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On the Internet

Online conferences and teacher professional development: SLanguages and WiAOC 2009

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Educators are constantly networking with one another. Brick and mortar educational institutions almost always have some form of staff room or teacher's lounge, and since the advent of the Internet, the staff room has extended virtually beyond the physical walls. Many teachers in fact, find their most productive networking to be in those virtual online spaces. A substantial number of these wired teachers can be said to be quite passionate about the quality of learning that takes place in those spaces, and a common reason for that passion is in turn excitement about the potentials inherent in application of what is learned to improving the learning environment for their students.

The common motivator stoking this enthusiasm is a desire to learn as much as possible about educational technology. But this is not an interest in technology for its own sake, this is a goal-directed interest derived in understanding how technology enhances learning. It is widely understood that technology is constantly developing, and that new technologies are cropping up or being adapted in novel ways to enrich the learning environment. Most of this learning takes place collaboratively, and there is a sound theoretical base suggesting that learning is social, that people can help to scaffold one another in their learning, and that knowledge tends to diffuse throughout networks so that in order to 'know' a particular thing, what you really need to know is not that thing exactly, but rather how to seek out and access the information needed, as it's needed, from wherever it resides on your network.

Language teachers were among the earliest educators to see the value in networking via the Internet. At the turn of the century, many were participating in popular mailing lists such as TESLCA-L and NETEACH-L and synchronous chat environments spawning collaborative communities, such as Tapped In <http://tappedin.org>. Communities of Practice (CoPs) such as Webheads in Action <http://webheads.info> were exploring ways of connecting with peers and carrying out projects involving students collaborating with one another, initially as e-pals, but more recently broadcasting to the world via voice and video, and conversing with other learners via blogs. Typically teachers would showcase their efforts at live face to face conferences but gradually they and their students started infiltrating online conferences (Stevens, 2009).

The trouble was that before 2005 there was usually a registration fee for participation in such conferences, though some might waive fees for student presenters, as did Teaching in the Community Colleges in 2003 <http://prosites-vstevens.homestead.com/files/efi/papers/tcc2003/proposal.htm>. The fact that conference hosts generally required credit card details for access was one reason that the Webheads in Action CoP put on its first completely free online conference in 2005. Ground-breaking at the time, this event was proof-of-concept that teaching practitioners could produce and deliver their own international online conference peer to peer for free and make it as good or better than one that was organized top-down and had to be paid for (Stevens, 2005).

Webheads were not the only ones thinking along these lines. The following year the first K-12 Online conference made its debut <http://k12onlineconference.org/>, its organizers, judging from no mention of WiAOC in blog posts and webcasts participated in prior to their conference, seemingly unaware of the WiAOC event that had preceded it by almost a year <http://weblogg-ed.com/2006/k12-online-2006-conference/>. Both WiAOC and K-12 Online were promoted and aided by the Worldbridges community of webcasters that was just starting to form around then (Lebow, 2006). An era of Web 2.0, free content, open source software, and creative commons copyright was well upon us by then. The Worldbridges community, especially its offshoots EdTech Talk and Webcast Academy, was in the process of revolutionizing the way educators sustain conversations in an age of optimal connectivity <http://edtechtalk.com/ and http://webcastacademy.net/>.

George Siemens has articulated a framework for such phenomena under the term "connectivism" (Siemens, 2004) and he himself mounted in 2007 the first of many of his free online events of great interest to educators: an Online Connectivism Conference and The Future of Education Online <http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/moodle/course/category.php?id=8>, with downloads of podcasts and other internet artifacts richly aggregated. George's efforts eventually evolved into an entirely new kind of event, a massive free online course given in 2008 with Stephen Downes, where anyone was invited to sign on for free, as some 2400 did, and when asked how they were going to 'deliver' a course for so many people, George and Stephen articulated a position whereby they would suggest the tools and provide coherence for the course, the participants would carry on the discussion, all would learn together, and whatever any one person learned would be up to that individual. The course was anchored in a small coterie of students who had paid to take it for credit, but to invite a huge community along for a free if uncharted ride was a bold experiment taking the idea of sharing learning to new directions and heights <http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/connectivism/>.

One interesting aspect of all these events mentioned so far is that none is simply a repeat of another. Each is unique. The Webheads in Action Online Convergence, held every two years, is a groundswell of community creativity that sustains itself synchronously with very few gaps for 72 hours. The K-12 Online conference is a mostly asynchronous event where participants interact in online spaces only after viewing pre-recorded refereed presentations. George Siemens's events tend to feature only a few presentations a day, but each is of crucial significance, the conversation around them is always provocative, and each presentation is, as in all these events, available online for replay later.

Participants sometimes say that the quality of online conferences is better than what they find at F2F ones. Jen Wagner of Women of Web 2.0 fame said online that WiAOC 2009 was "one of the best conferences I've ever been to. If you want to talk about diversity ... everything that they showcased was just, like, wow!" (at 29:00 into the recording of Ed Tech Brainstorm, May 28, 2009) <http://edtechtalk.com/node/3766>.

In recent years yet another unique free event for sharing among educators has been started, SLanguages, where participants appear as avatars in Second Life and use the voice and multimedia, multidimensional objects there to attend a conference with a uniquely palpable sense of presence <http://www.slanguages.net/>.

One thing that organizers of free online events have in common is dis-satisfaction with the way on-site conferences tend to be organized year after year. At mainstream conferences, delegates pay dearly to travel and incur hotel expenses to convene at convention centers where, if the wireless charges haven't been paid for that particular event, the only kind of networking possible is the interpersonal kind. I don't mean to be so reclusive as to suggest that interpersonal relationships are not important; however, two points are clear:

1. The ideal conference configuration capitalizes on the benefits of face-to-face encounter while providing ubiquitous connectivity to maximize the potentials inherent in conference participants keeping connected with their wider professional networks.
2. Conferences that do not provide adequate connectivity will become of less and less interest to those for whom connectivity is crucial to professional development

There are a number of face-to-face real-world conferences where organizers try to approach a configuration of optimal connectivity. For example, EuroCALL has had a Virtual Strand at its conferences since 2007 <http://vsportal2007.googlepages.com/home> and IATEFL have included online components to its recent conferences in. Exeter in 2008 <http://exeteronline.britishcouncil.org/> and Cardiff in 2009 <http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2009/>, which incidentally experienced an outbreak of Twitter at that last event <http://m.twitter.com/iateflonline>. Some other face-to-face conferences with exemplary networking opportunities have been:

- EduCon 2.1--http://educon21.wikispaces.com/
- EduCon 2.0 is discussed in It's Elementary #28--http://edtechtalk.com/node/3495v
- NECC--http://center.uoregon.edu/ISTE/NECC2009/
- and its online parallel conference, NECC Unplugged-- http://www.necc2008.org/group/neccunplugged
- Learning 2.008 in Shanghai--http://learning2cn.ning.com/
- Learning 2.0: A Colorado Conversation--http://colearning.wikispaces.com/Home 2009

The remainder of this article is about two events of this nature that took place in May 2009, the Webheads in Action Online Convergence (WiAOC) and the SLanguages conference held in Second Life. Each conference was taking place for its third time.

WiAOC 2009

WiAOC, or Webheads in Action Online Convergence <http://wiaoc.org>, has taken place in 2005, 2007, and 2009. In the intervening years 2006 and 2008 proceeds were produced from some of the papers presented at these events (Stevens, 2006a and 2006b; and Stevens and Hanson-Smith, 2008).

Each year WiAOC has introduced some innovation to the concept of online conferencing. As mentioned earlier, in the first year, it was one of the first, if not the first, to test the concept of holding a free yet impressive peer-to-peer conference online.

One of the most difficult steps in starting up an online conference is getting the community to agree on the date. After that a theme has to be decided along with timings for important events,

and wording of a call for participation must be negotiated.

A still trickier task is to decide on keynote presenters. It helps to mention some well-known names in the CfP; hence, a need to organize this in the early stages of planning. The Webheads in Action have a unique rule which is that keynote presenters must come from outside the community. There are two reasons for this. One is that in a community where so many are qualified to give keynotes, this obviates competition or rivalry among community members for keynote positions, where some outstanding community members would inevitably be passed over. And second, it injects voices, perspectives, and knowledge into the community from the wider network that might not otherwise reach us except obliquely (as echoed by Stephen Downes in this comment: http://www.downes.ca/cgi-bin/page.cgi?post=46477).

WiAOC have consistently been able to attract a variety of interesting speakers who have helped to attract others in the wider community to both present and attend. Keynote speakers are selected by a committee that attempts to be as egalitarian as possible (we ask at our weekly meetings and via our mailing list who would like to participate in keynote speaker selection and all volunteers are welcomed). We then create a Google Doc wiki, where nominations can be made and recommendations for various candidates discussed in a secure and private shared location. Choices are made through consensus and committee members then invite the speakers selected. In previous years we felt that we should limit our keynotes to just half a dozen or so but this year the choices were many and difficult to make, so in the end we decided that any constraints were artificial ones and we ended up inviting over a dozen speakers, almost all of whom accepted <http://wiaoc09.pbworks.com/KeyNoters>.
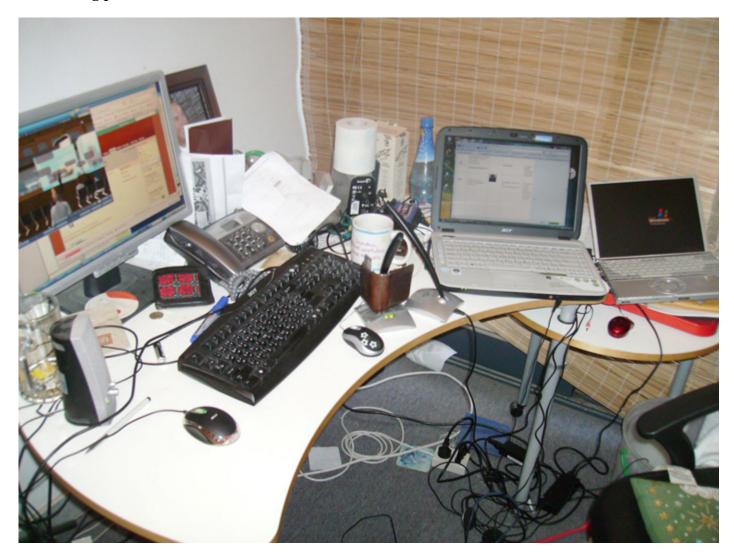
As the WiAOC is a biannual event, developments in educational technology in the intervening years suggest different approaches each time the event is mounted. For the first one, we used a Moodle for registration and discussion as well as static web 1.0 sites in conjunction with a dynamic submissions, vetting, and scheduling system designed in asp by Fernanda Rodrigues, one of our community members. Worldbridges kindly offered to webcast as much of the event as they could stay awake for and to store audio recordings for us, whose urls were baked into our static schedule pages. For the second WiAOC in 2007 we again set up a vetting process using Fernanda's dynamic database system, but we moved registration and tracking of content, including storage and retrieval of presentation recordings, to the Worldbridges WiA Drupal portal at http://webheadsinaction.org.

For the 2009 convergence we made yet another major innovation. We decided to simplify the vetting process by essentially doing away with it. Having noticed over two conferences that we accepted all proposals where feedback was attended to, and that the quality of submissions was generally high, we decided to trust the community to self-referee by opening a wiki to anyone who wanted to write in presentation titles and abstracts in the time slot they wished to present them <http://wiaoc09.pbworks.com/schedule>. There was talk of opening parallel sessions but this would have burdened the webcasters who had volunteered to stream our events, and in the end presenters spaced themselves out graciously and parallel events were not necessary. Apart from one or two instances of confusion over GMT time conversions, sorted out in flurries of behind the scenes activity, presenters spread themselves evenly and amicably over the 72 hours in the 3-day time period.

WiAOC was entirely organized and run by a large community of volunteers, often working independently to tweak this wiki or that or do whatever was necessary or appropriate as work seemed needed. One of the wikis was an organizational one, and this served to coordinate efforts behind the scenes. Elluminate presentation rooms were once again provided through the

generosity of Learning Times <http://www.learningtimes.net/> who donated two rooms with no bandwidth cap for us.

We were able to alternate presentations between the two rooms so that at busy times we could clear one room, which needed to be empty before the recording would be automatically uploaded to the Elluminate server, while the next presentation got under way in the other room. The next presenter in the empty room then had time to upload slides and prepare the room for when the participants arrived from the room where the intervening presentation was held. That other presentation room could then be cleared, its recording uploaded, and the next presenter made ready for as many iterations as were necessary. This put pressure on moderators who sometimes needed to be in two places at once, clearing one room and receiving the next presenter there while making sure that things were starting smoothly in the second room. I managed this (plus made backup recordings by enterering presentation rooms as an alter ego and recording in Audacity) by working from three computers, sometimes four (if I needed to monitor the live stream). But when intervening presentations were held in Second Life or in other venues then transitions were easier.

Strands had been suggested to help presenters to organize around themes, but most presenters associated themselves with the "Unconference" strand, perhaps as a default or avoidance strategy. However, the Second Life strand was well subscribed, with several presentations and workshops emanating from 'in world' each day. Presenters conducted tours of learning spaces, gave presentations and discussions on best practices in using Second Life as a learning platform, and often held workshops where participants could design and manipulate pre-scripted objects.

This serves to segue us into a discussion of the second of these two free online conferences held in May, 2009, as written-up by its organizer, Gavin Dudeney.

SLanguages 2009

The SLanguages conference is the only annual conference in the virtual world Second Life for language teachers and teacher trainers. This year it had its third anniversary.

Some history

The SLanguages conference started in 2007 as a small venture in which there were five speakers and an audience of approximately thirty people. Everyone who attended the conference was personally known to me (or at least their avatars were!) and we simply got together to talk about what we had learned about teaching languages in the virtual world and to share some examples of best practices.

In those days we had one island in Second Life (EduNation) and the entire 'conference' took place in one small venue on that island. In some ways it was a nicer experience than the current conference because it was more 'homey', perhaps easier to make friends and to socialise with such a small group of interested people. We had speakers from Language Lab and from the British Council and that was pretty much it.

In many ways it was a good excuse to meet up and just give ourselves a pat on the back for the work we had done, which we thought was very cutting edge for the time. Luckily I had the prescience to call it the 'First Annual...' so that nobody else could appropriate the idea and run a similar event the following year.

In 2008 we had about thirty presentations and well over 200 visitors during the twenty-four hours the conference ran. I also enlisted the help of Howard Vickers (of Avatar Languages) to set up and run an official conference website (http://www.slanguages.net) and we had a proper call for papers and selection process. I slept for only three hours over the conference period!

And so to this year, the Third Annual SLanguages Conference . . .

In many ways the conference is still put together with the same idea in mind: to give everyone working in language education in SL a forum to present their ideas and experiences and talk about them with like-minded people; to share examples of best practice and to work towards a better understanding of how language learning and teacher training work in virtual worlds.

SLanguages 2009

This year we made an early start with the conference, updating the official website and putting out the call for papers in early January. Of course, our efficiency didn't actually lead to people putting in their proposals earlier, but I was conscious of the fact that people have now begun to expect a more 'professional' event three years down the line, so it was important--at least for me--to ensure that the 'paperwork' resembled such an event as closely as possible.

Of course, this is difficult as the bulk of the work is carried out either by myself or Howard, and we have limited time--but I've started to put in process a set of steps to guarantee a bigger organising committee for next year and I hope this will ease the strain in the future.

In many ways organising an online event is not much different from organising a face-to-face one: the venue, the website, the proposals, timetabling, etc. Perhaps the only added complication is in-

world logistics such as presentation tools, etc., but mercifully all the speakers were well-prepared and well-behaved! Having organised a few f2f events, I don't find the actual logistics too different or too onerous.

In terms of the event itself, it runs for twenty-four hours (in order to cover the world in terms of time differences) and we try to ensure that (where possible) each speaker does his or her session twice at different times to facilitate as large an audience as possible. This year we started with the now traditional party and then moved on to a 'where are we now?' plenary session which I facilitated. The rest of the event then went into plenary sessions and we had course reports, practical workshops, sample language lessons, field trips and roundtables--more or less the sort of thing you'd find f2f.

I think the major difference this year was an attempt to ground the conference more in practice-- hence the practical workshops and sample lessons, and this was amply demonstrated by Howard Vickers' decision to bring in an actual learner to talk about his language learning experience. Pierre, a Parisian student of Avatar Languages, was perhaps the most persuasive argument for the use of virtual worlds in language learning that I've yet to hear, and I think we'll want to be looking for more of these 'learner voices' next year.

We finished up with another party, with me streaming music live from a second laptop onto the island in Second Life and lots of avatars dancing. A lot of people who haven't experienced SL find all this a little, shall we say, disturbing--but the social side of the event is equally important as the sessions and we try to set aside plenty of opportunities over the twenty-four hours for people to get to know each other and chat informally.

Of course the big question has to be 'why bother running a free event with all the grief it must bring organising it?' For me it's a way of affirming my commitment to Second Life (which makes up a small but growing part of my professional life) and also gives other smaller voices and organisations a chance to feel part of what is, at times, a very disparate community. This year we had presentations about teaching Spanish, Chinese and Italian, as well as the majority English and it's fantastic to see everyone together and comparing notes and experiences.

I suppose the same question might be asked of any f2f event--why bother? It's the collegiality, the networking, the shared experience, feeling part of an important community that is doing something good, pushing the boundaries of the profession. It's a celebration of our 'art'. Of course I can't deny that there is a knock-on effect for me in terms of 'visibility' and perhaps for my company in terms of coverage and reputation, but the decision was made early on in the development of this event that it would remain uncommercial and unfettered by a myriad of logos. So whilst it's a lot of work, I'm proud that we don't do sponsorship (in any real sense), we don't have company logos everywhere and we don't advertise during the event itself.

Avatar Languages (who pay for, and maintain, the website) get to have their logo on a slide at the end of the conference alongside one for my company and (this year) one for Language Lab who generously provided free orientation sessions for new SL users--but that's it. There are no big commercial sponsors and no large adverts anywhere. And I think that's what makes it special--the event is about the content, not the publishers, providers or writers, etc. It's about the people who work in SL and what they do. We also have no 'star turns' yet, and I've striven to keep the event practice, rather than research, based. I think there will come a time when research will be more important (when more has actually been done!) but at the moment the conference is about real classes and real teaching.

This year we had four simultaneous sessions most of the time, and it has become apparent to me that if the event continues to grow exponentially as in the past three years then there is going to be a need for a bigger team and more organisation and it was great to note this year how many people volunteered their time for next year, an offer which I shall most definitely take up, provided it's still about the people and not the organisations.

In terms of participants, we do solicit feedback after the event and I'll include just a couple of quotations from that feedback (from the past three years) here:

> *"It's been the best organised conference (in RL or SL) that I've been to all year--well done!"*

> *"Well, the SLanguages 2009 conference is over. Phew! This was undoubtedly the best online conference that I have ever attended. I learned an enormous amount about teaching foreign languages in virtual worlds, and I even took part in a lesson for beginners in Spanish."*

> *"I learned more about SL in the few hours I was in this conference than the whole of the rest of my time in SL so far. In fact I signed up in SL to have just these types of experiences, so I finally felt that I got what SL was all about (finally)!"*

> *"An inspiring event. It was great to see educators from across the globe generously sharing their experience--an illustration in itself of the educational benefits of SL!"*

Of course, not everyone is 100% satisfied--there are issues with timetabling (people need to sleep, apparently!) and also, perhaps, the start of issues with content, though I'm loathe to go down the route of a review committee for abstracts, etc. With that in mind, we're currently poring over the feedback (as we do every year) to see what changes we can make for next year when, I suspect, the conference will be even bigger and even better attended. As for its significance, I think that's really difficult for me to judge. I think perhaps the best contribution it makes is giving people the energy to continue and to keep 'fighting their corner' in the face of often-seen criticism of SL as a fad that won't last, an abomination in educational circles, etc. If it only fulfills that role then I guess it's achieved something special. But I hope there's more to it than that.

What next?

Work continues on WiAOC 2009. At this writing Worldbridges webcaster Jose Rodrigues is organizing volunteers to edit and store recordings. Robert Squires has just attained the ability to rip MP3 files from Elluminate recordings, which will pass through the editing process to join the Ustream recordings, raw audio, chat logs, and podcasts of edited audio available at http://webheadsinaction.org/. At some point, a proceeds will be organized. Presentations from SLanguages are also archived at http://www.slanguages.net/.

Both conferences will likely enter their 4th rounds, SLanguages in 2010 and WiAOC in 2011, where they will continue to contribute to the growing archive of conference materials currently available to practitioners seeking to engage in professional development for free and at their convenience from wherever they are in the world.

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