

We do have our prejudices, don't we? Teach English with the internet? I don't think so.

But until I actually lost some classes to an "online" provider, I pretty well relied on my first reactions and failed to inform myself. Now it was costing me money not to be able to talk intelligently about online teaching, First, I couldn't point out the drawbacks well; second, I couldn't give my prospective client the characteristics of a "good" provider...if there were such a thing. Sure, there was blended learning, but my limited experience with that was not good. The only person I knew (not an ELTAFer) who was doing blended learning was a bit of a flake.

About that time, Electronic Village Online was offering six courses free. "Online." I chose "Becoming a Webhead (BaW): A hands-on workshop on how to use Web communication tools for language teaching and learning". My own experiences with internet courses had not been good. They mainly consisted of pages and pages of text, which I had to download to read, and then pages of static exercises.

But, I decided this might be a chance to learn a little more. And learn more I did.

1. I lost my "fear" of navigating websites, of clicking on something just to see what would happen, of trying till I finally got what I wanted. (There must be something wrong – probably with me.)

2. I can now create websites (<http://ettpatwork.tripod.com>), blogs (<http://tothepointtuwe.blogspot.com>), Yahoo Lists, Photo Stories, customized online exercises, etc., and am using these to promote communication in English with my students and clients.

3. It is now possible for me to participate in live, synchronous, collaborative teaching/learning efforts with people from literally every continent. These are very valuable experiences. I don't know how to set one up, yet, but I'm sure that is just a matter of time.

4. I can now text chat, voice chat, chat with a webcam, send voice emails, telephone, conference – all on the internet, all free.

5. I learned that entire classes can be conducted online with fun and success. I know blended learning is more than directing your students to an internet exercise. And I also learned that for most people there has to be contact with a live person. Certainly for learning a language, there is no substitute for conversation.

The course was expertly and – yes – lovingly guided by Dafne Gonzalez, Professor in the Applied Linguistics Program, Universidad Simon Bolivar, Caracas (Venezuela) and Teresa Almeida d'Eça, a sixth-grade teacher near Lisbon (Portugal) and Chair of the TESOL Technology Advisory Committee. Each woman has had over 30 years teaching experience. We also had a lot of input from experienced Webheads and not so experienced participants all over the world. All made their advice and knowledge freely available with friendly patience. No question was too "stupid" (they even answered the same "stupid" questions more than twice); no question went unanswered.

I could work as much or as little on the assignments as I liked, but participating was the key to learning how to use these tools: participating, not only in the activities, but also in the discussions about topics germane to teaching; e.g., correcting written mistakes in online work, learning theory, typing and computer skills for youngsters, how to build participation on line.

These courses do take time. I wasn't quite prepared for how much. I had a very heavy teaching schedule and a sweet supportive husband. After the first week, I found that as soon as I got home, I switched on my computer and checked the latest from the BaW2005 list - at least 25 messages, many of which I wanted to reply to. And then there were the links to follow and assignments to do. As a result I ended up eating a sandwich in front of the computer and going to bed way past my normal time. I found out I wasn't the only one.

This was the fun: intense learning of something that is interesting to me, meeting lots of new people, establishing connections all over the world. The support, no matter what your project, is one of the most valuable outcomes of the BaW course. In fact, these connections have even turned into f2f (face to face) meetings with a wonderful exchange of experiences and teaching ideas from a "foreign" perspective.

What are Webheads? "Webheads in Action is a three-year-old community of practice of language teachers worldwide, coordinated by Vance Stevens. We explore Web communication tools and share the best ways of using them in our teaching practices, engage with students in virtual classes, collaborate on projects, and participate in conferences as audience and presenters. This collaboration takes place online, as we are all geographically apart."

http://www.geocities.com/vance_stevens/papers/evonline2002/webheads.htm

When are the next EVOonline courses? In January, 2006.

Who can participate? Anyone. You just have to at least be able to email and get into the internet. No other qualifications are necessary.

Yes, but, does this stuff really work for teaching your classes? As with all tools, some things work with some people/classes, some things don't. I think what all of them see is that I am up-to-date. This has a tremendous marketing value and an impact on the decision makers as well as the students. Practically, if the student thinks it helps him or her I'm happy.

But I've never taken an online course before. This sounds scary. Just sign up and sign in. If you have questions, there is always a friendly and helpful answer. And you can always email me.

There is a more detailed description of the course in the July issue of Jarek Krajka's "Teaching with Technology".
<http://www.iatefl.org.pl/call/callnl.htm>

