

From the e-Sphere

Webheads in Action A Community of Practice Scaffolding Multiliteracies Skills in Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract

Webheads in Action is an online community of practice (CoP) comprising teachers and learners who, for well over a decade now, have engaged one another in frequent collaboration serving to enhance the learning and knowledge of all concerned. This is achieved through constant exchange of ideas not only about teaching but also on the use of the Internet to provide opportunities for learning through appropriate application of freely available Web 2.0 tools in personal learning networks (PLNs). This article introduces Webheads as a CoP and provides specific examples of how participants scaffold each other's teaching of writing and development of multiliteracies skills.

KEYWORDS: ONLINE COLLABORATION, COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE, INTERNET, WEB 2.0, PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS, WEBHEADS, MULTILITERACIES, TEACHER DEVELOPMENT, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

The amount of information available to us is accelerating exponentially. The Internet contributes to this proliferation even as it facilitates access to information. The challenge is to filter and extract from this vast sea of information without being drowned in it. We need to question how much we learn just by receiving this information, considering that it is often interactive, and constantly changing in quantity, quality, and modality.

Accordingly, we, as educators, need to be selective about what to include in our school curricula. Print literacy as a conduit for this plethora of information is losing its primacy. We must help our learners access, understand, and create academic media that require multiliteracies skills, and to do this we face another challenge: that of developing our own 21st century learning skills sets.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, it is inevitable that there is change not only in the way information is obtained but in how learning takes place. Prensky (2001) suggested that today's learners were born into an environment in which technology is used much more extensively than in the world in which their teachers were born; consequently, traditional educational systems do not engage them (Prensky, 2005). Indeed, many learners are technologically savvy; their daily activities include surfing the net, quickly sending SMS messages, voice chatting using VOIP, and playing computer games. However, traditional classroom settings commonly exclude such activities. For example, it might be forbidden to use cell phones although many students consider them to be an indispensable feature of their identity.

As educators, we know that students perform best when their needs and interests are addressed, yet some of us neglect these needs. If learning technologies are to be incorporated into school curricula, then the huge challenge facing teachers, teacher educators, materials developers and others involved in education is to keep current in their use of learning technologies. Moreover, multiliteracies skills are needed for teachers and students to make the most appropriate uses of these technologies; to be aware of the strategies to manage, process, and interpret the constant influx of information; and to be able to filter what is useful from what is not.

If today's youth learn differently from how their teachers learned, educators must adapt in order to overcome the gap between them and the *digital natives*. Working together in communities of practice becomes a powerful way for educators to overcome their digital immigrant 'accent' and rise to this challenge.

Webheads in Action

The first author of this article explains how she herself confronted this challenge through her interactions with the CoP Webheads in Action:

I myself had no effective means of adapting to the new multiliteracies until I became aware of a helpful group of educators, Webheads in Action (WiA, or just “Webheads,” <http://webheads.info>). As a language teacher in the 21st century, I know I need to keep up to date in order to appeal to my digital natives, but like many of my colleagues, I feel overwhelmed with attempts to swim in the vast sea of information. Before discovering the Webheads, I accessed e-mail groups and Web sites to fulfill this need while augmenting my professional development with face-to-face opportunities such as conferences, workshops, or teacher education courses. However, I was also aware that such encounters were unlikely to be followed up on, and later I would learn that they could be made even more productive through advance knowledge of mutual interests gained in prior collaborative and hands on activities online.

When I eventually learned from an e-newsgroup about the Electronic Village Online (EVO; <http://evosessions.pbworks.com/>) sponsored by the international organization TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) and decided to join a session, I expected merely to exchange information with other members. To my surprise, I realized that the moderators and many of the participants belonged to the group, Webheads in Action, and collaborated throughout the year in continuous professional development without ever meeting face to face. The way they formed global friendships and collaborations involving even their students in ongoing professional development made me wonder how I had managed my professional life before becoming involved with Webheads.

Founded in 1998 by Vance Stevens in Abu Dhabi, Maggi Doty in Germany, and Michael Coghlan in Australia, WiA was one of the first free, cross-cultural, wholly online communities to involve both educators and students in activities using Web 2.0 and computer-mediated communication tools to facilitate participants’ sharing of knowledge, expertise, and reflections. The main communication platform remains the Yahoo! Group (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/), through which participants send messages about various issues, ask for help, respond to each other’s questions, or even share important events in their lives. In addition, they have regular live online meetings to brainstorm on how to adapt Web 2.0 and social networking tools in their classes. These are organized each Sunday from around noon to 14:00 Greenwich Mean Time via a wiki at <http://learning2gether.pbworks.com>.

Webheads tend to innovate – for example, they became early adopters in using a “Webheads Wave” wiki to organize sending each other invitations

to try out *Google Wave* when that application first came online (<http://webheadswave.wikispaces.com/>), and now they are back at the cutting edge in their early use of Google Hangout to supplant synchronous video meetings that would formerly have been held in Skype; see <http://webhead-sinaction.org>. They enjoy themselves online – for example, organizing tours to explore Second Life, where educators develop realistic contexts for students to interact with other speakers of English. During these tours, the participants talk to each other using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) while flying and teleporting to each other's locations (e.g. inauguration of Webheads HQ in Edunation at <http://tinyurl.com/12dec2010edunation>; and Stevens, 2008). Webheads are innovators in use of educational technology in the classroom as well – for example, using voice-enabled presentation software to turn bland end-of-term class presentations into authentically communicative international online events (Alothman, 2003) or the Web 2.0-enriched, CoP-inspired listening and writing course materials produced by Webheads at Casa Thomas Jefferson in Brasilia (Arena, 2010; Lima, 2010).

WiA helps others besides its own list members to become conversant in the use of synchronous and asynchronous Web 2.0 tools. Through its collaborative spirit, WiA has contributed significantly to the development of other communities like Worldbridges (<http://worldbridges.net>) and Electronic Village Online (<http://evosessions.pbworks.com>). Many EVO moderators are Webheads who started out in previous EVO sessions, then became contributing Webheads, and now share their insights with newcomers. Not surprisingly, the topic of one EVO session that runs year after year, and whose moderators are active in Webheads, is Multiliteracies (<http://goodbyegutenberg.pbworks.com>). Some Webheads members have formed offshoot communities such as “Becoming a Webhead,” an EVO session that graduates participants into the mainstream Webheads community (<http://evosessions.pbworks.com/w/page/48511306/BaW2012>), and the Learningwithcomputers Yahoo! Group, whose purpose is to share what Webheads are doing with a less experienced audience (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/learningwithcomputers/>). Many participants in these groups identify with Webheads and inspire other non-Webheads to make transformative shifts in their professional learning journeys.

Webheads also host important cross-community bi-annual events such as WiAOC (Webheads in Action Online Convergence, <http://wiaoc.org>), which has been organized, moderated, and presented by WiA members three times since 2005. Non-Webheads are encouraged to participate, and Webheads share the workload, from finding the speakers to organizing the wiki with links to sites where participants can schedule their own presentations, adjust to the tools and deal with technical problems, access the

venues of the meetings, have their questions answered, and eventually find the recordings of the presentations. More recently the grueling biannual 3-day 24-hour presentation format has been supplanted by a weekly event when group members take turns to present their expertise to one another, organized via a wiki and archived (and podcast) at <http://learning2gether.posterous.com>.

WiA has operated for over ten years completely without funding, so nobody is paid in these events, not even the guest speakers. The *Blackboard Collaborate* (formerly *Elluminate*) presentation venue used has been made available to Webheads on a grant from Learning Times (<http://learningtimes.net>). As one participant described the first WiAOC conference in 2005:

It was 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. Seasoned and novice onliners were introduced to tools, concepts, ideologies, and practices in an environment encouraging multi-tasking and risk-taking on the part of the participants. (Hunter, 2006)

Examples of social scaffolding through the group are numerous. Members are invariably helpful when answering questions or giving feedback to other members, and they understand that some participants need more time to process the information learned through exchanges with experts. Knowing that constant support will be provided, members feel open to experimenting with new tools and proposing new ideas. The camaraderie of the group encourages newcomers and long-time members equally to discover innovative uses of Web 2.0 tools.

WIA as a Community of Practice

Since WiA started, online communities have become more and more common as Web 2.0 spaces to congregate using the Internet continue to proliferate. Use of social networking tools makes it possible to extend interaction from local contacts to global online Communities of Practice (CoPs) like WiA. *Community of Practice* is a term coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991), although the concept it refers to is not necessarily new. CoPs are “groups of people sharing a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006). CoPs draw on Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social cognition underlining the significance in learning of social interaction and peer collaboration and guidance. Regarding the overwhelming sea of

information educators now face, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002: 6) promote the CoP model as an antidote to the fact that “increasing complexity of knowledge requires greater...collaboration; whereas...the half life of knowledge is getting shorter.”

According to Wenger (2006), a group becomes a COP when it exhibits three characteristics:

- (1) A shared domain of interest;
- (2) A community sharing a passion to learn about that domain;
- (3) A practice; i.e. the collaborative actions of people sharing the same domain of interest.

Several PhD theses have examined Webheads as an example of a CoP (e.g. Johnson, 2005; Steele, 2002). These dissertations identified WiA as being a CoP according to careful interpretations of Wenger’s elaborated criteria since community members share interest in the domain using Web 2.0 tools to support and motivate collaborative learning as they broaden their horizons through social interactions in numerous online spaces. They are knowledgeable in the practice of lifelong learning and utilize each other’s experiences in their learning journeys.

In his keynote address at the 2007 WiAOC, Wenger (himself an advisor on Johnson’s doctoral committee), said that before he learned of WiA, he had thought that CoPs were more space-constrained, but as WiA was a CoP whose members function successfully in so many online spaces, he said he was rethinking this aspect of his theory (Wenger and Nyrop, 2007).

Webheads and Writing

Being a member of a COP like WiA can help learners and teachers of writing. As the Webheads teachers collaborate within the CoP, they frequently come together to engage their classes with one another in writing projects. Participants are constantly modeling the creation process in writing, which can be emulated in the teaching of writing as regards cultivation of target audience, collaboration, motivation to write fluently, and making writing task-based and authentic. Therefore, another benefit of belonging to WiA is the opportunity to improve as a writing teacher by observing the tools and methods Webheads employ while collaborating.

WiA draws ideas from language teachers who model different ways of teaching. For example, one EVO session called “Collaborative Writing,” undertaken mainly by members of WiA, provides its participants with ideas on how to utilize tools such as Google Docs when teaching writing. It is interesting that there are no lectures but rather an ongoing interaction in the Yahoo! Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/collaborativewriting09>)

and in a collaborative writing blog (<http://collaborativewriting09.blogspot.com>). Because of time zone differences, tasks often require participants to collaborate asynchronously, increasing opportunities to explore Web 2.0 tools when teaching writing.

In addition, WiA can help writing teachers find readers for their students' writing and partners for their projects. The WiA Yahoo! Group list is full of messages asking for comments on their students' productions. For example, the message at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/message/26091 is from Masoud Amiri, working with novice teacher trainees who were just learning how to create blogs and use them for teaching English. The email solicits comments on the novice teachers' blogs at <http://www.htlfarsi.blogspot.com>. As usual, responses of WiA members to this thread were quick and supportive. Comments were made on the student blogs to the effect that they were making good use of images, and other kinds of useful reflective comments. In this example, WiA members quickly became the target readers of the students' posts. This kind of request and response happens frequently on the WiA Yahoo! Group list.

Another benefit of such support is that teachers commenting on students' productions may focus on aspects different from what the teacher might normally comment on. The first author of this article reflects on this in a recent case study:

In a class wiki I used recently with my students, because of the requirements of the curriculum, I tended to focus on accuracy and therefore created tasks asking students to find and correct their own mistakes (<http://bahcesehira1y.pbworks.com/Error+Correction+Task+1>). After realizing that it was just me and some students interacting while others remained silent, I asked a Webhead, Jose Antonio De Silva, to help create a task in which he could interact with the students. He agreed (<http://bahcesehira1y.pbworks.com/Jose-Antonio's-Problem>) and in subsequent interaction, both the length and the number of the responses of my students increased, and their feedback on this activity in our real time class became quite positive. In an interview conducted with one of the learners in that class, how the students view outside readers is obvious:

Interviewer: How does seeing comments from someone who is not Turkish affect you?

Interviewee: It multiplies my encouragement by two. There are three kinds of people commenting on the wiki. The first one is our classmates. The second one is comments of Turkish people outside the class. The third one is the users from all over the world who speak English as their native language. The last one, I guess, makes you feel you are learning.

Being a member of WiA can also help teachers find partners for cross-cultural projects. The Writingmatrix project is one such example of collaboration among WIA members and their students (<http://writingmatrix.wikispaces.com/>). In this project, four WiA teachers from Slovenia, Venezuela, and Argentina came together virtually to engage one another's students in using blogs and tagging. First, the students were asked to write anything they wanted in their blogs, tagging the posts "writingmatrix" (in addition to other tags they felt appropriate). The next step was to use *Technorati* (<http://technorati.com/>) to find other participants' posts. In time, the number of posts made by the students increased from all the participating countries and even their teachers were amazed by the number of the comments received. Other teachers in WiA began spontaneously joining in the project. As Ronaldo Lima commented on a post by Stevens (2008): "I had my students tag their posts 'writingmatrix' and later they were amazed to see some comments from students from totally different countries and backgrounds. So, it surely works!"

The fact that students could receive feedback not only from their own teachers but also from other participating teachers and students can be seen in the comments to an introductory message in one of the students' blogs. In this post (<http://alex4uall.blogspot.com/2007/04/my-short-introduction.html>) Aleksander in Nova Gorica, Slovenia, introduces his "two lovely girls," his wife and daughter. He quickly received comments from all over the world, as can be seen at <https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=7511435432365151537&postID=1893682604508734875> (e.g. "Dear Aleksander, welcome to the blogosphere. Your sweet Ema is the same age as Tom, my youngest son. Thanks for sharing her photo.")

The impact of the project is obvious from other students' posts, where it can be seen that each post is tagged and many comments were received. The comments mean that peer readers appreciated the content of the post and commented voluntarily, unlike how teachers comment on their students' writing tasks. As the project was not so teacher-directed and was relevant to the students' own interests, it became quite successful. In addition, the students became more literate in their use of Web 2.0 tools and developed their multiliteracies skills.

Webheads and Multiliteracies

In order to understand the role of Webheads in raising awareness of how teaching and learning have changed in this century, we need to think about what it means to be literate in today's changing world, and even reconsider our definition of literacy. While being literate once implied being able to read and write, multiple possibilities for expression due to shifts in multimedia

and cultural diversity along with globalization have led educators to focus on multiliteracies as redefined by the New London Group (1996). The New London Group approach the concept of literacy through multiple aspects, including print and language, while also considering the impacts of multimedia and connectivity on alternate means of communication, with implications on how these can be addressed in lessons. Applying the notion of multiliteracies therefore requires shifts in educators' understanding of critical pedagogy.

Webheads constantly model multiliteracies in the way they conduct their many activities. They address the issue overtly in the EVO session mentioned earlier, "Multiliteracies for social networking and collaborative learning environments," run by Webhead moderators (<http://goodbye-gutenberg.pbworks.com/>). The objective of this course is for participants and moderators to better understand the shifts in thinking needed to apply the latest technology skills to each participant's practice of engaging students in learning languages.

In these sessions, participants carry out tasks involving the use of Web 2.0 tools, such as *Delicious* (<http://delicious.com>), blogs, wikis, and other digital storytelling tools, and reflect on them after considering examples of videos and blog posts as well as books on multiliteracies written by Stuart Selber (Selber, 2004) and Mark Pegrum (Pegrum, 2009). The sessions present heuristics for collaboratively exploring the tools mentioned, and participants are encouraged to maintain blogs, develop them into e-portfolios, and interact using synchronous and asynchronous learning spaces such as Elluminate, Ning (<http://multiliteracies.ning.com/>), and the Yahoo! Group at (<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/multilit>). Thus, the participants utilize, analyze, and reflect upon their use of Web 2.0 by interacting with other like-minded educators in free online spaces where they can experiment with the learning environments utilized in the EVO sessions and also adapt these to their own teaching.

Conclusion

The rationale behind the activities and EVO sessions offered by Webheads help develop multiliteracies skills and broaden the horizons of participants and their students through innovative uses of various Web 2.0 learning platforms. As well as supporting language teachers in their professional development with the many teacher development opportunities described here, a COP like WiA helps writing instructors find target readers for student writing and to render the writing process purposeful, interactive and motivating. It also exposes students to the Web 2.0 tools and multiliteracies skills sets crucial to learners in the 21st century.

Teachers who are members of CoPs strive to learn about their profession and develop their skills in connecting first with each other and then putting their students in touch with others throughout the world. This article has shown how CoPs can help participants select and implement the most appropriate Web 2.0 tools for different contexts so as to improve writing instruction and lead students and teachers to acquire the skills critical to adapting their method of learning to our rapidly changing world. It has also shown how educators can enhance their knowledge and expertise by participating in online CoPs along with the face-to-face ones that most teachers cultivate in attending conferences and professional development workshops. In these ways, online teacher groups like the Webheads are in the forefront of those developing the communities of practice and the various literacies of the future.

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