Becoming a Webhead: Bridging the Gap from Classroom to Blended or Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT
Becoming a Webhead (BaW) is a 6-week free teacher development online workshop, one of the TESOL Electronic Village Online (EVOnline) sessions offered annually as preconvention activities for members and nonmembers of TESOL. The main goal of BaW is to introduce language teachers around the world to different web communication tools and explore the best ways of using them in their teaching practices in a friendly and collaborative atmosphere. In this paper, we will describe the syllabus, materials, participants, and success stories of this Webheads workshop.

KEYWORDS
Online Teacher Training, CALL, CMC, Web Tools, Electronic Village Online

INTRODUCTION
Stepping, or maybe jumping, from a face-to-face traditional classroom to online and blended teaching (a mix of classroom and online teaching) is not an easy task for teachers if they do not have the right preparation, which is hardly ever offered in their educational institutions as evidenced from the messages sent by English teachers worldwide to the Webheads in Action list (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads). Our own experience has shown us that becoming an online student is the first step towards bridging that gap. In this article, we will describe the syllabus, materials, participants, and success stories of a free online teacher development workshop where teachers are offered that opportunity.

FREE ONLINE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT
In January 2002, we had the chance to meet in the TESOL Electronic Village Online “Webheads in Action” session (see http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evon
I now see, from the few who have already signed in, that this will be an opportunity to get to know interesting professionals from all over who, perhaps, have different perspectives. I think it will be fun.

These introductions are posted to the course participants web page (http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/participants.html), an integral part of the BaW web site along with the syllabus, weekly activities, chat sessions, readings, links to all the tools used in the workshop, and any information that might be of help for the session. This web site, as well as the Yahoo group, is kept online after the end of the session for future reference. We also encourage participants to
post a photo to the Yahoo group, which we insert in the web page. We have found that this is a way to relate faces to ideas, build rapport and create a sense of community. Uploading a photo to the Yahoo group is the first threshold in the session, thus, the first opportunity for collaboration, as the following messages from two participants show:

my photo in participants is now non existent … probably because I deleted it from my profile and uploaded a new one! I have tried to make the alterations myself to no avail. What can I do?

I’m not sure where the problem is. I just deleted my own photo in the participants folder and uploaded a new one without any problem. Are you sure you were in the right folder before you uploaded? Just a thought.

Scaffolding or helping one another, giving hints about questions asked and helping participants overcome difficulties is how the interaction and collaboration start to build. Scaffolding has its origins in Vygostky’s sociocultural theories and the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), where the more knowledgeable peers help the less knowledgeable ones. The moderators do their best to encourage these exchanges in what we can call a follow-the-leader strategy.

Participants come from all over the globe with varied and interesting backgrounds. In 2005 we had 208 teachers from the five continents. We used an interactive map from Bravenet in which participants located themselves. This is a free application that holds 100 posts, so we had to use two maps in order to host our large number of participants (see http://www.prof2000.pt/users/mfr/baw2005/map.html). This is another step toward group cohesion.

FLEXIBLE SYLLABUS

In this diverse group of participants, there are different levels of technological expertise, evidence of which we obtained through a diagnostic survey completed in week 1.

In addition, participants work at different levels of education, from preschool to graduate level, including freelancers, which involves both different time commitments and different interests and needs. In order to cater to this diversity, our syllabus, though structured for 6 weeks, is flexible in the sense that the activities designed are just suggestions. Participants can follow them step by step or do only those that interest them. In order to ensure that everybody participates and works with one another, we post weekly tasks and questions, but it is up to the participants to determine their own agendas. We emphasize that all the material of the session will be available online for further exploration. The chance to work at one’s own pace and select material according to individual needs is fundamental in terms of coping with the abundant resources available for participants to explore and experiment with. In this way, we are promoting self-access and learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991), paramount elements in online learning (Dotson, 2003). The syllabus also includes a list of suggested readings for each
of the weekly topics, and participants choose the ones they wish to comment on (see http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/readings.html). In the second edition (2005), we added new topics to our session (e.g., using voice email, editing images, and capturing screens) to meet specific needs felt by some participants in the 2004 edition.

Most participants consider our flexible syllabus to be the starting point in their venture into cyberteaching, as expressed in the following message:

I might not have been as involved as I would have liked but there are tons of readings, sites and potential materials to design on my own that will keep me busy for quite some time and I pretend to still count on all of you, BaW friends from Class 2005, as you can count on me too.

INVITED GUEST SPEAKERS

At the end of week 1, after everybody feels comfortable with our asynchronous communication in the Yahoo group distribution list, weekly guest speakers initiate a series of live sessions to talk about the main topic of the week. In these synchronous events, participants can interact with our guests by discussing the use of several web tools in language teaching and learning while, at the same time, exploring the use of these tools (e.g., text-based and audio-based chat rooms and different virtual classrooms that include Web page projection and interactive whiteboard features.)

Our speakers also come from all over the world: the US, Australia, Brazil, Taiwan, Kuwait, Holland, and Spain. The topics range from tours of a well known community of educators (Tapped In) and creating interactive online exercises up to designing blended activities to facilitate effective teaching and learning approaches. Participants leave these sessions having experienced what an online live session feels and looks like and how it is carried out—the first steps to venturing to lead one themselves, as many of our participants have been doing after our workshop. These sessions are recorded for those participants who cannot attend and are kept on a chat sessions page (http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/chatsessions.html). One of the participants described these live sessions as, interesting, practical, relevant and useful. Excellent illustrations of how to apply various tools in developing online learning materials and transforming old concept of blended teaching/learning into the new one in the era of Information Technology.

TOOLS AND CONTENT

In our workshop, we have tried to blend practice of tools with reflections on their use in language learning and teaching in the different contexts of our participants. Reflection on practice (Schön, 1987) is important for participants to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the variety of tools presented and how they can incorporate them into their own educational settings (Almeida d’Eça, 2004; González, 2004). We promote live sessions to demonstrate how specific tools work and encourage participants to experience them hands on, followed by
a discussion of impressions, feedback, and ideas on the application of the tools to language learning. We have tried to model the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools by using different applications for the achievement of our objectives. In this sense, the Yahoo group distribution list is used for general discussions, the forum (http://pub34.bravenet.com/forum/2849384074) for discussions of readings, and the blog (http://baw-05.bravejournal.com) for discussions of our speakers’ live presentations.

We introduced text chat with a tour of Tapped In (http://tappedin.org) and the use of voice tools with a presentation at Yahoo Messenger (http://messenger.yahoo.com). Once these basic tools were presented, participants were taken to more complex environments like the Alado vClass(room) (http://www.alado.net/webheads) and the Elluminate vClass(room) at Learning Times (http://www.learningtimes.org). Learning by doing and reflecting on practice is what we want our session to achieve.

One of our participants wrote in the session blog after a presentation on blogs by Barbara Dieu, a webhead from Brazil who is an expert in the use of blogs in language teaching and learning,

I really appreciated the clarity and completeness of Barbara’s presentation. So much so that I created a new blog on Bravenet and enjoyed doing it. I’ve been thinking on how to explore blogging further with my students.

Even those who are not new to some topics find these sessions relevant.

I was already familiar with Blended learning, having tutored a couple of courses for teachers on blended mode and read quite a few articles on the matter … but I didn’t realise that blended learning could have so an extensive meaning and application. So I enjoyed the presentation fully. I particularly appreciated the clear and straightforward way Aiden followed and her ability to squeeze in so many information in so short a time. Thank you Aiden. Sooner or later I’d like to join you in one of your live sessions with your students. I need to get more confident with synchronous tools first, though.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

During these 6 weeks, participants are encouraged to actively engage in the creation of blogs and web pages to start building their online presence (see Figure 1). We create pages with hyperlinked thumbnails of their work (http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/p-wpages.html) so that they can easily visit the pages of other participants and make comments in the discussion list.

To our surprise, in both BaW editions (2004 and 2005) participants spontaneously created group projects to involve students from different countries. In the Yahoo group, they independently decided to set up polls to find out about the group characteristics: What kind of computers do you use? What kind of Internet connection do you have? What kind of grouping do you use with your students? What free webpage creator software (e.g., GeoCities, Tripod, Bravepages) was more user friendly and most effective (e.g., easy to handle, understand, not time
consuming) when you finally designed your first home page? How have you collaborated online with another teacher’s group? In this way, they learned how to use the “polls” function of Yahoo groups while they collected feedback on personal experiences from the group.

Figure 1
Some Web Pages Created by Participants

![Figure 1](image1.png)

When we introduced text chat in week 2, we scheduled conferences—group chat sessions—for the moderators to meet with as many participants as possible and explore different features of the tool (see Figure 2). As an extension of this activity, some of the participants volunteered to be online at certain hours to chat with their peers (http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/chattingwith.html).

Figure 2
Chatting with Participants Using Web Cams

![Figure 2](image2.png)
Another important volunteer collaboration was the weekly summaries, a wrap up of the weekly discussions that took place in the distribution list to help keep track of the different threads that emerged. In the first BaW edition (2004), this task was done by the moderators, but, in the 2005 edition, some participants volunteered to write the summaries with help from the moderators and their colleagues. As one says,

Sharon told you more or less all you need to know to get started. I did the thread on a daily basis sorting messages into topics and pasting them on the right spot, then I added new ones in the next days as participants kept sending comments. It took me quite a long time at first, but less and less as i get used to it. You can add new topics if you wish. I used FrontPage but I guess Dreamweaver is even better.

We received more than 3,000 messages in the 6 weeks in 2005, a huge amount of messages that well illustrates the active participation in the project.

DISTRIBUTED KNOWLEDGE

Hands-on activities followed by reflection is our target, but as important as the actual action of each individual is the sharing of the experiences by all of the participants. This constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978) is the basis of our online workshop and is developed by participants who share their experiences, their knowledge, their successes and failures, their ideas, and their goals with the rest of the group. Having participants with varying levels of expertise is the key to distributed leadership (Gronn, 2004). Each can be learner at one time and teacher at another, achieving their objectives collaboratively in an environment marked by social scaffolding.

Below is just one example of a question posed by one participant and an immediate reply by another.

I wonder if you could help me? I’m working on my blog and I’m trying to put my picture in the right-hand side (I saw it done in Berta’s blog and Leslie’s) in the area “about me”. How do I do it?

There have been several messages you can find in the weekly threads about putting the photo in your right side next to your profile or introduction (go to weeks 3 and 4) http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/content/weeklythreads.html Dafne kindly sent me an e-mail explaining how to do it, but since I had already done it by then, I filed her e-mail in my BaW treasure file for later reading someday in the future.

Peer support and encouragement is a decisive agent in keeping participants in action.

I think you are doing an amazing job with your blog:
   a) so many posts, you are at least persistent
   b) incorporating blog and wiki terminology invites/implies familiarity (and hilarity ;) )
c) incorporating humour means you are not SO frustrated
d) you are adventurous enough to create and experiment within your blog
even BEFORE we’ve had Bee’s crash course. I’m not that brave.
I truly look forward to reading your future posts, and eventually when I be-
come a blogger, I may add comments directly.

To keep track of all the little details about the manipulation of different tools
that came up in the discussion list, we created a Hints page (http://80.60.224.77/
dyg/baw-05/content/hints.html).

GRADUATION CEREMONY

The 6 weeks dashed by, and, in spite of the intense work for both moderators and
participants, all felt sad that the workshop had ended.

Raise your hand if you can’t live without baw2005!

I lived all my life hates and still hating being addicted to anything. I believe
I do have a strong will. Unfortunately, this proved to be nonsense. It turned
out that I became an addict to baw2005!!!BAW and the whole EVO2005.I
can’ live with the fact that we came to an end. How come I will not be scroll-
ing my screen on the tons of emails ,trying to read every bit so as not to miss
anything ,laughing with funny comments, sharing feelings with others(how
is your father Bruce?),impressed by others blogs (your’s Berta and Aiden),
pitying Tere and Daf on replying to each one of us, attaching self-stick notes
on my desk reminding myself that I should finish adding links to my blog
(didn’t till now. Trying to calm my family when complaining about my sit-
ting for hours on my P.C., calling them to see my photo with the participants,
my family’s coming over quickly to me when shouting: (VICTORY: I MADE
IT) …

Some participants already had plans for after the session.

I must say that this has been another wonderful session and I am glad I par-
ticipated in it, I will look forward to next year’s session and of course I will
be so much web wiser, then. Thanks to A L L of you for your generosity and
good will!!

This experience has gone beyond all my expectations - for the better. And I
think - I am sure - this is a feeling the we all, WebHead Freshmen , share.
However, the journey has just started and it is up to us to continue travelling
together.

Now that we have the tools lets try them out and share practices and experi-
ences. I sure want to give some meaning to what I have learn here and share
it with you.

To make this workshop a truly memorable event, we prepared a surprise grand
finale: a live online graduation ceremony (http://80.60.224.77/dyg/baw-05/con-
tent/graduation.html) celebrated at Tapped In, the same place where we started the
live sessions in week 2. Participants were offered a virtual certificate (see Figure 3), while sharing virtual dishes and wine virtually brought by participants from different parts of the world.

Figure 3
Graduation Certificate

The highlight of the event was inviting everybody to join Webheads in Action, the community of practice (CoP) where they could continue their journey into blended and online teaching. Vance Stevens, the coordinator of this CoP, gave a warm welcome to the newly arrived webheads, and we thanked him for that:

Thanks dear Vance for smoothly opening the transition door and being there to greet these wonderful group of active participants who have kept Tere and I busy, sleepless, but mainly happy and amazed during these six weeks, or more, if we count the early birds who started on Jan 3 :-)

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The intense daily flow of messages generates an overwhelming amount of information, and many participants lack the time to deal with this intense information flow. Besides, going through messages in a list is cumbersome. Therefore, we created a weekly Threads page, a collection of each week’s important information organized by topics.

Since our workshops have had participants from the five continents, embracing many different and distant time zones, scheduling live chats and presentations at a time that caters to all is impossible. Though we have tried to accommodate the sessions at different times of day, with GMT as our standard time zone, our priority has been to respect the availability of the guest speakers. Therefore, the only practical solution found has been to record each session and make it available asynchronously as soon as possible in an integrated web page containing all the relevant information and links.

Moderating a session like this is not a simple task. It takes hours of work and dedication, but the response from the participants makes it all worthwhile, so
much so that we have already moderated three sessions. Planning ahead, dividing tasks, being organized, in short, working collaboratively as a team has been the crucial factor of our e-moderation.

CONCLUSION

When we were invited to write this article, we wanted to give a new perspective since two other articles about these sessions have already been published (González, 2004; González & Almeida d’Eça, 2005). Including feedback from our participants seemed like a very relevant new feature because their generous and intense participation, interaction and collaboration were the ingredients that made these sessions successful.

Several months after the end of our BaW workshop, as we get ready to start preparing the next edition, the BaW2005 Yahoo group remains open, with messages constantly flowing back and forth, while, at the same time, many of our BaWers are also actively participating in the Webheads in Action community, exploring tools and sharing experiences.

I’ve got this fantastic virtual classroom to try out. Need someone to work with. It’s really awesome. Don’t you want to see it?

One of our most active participants, Barbara Chap (Germany), was invited to write a review of our session for the Frankfurt ELTA newsletter (Chap, 2005), while others have given presentations at conferences in their countries. Barbara summarizes her experience as

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.

Others do not show up so often, only surface now and then,

Sorry for “lurking” for so long. I’ve been following along with interest on the quiet.

We believe that both our sessions have attracted a significant number of participants because web-based communication tools arouse curiosity, spark interest for the unknown, and add a sense of adventure. As soon as the action starts, exploring and experimenting with the tools, enthusiasm and excitement increase because participants see for themselves, through hands-on experience, that these tools foster collaborative work, help generate knowledge, create strong professional and personal bonds, and bring people closer together, often much more than face-to-face environments.

To sum up, we truly believe that it is the “human” element that has made BaW a powerful mix of “high tech and high touch:” technology with sensitivity and humanity, or technology with the “human touch.”
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WEB SITES MENTIONED

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