

Learning2gether: Wiki-based worldwide teacher professional development

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Abstract

Learning2gether is a wiki which, since September 2010, has served to organize teachers in meeting online at regular times weekly to conduct free “class-roots” professional development seminars and discuss topics of mutual interest to teachers of ESOL in particular and educators in general. Presenters and participants range from expert to those merely interested in the topics. Participants come from all over the world, but from its inception there has been an effort to involve teaching practitioners in Arab countries through coordination with the TESOL Arabia TAEDTECH-SIG. Sessions are recorded, and a growing archive of recorded resources is accumulating at the associated podcast site.

This paper explains how Learning2gether came about, and how it draws on and expands its participants' personal learning networks so that knowledge is shared informally and peer to peer. A crucial aspect of the learning that takes place there is where teachers model to one another how to use Web 2.0 tools to leverage lifelong learning through networking, and to apply these to classroom and other professional development opportunities. This is set in the context of a greater movement of communities of online educators finding innovative ways to train one another by organizing themselves in frameworks for learning ranging from free online conferences and informal seminars to MOOCs or massively open online courses.

Lifelong learning through lifelong friendships

Learning2gether (L2G) is a weekly online teacher professional development event that has gone on in one form or another for almost 15 years and which draws for viability on a base of over 1000 members of a vibrant community of practice (CoP) known as Webheads in Action (WiA) or simply "Webheads" <<http://webheads.info>>. WiA in turn intersects with many other distributed learning networks populated by educators worldwide. The aim of this CoP is to pioneer and develop multiple means of sharing knowledge and resources within the community so that all can benefit through continual and sustained interaction with one another. WiA achieves this by lowering effective filters when welcoming newcomers to the group, and by forming friendships that take the concept of lifelong learning to the next level of sustained learning from colleagues who become lifelong friends.

WiA has cultivated ties with TESOL (Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages) through its Computer-Assisted Language Learning

Interest Section (CALL-IS) <<http://www.call-is.org/>> and through TESOL/CALL-IS-sponsored Electronic Village Online (EVO) <<http://evosessions.pbworks.com>>, an annual professional development event in which anyone can participate over the Internet. The present author was a founding member of CALL-IS in 1985; co-founder of WiA in 1998, and has been a moderator and/or coordinator with EVO since 2002. For ten years after 2004 there was always an EVO session called Becoming a Webhead (BaW) that introduced educators gently to tools and concepts in learning together from peers online. As the Webheads CoP attracts many participants who are also active in TESOL, Webheads have become increasingly more involved with the CALL-IS steering committee. Learning2gether also acts locally. In the UAE, Learning2gether activities are posted on the events page of the EdTech SIG website <<http://taedtech.ning.com>> of the local affiliate of the international professional organization, TESOL Arabia.

Since this online movement reaches participants from all over the world, and as the number of people identifying with WiA increases, so do the chances of face-to-face encounter during travels to or from, and especially at, international conferences and workshops. Frequent face-to-face encounters among Webheads have augmented their already productive online ties, multiplying many bonds and opportunities promoting learning.

How Learning2gether came about

The roots of Learning2gether can be traced back to 1995 when I left a teaching and CALL coordinator position in Oman and took a job as courseware designer for a startup EFL software company in Cupertino, California. I had been teaching for 20 years by then and in my new office job I missed the stimulation of contact with students.

So in my spare time I started teaching informally online with Study.com <<http://www.study.com/>>, a “free place to study world languages” (the study.com domain has since been sold by its founder David Winet). Early classes were organized and run by email, but by 1997 Dave was steering students and teachers who expressed interest in “3-D learning” into The Palace, an avatar-based space with multiple worlds, where he had arranged for a Virtual Schoolhouse to be created on a grant basis through a local hosting service friendly to education called Coterie. I met my Study.com students there.

Companies came and went quickly in Silicon Valley in those days, and when my company showed signs of insolvency I managed to get a job in Abu Dhabi helping set up a state-of-the-art language school for the UAE military. When the newly constructed school got its LAN working I began hanging out at the Palace, meeting students and other teachers who were attending classes with Study.com.

Writing for Webheads

My online teaching times were back to back with another Study.com class meeting in the Palace, given jointly by Michael Coghlan and Maggie Doty. Thanks to this serendipitous overlap, our classes and students effectively merged, and I had the idea to set up a Web 1.0 website for our small group of teachers and students. There were trust issues at the time with sharing photos and other personal information online, which we overcame gradually in this early online community. After some initial hesitancy, students started sending their pictures to be posted on the site, and within a year or two, as more students and teachers joined us, many more sent photos, as can be seen in the gallery at the class portal for Writing for Webheads <<http://prosites-vstevens.homestead.com/files/efi/webheads.htm>>.

The fact that Internet users sent us photos despite having no knowledge of one another apart from what they revealed through writing to each other at a distance was all the more remarkable because neither Facebook nor Moodle, one of whose innovations was to display user photos or avatar images next to posts by that user, had been conceived at that time. Both appeared later, in 2004 and 2002 respectively, when the nature of sharing over the Internet was more accepted and becoming better understood.

We met regularly on Sundays, and we helped learners with their English by interacting with them purposefully and authentically, and encouraging them to write sentences, paragraphs, and essays which we could post online. We started posting transcriptions of our meetings at our website in 1998

<<http://prosites-vstevens.homestead.com/files/efi/chat1998.htm>> which is how we can document that our weekly meetings have taken place on Sundays, regularly at around noon GMT, since September 1998.

That year 1998 was the same year that a company called Hear Me <<http://www.hearme.com/>> developed a voice-enabled chat client that could be embedded in a web page. They provided chat hosting and the embed code for their plugin for free. Webheads were one of the early adopters and our Sunday meetings with online voice chat with language learners began attracting teachers worldwide who were interested in the potential of live real-time voice technology. By the turn of the century students and teachers in Writing for Webheads were taking our weekly meetings on the air and sometimes participating in online conferences. I gave live demonstrations at conferences in Cyprus, Spain, Canada, and USA as well as in the UAE where students at a distance could interact with participants physically at those conferences via the Internet. At the time we were surprised that we

could make appointments with people we knew only virtually from half a world away to meet us online at a given time, and they would actually keep their appointments. This was critical, as time and again we were staking our professional reputations on what seemed like a tenuous chance that our students might or might not show up. But they always did, and I learned the valuable lesson that given the right conditions, online learning works.

Webheads in Action and WiAOC

The following year (2002) I agreed to give an EVO session to explore those conditions for nurturing communities engaging in successful learning online and in the process help other teachers to experience how to set up their own learning communities based on the Webheads model. Helping-others-to-experience was much more compelling than merely 'showing'. The participants quickly jelled into a cohesive group, and many who assembled in that seminal year still frequently interact with one another online, over ten years later. Thus Webheads in Action was officially started and soon accumulated its own participant photo gallery

<http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/webheads_evo.htm>.

WiA has grown since then to over 1000 members in its Yahoo Group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/> (since ported to <https://groups.io/g/webheadsinaction>), which provides us with our main forum and ongoing record of membership. But Webheads interact in a number of other online spaces, often without participants having to register for anything. Pushing beyond simply a Yahoo 'Group', WiA went on in 2003 to consider itself a 'community of practice', and then successfully intersected with other similar communities in hosting three free online WiA Online Convergences in 2005, 2007, and 2009

<<http://wiaoc.org>>. This brought us in touch with hundreds of colleagues in what Downes (2006) characterized as a distributive learning network (Stevens, 2009b).

We continue to leverage our social networks with other educators using Twitter, Facebook, Skype, WiZiQ, etc. (to name only a few of the most obvious social online spaces that come immediately to mind). Additionally we have formed loose but productive associations with Worldbridges <<http://edtechtalk.com>> and IATEFL, a robust professional organization that is quite good at leveraging its own social networks. As WiA in turn networks with hundreds of participants each year through EVO, it seems fair to say that our base of colleagues who either participate in or who are at least aware of what Webheads are up to on a regular basis must number in the thousands, and these are the colleagues whom Learning2gether reaches when it announces its events through our WiA network spaces.

Free online spaces for Learning2gether

Through the end of the first decade of the read-write century (Lessig, 2008), Webheads were exploring ways of bootstrapping each other's knowledge through connecting with one another in multiple spaces, both online and face-to-face. We have sustained this high level of connectivity totally without funding, apart from grants made to support educational services we associate with and sometimes to Webheads as an entity itself. For example, our weekly meetings start out every noon GMT at TappedIn <<http://tappedin.org>>, a text-based environment created as a free virtual space for educators by SRI International with funding from the National Science Foundation, and servers provided by Sun Microsystems. Webheads have also been beneficiaries of a grant from LearningTimes <<http://learningtimes.com>>

who have for the past decade provided us with a Blackboard/Collaborate (was Elluminate) virtual voice and webcam enabled meeting room which we use often on Sundays. LearningTimes also hosted without charge our three WiAOC conferences, including setting up the web interface for us and archiving both our conference and weekly recordings.

At our last WiAOC conference Kim Cofino and Jeff Utecht introduced us to the concept of speed geeking <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speed_geeking>, a way of holding multiple short presentations in kiosks sharing one large physical space that are repeated as participants move on cue from one kiosk to another. We redefined the concept for our purposes in an attempt at having multiple presenters come online for one of our weekly sessions and present one after another for the hour-long session. But in late 2009 we attracted only one such presenter, Teresa Almeida d'Eca <<https://learning2gether.net/2009/06/14/teresa-almeida-deca-taggalaxy/>>. We did however manage to mount a similar event that year in Second Life where several presenters appeared in-world and teleported us one after another to virtual spaces they wanted to show us. We dubbed it "speedlifing" (Stevens, 2009a).

As we entered our second decade of 21st century learning, I felt that Webheads in Action was in need of a next step. Although people continued to stop by on Sundays, there seemed to be a waning of interest in our weekly text chats at TappedIn. We had pioneered the concept of putting on from scratch free class-roots <<http://classroots.org/>> online conferences (before 2005 the few that had been held had all been pay-walled) but having established that proof of concept, there didn't seem sufficient interest in our group for wanting to devote the considerable time and effort to mount yet another when others were by then filling that vacuum for us. K-12

Online for example held their first free online conference in 2006 and is still going strong year after year. George Siemens started convening free online conferences in 2007

<<http://elearningtech.blogspot.com/2007/10/free-online-conference-corporate.html>>. Siemens, along with Stephen Downes and Dave Cormier pioneered the concept of MOOC in 2008 (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, and Cormier, 2010); and nowadays it seems there is another MOOC every week, not to mention a myriad of other free learning opportunities sometimes hosted by major universities.

WiA still retained a powerful and cohesive network, which is the greatest single asset of any aggregation of people online (as can be seen in the persistence of Facebook, Twitter, and similarly viable social networks). Our online community has always enjoyed strong social bonding, plus friendship and spirit, and we had a number of free tools available and considerable experience nurturing communities-of-practice in online environments geared toward professional development and language learning. But we needed a breath of fresh air, an innovation.

As Clay Shirky (2010) argues in his book Cognitive Surplus, the tools are now in place for educators or anyone wishing to do good in the world to organize on a large scale significant movements for free that would have been impossible to organize before the advent of Web 2.0 (without paying for printing, envelopes, postage stamps, not to mention the labor of folding flyers, licking stamps, etc.). However, it's not enough to have available tools. The network of people who can be reached using those tools must be in place as well. This is the formula by which Webheads in Action were able to leverage such a distribution through the guise of Learning2gether (Stevens, 2011).

Learning2gether

Sustaining its weekly meetings seemed vital to what our community was about, so I decided to reinvent them. My idea was to harness the energy of our CoP that had fed our Webheads in Action Online Convergences but avoid the sleep deprivation by having our community members give presentations not over 3 consecutive days, 72 hours running, every other year, but spread throughout each year, week by week.

As with any endeavor of this nature, one has only to announce it (Godin, 2008), but getting it accepted with sufficient traction to push it through that essential critical mass is the hard part. For the first year, 2010, it seemed we almost never had an event lined up a week in advance. It was almost the same for much of the second year, but the movement is gaining credibility as the track record becomes established, and in 2012 our events are starting to be lined up several weeks ahead of time.

Getting the word out

Having mechanisms for announcing events is also critical to the process. It takes knowledge of and experience with social networking to do this successfully. I announce our events weekly to several Yahoo Group lists I've been involved with over the years, including the one for WiA, but people interested in cutting edge learning are following more inputs than just email. Twitter and Facebook are both instrumental in cultivating personal learning networks, or PLNs, and colleagues sometimes join our live sessions having received just-in-time postings on Twitter or read about them on Facebook <<http://www.facebook.com/groups/learning2gether/>>. Our Posterous blog <<http://learning2gether.posterous.com>> also becomes a social news

dissemination site when people subscribe to it, and I discovered by accident that when I scoop our podcasts on Scoop.it not only are they often re-scooped, but in place of an image, a media player appears with which visitors to the site can play episodes conveniently <<http://www.scoop.it/t/learning2gether>>. (When Posterous folded I moved my Posterous blogs to Wordpress; e.g. <https://learning2gether.net/>)

Ning, the network organization vehicle of the TESOL Arabia EdTech Sig, is an effective way to organize a social network, but the service is no longer free. Steve Hargadon successfully uses Ning to organize his regular Classroom 2.0 events <<http://www.classroom20.com/>>, as does Heike Philp with AVALON <<http://avalon-project.ning.com/>> and Burcu Akyol and Graham Stanley with aPLaNet <<http://aplanet-project.org/>>. Free and open source Moodles are also successfully used to organize such events, as with the aforementioned CALL-IS Moodle <<http://www.call-is.org/>> and Nellie Deutsch's Integrating Technology site <<http://www.integrating-technology.org/>>. Deutsch also makes extensive use of the social aspects of WiZiQ to have it post announcements of her many events to Facebook, as well as to participants in automated email announcements <<http://www.wiziq.com/nelliedeutsch>>.

Getting real: Wiki-based bottom-up professional development

An important aspect of L2G is that it is bottom-up professional development (PD). Busy educators are sometimes annoyed when forced to make time for PD sessions when someone in an institution decides for them what they think they need to know. It's common to direct such efforts across too wide a spectrum in an institution, which can be an inefficient use of time and resources, because with PD, one size only

rarely fits all. L2G is premised on the idea that educators are intelligent enough to discover what they need to get themselves to the next level. They are educators by profession and they should be experts in how to learn. If they can learn during “training” fine, but they also realize that no one can help them learn as well as another educator who has achieved an edge in what they in turn might want to discover themselves. As Cross (2003) points out, “people love to learn but hate to be taught.”. L2G gives educators who want to learn a mechanism for organizing themselves so that learning happens collectively.

L2G is wiki-based. This means that anyone can join the wiki and write in the date and time they wish to present. They just need to explain when and how others can join them online, and write enough of a description that will attract peers to their presentation. Wikis are perfect for such “class roots” organization. The process isn’t idiot-proof, but mistakes can be easily rectified, as the owner of the wiki can get a feed of all changes and if necessary revert the wiki to any previous version. That’s the theory but in practice participants have only slowly become comfortable with writing up their own presentations in the wiki. In practice people usually negotiate timings with me and then have me write in the details, but either way, no one person decides what the program will be for a given week. Learning is driven by the participants in the process.

Getting around the site

Navigation is another critical aspect of mounting an online classroom where people will go with some expectation of being able to quickly figure out what they can learn there. Going on a DIYLMS model (do it yourself learning management system, (Stevens, 2012). I created

a portal to manage the event <<http://learning2gether.pbworks.com>>. I set up links in the sidebar to explain who we are, how anyone can answer our call for participation, and link to where our upcoming presentations are listed, and our podcast and index of past events.

I set up a separate site <<http://learning2gether.posterous.com>> to archive our events (since moved to <https://learning2gether.net/>). I chose Posterous for this because it will accept media uploads, including large mp3 sound files. Posterous prides itself on having a range of plugins that will play a wide variety of media, often through just providing a link. For example, if I provide a link to a photo on Flickr, the photo appears fully displayed in the posting; as does the appropriate embed activated by only a link to a Slideshare presentation or YouTube video. Also, when I upload mp3 files, a player appears to allow streaming or download of the media. However, Posterous does not podcast these media (does not itself provide an RSS feed that will allow others to harvest the mp3 files). For this, one must use Feedburner to set up a podcast feed from the Posterous blog. Thus I was able to set up a proper podcast feed for Learning2gether by using the aforementioned mashup of free Web 2.0 tools.

Conclusion

Learning2gether is an ongoing effort to create a "small pieces loosely joined" (Weinberger, 2002) and <<http://www.smallpieces.com/index.php>>) online space where educators can come together on a regular basis and help one another learn more about aspects of their profession important to them. Weekly events are driven by presenters who volunteer their time and expertise to help all involved learn literally together. The events are organized using freely available Web 2.0 tools that anyone can understand and learn to

use. Learning2gether models the potential of these tools to participating teachers, so that all can get insights into how they can use such tools to promote learning in their students. Learning2gether also models how teachers can form PLNs to organize similar events and extend their learning to their own professional environments.

Through this way of learning together, we seek to model for one another how to best prepare students to relearn how to compete for jobs that may not yet exist. By discovering for ourselves how learning occurs using online tools and connections with one another in real projects with meaningful outcomes, we learn how we can empower our students to learn likewise once we have gained familiarity with the available tools and processes.

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Additional notes

Not meant for publication

This is the text of the last version sent Oct 8 to the editor of the TESOL Arabia Conference 2012 proceeds. This file is accessible at

<http://tinyurl.com/tacon2012L2g>

This message was posted on LinkedIn to someone asking, “What is Webheads?”

Thanks for asking about Webheads. <http://webheadsinaction.org> is a community effort and posting there depends on what the community is doing. <http://webheads.info> is curated and maintained more comprehensively. There is a link here to the YahooGroup that has served at our forum since 2002, which you can still join (but you need to join to reply). With the demise of YahooGroups, the list was ported intact to <https://groups.io/g/webheadsinaction>, which is the list you can still join as of this update in Aug 2021.

Webheads has had to reinvent itself a few times since 2002. There was a period when we played with <http://wiaoc.org> (now found at http://vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/wiaoc_index.htm) and that morphed most recently into <http://learning2gether.net>. I recently wrote an article about that and included as background a history of webheads:

This paper is accessible as a Google Doc at <http://tinyurl.com/tacon2012L2g>

This file was uploaded to Research Gate on Aug 13, 2021 and in the course of preparing this version for that it has been updated slightly.