

Webheads

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Framing the Issue

The preferred reference to Webheads is “Webheads in Action” (WiA or #webheadsinaction, because the tag #webheads confounds with Spiderman artifacts online). The term Webheads originates with David Winet, who created a free Web site called EFI (English for Internet) at Study.com, which for nearly two decades offered free language classes by matching volunteer instructors with virtual students. Late last century, Winet was experimenting with The Palace, an avatar-based space where clickable doors created an illusion of depth, and in 1997 he sent students interested in “3D classrooms” to the author and other teachers who were using such spaces with students.

Webheads came about when the author’s classes merged with those of two other teachers at The Palace, Michael Coghlan’s from Australia and Maggi Doty’s from Germany. The author created a Web page for the newly merged classes called Writing for Webheads (WfW; <http://prosities-vstevens.homestead.com/files/efi/webheads.htm>). Students were persuaded to send pictures and a gallery of photos was started which lent the site a personality that predated what Martin Dougiamas and Mark Zuckerberg would achieve next century with Moodle and Facebook (in 2002 and 2004, respectively). Connection was established using a variety of voice and graphics tools so the Web site anticipated social networks, except that, because there only existed Web 1.0 at the time, all the content had to be put online by Stevens, though it was provided by the students and a growing number of teachers who became interested in what was being done and started joining in the activities (Stevens, 1999, 2007).

There was no syllabus, but a “living curriculum” was used as conceived by Wenger (1998). All writing was done authentically, with language learners interacting with each other and with native English speakers both through the Web site and in synchronous events held regularly in several online spaces. Chat logs were posted online—the earliest dating from September 1998, which is how Webheads dates itself from that year (<http://prosities-vstevens.homestead.com/files/efi/chatlogs.htm>).

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Making the Case

Teaching practitioners had already developed an interest in Webheads' online activities when WiA was formed as part of a 2002 TESOL-sponsored EVO session moderated by Vance Stevens (Electronic Village Online, <http://evosessions.pbwiki.com/>). That session aimed to introduce teachers to online learning communities by modeling the techniques that had succeeded with WfW. Many people believe that Webheads started with the EVO session, but this is true only for the CoP (community of practice) of educators who joined the Yahoo Group created for that session at https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/evonline2002_webheads/info. That group has grown from the 87 enrolled in the original session to 1082 at this writing. In 2009 there were 538 enrolled members (see <http://vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/community.htm>) and the 1000 mark was surpassed in 2012. Since then membership has risen slightly (more new members continue to enroll than leave the list) though the number of messages posted to the list has tapered off, as shown in Figure 1.

However, statistics can be misleading. Not all Yahoo Group members are active (over 300 current emails are listed as bouncing) yet the number of posts does not track all interaction among members. The reason for this is that WiA members do not interact exclusively in Yahoo Groups. It is difficult to determine who is a Webhead because they interact in so many places. WiA has a Facebook group with 376 members, a Google+ community with 214, and a LinkedIn group with 413 (URLs given at <http://webheads.info>). Also, Jeff Lebow created a domain at <http://webheadsinaction.org> which is maintained as a Drupal site at the disposal of WiA.

In addition WiA members have formed other networks and communities where interaction takes place. One example is *Becoming a Webhead (BaW)*, a series of EVO sessions moderated annually 2004–2013 by a team of original Webheads. These sessions have created a parallel network introducing hundreds of participants to WiA by going back to the precepts of modeling community-building using CMC tools (Almeida d'Eça & González, 2006). Though the founders of this movement have retired from BaW, a new group of moderators has emerged from the network and is perpetuating essentially the same concept with an EVO session called ICT4ELT, just completing its third session 2014–2016.

Whereas BaW served to welcome newbies to WiA, others have explored its ramifications as a social media phenomenon. A second EVO session in 2003 explored WiA as an instance of CoP culminating in a colloquium at the 2003 TESOL conference, documented at <http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/tesol/baltimore2003/copractice.html>. The concept of WiA as a CoP has fueled at least four dissertations (Steele, 2002; Simpson, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Costa, 2007 and 2010).

An even wider network of educators interested in connectivist CMC was reached by organizing three free Webheads in Action Online Convergences in 2005, 2007, and 2009 (WiAOC http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/wiaoc_index.htm). Other online conferences at the time erected pay-walls but the 2005 conference showed that online conferences could be instigated for free by communities acting on their own initiative. It was "the epitome of connectivist

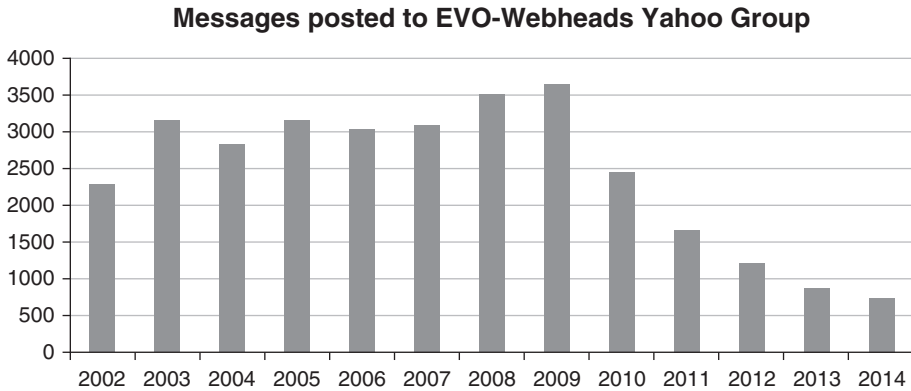


Figure 1 Messages posted over time as per evonline2002_webheads Yahoo Group analytics.

learning at the time, pre-dating by a year the first K-12 Online Conference in 2006, and by two years the first of many conferences that George Siemens held for free and recorded and distributed as open resources” (Stevens, 2014). Hunter (2006) called it “a marvelous example of community spirit and professional development, offering participants a myriad of examples of best online practices and cutting-edge technologies being used by learning professionals throughout the world in an informal learning environment” (see also Stevens, 2005; Stevens & Dudeney, 2009).

Etienne Wenger appeared as a keynote speaker at WiAOC 2007. Wenger’s writings had established criteria for defining a CoP against which Johnson (2005) had measured WiA. Johnson found WiA departed from Wenger’s stipulation that distributed CoPs had well delineated spaces for interaction (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). After his keynote, Wenger was asked if his brush with WiA had altered his concept of CoP, and he replied that WiA was clearly a CoP but one that existed in more virtual spaces than he had originally thought possible (see comments at Stevens, 2007).

Pedagogical Implications

The value of WiA to teachers should be self-evident from the fact that it has sustained itself for almost two decades, but one might wonder what it is about Webheads that elicits ongoing participation in the community and also why one would want to join it. People join because they find like-minded colleagues with whom they can interact informally when they need help with a professional matter, or when asked for help. This help might be with a technical issue, or it might be a request to connect students online or find subjects for research projects or partners in professional collaboration. It is not hard to find examples of such instances in WiA artifacts online, but the most illustrative examples are stories.

One such story is about a project where teachers in WiA used Web 2.0 tools to have their students start blogs, tag their posts #writingmatrix, and then find each other's blogs using Technorati, a tool that at the time would ferret out all posts in the blogosphere with a given tag. It was possible to connect classes in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and Slovenia in an experience where the teachers learned a lot about social networking and its ability to engage students, and the students practiced their English in a context which they thoroughly enjoyed as they made new friends and gained insights into other cultures. Unlike other similar projects, this one did not require teachers to coordinate with each other, but simply get their students blogging and tagging in order for them to participate worldwide. The teachers involved then created a multimedia presentation for the 2007 K-12 Online Conference, presented it at WiAOC 2007, and two of them met face-to-face in Fukuoka, Japan, to present a paper on the project at WorldCALL 2008 (Stevens, Quintana, Zeinstejer, Sirk, Molero, & Arena, 2008).

With over 31,000 messages in its Yahoo Group archives (which, along with all Webheads archives, are open to all) one can explore the many appeals and successes reported over the years, too many to encapsulate here. However, there was an outpouring of Webheads goodwill evidenced in this thread in June 2014, when Ali Bostancioglu started interviewing WiA members as part of his dissertation research. This prompted one member to write the list about what a positive experience it was for her, and this elicited over 30 messages of reminiscences about community experiences over the years, including the surfacing of at least one participant who had not interacted with us for years. It is indicative of the community spirit that such enthusiasm for WiA can still appear in this one sample message thread: https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/evonline2002_webheads/conversations/topics/31138.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Webheads to pedagogy is the notion that for teachers to inculcate connectivist methods in students, their professional development must incorporate these same methods. One community where this holds true, and where WiA members gather, is EVO. Vance Stevens has moderated several EVO sessions since WiA, most recently a series of sessions based on courses he was asked to develop for TESOL on multiliteracies, resulting in yet another CoP (each rendition since 2004 is archived at <http://goodbyegutenberg.pbworks.com>).

In addition, a community was founded in 2010 called Learning2gether (<http://learning2gether.net>). The aim of this community has been to carry forward two critical features of WiA; namely, to act as a platform for allowing CoP members to routinely share knowledge and expertise with one another without having to resort to intensive three-day round-the-clock online conferences, and to perpetuate the Webheads tradition of meeting synchronously online each week since 1998.

With each community formed, there are overlaps with WiA when Webheads join them, and interactions between community participants and Webheads that solidify connections among individuals acting as nodes in their wider networks. Stevens (2009) frames WiA in terms of groups, communities, and networks, making the point that educators who consider themselves Webheads are not necessarily enrolled in a particular group. The connections between the Multiliteracies CoP and WiA are clarified in Yilmaz and Stevens (2012), and those between L2g,

MultiMOOC, and WiA are explained in Stevens (2014) drawing on connectivist principles espoused by Siemens (2004) and Downes (2005).

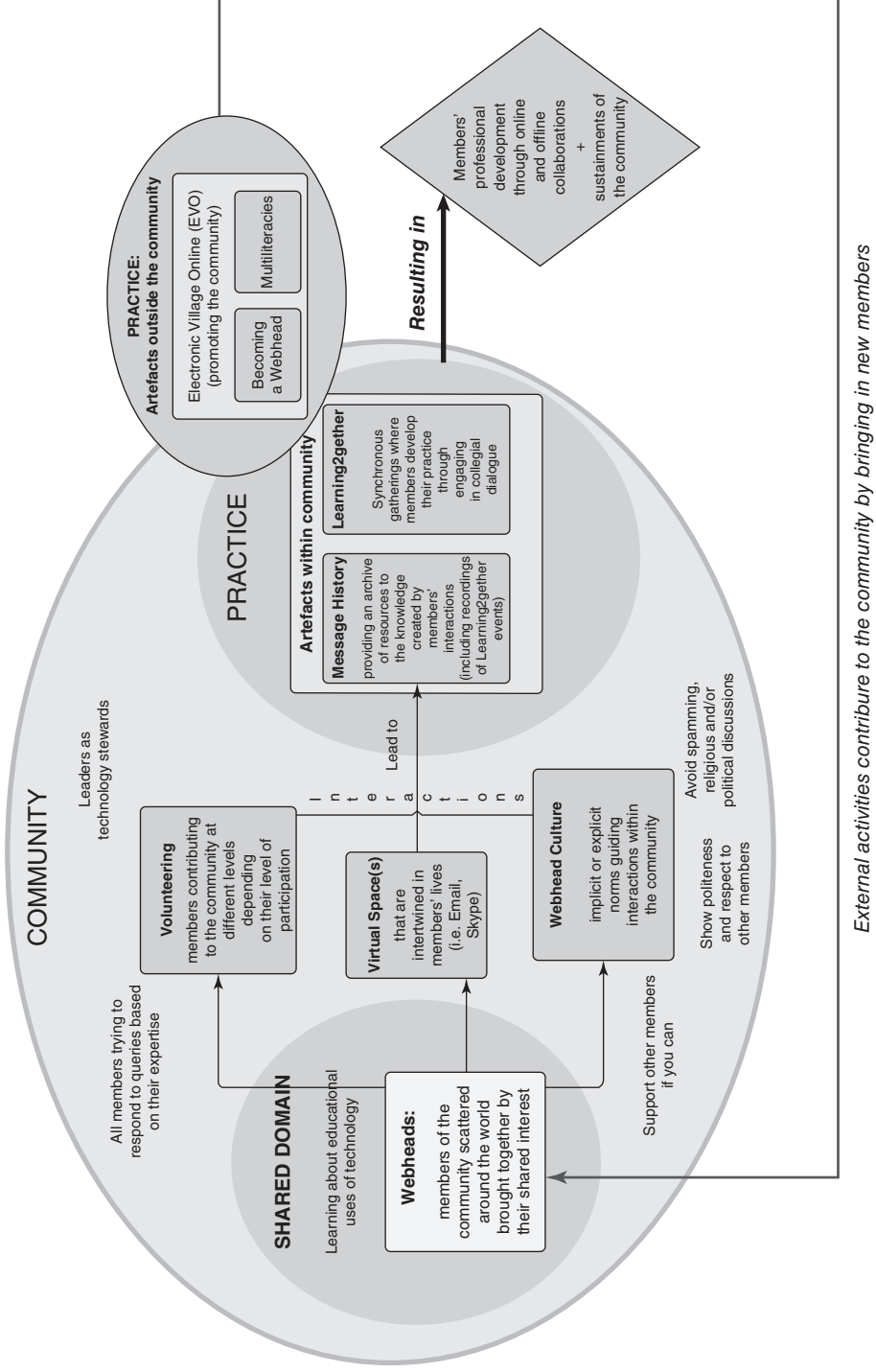
Learning2gether (L2g) is unique also in that it breaks the mold in which many online webinar series are cast. L2g is free, and its archives are on open access. Many webinars find celebrity educators to enhance their stature; L2g occasionally hosts well-known names but particularly encourages practitioners to come forward and share their experiences at the chalk-face. L2g tends to be informal and chatty. Microphone access is always granted to participants whereas many webinars tend to be controlled by a moderator who shares mic access only with the featured presenters, to minimize threats to sound quality. L2g tolerates chaos in the interest of engendering conversations among as many educator voices as possible. Many who attend L2g webinars are WiA members, but many other participants have never heard of Webheads, so in this way, the community can lose track of who comprises it to some extent, but benefits from the cross-fertilization through other networks.

Informal interactions are the primordial soup of WiA. Much of the literature cited here has sought to understand what it is about Webheads that has held them together so productively for so long. One factor is that no one pushes an agenda in WiA, and the coordinator of the group takes a cat-herder approach to management, intervening only as a last resort. Ali Bostancıoğlu, the most recent researcher to embark on a dissertation on WiA, has shared in preliminary findings norms mentioned by WiA informants that serve to keep WiA members interacting with each other year after year (as illustrated in Figure 2), and in so doing altering their practice with students. From Bostancıoğlu (2014) members

- support one another technically and professionally and on a personal basis (“sharing emotions, successes, sadness, holiday messages”);
- are polite and respectful to one another;
- avoid politics, religion, spamming one another;
- meet regularly online;
- share to pay forward to the community.

That last point, paying forward to the community, touches on the thesis of *Cognitive Surplus* (Shirky, 2010). Stevens (2011) explains how the notion of cognitive surplus drives interactions in WiA because community members are intrinsically motivated to help one another, and Web 2.0 tools only lately available to online communities facilitate this. Another important element in Shirky’s thesis is that people are intrinsically motivated to give freely of their time and knowledge only so long as all in the community are sharing alike. If this situation is altered it cannot be returned to its previous condition. WiA has avoided that pitfall and has sustained itself on cognitive surplus for almost two decades now.

It is hard to say what will happen to Webheads in the future. All things change and evolve, and Webheads itself has metamorphosed into numerous reincarnations, not all of which are easily recognizable as originating with Webheads, as the community works to re-invent itself and keep up with changing times. It can be said the things that are really worth doing are those where any one person can



External activities contribute to the community by bringing in new members

Figure 2 Characterization of community interactions in WiA courtesy of Ali Bostancıoğlu.

retire from the scene and the endeavor will continue on its own momentum. Time will tell if Webheads is such a movement.

SEE ALSO: CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning); Collaboration and Collaborative Practices; Communities of Practice; Electronic Village Online (EVO); Emerging Technologies; Intercultural Communication Through Technology; Online Professional Development; Reflective Teaching; Social Networking; Teacher Preparation for Using Technology; Technology and Professional Development; Telecollaboration

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