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Establishing and Maintaining Web Presence: A guide for educators

By Vance Stevens

What is Web Presence?

"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us To see oursel's as others see us!" - Robert Burns, from *To a Louse* (c.1785): http://www.robertburns.plus.com/louse.htm

Web presence is in essence the gift to see ourselves as others see us, enhanced uniquely by the Internet. It might be more precisely defined as an ability to convey messages in text, sound, and image over the Internet through means of communicating asynchronously through fixed URLs. It used to be that to establish Web presence, one had to be in that group of *cognoscenti* known as "Webmasters" who created sites in HTML code and then uploaded files manually to host servers with restricted access. But nowadays, anyone with an Internet connection can be a 'Webmaster' in a matter of minutes. This article explores some of the tools making that possible.

There are many reasons why teachers might be interested in Web presence. First of all, teachers might want to bookmark information on a particular area of expertise within their field for their own use and then share it with peers, or they might want to help students establish Web presences themselves so they can write authentically and communicatively to an audience extending beyond the walls of the brick and mortar classroom. Since maintaining a Web presence can become a complex and time consuming task (setting up Web presence is easy compared to maintaining constant updates and enhancements) teachers can find that the job becomes unwieldy when they try and maintain Web sites for whole classes of students. Teachers in this position will appreciate knowing about tools within reach of the most casual novice computer-users which will facilitate this task, so that students with Web access can easily be trained to maintain their own online Web presences.

I have created a tutorial explaining the most practical of these tools as part of the January-March 2005 TESOL-sponsored Electronic Village Online sessions: [-1-]

- The portal for the 2005 EVOnline sessions is here: http://www.geocities.com/ehansonsmi/evo2005/announce.html
- A recent article on last year's sessions: Hanson-Smith, Elizabeth, and Christine Bauer-Ramazani. (2004). Professional Development: The Electronic Village Online of the TESOL CALL Interest Section. TESL-EJ September 2004: http://writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej30/int.html
- The portal for the session on *Establishing and maintaining 'Web presence'*: http://sites.hsprofessional.com/vstevens/files/efi/papers/tesol/evo2005/webpresence.htm

The impetus for this session was what, for me, has become an overwhelming realization: that once you form an online community it becomes exponentially difficult to sustain the cohesion of the group with one leader creating all the Web pages for all the new members. This session aims to go some way towards correcting this problem by placing online a tutorial that facilitators of online communities can refer their members to. In other

words, through use of this tutorial, participants in an online community can be encouraged to maintain their own Web presence, while the role of the coordinator of the community in maintaining group cohesion becomes one of updating a portal but not maintaining all the pages pertaining to all the individuals, who can number hundreds in all but the smallest of such communities. This article elaborates on some of the tools mentioned in that tutorial.

Yahoo! Groups

One of the most useful of the free tools for establishing and maintaining online presence is YahooGroups. Starting out as OneList in the 1990's the facility evolved into eGroups and was acquired by Yahoo! at turn of century. Yahoo! has proved to be a reliable host and has worked to develop a public facility that is easy to use, free of charge (in return for a tolerable number of ads accompanying messages, easily clicked out of the way), and is somewhat (though not completely) protected from spam. The acquisition has been beneficial for the online communities affected, identity of users with multiple email addresses being but one aspect of eGroups simplified through integration with the Yahoo! profile system. Enrollment with Yahoo! is however optional. Email list services are provided to any addressee registered with the group, but only Yahoo! members who sign in with their ID's and passwords can use the other features of a YahooGroup portal site.

The most typical reason for forming a YahooGroup is to set up a listserv, but the features provided by YahooGroups lend themselves to a variety of uses ranging from communication with immediate family members (to the exclusion of all others) to large communities of practice where members share files, links, post photos, set polls, and enter reminders and announcements in the calendar services. The file space provided each group is a generous 20 megabytes, which can be used for storage of documents (text, HTML, multimedia, etc.) accessible from anywhere on the Internet, amounting to a convenient file transfer service between computers used by one or more members. There is also a database feature which allows fields to be updated by multiple members, emulating the collaborative function of a wiki <http://wiki.org/wiki.cgi?WhatIsWiki>.

One advantage to a YahooGroup for the purpose of education is that various aspects of the group (membership and postings for example) can be moderated. Thus a class can be enrolled in the group and the teacher can ensure that no others are allowed in. Member privacy is maintained through masking of email addresses to all but the owner(s) and moderator(s) of the group, initially the idividual who set it up, though these responsibilities can be granted to others, with a graduated set of privileges. Management of the group is handled through a special interface seen only by moderators, allowing numerous settings ranging from appearance of the portal (color scheme, text, links) to whether attachments are permitted, whom replies go to, who can post messages, who can access files and photos, and so on. In the hands of a skilled moderator, a YahooGroup portal can be made to function with many features of an expensive and more complicated LMS (learning management system). [-2-]

- To set up your own group, just visit Yahoo Groups and follow instructions: http://www.yahoogroups.com
- More information from the Webheads in Action syllabus: http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/week1.htm#wk1-1
- A model from the session on *Establishing and maintaining 'Web presence'*: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/webpresence/

Blogs Away!!

One way individuals can easily maintain their Web presences is through blogging. Before blogging, I used to send novice users to Filamentality <http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/>, which prompted them to fill out an online form to create and annotate bookmarks on the Web and then submit the form to the host site. This created a Web page with a URL, and for a long time this was the best way I knew of that a complete newcomer to the Internet could quickly and easily establish a Web presence within the time-frame of an hour-long language class. However, the forms template locked users into a virtual straight-jacket, so students were rarely encouraged to revisit and develop their ideas.

When Blogger appeared <http://www.blogger.com> I was once again able to get computer-novice students signed up and online with their own personal URL in one class period, plus they had a Web space in which they could express themselves, and which they could manipulate in terms of graphics and linkages. The straight-jacket had vanished. Students were able to freely develop their ideas and comment on each other's blogs. They could include links to other sites, invaluable in expanding on topics or for validating research. More importantly, they had an audience for their work. They could say to their friends and show their family, look right here on the Internet, this is what I did in school today. And to their surprise and delight they occasionally got feedback on their work from readers abroad. Blogging is a significant development which has impacted all walks of life, not just education. Even Noam Chomsky has a blog <http://blog.zmag.org/ttt/>.

In terms of establishing a personal Web presence, blogging might be a tool of choice even for people who maintain their own more traditionally hosted Web sites elsewhere. Although I maintain many such Web projects, I find that blogging lends itself to integrating other Web presence tools in ways that allow me to go online more spontaneously than in the past. Previously, I had to create HTML documents and FTP them to my host server <http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/F/FTP.html>. To do that, I needed to carry all my Web documents around with me (on a laptop, because I needed an HTML editing tool to work with the documents) and wherever I happened to connect to the Internet, I needed to be able to patch that laptop in. I no longer find it necessary to work in that way. I prefer to work from my office or from friends' computers, or from cybercafes or institutional networks, wherever I happen to be, without needing my laptop, so when I have the urge to put stuff online, I just switch on whatever computer is there and do it right then. Working through blogs, I have access to all my existing online materials plus documents and photos stored at Yahoo Groups and similar locations, and I can pull these from the Internet and work them into my blogs, on the spur of the moment.

Two blog sites particularly meet my needs in this regard. One is Blogger, which has the advantage of allowing you to set up multiple blogs under one account, so that you can keep a network of blogs under a relatively simple login. Blogger has recently improved its comments system so that any registered Blogger can comment on another's blog, though viewers often have to dig to see them by clicking on a Comments link. This network can easily extend to other people's blogs, since you can add collaborators to any of your blogs (and be added as contributor to those of others). The shared blog appears in each user's 'dashboard' (with management privileges only if granted, or limited to posting only) - and these postings can be seen as part of the blog, not buried in a comments area. Pictures can be linked into the blog, but Blogger doesn't store your pictures on its servers (they have to exist elsewhere on the Internet). Blogger's posting interface includes a limited set of HTML tools so that hyperlinking and simple formatting are easily achieved by anyone who can click an icon with a mouse. Blogger also gives high return in the form of attractive layout with an intuitive interface requiring minimum understanding on the part of the blogger, so it tends to be the blogging tool I suggest when working with newcomers. [-3-]

A site that is even easier to use if you want to post images is Buzznet. Buzznet hosts the images, which you can upload from your computer. The images are displayed in a gallery of thumbnails, and when users click on a thumbnail they see the image enlarged plus any commentary the blog owner has placed there. Another advantage to Buzznet is that comments made by viewers appear beneath each blog entry, easily viewed and responded to by other viewers. Each image screen has its unique URL and these can be given out so that viewers can enter the blog at whatever point is chosen (or, if the default blog address is given, viewers enter the blog at the last posting). To more sophisticated users of Buzznet, having a unique and easily discernable URL for each entry presents opportunities for control over navigation. Although Buzznet provides no HTML posting tools (as yet) you can include HTML code in postings to allow navigation to other images in the blog or to other blogs or Web sites (so you can set up an index as (I have done here: http://webpres2005.buzznet.com) from which viewers can navigate to other images in the blog). As can be seen from this example, the images could be associated with each student in a class, so that each student gets a page in the portal blog, and from there maintains his or her own blog or expanded Web presence.

Here are some other links which approach the topic of blogging from various perspectives:

- How Blogs Work: http://computer.howstuffworks.com/blog.htm

- About Blogs from the Webheads in Action syllabus: http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/week5.htm#blogs
- Barbara Dieu's Webooklet on Blogging and Presence Online (Feb 2004) directed at the potential of blogs in language learning: http://members.tripod.com/the_english_dept/blog04/
- Blog sites compared : http://blinger.org/imagesblog-comparison.htm
- Dafne Gonzales's instructions for working with Bloki: http://daf.bloki.com

Learning to use HTML

Although I was a language teacher for 20 years, backwash from the wave that carried me into an ESL career has presently beached me as a teacher of computing. In this discipline, and despite the plethora and variety of HTML authoring tools, I start students creating Web pages using Notepad, the Windows plain text editor. My colleagues and I familiarize them with the basic tags, including bulleting and tables. Then when we introduce them to Front Page, they have a basis for understanding the code underlying the documents they create, and they can troubleshoot accordingly.

A working knowledge of HTML is to Web presence as ability to read musical notation is to a musician. You can play it by ear, but one is constantly surpassed in levels of creativity to which the untutored cannot aspire. There are three important points to make here:

1. It is not only possible but in fact easy to create functional Web pages using only a text editor such as Notepad (these could be posted directly onto blog pages as allowed by Bloki, for example, http://www.bloki.com, or the pages can be uploaded directly to the Internet, as we shall see shortly).
2. A knowledge of enough code to create simple pages will allow you to troubleshoot and enhance documents created in more sophisticated editors, and will reduce frustration when the results produced by those editors do not match expectations.
3. And finally, as mentioned above, integrating HTML into your blog postings will allow you to achieve effects that magnify the power of your blogs.

I have created a tutorial to teach just enough basic HTML code to enable anyone to emulate the effects described up to here so far (see the first link below). The second and third links direct users to more information on learning about HTML and HTML editors. The fourth addresses frequently asked questions when dealing with images on Web sites, and the last item provides information on placing JavaScript chunks in your code to achieve interesting effects without understanding a thing about the code itself (except where to put it). [-4-]

1. Vance's e-Zguide "10+ steps to creating simple HTML files": http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/pi/very_basics/starthere.htm
2. A set of resources for learning HTML (from Vance's ESL_Home): http://www.vancestevens.com/htmledit.htm#learning_html
3. More sophisticated HTML: http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/week6.htm#skills
4. Capturing images and resizing them: http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/pi/very_basics/pictureperfect.htm
5. JavaScript: http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/pi/very_basics/internet_syllabus.htm#javascript_forms

Hosting your Site

Once you've started creating your own Web pages, you might find the blog format limiting, or you may want to design your own Web spaces which you develop reflectively offline, or in a local or LAN environment with intent to upload it later to the Internet. You can of course create interlinked sets of Web documents, put them online, and link to them from your blogs, and visa versa. To do this you'll have to either purchase space on a Web server or sign up for a free service (ads!!). If you pay for the service you can expect your site to be ad-free and to be able to FTP numerous files at a time, making your Web site fairly easy to manage. Most of the free services restrict you to an HTML upload interface that can make maintenance of your site tedious, but you get what you pay for and they want you to upgrade to their paid services.

There are a number of free Web hosting sites. I recently had a number of trainees use Tripod <http://www.tripod.lycos.com/>, and they were able to put their own Web pages online, but we had to be very careful that the dozens of commercial services that were checked ON by default stayed checked OFF once we had cleared them. Tripod has a tricky way of presenting what looks like the same page again but with some of the invitations for spam email restored to ON status in a way the unwary might not notice, so I am taking the trouble here to warn you about it. Colleagues I know have used Bravenet but in the past when I have visited their pages I've been invited to download spyware on my computer (an example: *download this free improvement to your system calendar, we're sure you'll love it, signed Gator*). I'm not sure if they are still doing that, but as always it's up to you to be careful. I haven't had such trouble with Geocities (<http://geocities.yahoo.com/>, recently acquired by Yahoo), whose free service seems to be accompanied only by an ad in the corner of each page, easily dismissed.

If you are concerned that using free Web hosting services could be annoying, you might consider a minimum-level paid service. This would be ad-free and should grant you access to FTP uploading, and it normally costs around $5 a month. There is more information, including links to lists of potential host sites, at the URLs below:

- From the Webheads Syllabus: <http://www.vancestevens.com/papers/evonline2002/week5.htm#uploading>
- From the 10 e-Z Steps guide: <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-vstevens/files/pi/very_basics/housekeeping.htm#presence>

Your Own Moodle?

Another form of online presence that has been gaining popularity among proponents of open source software lately is Moodle <http://moodle.org/>. This is software that can be freely downloaded and installed on a server, and anyone with access to that server can create courses using its LMS (learning management system) interface. Unlike the other options mentioned above, which are freely available to anyone with a browser and an Internet connection, and which utilize free Web spaces on servers that anyone can register to use, Moodle requires that you have access to a server running Moodle, and therefore you either set up your own or prevail on an institute or a colleague already running one to let you use that one. [-5-]

A learning management system is an important part of many educators' online Web presences. Many institutions provide access to such systems in the form of Blackboard, WebCT, Desire to Learn, First Class, and so on. However, these are not free systems, and they are available only to authorized users. There are no publicly available servers running Moodle that I know of, but there is one LMS that has remained free over the years (and whose owners insist that this will remain the case) and that is Nicenet's Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) <http://www.nicenet.net>. Anyone wishing to try out an LMS can register with Nicenet and see how they like the environment. Typically, an LMS provides its users with some way to structure a course and add content, and with some means of communicating within the class, usually through an asynchronous discussion forum. Synchronous tools in these environments, even in the expensive models, tend to be weak. For developers, confronting an LMS for the first time can be daunting (LMSystems tend to sit there and wait for you to do something). But once you get get the hang of working with them, they prove to be intuitive and, like any tool, facilitate creativity in the hands of skilled users.

- If you are interested in learning more about such systems, check out Robin Good's presentation here: Synchronous Collaboration Tools for the Academic World at e/merge2004 Blended Learning and Collaborative Technologies Conference June 15, 2004: <http://www.voxwire.com/kolabora/emerge>
- There is more about LMS's here: <http://www.vancestevens.com/authorng.htm>

Moodle has gained popularity recently among language educators in particular because it has features especially suitable for language learning: discussion forums and chatrooms, glossaries with auto-link functionality, embedding of multimedia files in discussion forums, resources, and quizzes, wiki activities for on-line collaborative writing, easy integration with HotPotatoes, etc. Here are some resources from the link just given:

- The official 'manual' is at <http://moodle.org/doc/>

- Matt Riordan has also produced a more comprehensive Teacher Manual, also at the Moodle site: http://moodle.org/docs/
- Here's an interesting discussion--pros and cons--of Moodle as a course management interface: http://www.bath.ac.uk/dacs/cdntl/pMachine/morriblog_more.php?id=310_0_4_0_M
- Here's an article written by a teacher who used Moodle for a year. http://www.penwithlearningcommunity.org.uk/research/Andy%20Diament.pdf
- Robb, Thomas. 2004. Moodle: A Virtual Learning Environment for the Rest of Us. TESL-EJ Vol 8 #2. http://writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej30/m2.html

My EVOnline session *Establishing and maintaining 'Web presence'* has been rendered as a tutorial hosted on a Moodle server generously maintained by Venny Su as an open-source service for educators at http://www.opensource.idv.tw/moodle/. To access the tutorial, under Education select the Web Presence Course and log in as a Guest.

The tutorial shows various ways that entry-level computer users can establish Web presence in such a way that it can be used or taught to others to ensure that members of an online community are capable of taking on the responsibility for establishing and maintaining their own Web presence. This frees the facilitator to devote attentions to other aspects of community building without having to neglect the most crucial one --creating an environment in which community members can meet and appreciate the skills and personalities of one another. This article has provided an explanation of various tools mentioned in the tutorial.

The URLs noted in this article were all retrieved January 8, 2005 from the Web sources indicated.

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