

## **Writing for Webheads: An online writing course utilizing synchronous chat and student web pages**

***By Vance Stevens***

A Paper submitted for the 4th Annual Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference, Theme: Best Practices In Delivering, Supporting & Managing Online Learning, April 7-9, 1999,

### **ABSTRACT**

This course is one of many taught under the auspices of EFI, English for Internet < <http://www.study.com/> >, which offers free ESL courses taught on a volunteer basis. Teachers have complete freedom to construct, or in this case, evolve, their own courses. One of the most difficult aspects of online teaching has proven to be gaining student confidence in the validity of the concept, before which it is not possible to achieve the sense of community among students that might encourage them to work in an environment with purely virtual contact. A second problem has been finding a focus for the course. This paper shows how both problems have been addressed in the current reincarnation of the course.

The present course started as a chat class, and this produced a core group of students who appeared at the Palace < <http://www.thepalace.com/> > each week almost as consistently as did the teacher, contributing to the growing sense of community. The course was then revamped with focus on writing via web page development with the chat sessions preserved as an optional adjunct to that. Students are now encouraged to participate either synchronously online or via email contributions to their web pages or to the "eclass" which operates through a listserv.

The class has the following features:

- There is a [Webheads main page](#) which serves as an entry point to the website, with links to all the other areas below and pictures of some of the students linked to their web pages < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/webheads.htm> >.
- There is a welcome message and [explanation of the course](#) and its three class venues: the synchronous chat class, the eclass, and the student web page displays < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/webwelcm.htm> >.
- There is a [students' webpage](#) listing all the students in the course with links to their web pages and some indication of when they last contacted the class < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/students.htm> >. A web page is initiated by the teacher for each student who applies for the course, though students are encouraged to get their own web space with Geocities and [produce their own sites](#) < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/ott/> >.
- [Instructions](#) are given for downloading the synchronous chat software used (the Palace and ICQ clients) and for getting started with the course < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/software.htm> >.

- [Assignments](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/homework.htm) for the class, what students can do to get started, can be found at: < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/homework.htm> >
- The site also contains [transcripts of online sessions](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/chatlogs.htm) at the Palace < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/chatlogs.htm> > ,
- There is [a review of the course](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/bicknell.htm) produced by a PhD candidate who sat in for a session < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/bicknell.htm> > .

## INTRODUCTION: ENGLISH FOR INTERNET

Writing for Webheads is billed as an experiment in world friendship through online learning. It is in fact a language class that is conducted for free and on a volunteer basis for any student anywhere in the world who signs up for it or participates in it. The class has been in operation in some form for over a year now.

Students find the class by going to <http://www.study.com>, where they find the website of the English for Internet. Students can enroll in courses on the web site, and Dave Winet, who coordinates the program, tries to allocate the students among the available teachers. Dave usually has a backlog of students, so there are waiting lists for most of the courses. What courses there are depends on who is teaching at any given time.

Teachers volunteer their time and are given almost no guidelines by Dave (Winet), except to teach according to their expertise. Dave tries to ensure that all who volunteer to teach are in fact *bonafide* teachers, and having established that, it is up to the teacher to set out a syllabus in whatever way he or she sees fit. Dave advertises on the web site that there are courses in various categories, but in fact, once a teacher has agreed to teach under one of the general categories, then it is up to the teacher to tailor a course to his or her students needs according to his or her interpretation of what that course should comprise and through negotiations with the students involved.

Dave has set up a mentoring system wherein experienced teachers agree to help neophyte teachers, and there is a listserv where teachers can post comments or ask questions about what they should be doing in their classes and how they should get started. There is also an online training class which teachers can join which is run something like classes at the EFI might be, except that the students are other teachers learning from example how to teach in ways found effective by other teachers at the EFI.

## PROBLEMS WITH STUDENT INDIFFERENCE AND ATTRITION

It is through the EFI teachers' listserv that the teachers have divulged one of the givens of teaching for free at the EFI: that student attrition rate is high, and those who persist are liable to range from totally noncommittal to only occasionally responsive. This leads us to wonder why a student might sign up for a language course of this nature.

Probably, most students, while browsing on the Internet, come across our language courses and find that they require only that one register for them. So, they leave a name and email address, and when Dave can put them into a class, a teacher gets in touch. The students may or may not have registered in earnest in the first place, and their circumstances may have changed by time they are assigned to a class (which can

take some time, since there are more applicants for EFI courses than can be readily assigned to classes). Consequently, when teachers contact the dozen or fifteen people that Dave has assigned them, it is normal to hear back from only half of those, and of those who respond that first time, only two or three might maintain their end of the dialog over a correspondence lasting several exchanges.

Teachers wonder what can be responsible for the high attrition rates. Some find themselves at fault and appeal to the list for help in improving the situation, but in fact the teacher who thrives best in this atmosphere is one who can accept the appreciation of the few students who take advantage of what is offered while ignoring the indifference of the many.

## **MY FIRST EFI CLASS**

When I first started teaching with the EFI in 1996, I had agreed to teach an intermediate grammar/writing course through email. But in the circumstance of so few students answering my emails, I had to adapt my conception of what to teach to the few students who did respond. I would solicit their emails and correct what they wrote, and construct exercises to teach grammar based on the mistakes they made. Some students returned these exercises, but more typically, they didn't seem interested in work directed toward the goals that I had mapped out. If they did any work at all, it was more likely to be along the lines of having me correct a letter they needed to write in their business, or to help with an application for foreign study. They didn't seem at all interested in corresponding with each other, despite whatever I might do to encourage that. From this experience, I gathered that each student had a unique reason for participating in the course, and each of these reasons was in the student's view best served through contact with the native speaker teacher, and not with other students.

## **MY SECOND EFI CLASS: AN IMPROVEMENT ON THE FIRST ATTEMPT**

Having seen that the work my first students had done was mostly directed toward individual goals, I decided to capitalize on the reality of the situation. For my second rendition of the course, which followed directly on the first, I decided to place an emphasis on student project work. That is, rather than me bother with creating a syllabus I doubted anyone would follow, I suggested that students consider whatever reason they had for taking the course and declare a project that they could then develop to improve their English. In general, this suggestion fell on the same indifference that had characterized my previous class, with few students responding at all, and most of those who kept in touch over the next few months not committing to any real work at all.

There was one notable exception however. A student named Andrea decided for his project to make a web page for the class. At the time, I hadn't yet learned the skill of creating web pages myself, but Andrea did an excellent job in my behalf. He created the pages for the class along the lines of content I sent him and I would correct what Andrea produced of his own accord. For a couple of months, we kept in close touch as collaborators on the project. For the most part, though, the work was Andrea's. He maintained introductions of each student, posted my assignments and suggestions to the class, and created his own features; for example, a game wherein students would do web searches to find answers to puzzles.

Andrea's project should have formed a fine focus for our class, but met with that inexplicable seeming indifference of the others in the class. When Andrea realized that the students weren't playing the games

he had worked so hard to produce or working the exercises I had provided, he stopped working on the web site and eventually stopped corresponding with me completely. He left the site up for some time as evidence of what a student can accomplish in a virtual community, but the failure of that community to seriously come together marked the end of Andrea's interest in the project. And my work with that particular class, apart from collaborating with Andrea on his website, was devoted mainly to the correction of a few exercises returned by students to whom I had sent them in email after they claimed they couldn't get the exercises off Andrea's website. We had not quite entered the era where browsers could be taken for granted on student computers.

## **A CONSIDERATION OF SYNCHRONOUS CHAT FOR EFI CLASSES**

At this time my professional life caused me to move household, and so it would be the summer of 1998 before I would take on another online teaching assignment with the EFI. In the meantime, I had been dabbling with ICQ < <http://www.mirabilis.com> > and the chat areas The Palace < <http://www.thepalace.com> > and Active Worlds < <http://www.activeworlds.com> >. ICQ is a software package that enables users (e.g. teachers) to see when their buddies (e.g. students) are online and contact them through either the dialog or message facility. The Palace is a virtual environment where a Virtual Schoolhouse has been established and made available for use by the EFI (provided free of charge for EFI non-profit use thanks to Nettie Tatum, <http://www.coterie.com> and <http://www.virtualscholar.com>). A student, or anyone, who downloads the Palace client, can type in the address of the schoolhouse and possibly find other teachers or students there < for [instructions](#), see <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/software.htm> >. The Virtual Schoolhouse at the Palace is an appropriate venue for synchronous language learning because the schoolhouse graphic sets the context, it's quiet and private, and avatars (customizable) for each user appear on-screen with bubbles displaying what each avatar says. Students can follow the conversation as the bubbles appear, or they can simultaneously view the chat log which presents the dialog line-by-line (ICQ on the other hand allows multiple participants in chat mode but each participant's dialog appears in a separate window, so it is harder to follow who says what when).

Active Worlds is a compelling environment where a students can have avatars who speak in by-lines and who appear in one physical space. But whereas avatars in the Palace appear as variations on Pacman figures, the avatars in Active Worlds are animated characters which can move around in the 3-D environment, and even fly. One of my dreams for my online class was to have the students join me in learning how to build our own learning space in this 3-dimensional world in a place on the ActiveWorlds virtual game-board where only we would be (one criticism of ActiveWorlds for language students is that it can be too overwhelmingly busy -- it can also be overwhelming to a microprocessor; demands on my own computer and difficulties with my proxy configuration have precluded use of ActiveWorlds so far with my Webheads class.)

Dave Winet has been holding classes at the Palace since 1996 and has succeeded in getting other teachers to base their classes there (see <http://www.study.com/schedule.html> for a list of EFI classes held at the Palace). I had visited his class at the Palace on a number of occasions prior to my starting my own class there. It was in fact exposure to people knowledgeable of synchronous communications (e.g. using chat areas, and moving audio and video around on the web) that made me feel I was benefiting professionally and maintained my interest in teaching with the EFI.

### MY THIRD EFI CLASS: UTILIZING SYNCHRONOUS CHAT

Once I had settled into my new posting in Abu Dhabi, I agreed to start my own EFI synchronous chat class based at the Palace. My syllabus this time around was project-based and pitched at students who had access to the Internet and an interest in exploring it. My idea was to develop a class whose interest would be maintained through a mutual fascination with web-based tools conducive to communications. I started a web site at which I announced the goals for the class and instructed students on [how to download the software](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/students.htm) < <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/students.htm> >. I set two class times a week at the Palace. The objectives were to develop fluency through email exchange and through chatting at the Palace, and through my plans to build an EFI enclave in Active Worlds. On a suggestion from Dave Winet (during an ICQ chat conversation), I called the class English for Webheads.

Dave nominated around a dozen students and I contacted them. The usual percentage attrition occurred so that I was down to half a dozen communicators when I declared the class under way. Of these, only a few ever made it to the Palace, where all but two were infrequent visitors. Occasionally, a student was able to reach the Palace only through coaching via ICQ (There is an example of where I could see via ICQ that a student was online at class time and I was able to contact her and help her resolve her problem with running her Palace client software so that she could join us there; see <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/pchat11o.htm>).

As noted above, the project with Active Worlds never got off the drawing boards. My idea had been to get students to join us at Active Worlds. The gateway is very busy there, not appropriate for language learners, so we would have to move to some empty location, which in Active Worlds means to type in pre-arranged coordinates and go there. I was hoping to stake out a coordinate area for us and then learn with students how to plant shrubbery there and build structures that students could roam. One of my students, from Korea, was apparently enthused about the idea. By apparently, I mean he emailed that he was enthusiastic about the project, but then did not follow up and soon lost contact. In any event, it became clear that use of ActiveWorlds was not feasible given the levels of processing power and Internet access that students can currently be expected to have, but it is an idea whose time will come.

Meanwhile, I had been "hanging out" at the Palace whenever possible during my work hours. By that, I mean that I had been launching the Palace software in the morning and then letting it run in the background whenever I could while I went about my business. If anyone happened by the Palace Virtual Schoolhouse while I was lurking there, I would greet them. Since I was online at odd hours for the western hemisphere, there was little activity there while I was at work. But in this way, I did get to know a couple of students from Taiwan who were in fact students in other EFI classes, but had just dropped by the Palace to see who was there. As I got to know these students, I added them to my class roster.

I had arranged my official Palace classes so that they would take place just as I would normally be leaving work. On those days, I would log on to the Palace and wait for class members to drop in. At first, there would be no one there from our class. But as time went on, I found that I might meet students who just dropped in at that time. Also, my class time just preceded the class times of two other teachers, Margaret Ann Doty and Michael Coghlan. These two would often come online at about the time I was getting off, and students who were used to meeting them for their classes would realize that I was on beforehand and come on early to meet with me as well. So if my class went overtime, it would coincide with the next

class, and after a while, those teachers started coming early as well, so that we are now effectively one class, and whose class the students belong to has become fairly irrelevant. Another way of expressing this is that online teaching, which is available to students when it is convenient for them, has dispelled the notion of "belonging" to a class. (You can view the logs of these sessions; see the ones from October 6 through December 13, 1998 at

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/chatlogs.htm>)

During this time I had the usual problem of finding a way of getting students to buy into the course. I have mentioned that I started a homepage for each student under my Webheads site, and as I got to know the students, I would ask them to send pictures for their pages. Few would send a picture at that point, but I discovered that having their own URL on the web was a draw for the students. Those who responded at all often indicated that they were impressed by the work I had done on their homepages, though I had done little more than to simply post their introductions into a template page I had developed, and illustrate this with a picture if they sent one.

A couple of my students began sending me more writing to be added to their developing homepages. This turned out to be one key to the problems of both focus and community that had been previously lacking in the course. Only a few students were coming to the chats and those who were unable to launch the clients or meet at the times designated perhaps felt that they couldn't participate in the class. Students who came to the chats seemed to want to do little else but chat aimlessly (perhaps they had an aim, but none that I could detect). So I decided to revitalize the course as one whose focus would be the creation of web pages. This would involve any student who could get in touch by email or by chatting, as the project-based focus of the class would now be on the creation of web pages. The chat aspect would be preserved, but this time as an ancillary to the course, not as its main focus. In fact, Palace classes would be cut back from two days to one per week, with only the weekend day, Sunday, preserved.

#### **MY FOURTH EFI CLASS: THE FORMULA THAT SEEMS TO WORK**

In December 1998, I disbanded the English for Webheads class and simultaneously formed a new class which I called this time Writing for Webheads. I sent email to all students informing them of the change in focus and invited them to join the new class (in this way, I did a bit of spring cleaning, weeding out students who had not been in touch and who did not respond to the call to join the new class). I told them that in the new class they could develop their own web pages. I would show them how to start their own web site at Geocities if they wished (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/ott>). Or, they could send me material and I would post it to their existing Webheads site. Language development would occur as I corrected their English either on their own websites or before posting it to their Webheads pages. Any student could participate entirely by email if desired, and we could use their writings as a focus of discussion in the chat class.

The latter event rarely occurred. Discussion of student web work was rarely a focus of our chat class. However, three students did start their own web pages at Geocities, others contributed substantially to the Webheads pages that I maintained for them, and one student has been using the class to correct the English in his previously existing website. Of the three students who started their own web pages, one was talked through the process of starting a Geocities website during the course of a Palace chat (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/pchat27d.htm>).

A final evolution in the successful running of the class was what I came to call the "eclass". The eclass is a listserv where students can send mail which will reach all who have subscribed to the eclass, and replies to the list are sent in turn to all the subscribing students. The list was easily set up through the free services provided at <http://www.egroups.com>. The metaphor of a virtual class followed logically. I characterize the listserv as a virtual classroom where all the students are present. For a long time the students sat silent in class. Each felt alone in the classroom, and I had to convince them that breaking the silence was up to them, that there were others present, and that the class would come alive once the students began speaking to each other. Eventually they did. Some students posted grammar puzzles for others to solve. One student started flooding the list with junk email and had to be told to pipe down and let others speak up. We got onto a thread on accuracy vs. fluency, where it was revealed that most of the students had the expectation that the grammar in whatever they wrote should be corrected. The teacher of course tried to convince them that their grammar would improve through practice, without painstaking correction, and one student who had been a longtime lurker was moved to make the following eloquent statement:

*"I agree with Mr. Vance Stevens...*

*Sometimes i felt stupid if someone send me a letter and in that letter so many correction and i think that i'am a stupid person and that made me dont want to learn english lesson..*

*so i think is the best to make a person who study english, give they spirit.*

*ok bye-bye"*

The class had jelled at this point not only because a vehicle (personal web pages) was found that students responded to, but also because students were by this time coming to know each other and lowering their defenses against possible abuse through the web by anyone involved in the class. One student who had used a variety of aliases up to this point divulged his real name and invited his teachers to visit his house in Brazil. Students began sending in photos, which they had been hesitant to do in the past, possibly over concern with possible abuse. Each breakthrough by one student seemed to enhance the validity of the entire project, with the result that other students became more forthcoming with their materials.

The resulting course has been in existence since December 1998 and has the following features:

- There is a main page at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/webheads.htm>: This page has pictures of all students who sent their photos with links from the photos to their personal and Webheads web pages. Times for the class are posted here as well as links to the other areas of the website. There are also testimonials here from students who have benefited from the course.
- Prospective students who like what they see this page can go to a welcome message at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/webwelcm.htm>. Here, the goals of the course are explained, as are the three class venues: (1) the eclass, (2) the Palace chat classes, and (3) the students' individual web pages.



- There is a page at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/software.htm> which tells students what software they need and how to get it. There are instructions here for reaching the Virtual Schoolhouse once they have downloaded and installed the Palace client.
- Assignments for the class can be found at:  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/homework.htm> - This page tells students what they can do to get started. Essentially, students need to send an introduction and picture and get the software. There are other suggestions for things to do, including examining links for ESL students and seeing what other students have done with their websites and considering how to start their own.
- The chat logs are at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/chatlogs.htm> - Logs of all chats at the Palace are kept and a list is posted here. Students in this class are encouraged to use them to review the dialog in their Palace classes as well as to see what took place when they weren't there. The logs also form a useful record for anyone interested in what happens in synchronous online chat classes.
- There is a Students page at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/students.htm> - Here, you can find a list of all students who have kept current with the Writing for Webheads course. There is contact information for each student and a link to the Webheads page for each, plus a link to the student's own web project if any. Of particular value here is the date that each student last contacted the class, and in fact, the list of students is sorted on that date, so that the inactive students all fall to the bottom of the list.

This class was the topic of a project undertaken by EdD candidate Jerry Bicknell. Jerry prepared a report on the class which is posted at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/4631/efi/bicknell.html>.

---

**Last updated: May 21, 1999**

At <http://prosites-vstevens.homestead.com/files/efi/hawaii99.html>

[Return to the Webheads page](#)

---

[Click here to see the log of the session at which this paper was presented](#)