

WEB RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS 1: DISCUSSION GROUPS FOR TEACHERS

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This is the first of two articles that have been prompted by two things I've often heard teachers say.

The first is "teaching can be a lonely job". It's ironic, really, that people can say that when, day in day out, they are working closely together with other humans in rooms which are full of people, in the form of their students, isn't it? But that doesn't stop it from being true, of course; students' perspectives are very different from ours, and not all of us have the time or opportunity to discuss our concerns and experiences with colleagues. And this, I think, is one of the reasons why teachers love to go to conferences, where they can meet friends and colleagues and share with them.

Another reason why teachers love to go to conferences seems to be to get fresh ideas and new materials. Which brings me to the second thing I often hear them say, "I can't ever find what I want on the internet". Again, I have considerable sympathy; trying to find exactly what you want, when you want it, can be rather like searching for a needle in a haystack. But the Internet offers real advantages that going to a conference or to the library can't, in terms of its convenience, cheapness, and the sheer volume of material that is available. If you can find it!

There are various features that the internet provides which I think can be of real help to teachers facing the problems above. Among them are *discussion groups*, which are groups of people who communicate with one another about topics of mutual interest, and *online journals* and *e-newsletters*, which are similar to print journals (such as the one you are reading now) but appear in electronic format. I will deal with the latter in the second article. Now, though, let's look at some discussion groups.

A common way of dividing up discussion groups (also known as 'chat groups') is into *synchronous* ones, in which communication takes place in real time, and *asynchronous* ones, where you get messages a little bit later. All the groups I'm going to mention offer you a choice of either 'individual messages' (i.e. whenever somebody sends a message to the group it comes to you in the form of an email) or 'digests', which bundle messages together so that you receive all the postings from a certain time period at once. The 'individual message' option means you get things while they are still fresh and can see them in the order they come in, which is quite useful when you are trying to follow a discussion, but it also means that your inbox may get very full and that you may have to struggle through a lot of mail, not all of which is going to be interesting for you. Personally, I prefer to get my messages in digest form; I find it saves time. One problem is that digests often strip out any attachments that there might have been, but as most groups also have a website where all previous messages, and anything that may have accompanied them, is stored, I don't find that a problem.

All the discussion groups that I mention below were, at the time of writing, alive and well, free to join, and open to anybody. They are all also English-medium.

CETEFL-L was originally set up for teachers of English in Central and Eastern Europe, but has members as far away as Australia. A few years ago it was an extremely vibrant group. These days it's much quieter but still carries on. An interesting feature is that it is divided up into a number of dedicated channels, each of which exists for a specific purpose. So there is a CHAT: channel, for light topics, a TECH: channel for discussion of technical matters, a REV: channel, where reviews appear, and so on. You can decide which channels you want to be involved with and choose your settings accordingly. To subscribe you simply send an email to the address LISTSERV@CESNET.CZ with the command SUBSCRIBE CETEFL-L YOUR NAME (so I wrote SUBSCRIBE CETEFL-L SIMON GILL) in the subject line. You then receive a mail telling you what to do next.

CREATIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS is a relatively new and extremely active group founded by a teacher from Turkey. They seem to be very keen on sharing materials and classroom ideas and can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/creativeenglishteachers/>. This group, like several of the others mentioned below, is organised through the popular Yahoo! Groups. You have to join Yahoo! Groups in order to join the group, but the process is very simple and you can then join other groups hosted by Yahoo! For example, their search engine lists several hundred other groups that claim to be dedicated to English teaching. Some of them very obviously aren't, but there might be some gems that I haven't noticed in there.

DOGME ELT is a very active list, with over 8000 postings since it started in 2001, dedicated to 'a pedagogy of bare essentials', and I've mentioned them before in articles I've written for this newsletter. Their basic idea is that teaching should be less focused on materials and more focused on the interaction between the people in the classroom, i.e. the teacher and students. You can find out more about the group, and join it, by going to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme/> and they maintain a good website, 'Teaching Unplugged', at <http://www.teaching-unplugged.com/>

ELTECS-L is run by the British Council. It stands for *The English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme*. It functions primarily as a provider of useful information. For example, recent postings have mentioned up-and-coming conferences and courses, provided reports on events that have taken place, given news of job and study offers, and carried invitations to take part in research and to get involved in international programmes of various kinds. You can join by going to <http://mis.britishcouncil.org/archives/eltecs-l.html> and following the simple online instructions. There is also a complete archive of previous postings at this site. It's a moderated list, which means that anything you post will be looked at by an administrator before it actually gets posted to the list.

IATEFL is the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language and our own association is affiliated to it. It has a number of Special Interest Groups and many of them have their own discussion groups, again mostly organised through Yahoo! Groups. These include:

The Computer SIG - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/IATEFLComputerSig/>

The Global Issues SIG - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gisig/>

The Teacher Development SIG - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TDSIG/>

The Teacher Trainers and Educators SIG - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ttedsig/>

The Young Learners SIG - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/younglearners/>

So if you are interested in any of these areas these are worth checking out. You don't have to be a full member of IATEFL to join, although last year the Young Learners group were very actively discussing the idea that membership of the list should be restricted to members of their group. In the end, however, they decided not to.

TESL-L is the grandfather of all such lists. It was founded in 1991 and is administered from the City University of New York. It has a huge membership, with somewhere around 30,000 people subscribed, but not all of them, you will be pleased to read, are active and the number of postings has always remained manageable. It also has a number of special interest subgroups, dealing with such areas as ESP, job opportunities, and computer technology in ELT. You can find out more by going to their website: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/> or you can simply join by sending an email to: LISTSERV@CUNYVM.CUNY.EDU with the command, NOT in the subject line but in the body of an otherwise blank email, SUBscribe TESL-L yourfirstname yourlastname For example: SUB TESL-L Simon Gill

All of these groups have various settings that you can choose. You can get your messages individually or in digest form, you can get them as HTML or plain text, and you can also interrupt them if, for example, you are going to be on holiday or away for a period, so that there's no danger of your inbox getting totally swamped with unwanted mail. And you can always cancel them if you don't like them!

Another thing 'newbies' often worry about is the fact that they don't want to actually send anything but would rather just read what other people are saying. Don't worry; that's perfectly all right. The practice is called 'lurking' and it's actually very common and not at all frowned on; after all, can you imagine what it would be like if all 30,000 members of TESL-L wrote at once?

I don't claim that what we have here is a complete list; I am sure there must be many others. However, I think they provide plenty to be going on with. We are, after all, busy people, and the worth of these groups lies not in the fact that they fill up our long empty hours but that they help us to do our jobs better and more efficiently. I have found them to be an extremely useful 'virtual staffroom' in that:

- they provide me with a lot of useful information about conferences, courses, events, books, websites, downloads etc
- they are a great source of practical ideas for my teaching
- they are places I can go to with problems (pedagogical, linguistic, technical...) and know that there will be colleagues who will try to help me
- they put me in touch with teachers all over the world, which is a fantastic feeling!

Simon Gill - MSSUA / MSATE Newsletter Spring 2005

I wish you pleasure and professional enrichment from the above groups and, if you find any others, please do let me know, either through one of them (I'm a member of them all) or by email: pangill@hotmail.com