Learner Independence
Special Interest Group

TESOL ARABIA

TESOL Arabia

Welcome to the
Learner Independence Special Interest Group's
2009 Conference Newsletter.

This special issue of our newsletter welcomes to the Conference two well-known speakers from the world of learner autonomy, Dr. Ema Ushioda and Dr. Phil Benson. Sara Cotterall, TACON Speaker, 2007, shares her thoughts on varied themes associated with learner autonomy in a "Q 'n' A" interview. Diane Malcolm discusses current issues in learner autonomy from the AILA 2008 Conference held in Essen, Germany. Closer to home, Connie Eide investigates reactions to trends in distance learning courses. Jessica March details her students' experiences with learning technologies and their potential acquisition of learner independence. Continuing this theme, Mark Karstad discusses the interdependence of independent learning and information literacy. Local ET specialist, Vance Stevens promotes lifelong learning possibilities available via the EVO. In stark contrast to the learning environment in this region, Jonathan Hadley describes the realities of teaching in Ethiopia.. Finally, reporting on developments in UAE schools, Amr El Zarka highlights initiatives taken by teachers in local schools to encourage an ethos of independent learning in the classroom.

We hope you have a great conference!
See you there!

About LI-SIG

TESOL Arabia's Learner Independence SIG was created 8 years ago. Its founding premise and structure were unique among the SIGs as it is based on a cooperative system - usually a 4-person team, with each having an area of responsibility, yet collaborating on major projects. Here, people come and go, but this organizational concept, based on democracy and teamwork, has enabled LI-SIG to survive change. Whilst we regret the loss of personalities, support and talent, we embrace newcomers, and the shared responsibilities within our proven format make our SIG leadership less daunting. From the start, LI-SIG was innovative: the first SIG with a website and international discussion lists. Now, we have online photo archives, a *Moodle* site, a practical ILC handbook and special interest wikis, too. LI-SIG has always tried to incorporate new technologies to support its members and their students. Long may this initiative continue!
The current team comprises Phil Cozens, Rachel Lange and David Dixon. The secret of our success, however, is our network of supporters ... **YOU!!**

Let's share our ideas, expertise and knowledge!

SIG Speaker : Dr. Ema Ushioda, University of Warwick, UK

Re-examining Motivation:
engaging our students identities through English
Friday, 13 March, 2:00 – 2:45

Motivating Learners form Within
Saturday, 14 March, 1:00 – 1:45

Find out more about Ema on pages 3 and 8.

LI-SIG Welcomes Dr. Phil Benson

Language Learning Histories
11:00—12:45, Friday
Autonomy in language teaching and learning:
where has it come from and where is it going?
Saturday 12:00—12:45

Read about Phil's AILA session on page 3.

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Life-long Learner Autonomy Meets Electronic Village Online

Vance Stevens, Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi

The latest rendition of the Electronic Village Online (EVO 2009) was held this year in the six week period from January 12 to February 22, 2009, http://evosessions.pbwiki.com. This is the ninth consecutive year that these sessions have been held. Originally conceived as a kind of run-up to the annual TESOL convention, they are offered under the TESOL umbrella but are in fact a grass roots movement where educators volunteer their time to help others learn about each other's expertise. Participants don't have to be TESOL members, the courses are completely free, and they are an embodiment of the kind of program I had in mind for autonomous language teachers as put forward in Stevens 2007.

This year, session offerings included libraries for ESL students, teaching English through drama, using images, video, and Web 2.0 in materials development and lesson preparation, collaborative writing, digital storytelling, Internet for beginners, blogging, e-portfolios and digifolios, multiliteracies, and virtual worlds and language learning. This is a healthy menu for teachers wishing to upgrade skills in areas vital to their craft. Improvement is likely to be the outcome, as the sessions are mounted in a framework of comprehensive training of moderators and quality control throughout. Proposals for sessions are collected early, in time for aspiring moderators to go through a program of systematic introduction to EVO culture. The training ensures that all moderators actually develop materials for their sessions and get them online by the end of the year. Candidates having trouble meeting the benchmarks either shape up or wisely decide to defer their session until they truly have the time to meet the serious demands about to be made on them. When at the end of January the courses open to participants, they have been through a crucible and are therefore among the best and most accessible opportunities for professional development available at no cost to educators on this planet.

Although participant numbers tend to overwhelm moderators, I'm most surprised that relatively few avail themselves of this opportunity to upgrade their skills. It's possible that many are either unaware of them, or hesitant or too busy to try and adjust to an online environment. In fact, the session moderators and participants go out of their way to help each newcomer adapt to the new surroundings. Accordingly, the most interesting aspect to these courses is not to be found in the descriptions of the courses themselves. Earl Stevick said in one of his books that the quality of the learning that takes place when we focus our attention only on the items to be learned is different from (and probably inferior to) the quality of learning that is incidental to something else that we are trying to do (1982). I applaud David Warlick's concept of teachers being "master learners" (which he mentions in recent podcasts) and Stephen Downes's characterization of teaching being to *model* and to *demonstrate*, and learning being to *practice* and *reflect* cited in Stevens 2007. In this respect, if teachers want to improve their craft, the way to do it is to engage in a

cycle of teaching and learning with practitioners who model and demonstrate AND practice and reflect, because in reality, we are all at once teachers and learners. THIS is what these sessions actually inculcate: how to interact socially online with people you've never actually met and in the process learn like you've never learned before. But in order to do this for the first time, you have to have an open mind and be willing to ACT on your potential as an autonomous learner.

Suzanne and Ron Scollon suggested that interactions mediated by computers tend to be patterned not as a conduit but more like a berry bush (1982). When that was written, the dominant metaphor in education and training was the conduit, and many trainers still operate under that premise. EVO models a berry bush approach to learning through technology, where users are presented with choices and encouraged to select the most appetizing ones, rather than expect to be taught stepwise, and feel they are behind if they missed the first few lessons. Teachers seeking to both *be* and *coach* autonomous learners would do well to become involved with these sessions next year. Participants emerging from them often credit EVO with having brought about true change in their approach to personal and learner autonomy.

References

Scollon, Suzanne & Ron Scollon. 1982. RUN TRILOGY: Can Tommy Read? Paper presented at the symposium Children's response to a literate environment: literacy before schooling, University of Victoria, October 9, 1982.

Stevens, Vance. (2007). The Multiliterate Autonomous Learner: Teacher Attitudes and the Inculcation of Strategies for Lifelong Learning Independence, Winter 2007 (Issue 42) . Available: http://www.learnerautonomy.org/VanceStevens.pdf

Stevick, E. 1982. Teaching and learning languages. New York: Cambridge University Press.