


# BRAZ-TESOL NEWSLETTER

Issue 4, 2010



**BEST WISHES  
FOR 2011**



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear teacher,

It really seems like yesterday that I was writing to you for the first time as the BT Newsletter editor. Time does seem to fly when you're busy and having fun. As I write this, I can see holiday lights outside my window signaling the end of one more year. But I don't feel it's the end of anything – it's the beginning of a new cycle.

Instead of going over the BT News issues as usual, I'll let you flip through the pages and discover what we have in store for you by yourself.

This is not only the last issue of 2010, but also the last issue of the present BT Board – next time you read this, Jeff Stranks will be the one "talking" to you. In the next edition, a whole new group of people, chosen by you, will be busying themselves with keeping BT the lively association it is today.

Being part of BT has been one of the greatest learning experiences of my personal and professional life. All the hard work, the rewards, and the compromise that come with the job, helped me grow and prosper. A huge thanks to everyone who helped with the BT News, but a special thanks to you, BT Member, for whom we make this publication and the reason of the BT existence.

I wish the new board all the success in the world!!!

Best wishes,

Daphne Walder

BT 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President 2009-2010



**Daphne  
Walder**  
Editor



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# ARTICLES

## PLN: The paradigm shift in teacher and learner autonomy



Vance Stevens was an ESL teacher for 20 years and has since moved through CALL coordination and commercial ESL software development to consultancy in CALL environments to his current position as lecturer in computing at Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi. He is the coordinator of The Webheads, a community of practice of hundreds of language teachers online. He has been working for the past decade on promoting professional development and learner autonomy via social media and collaboration in online spaces.

In 1998 I started teaching an online EFL class that met in The Palace, where each teacher and student interacted in text chat using an avatar. I created a web page for the students, called it Writing for Webheads, and we had soon accumulated numerous student photos and writings online (still viewable at <http://prosites-vsteven.homestead.com/files/efi/webheads.htm>). When we installed a voice plugin on the website so students could talk with one another and to the world at large, we invited the world to our chats and caught the attention of teachers worldwide. In 2002 I conducted an EVO or TESOL Electronic Village Online class to model to teachers how to start such online communities, and Webheads in Action was born, <http://webheads.info>.

The Webheads community has remained robust for a dozen years now. It has hundreds or perhaps a thousand members in its various online spaces. We have met each Sunday at noon GMT at <http://tappedin.org> for the past decade, around 600 consecutive weeks now. We have put on three major online conferences for free, <http://wiaoc.org/>. Members still send a dozen mails a day via our YahooGroup mailing list (well over 25,000 messages in all; <http://groups>.

**"Webheads are one key component of a network of educators who collaborate constantly online, ..."**

[yahoo.com/group/evonline2002\\_webheads/](http://yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/)), and we have been the subject of several dissertations studying communities of practice, even attracting the attention of Etienne Wenger in this regard.

Many people calling themselves Webheads teach all over the globe, and many of these are in South

America, especially in Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela. Normally we collaborate online, but occasionally we are able to meet in person. I met several Webheads

from South America when they obtained grants to attend the last WorldCall conference in Fukuoka, and I have met several dynamic Brazilian Webheads such as Barbara Dieu and Carla Arena at TESOL conferences in the USA.

Webheads are one key component of a network of educators who collaborate constantly online, each as a node in what we can call a PLN, or personal learning network. To each individual, the PLN is just that, personal. But in aggregate, a PLN, or what we might





view as a Venn set of constantly interacting and overlapping PLN contain huge potential for ensuring that teachers remain lifelong learners, and are thus able to inculcate a passion for lifelong learning in their students and in one another.

Too often teachers are put in situations which are labeled professional development but which in reality are (a) driven top-down, (b) don't address teacher needs, and (c) do not lead to development. Teachers who drive their own professional development through participation in PLNs constantly express and address each other's needs, and promote professional development on an as-needed basis, from where it is only a short leap to applying it to students.

Social networking is a term that was coined a century ago, so the notion is not new, but technology has given that notion vastly expanded scale and dimension. Last century our networks were limited to those we met or corresponded with, but now we can consider our networks to encompass not only those we know but also those who know the ones we know, and so on. In theory, any knowledge in that greater network should be accessible to any individual node within that network, and theories such as connectivism have emerged to explain how this works for educators who engage each other online.

This means that our dream of lifelong learning becomes a reality easily within our grasp, but it also carries with it a grave responsibility. As educators, we are charged with exploring new ways of learning and guiding our students into constructive uses of the potentials and affordances of technology best suited to leveraging that learning. This is our great challenge as we enter an era where we must empower future knowledge workers

with 21st century skills to enable them to cope with the demands we can't anticipate of jobs that haven't even been invented yet.

In order to meet this challenge we must retool the way we conceive and approach

education. This summer \*I plan to come to BRAZ-TESOL to speak about ten "paradigm shifts" that teachers need to understand in order to apply them in transformative ways to students (see Stevens, 2009).

Used correctly, technology can greatly facilitate the process of any kind of learning, language learning in particular; incorrectly it can be an obstacle. I hope to explain that using technology is less about interfaces and settings than about having a theory of learning, and adapting technology tools to foster development in a subject matter in ways commensurate with that model of learning. Web 2.0 is the driving force for technology to be applied in constructivist and connectivist models of learning. I explain how such tools can enable learners to leave artifacts online where other learners can find and interact with them, intrinsically motivating students to produce quality work in response to a palpable awareness of audience. I will explain how tagging and RSS enable students to move away from the old ways of information dissemination to find one another online, themselves control this interaction, and utilize it in their learning. In order for teachers to grasp the fundamentals of applying

technology to transformative learning, practice with peers is necessary, where teachers themselves become mentors for one another while sharing discoveries and experiences. I plan to suggest ways that teachers can develop their own personal learning networks to ensure their continuous lifelong learning, and cultivate 'teacher autonomy', where the teachers are in their roles by virtue of being 'master learners.'

I hope to help frame for teachers how their role vis a vis their students has changed already this century. I hope to show how making

the necessary paradigm shifts should apply in transformative ways to students, how Web 2.0, tagging, and RSS are crucial to this process, and how teachers can develop their

own personal learning networks to practice continuous lifelong learning and 'teacher autonomy' before applying it to students.

## References

Stevens, Vance. (2009). Modeling Social Media in Groups, Communities, and Networks. TESL-EJ, Volume 13, Number 3: <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/past-issues/volume13/ej51/ej51int/>

**"... PLN contain huge potential for ensuring that teachers remain lifelong learners ..."**

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\* Note: Vance Stevens was invited to write this article prior to presenting at the 12<sup>th</sup> BRAZ-TESOL National Convention in July.