inquiry into communities of practice through introspective study of its own development.

HOW THE TWO GROUPS INTERACT

At the time of this writing the two active groups, Writing for Webheads and Webheads in Action, remain very distinct in aims and in the nature and topics of postings to the respective groups. However, there is much overlap of membership, with many teaching Webheads participating in the student group and some bona fide students participating in the Webheads in Action group.

Topics and Tasks

The examples below give a sampling of the range of topics broached and illustrate some of the many genres of writing possible when students are given, or better, allowed to invent, purposeful tasks designed to facilitate their language learning.

TEACHERS COOPERATING ON PROJECTS

Aiden Yeh, a nonnative-English-speaking teaching professional at National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology, has utilized Writing for Webheads in several projects. In one, her students listened to a song by Michael Coghlan, an active member of Writing for Webheads and Webheads in Action and an accomplished guitarist and composer, who posts links to his music and accompanying exercises for English as a second language on his Web site. Aiden developed a Web page to set the task. The students were asked to listen to one of Michael's original compositions, "Fear of Being Too Good," and then give their own interpretation of the song. After her students had listened to the music, Aiden invited Michael to meet the class online and discuss the deeper meaning of the song. She followed up, using the transcripts of the conversation with Michael, and posted a Web page recording the event, as well as her students' reactions to the song and their interpretations of it in both text and student-recorded sound files.

Dr. Arif Altun, a nonnative-English-speaking professor with an Ed.D. in CALL from an American university, divides his time between two universities in Turkey, teaching methodology to Turkish EFL students. His class joined a Webheads Sunday noon GMT chat session; this resulted in a follow-up meeting with a class in China headed by yet another nonnative-English-speaking teacher of English in Liuzhou. The two classes later repeated the meeting as remote participants in a presentation that I orchestrated live at a conference in Abu Dhabi (Stevens and Altun 2002).

WRITERS COOPERATING ON THEMES AND TASKS

Writing for Webheads is a virtual counterpart to classes where students organize the activities and take responsibility for bringing materials to class to carry out projects in an environment rich in scaffolding provided by others. Initially there is no plan of action beyond an agreement to meet online and use English as a medium of discussing a topic or engaging in a loosely directed activity (or a somewhat formally constructed one, as in the case where we meet for conference presentations).

More directed activities have included variations on Webquests; for example, where several NNS students and teachers collaborated on a Web site describing Carnival and how it was celebrated in different parts of the world (see Susanne Nyrop's <http://home19.inet.tele.dk/susnyrop/sambaschool.html>). Going from the theme of "carnival schools," a group of Webheads discovered they had in common an interest in preparing national dishes and so they collaborated on a "cooking school" where they produced Web pages with pictures showing how they made their dishes and "projected" them (on the browsers of virtual participants) during a joint presentation in Tapped In during one of its Summer Carnival events to showcase progressive uses of that medium (<http://home19.inet.tele.dk/susnyrop/cooking/pancakes.html>). We have made other imaginative uses of seemingly simple features of Tapped In, such as the ability to create and project text notes. It has become a tradition at Halloween time for Webheads to hold a fancy dress party, where we "design" elaborate costumes by describing them on

these "notes" and then project them so that others present can imagine what we look like. The result is a collective role-play, with teachers and students acting out roles of fantasy creatures, which students very much enjoy, especially for the cultural insights, which we have supplemented by collectively preparing a Web site on Halloween themes (<http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/hallowebhead.htm>); also see our chatlogs from two such events: October 28, 2001 (<http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/chat2001/wfw011028.htm>), and November 3, 2002 (<http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/chat2002/wfw021103.htm>).

In a sense, participants in such chats are constantly role-playing through what is known as "emoting;" for example one participant might give another a virtual "hug" (or worse ;-)):

ChristopherMJ [sleepy] exclaims, "Hi everyone!"

VanceS [^-^] gets bucket of water ready to pour on Chris

ChristopherMJ [sleepy] says, "Hi Ying"

SusanneN hugs Chris and Ying

VanceS [^-^] says, "Hi Chris, Hi Ying"

ChristopherMJ [sleepy] enjoys the feeling of ice water running down his back

Ying [guest] says, "hi"

ChristopherMJ [sleepy] says, "Thanks, Vance, I needed that"

Role-plays can get even more elaborate. In one synchronous chat at the Palace the participants each spontaneously took on roles and put on an impromptu play (Stevens 1999). In this case, it started when one of the participants said she would like to write a play but didn't know how, so we offered to help her conceive one:

VANCE: Another idea is to come to class prepared to take on roles and use the chat logs as a script, or the start of one.

MAGGI: and the teacher is only a monitor or helps to jumpstart things when they stall

VANCE: But we'd have to have a storyline and characters defined.

MICHAEL C: That would be interesting Vance. Kind of develop the play as we go!

FELIX: let's start one now?

MICHAEL C: I'm willing Felix.

VANCE: Well, we could start on a plot now.

MAGGI: who wants to start

The characters were defined as the participants dreamt them up. Here, Ying Lan creates the role of a beautiful doctor named Sam:

YING-LAN: Sam is a doctor.
VANCE: Good start.
YING-LAN: ^she is a beautiful woman too.
MAGGI: What kind of doctor
MICHAEL C: Sam is a woman?
YING-LAN: ^Like thrapist
MAGGI: good . . . a beautiful female doctor

In this way, a set of roles was conceptualized. Then the participants in the chat changed their name designations to assume the roles of the characters they had hypothesized, and made up dialogue as they went along. It was easy for participants to become emotionally involved in their roles and in the impact of other roles on their character. Here is an excerpt from the resulting role-play:

BILL (FBI): Joyce—while you're waiting could you get out the files on all Dr Sam's patients please?
JOYCE: ^Sam, I have already noticed the lawyer, he will be here after one hour. Actually he is in court now.
SAM: those files are the my property dective
BILL (FBI): Did you speak with the dead woman jack?
SAM: and you need a court order to have them
JOYCE: ^But, sir . . . all the files are still in our office.
JACK: Yes, we had a small talk . . .
SAM: dead women can't speak
BILL (FBI): I have a court order. Here it is.
BILL (FBI): Very funny Dr.
JOYCE: ^ I did not bring those file.
SAM: excuse me a second while I read this over
BILL (FBI): Well go and get them would you Joyce.
JOYCE: But what do you want to know?
BILL (FBI): jack—are friends with Jseph?
SAM: Jooyce stay right here
BILL (FBI): I want to know everything Miss JOyce.
JACK: yep.. we used to play tennis together.
BILL (FBI): Dr—you are not being very helpful.

In other instances, the projects can be more personal. For example, one of our original Writing for Webheads students likes to write about her travels and feelings, especially in appreciation for something she has read or heard, such as the songs of Leonard Cohen, the poetry of Shel Silverstein, or the fantasy of the Harry

Potter series, which she was reading in the original before it became popular (see http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/efw_ying.htm). A Webhead from Brazil likes to tell us *about his country*, especially about the beaches and carnival, as well as get help with his studies. His Web pages show the nature and history of his region (and he was the *first Webhead to broadcast video* to the rest of the group) (see <http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/efwbahia.htm>). Another Webhead sends instant messages when she gets stuck translating documents for her school. In each of these cases the tasks are instigated by the students.

CMC Tools and Modalities

It can be seen that Webheads are communicative within the group in inventive and imaginative ways. This is quite an accomplishment for a group of people who in most cases have never met one another in person. We turn now to a consideration of the online tools that facilitate interaction.

SELECTION OF TOOLS

Primarily our materials are our computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools. These tools comprise text, graphics, voice, and video-based chat clients,⁵ which are often nominated by participants in the community. New CMC tools are not always discovered by the instructors, who are also participants, but often by the students. These tools are selected according to suitability to the purpose. For example, participants often enjoy using voice and video for communication, but there are times when text chat seems more appropriate to the purpose at hand. For example, there may be people in the chat who have no sound capability, so the group will opt for text chat mode. At other times, groups of voice chaters and those broadcasting Web cams will form breakout groups and find it hard to pay attention to the text chat. Higher than usual demands are placed on participants who fiddle with managing chats in multiple modes, which one of our participants characterized as "chaos navigation" (though once she started to get the hang of it, she changed that to "intuitive chaos navigation"). All of these modes of CMC interaction, whether challenging or phatic, contribute to the cohesion of the community of users that comprises the Webheads projects.

This brings us to the question of what CMC tools best lend themselves to distance language practice and formation and cohesion of communities of practice. Here are four considerations in selection of such tools (see appendix A to this chapter for a fuller description of specific tools used):

1. Cost: appropriate to the means of the institution. In an implementation such as Webheads, where there is no funding and the appeal to participants is to as broad a spectrum of users as possible, these tools must be free (to members of the community); that is, simply downloadable by anyone in the community with an Internet connection.

2. Ease of use: easy installation, no complicated registration, intuitive interface.
3. Multicasting capability: in order to engage groups of people, the ideal CMC tools need to broadcast one-to-many. Text chat easily meets this test, but the choices for multicasting voice and video (for free!) are limited.
4. Cross-platform adaptability: run on Mac and PC.

There is no need to look for an all-in-one CMC tool. Several communications tools can usually be run simultaneously over slow Internet connections on common denominator computers (although users can normally have only one sound and one video device running from the same computer at any given time). Thus CMC enthusiasts should be able to select from a choice of clients according to suitability to perform a given task. Webheads, for example, favor Tapped In for text chat, but Tapped In does not have multimedia capabilities. Therefore, we text-chat in Tapped In while using *other* CMC tools to effect our voice and Web cam sessions. There is no one tool that meets all our needs at all times, so we choose the tool that meets the occasion as one would select an arrow from a quiver to dispatch the target at hand.

Cooperation Worldwide

When starting out with CMC the first hurdle is to find a remote partner to experiment with. Once you begin to interact with a community, partners appear out of the virtual woodwork. For example, suppose I install a Web cam and want to see if it works. One good way to find out is to go online and check my buddy lists to find someone else who is online at the same time I am. I use several programs that tell me when other users of those programs are online; for example, ICQ, MSN Messenger, and Yahoo! Messenger. Chances are there will be someone online that I can ask if he or she can see my Web cam. Most people in my virtual community will take a few minutes to help each other with online troubleshooting of this nature. Thus, the community serves not only to inform, but also to assist with experimentation.

One teacher in China, Yaodong Chen (Stevens 2002b), has often asked me to help him surmount a technological hurdle, join him at an interesting Internet site, or speak with his students or colleagues for whom he is demonstrating techniques with CMC tools. In one such instance, he met some of our students at the Military Language Institute in Abu Dhabi online. In another, we engineered a meeting between students in his class and one in Turkey. That encounter pre-saged a reunion of the two classes before a live audience at the Teacher 2001 conference in Abu Dhabi (Stevens and Altun 2002).

On another occasion, this same teacher contacted me for help in answering riddles in English. It turned out he was at a MOO,⁶ called Grassroots (<http://www.enabling.org/grassroots/>). One characteristic of MOOs is that

they can have "bots"⁷ to interact with real people who visit the MOO. Yaodong had found a bot at Grassroots that asks riddles and handles attempts at answering them. This teacher was doing these with his students who were getting language practice not only with comprehending and attempting to answer the riddles, but through interaction with native English speakers in the "greater" online environment who were available at the time to help them understand the riddles and their possible answers. And this teacher was making use of the native speakers in his online community to successfully compensate for his own shortcomings in the language he was teaching, thus overcoming a common problem often faced by nonnative speaker teachers of foreign languages. This kind of interaction is an almost daily occurrence among Webheads community members who might find each other online and ask for various kinds of help.

MODALITIES, TASKS, AND MODERATOR ROLES

In a classroom or *blended* learning environment,⁸ an implementation such as Webheads would have a face-to-face component, but because Webheads is a purely online phenomenon, it has no classrooms but uses instead virtual spaces on the Internet. In these spaces, Writing for Webheads bases its interactions with students around three modalities. These are (1) e-mail funneled through our Yahoo! Groups listserv, (2) Web pages for publishing introductions and writing "assignments," and (3) synchronous multimedia chats. In this section, we will see what tasks are distributed throughout these modalities.

E-mail via Yahoo! Groups Listserv

The Yahoo! Groups for Writing for Webheads not only distributes e-mail but also allows individual members to self-regulate whether they want to receive this mail by choosing to remain on the list or not. It also provides other useful features such as allowing members to determine how e-mail from the group is delivered to them (choices are receive messages individually, in digest form, on none at all in case Web access is sufficient). However they prefer to receive e-mail, members are also able to read Webheads e-mail and post replies directly from any Internet-connected computer anywhere in the world. Besides archiving all Webheads list traffic at its Web site, Yahoo! Groups also provides convenient (and generous) upload and access to Files and Photos areas on each group's Web site, also accessible from (in theory) any Internet connection anywhere in the world. All these features are available for free to anyone who wishes to start a group on Yahoo! Groups.

Webheads make use of all these features, especially the e-mail list facility. Most writing in Webheads is geared toward developing fluency, and e-mail is a good vehicle for this. Webheads are encouraged to post on any topic they like, and the list can attract over 100 messages in a given month. The list moderator takes some of the messages (introductions and those that address threads under discussion), corrects them, and posts them to Web pages. Students are encouraged to compare their e-mail with what they see posted at the site. We do have some evidence that this is done: one student writes, for example, "About other

e-mails that you sent to me I print all of them and I study, compare, and underlined your corrections" (Stevens 2002a). Other than offering corrections when asked, posting corrected e-mails to Web pages is the extent of attention paid to accuracy by Writing for Webheads. Some of the tasks associated with this modality are

- sending and managing e-mail;
- joining a listserv (such as *efiwebheads*);
- creating, configuring, and managing participation in a learner management system (LMS), for example, starting a group on Yahoo! Groups and accumulating participants through a call of some kind; and
- uploading digital photos to an LMS space.

Web Pages for Publishing Introductions and Writing "Assignments"

Although training and assistance have been offered, most of the Webheads Web pages have been created and posted by the main Webheads instructor. The content of the students' pages derives from the students and is harvested as follows: Once students find us on the Internet and subscribe to our Yahoo! group, they might eventually be invited or take it upon themselves to send an introduction message to the group. This introduction will be made into a Web page linked from the Student Page where all Writing for Webheads students are listed (see <http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/students.htm>). If a student supplies a picture, it will be put on the Web page in near-original form, with a thumbnail version on the Student page and in the gallery of all available student portraits on the *main portal page*. Then a message is sent to the list indicating how everyone can meet the new student at the new URL. Often this is the first time that these students will have had any kind of a Web presence and they are usually pleased and impressed to see their writing made so widely accessible.

The portals for all the Webheads projects follow a formula that we believe enhances community building. The ingredients in this formula are all items that project pictures and personalities of community members in an effort to introduce participants in the community to one another. To accomplish this, the group portals each have a main page with a description of the group and a gallery of thumbnail pictures of everyone who has sent a photo. With more than fifty such portraits on each portal page at present, the portal becomes a tableau of our community. When the pictures are clicked on, details of community members are revealed. Through this network of pages, visitors to the site can get to know the person behind the face.

As members address various topics, their writings are collected onto pages devoted to each topic. Each message as it appears on the page is illustrated with thumbnail portraits (where available) linking back to the student's page, so that visitors to the site can read a message or essay, click on the adjacent portrait, and read about the person who has written that piece. The Student's Page can serve as a portfolio for a student's work and link to other pieces the student has written. As many such pages accumulate over the years, an interesting gazette is devel-

oped that effectively records and contributes to the culture of the community. Some of the tasks associated with this modality are

- writing on various topics and genres;
- creating Web pages;
- taking digital photos and manipulating them (cropping them, resizing them, making thumbnail versions);
- recording digital audio and/or video, compressing it, and posting it to Web pages;
- putting students and teachers in communication with one another through as many senses as can be conveyed via Web pages posted on the Internet; and
- building Web pages explaining how the tools are used and exploited (e.g., Webheads in Action has a syllabus [http://www.geocities.com/vance_stevens/papers/evonline2002/syllabus.htm] to explain CMC and applying this to language learning; and Writing for Webheads has tutorials [<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/tutorials/tutorlist.htm>]).

Synchronous Multimedia Chats

Chatting online is the third modality on which Webheads bases its interactions with students and other participants in the community. In addition to numerous other virtual venues, Webheads have met every Sunday noon GMT synchronously online in one place or another since late 1998. Most of these chats have been logged and placed on the Internet with graphics showing screen shots of our interactions and pictures of people in the chats (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/chatlogs.htm>).

The base for our chats has varied over the years. At first, we used ICQ to find each other online. ICQ was unique in the late twentieth century for being one of the first chat clients to tell you when other people you wanted to meet had actually logged on to the Internet—essential knowledge when consummating group meetings online. We used ICQ to chat with each other and to even engage in multiuser conferences, though its multiple windows, one for each user, were not ideal for following such conversations.

Meanwhile, we had discovered the Palace, one of the most enjoyable text-chat clients we have encountered. The Palace was rich with features conducive to language learning. It allowed us to make our own avatars with our photos or graphics of fanciful objects. The avatars displayed cartoon bubbles when speaking, so it was easy to distinguish who had said what, and meanwhile a chat log was generated so that learners could recoup what they couldn't follow in the chat itself. From the log we could copy URLs we showed each other and paste them to our browsers. We started logging our chats at our Web site in an effort to share the experience with members in our community vicariously, and to give those who were there a record that they could use to study what had been said and thus improve their English.

A significant portion of the discourse generated in the Palace was about using features of the Palace, explaining to newcomers how to make their speech bubble stay on screen, for example, and, thus, it generated a rich matrix of contextualized comprehensible input for students. It was also not at all beyond the capabilities of second language learners to use. We would often encounter students on line in ICQ, invite them to the Palace, find out they had never installed the program, and have them with us in the Palace and using the software within about half an hour (and most of that was download time).

Meanwhile we were exploring other playgrounds to enhance our chat. We early on experimented with voice-enhanced communications across the Web, sending each other e-mails with Real Media or Pure Voice attachments, sometimes putting the Real Media files up on Web pages. This was at a time when expensive phone calls were considered to be the only option for most people to hear each other's voices from half a world away, so it was a significant breakthrough to have a means of speaking to one another at no cost, and to the students' advantage, be able to attend to pronunciation issues (one of which was learning how to pronounce each other's names). The students often took the lead in this. One student, for example, thought it would help her pronunciation if she could send us compressed sound files of her reading poetry and short stories, and we could give her feedback on her pronunciation in real time using our voice tools during our Sunday chats. It was also a student, this one from Brazil, who broadcast the first video to be seen on Webheads (http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/felix_see.htm), leading others among us to follow in his footsteps once greater availability of bandwidth became possible.

The real-time voice tool that had the biggest impact on our development at the turn of the century was Hear Me. This allowed multiple users to gather in voice chat rooms and not only talk clearly to one another but converse in text chat. Inevitably someone would join the chat who could hear us but had no microphone, so this person would respond in text while others talked. The text feature was also valuable when we wanted to convey certain information such as proper names or URLs, or when there was a breakdown, or breakup, in voice communication. Sometimes several of us would be interacting in combination text and voice when someone would appear online who had no sound capabilities. Rather than break off and regroup elsewhere, this person would be invited to join us, and then the chat might proceed in silent text for some time, so as to include the newcomer.

What is the purpose of these chats and what would be their counterpart in traditional education, usually conducted face to face? Classes in brick and mortar institutes meet regularly for class business, and transactions in class assume some degree of formality in order to enhance the efficiency of time spent there. After class, classmates might retire to a more social venue and talk about whatever they like. Though this is not seen as part of the class, any college freshman understands that this is a valued aspect of life at college. Thus, in Webheads, chatting is carried out in after-class mode. The moderators quickly learned that there was really no place for moderators in these chat sessions. If there was ever any attempt to set *regular* topics for the chats, this was abandoned early in our interactions to-

gether, since any attempt to keep participants on topic was invariably met with asides on the weather and greetings and interruptions from people coming and going (this applies to a *long* term course of interaction; perhaps not for a course of limited duration).

It has become clear that the modalities of e-mail and Web sites are the places in our online environment where business is conducted, not, as one might extrapolate through false analogy to face-to-face learning in a bricks-and-mortar institute, the chat rooms. Chat venues create good opportunities for people to come together to expound briefly on central themes, and in fact these might be discussed *out of interest*, and this is important, *not* because a moderator has made any sustained effort to keep people's noses to the grindstone. It has become clear over the years that people value these chats for social reasons, the same way villagers might gather regularly in pubs or tea houses, not to conduct business but to socialize. But there might be some business conducted in these gatherings, and in fact the socialization is critical to the way business is conducted when it comes time for that. So in the same way that a village sustains its community spirit around its after-hours meeting places, Webheads has sustained its community spirit in large part by virtue of its weekly chats. Furthermore, the fact that people regularly turn up by the dozens week after week and year after year for these chats lends credence to the assertion that they do so due to their enjoyably interactive nature; it is hard to imagine that they would remain so loyally committed to events more like business meetings run week after week.

Another draw of these online meetings is their exploratory nature. Webheads are generally eager and willing to experiment with each other's new discoveries. Willingness is important; Webheads do not respond "not now" when asked out of the blue in an instant message suddenly appearing on one's computer screen in the middle of the work day if they can stop what they are doing to help the interlocutor test a Web cam or see if PowerPoint slides can be made to launch remotely on the former's computer. This kind of thing happens at any time when Webheads leave their instant messengers up and running,⁹ but of course during the regular Sunday chat times, when so many Webheads are online at the same time, the urge to experiment can lead to challenging dimensions in multitasking. Some of the tasks associated with this modality are

- registering, installing, and using *instant messenger* software;
- establishing Internet connections from remote locations including home, school, and cybercafes;
- exploring a variety of virtual worlds, and creating and manipulating objects in those worlds;
- engaging in creative role-plays online;
- saving and exploiting chat logs;
- using synchronous voice communications online in communicative ways that enhance language acquisition;
- conducting phatic and communicative activities utilizing the broadcasting of Web cams; and

- communicating with community members while managing voice and video Webcasting with multiple participants, such as conducting online tours, engaging in online training, or participating in conferences online.

Evaluation

There have been a few efforts to evaluate Webheads through qualitative methods (see <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/efi/reports.htm> for a listing of many such reports). Stevens and Coghlan (2001a, 2001b, 2001c) did a study in which students in Writing for Webheads were asked what was important to them about the class, and from responses a questionnaire was drawn up and commented on by many of the students. The most interesting offshoot of this limited study was that it started an introspective dialogue between students and practitioners in the group; the latter were forced to explain and defend *their methods* against the more traditional views of the students. This airing of views was a healthy outcome for a community trying to reconcile its focus on communication and socialization with lack of assignments of grammar and reading exercises for the students (<http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/methods.htm>).

There is, however, a wealth of anecdotal evidence on how individual Webheads are responding to the learning environment created on their behalf. Coghlan (2000) cites a remark made by one of our original Webheads students from Taiwan: "We could find a lot of English grammar books in bookstores, libraries and other Web sites. But only the Webheads teachers give us a response fast. That's our Webheads' wonderful treasure. I can not find such a good precious pearl in the world as Webheads."

More comments from Writing for Webheads students have been collected at Stevens (2002a). For example: "I've been connecting on the Internet since last year and it was one of the best things that ever happened to me because as I don't have any English native speakers living down here, it was difficult for me to correct my accent, mistakes and the like. But now I have lots of help. The classes at The Palace have been an important source of information for me. They have good teachers: Vance, Margaret, Vera, Michael, Claudia, and Begum to name but a few" (Felix, Bahia, Brazil, March 1999).

We have also had interaction with passersby to our Web pages. Bicknell (1998), in one of the first reports ever done on Webheads, found "the public nature of their discussions and the work on their Web pages/sites is the ultimate evaluation as the other students . . . and any Internet user who happens on their site . . . are free to comment on the English content of the pages." The Webheads in Action group too has accumulated a collection of testimonials, which can be found on the Webheads in Action portal page (Stevens 2003). Some examples:

"You have all contributed to my personal development as examples of 'can do, will do' people. I am amazed at your skills, energy and dynamism and impressed by your talents and output" (posted to the *evonline2002_webheads* Yahoo! Groups list, February 2003).

"We are so lucky to be part of Webheads, this resourceful and sharing group of human beings who have introduced us to the wonderful world of e-learning" (posted to *EVOnline* moderator training Yahoo! Groups list, November 2002).

"This CoP [community of practice] has been one of the best professional development opportunities of my entire career—thank you all for being so supportive and eager to work together!" (posted to the *evonline2002_webheads* Yahoo! Groups list, March 29, 2003).

Additionally, this group recorded some longer essays on what the experience has meant to them professionally at the end of the *EVOnline* 2002 eight-week sessions (see http://www.geocities.com/vance_stevens/papers/evonline2002/week8.htm#reflections).

In early 2003, the group hosted a second *EVOnline* session whose purpose was to study itself as an example of a distributed community of practice. In the course of this session and subsequent colloquium, several Webheads in Action members evaluated how participation in the community had informed their teaching practices. Some documents to emerge from this introspection are Teresa Almeida d'Eça's comprehensive listing of the many Webheads sites all over the Web (<http://www.malhatlantica.pt/teresadeca/webheads/wia-index.htm>), and Arlyn Freed's database approach at getting to grips with all the output and organizing it in a searchable Web page (<http://www.eslhome.com/cop2003/db.htm>). During the sessions themselves Dafne Gonzales organized a week-long session on "How participation in a community of practice informs and influences the participants' personal teaching practices" and documented her work at a Web page with links to testimonials prepared by her comoderators (<http://dygonza.esmartweb.com/evonline2003/week5/w5p1.htm>). One of the most intriguing outcomes from that session was Buthaina Al Othman's impressive Web page documenting her capabilities before and after joining Webheads in Action (http://www.geocities.com/esl_efl_ku/). The transformation is apparent and clearly illustrated from the relatively flat pages before the influence and the JavaScript and frames effects of the more recent pages. These pages also link to a list of things Buthaina learned from Webheads in Action (http://geocities.com/esl_efl_ku/thingsilearned_wia.htm).

I was once asked after a conference presentation how we handled evaluation in the Writing for Webheads group. I realized the question was about how we judged the students, but I answered that we judge ourselves highly on the fact that after several years we are still going strong with increases in student numbers, many participants having stayed with the community since the very beginning. Although there is no testing or formal evaluation in the Webheads projects, we receive constant and mostly unsolicited positive feedback in terms of growth in and enthusiasm for our endeavors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter I have tried to explain the many facets of the Webheads projects in the context of current trends in the facilitation of language learning through

constructivist and task-based approaches. In so doing I am hoping to provide a model that others might use to achieve similar implementations in their own learning contexts. For example, we show in our model how students might practice and improve fluency through chat, e-mail, and postings of extemporaneous compositions to Web pages. In your situation you might want to include other genres, or build in mechanisms for greater feedback or evaluation.

It is important to realize that application of such a model to one's own context will depend on many factors. For example, do you meet your students primarily face-to-face or, like in the Webheads projects, almost entirely online? Or are you working in a blended environment where you see your students but are developing components for them to interact online? What performance objectives are set for your students and how do you evaluate them? Do you have enough flexibility in your situation that you can engage in exploratory learning, or can you write rubrics that will accommodate learning within constructivist frameworks? Your specific application of the principles explored in this chapter will depend on your answers to these questions.

The main message from the Webheads projects is that e-learning environments can and should be set up to lower the affective filter and promote the formation of a sense of community among members of those environments. Techniques for accomplishing this online include the sharing of still and moving images, and voices as well as text messages that give participants in a community an indication of who they are and what values and aspirations they share. It is the contention of this chapter that tasks directed at sharing such information can be powerful catalysts for language learning. Certainly these contribute to the willingness and motivation of learners to want to communicate with each other, thus giving them a reason for wanting to use the language under study that can be lacking in learning environments where attention to community has not been well developed.

The Webheads experience has shown that our model can be applied successfully in language learning and teacher training in predominantly online, or distributed, communities of practice. It seems reasonable to assume that there are countless other situations to which the tenets of our project might be applied.

Appendix A: Chat Clients Useful in CMC (as of Early 2003)

The following are CMC tools we have used and their limitations:

SOFTWARE MENTIONED AND WHERE TO GET IT

Blackboard—Blackboard, Inc., <http://www.blackboard.com> (license required)
 Chatterbox voice chat client, Talking Communities Online,
<http://www.talkingcommunities-online.com/Client.html> (license required)
 ICQ—ICQ.com, web.icq.com (free)
 iVisit—iVisit, <http://www.िवisit.com> (free)
 MSN Messenger—MSN, <http://messenger.msn.com> (free)

Netmeeting—Microsoft, <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting/> (free)

PalTalk—PalTalk.com, <http://www.paltalk.com/>

Wimba, <http://www.wimba.com> (license required for threaded voice and voice chat software; voice e-mail still free as of early 2003)

Yahoo! Messenger, <http://messenger.yahoo.com/messenger/download/index.html>

FIVE FACTORS TO CONSIDER

1. Cost

Wimba is a great product and has working relations with Longman, IBM, and Blackboard, but users must purchase the ability to create threaded voice boards. Webheads are currently helping to beta-test a Wimba product called Voice Direct. Another fairly robust voice chat client allowing the creation of voice chat rooms to accommodate numerous users is Chatterbox, but again, it's not free (however, Chatterbox can be tried out online, for free, at StudyCom English for Internet; <http://www.study.com>).

2. Ease of Use

Most of the free CMC tools are fairly easy to use (with the possible exception of iVisit—not intuitive how to use it).

3. Multicasting Capability

Do not support multiple conference users: Some free chat clients, in their freely downloadable form, are strictly one-to-one. This is the case (in early 2003) with MSN Messenger's voice enhanced chat, and Netmeeting (which is especially easy to use when conveniently launched from an MSN Messenger session). Netmeeting is an excellent CMC tool, with a useful whiteboard in addition to robust voice and video broadcast capabilities. The whiteboard enables users, for example, to draw or paste an image onto the whiteboard of one computer and have it appear on the whiteboard of the remote computer (very handy). Server software to enable Netmeeting multicasting is available but, unfortunately, not for free.

Allow multicasting: There are at least three free chat clients that will enable voice and video multicasts. PalTalk will allow one voice speaker at a time to communicate in conference with multiple listeners, and these conference participants can select up to four available Web cams to view at any one time. Yahoo! Messenger does even better than that, allowing voice users to meet en masse and speak in duplex in conference mode, with voice quality and users allowed seemingly limited only by bandwidth available. Yahoo! also allows broadcast and reception of multiple Web cams, again limited only by system resources available to the computer. Mac users can broadcast and receive video, though it seems that they can't access Yahoo! Messenger voice (as of this writing, but this appears likely to change).

4. Cross-Platform Adaptability

Enter iVisit, a cross-platform Mac and PC chat client that allows free creation of chat rooms and the ability to get multiple Web cams and voice users therein. However, in practice, I have found the downside to be that the interface is not intuitive (how *do* you create a chatroom?), voice can be erratic or not function at all, and the video display is inferior to Yahoo!'s. However, if the community contains both Mac and PC users, and if there is a need for voice and video enabled chat, iVisit is currently the only choice.

5. Ability to Fit into an Eclectic Approach to Usage of CMC Tools

The best in text chat: All the above clients are text-enabled, and this is important when sound is not clear, or when someone wants to copy and paste a URL that the others in the conference can click on. Most will also allow you to save your chats (though not Yahoo! Messenger conference chat). The best free text chat client, is Tapped In (<http://www.tappedin.org>), the portal for a community of educators who can join for free, keep and decorate offices, have chat transcripts mailed to them, join in online community activities, have avatars, project URLs on remote computers, and avail themselves of other features ranging from the amusing to truly utilitarian.

The preferred choices for an eclectic approach to implementation of CMC in language learning: The ideal CMC environment available today is an amalgam of all that is useful. My own choice for multimedia CMC on a PC is to meet in Tapped In and then open a multiple-user voice chat conference in Yahoo! Messenger and share video windows with those who have Web cams. If Mac users are present, iVisit might be the best bet, but look for Yahoo! to do more in the near future to accommodate Mac users.

Notes

1. An avatar is a digital representative of a participant in an online environment. An avatar can be an icon of some kind (a flat graphic representation of the participant) or an animated object.
2. EVOnline is the Electronic Village associated with TESOL.
3. A listserv is a mailing list that can be subscribed to in such a way that members can send e-mail messages to one another simply by addressing the "list."
4. As of May 2003, there are approximately 350 Webheads involved in Writing for Webheads and Webheads in Action. There are about 110 participants only in Webheads in Action, about 220 solely in Writing for Webheads, and perhaps 20 involved in both groups. Given current trends, these numbers are likely to increase in the near term.
5. Chat client is an interface through which participants in a chat connect with one another, e.g., Yahoo! Messenger.
6. A MOO is a MUD Object Oriented; object-oriented means it has graphics objects. MUD is a multiuser dungeon, from the game Dungeons and Dragons, a virtual

navigable maze. A MUD supports multiple players connecting from remote locations to the same virtual maze space. A MUD is usually text-based.

7. A *bot* is short for *robot*. It is an automated process that is programmed to interact with a user in such a way that the user perceives intelligence in what is, in fact, mechanically algorithmic.
8. Blended refers to learning environments where a curriculum has both online and face-to-face components (as opposed to purely one or the other).
9. An instant messenger (sometimes called instant messenger) is a kind of chat client that registers a user's "buddies" in such a way that they can "see" each other whenever they log on to the Internet (and on to that particular chat client).