

**\* On the Internet \***

Behind the scenes at the Webheads in Action Online Convergence, November  
18-20, 2005

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An earlier, shorter version of this article appears in *Innovative Language Learning #8* (2005, APACALL Newsletter) <http://www.apacall.org/news/Newsletter8.pdf>

Webheads in Action recently held its first annual WiA Online Convergence, November 18-20, 2005 <http://wiaoc.org>. The idea of the word 'convergence' as a variation on 'conference' was meant to highlight the fact that this conference focused the efforts of several free and open source online communities of practice. The conference was intended as a refereed event taking place completely without fees or funding, and the contributing partners had in common their open-source outlook and free distribution of educational resources and facilities.

We set forth these guidelines early on:

- The conference would be free of charge, and participation open to all
- Registration would be via a Moodle, open source software running on a server set up for free use of educators in Taiwan: <http://www.opensource.idv.tw/Moodle/>
- The conference would be held via whatever medium the presenter wished to use (our sponsor/partners were contributing voice enabled online spaces to this event).
- Events could be synchronous or asynchronous.
- The more developed of the presentation write-ups would be encouraged to join in publishing a proceeds.

### **1. Sponsoring partners**

The conference was organized by Webheads in Action <http://webheads.info>, an online community of practice of educators interested in exploring uses of CMC (computer-mediated communication) with students and peers. Since its creation in 1997-8, according to Candace Pauchnik, a Webheads participant;, "It has expanded to encompass a myriad of educators involved in e-learning in TESOL EVOnline (Electronic Village) and other language or cultural-based curricula. Webheads meet online regularly to explore the latest synchronous and non-synchronous communications technologies, including video and voice, to adapt and demonstrate new innovative ideas for e-learning

and classroom curriculum. These educators also display a deep warmth and dedication to helping others. They are evolutionary and enterprising scholars who are harmonious and know how to have a lot of fun." (from <http://henry.sandi.net/staff/cpauchni/webheads.html>)

Webheads and the sponsoring partners of WiAOC have in common that the facilities they provide encourage the work of communities of practice by promoting the principles of open source and/or creative commons. All the sponsors have worked collaboratively with Webheads in numerous projects carried out completely online, and the conference was thus a convergence and also a celebration of these many ongoing collaborations.

The sponsoring partners were, in alphabetical order:

- Alado, <http://www.alado.net> - supports numerous charitable educational concerns, such as providing computers and online support to inner city schools in Chicago. Andy Pincon at Alado has for some time provided Webheads with its own voice presentation room powered by Talking Communities at <http://www.alado.net/Webheads>, which was used as a venue for several WiAOC 2005 presentations. At the time of the Webheads event Alado was involved in its biannual (November and May) Tutor-Mentor conference <http://www.tutormentorconference.bigstep.com> with online components converging with WiAOC 2005, such as Dan Bassill's presentation to both events.
- APACALL, <http://www.apacall.org>, Asia Pacific Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning - a professional organization founded and led by Jeong Bae Son, which organized a panel discussion at the convergence and also donated two copies of its publication [Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Concepts, Contexts and Practices](#) to two individuals who both made outstanding personal contributions to WiAOC 2005 (Fernanda Rodrigues and Venny Su).
- Knowplace, <http://knowplace.ca> - a meeting place for educators whose liaison with WiAOC 2005 was Robert "Elderbob" Brannan, one of the coordinators of the free weekly Knowplace Weekends. Elderbob hosted a Web 2.0 'Smorgasbord' in the week leading up to WiAOC 2005 and hosted numerous events at the conference itself, in conjunction with his Knowplace Weekend event running in convergence with WiAOC 2005.
- Learning Times, <http://www.learningtimes.org> - a robust community of educators whose liaisons with WiAOC, Jonathan Finkelstein and Hope Kandell, created numerous presentation venues for us powered by Elluminate and set up a system of retrieving and making available recordings of the events taking place in them. Anyone wishing to attend the presentations or hear the recordings must first register with Learning Times, for free, and this membership grants them access to dozens if not hundreds of free online recordings of provocative presentations hosted by Learning Times in Elluminate presentation rooms, and an opportunity to join any number of communities where members might find common interests and opportunities for collaboration.
- OpenSource for Educators <http://www.opensource.idv.tw/> - essentially a computer in Taipei set up as a server hosting numerous items of Open Source server software and run for the benefit of the global educational community by Venny Su. The

server's Moodle was used by WiAOC 2005. There is more about this server and its facilities at [Su \(2005\)](#).

- TappedIn, <http://www.tappedin.org> - a long-running community of educators which originated some years ago in MOO-based interfaces. Its text chat remains so robust that the site can reliably be used as an anchor for online interactions when not everyone can reach more technically challenging presentation venues. For this reason, we based our live online helpdesk at Tapped In and found volunteers from the Webheads community to be there in shifts for all three days of the conference. Tapped In supports Webheads with its own Community of Practice virtual office, and provides many individual Webheads with personal offices free for the asking.
- Worldbridges, <http://www.worldbridges.com> - had established a convergence with Webheads in Action well before the conference, timing its weekly webcast at <http://www.edtechtalk.com> for two hours just after the weekly Webheads event each Sunday noon GMT at <http://www.tappedin.org>. Talking through Skype with EdTechTalk hosts Jeff Lebow and world-class blogger Dave Cormier <http://www.davecormier.com/edblog/> has been an enjoyable adjunct to Webheads Sundays and the two have accumulated a store of open-access recorded broadcasts on par with those at Learning Times. Worldbridges has provided server space to Webheads and WiAOC, made podcast recordings of as many WiAOC 2005 presentations as they could stay awake for (a useful redundancy since firewalls and proxy servers prevent some from accessing primary WiAOC venues and recordings), and in some cases hosted WiAOC presentations themselves (for example, all of Elderbob Brannan's presentations, and an event in interview format which served as Dave Sperling's keynote presentation).

## 2. Keynotes

The keynote speakers were themselves strong contributors to WiAOC 2005. Many command considerable fees for presenting at commercially-run international conferences, yet all agreed to support WiAOC by appearing free of charge in a spirit of sharing and collaboration. David Nunan is well known in the world of language learning as a prolific author and fixture at numerous international conference venues who has lately directed considerable interest and expertise to online endeavors, and he took valuable time out to not only present but to gamely master the Alado presentation tool. Curt Bonk is similarly prolific, moves in a parallel universe of conference and workshop travel, and makes much of his work freely available through <http://www.courseshare.com>. Curt generously agreed to do two presentations at our conference, the first delivered before his bedtime in Indiana to open our conference, and the second not long after he woke up the next morning.

Joy Egbert combined her presentation with a working visit to Turkey. Her presentation was especially interesting because through no fault of her own she was prevented by her hosts from being on time for it, but our on-the-scene contacts in Turkey kept us posted on her whereabouts and progress in joining us online, and her virtual audience used the paper she had set for us to read beforehand as a springboard for discussion so that her presentation was well under way by the time she arrived for it (and the event was a grand success. In a face to face situation such a delay could have been awkward and might

have compromised the event, but the online audience was graciously understanding and Joy's presentation started spontaneously, on time, and with productive interaction well in progress by the time she was able to appear).

Dave Sperling and Randall Davis are both widely known in the ESL world as sources for online materials and professional interaction. Dave revealed interesting insights on what goes on behind the scenes at Dave's ESL Cafe <http://www.eslcafe.com/>, and how he would like to see it evolve. Randall made the most use of all of our keynote speakers of the Moodle forums we set up for each presenter beforehand, experimentally utilizing the Moodle and Elluminate tools to systematically enhance his presentation on aspects of creating the audio at Randall's ESL-Lab <http://www.esl-lab.com/randall.htm>.

Links to all the keynote speakers' Web sites and presentations can be found at <http://keynotes.wiaoc.org>. The presentations themselves can be 'replayed' at <http://schedule.wiaoc.org>.

### **3. Team collaborations**

Webheads have always sought to inspire, encourage, and bring out the best in those who choose to participate within the community, and this is achieved through sharing knowledge and expertise in countless online interactions, including this one; i.e. writing an article to explain how it was done, and publishing it in a free online journal, itself a creative commons endeavor. It is hoped that readers of such an article might get ideas for their own online events or for implementing online components in blended on-site conferences.

It might be of interest to participants (those present at the synchronous event or enjoying the conference recordings in replay mode at <http://schedule.wiaoc.org>) to know how the conference was conceived and organized (in a word, loosely). We initially toyed with the idea of calling it a 'beta' conference, as if the first one would be a rehearsal, but the team of volunteer advisors thought that word should be dropped in favor of going for the 'real thing.' Still the convergence was organized in a highly spontaneous manner, with one of our supporters occasionally reminding us that we never clearly articulated a theme for it.

The conference would not have been possible at all if not for the existence of the Webheads community, whose members have, over the years, evolved a uniquely familiar style of collaboration. In its lists, the community might discuss the latest digital recording software in one thread while in others congratulating a member over a promotion or commiserating over the death of a loved one, often signing messages, 'hugs' (group messages are publicly available here:

[http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002\\_webheads/messages](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/messages), or via RSS at this feed: [http://rss.groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002\\_webheads/rss](http://rss.groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads/rss).) Through this group, volunteers were assembled to work on various aspects of the conference, such as setting up the Moodle, assembling the keynote speakers, working on a submissions form, putting out a call for papers, vetting proposals, scheduling the successful ones, publicizing the conference to the world, liaising with sponsoring partners, handling logistics at the conference itself, and publishing a proceeds. The names of all those who volunteered for work on these teams are given at <http://credits.wiaoc.org>.

One of our more seasoned volunteers was John Hibbs, the moving force behind what would have been the ninth annual Global Learn Day, which had been scheduled for October, 2005 (<http://bfranklin.edu/gld/>). GLD is held for 24 hours entirely online in the metaphor of a ship traveling around the globe, picking up presentations as it progresses in its day-long journey. John Hibbs has appreciated the consistently frequent participation of Webheads in these global online events to the extent of becoming a Webhead himself (and we also met Andy Pincon when Alado provided online voice presentation space during one of the GLD events, leading to Alado's donating a similar space dedicated to Webheads use at <http://www.alado.net/Webheads>). John has been outspoken in his support of Webheads and their goals, and his words of advice on WiAOC were taken as the voice of experience. Even more influentially, John's ability to cobble together significant worldwide online conferences out of meager resources for eight years prior to WiAOC provided crucial inspiration to Webheads in attempting a similar feat themselves, and was yet another important convergence for us.

One disadvantage of loose structure in a group of several hundred members is that it is virtually impossible to find agreement, and the first thing that had to be agreed upon, having found enough members who pledged to support the conference, was its timing. Clearly no one time would suit all in a group whose members were literally poles apart in latitude as well as longitude, but at an online weekly text-chat gathering of group members where there seemed to be enough present to support the idea, we agreed on November 2005 (and to hold the conference on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, so as to span work and weekend days of multiple cultures and religions).

### *Setting up the portals and Moodle*

The next item of importance was to make a home on the Internet for the conference. I set up a portal at one of my websites for directing traffic, but I had in mind that the conference could be managed through a Moodle. Inspiration for this had come from participation in a recent Moodle Moot at <http://knowplace.ca>, whose organizers had successfully made the Moodle portal both look like a website and feel like a conference. I had also been impressed with the rich community development features inherent in Moodle, the way the emails came with pictures of senders, for example, and how on opening them you could access the entire thread in the discussion that prompted the email. Moodle also allows participants to register themselves in a course (i.e. at a course comprising our conference). They can then upload information to their profiles that will enable others in the course to get to know them and regard them as professionals and peers. Of greatest appeal to me, this could be set up and run without a lot of maintenance on my part. Moodle seemed to have features that could be adapted as an interface for a conference, and these features would then not have to be developed. It turned out to be a good choice, I think, and I might add that my own rudimentary knowledge of Moodle was not particularly an impediment. I found that I learned easily as I fiddled with the system.

### *The submissions form*

Once the sites had been established with basic information we could then announce our conference through its call for papers. However, in order to do that we needed to have a means for proposals to be submitted. We had essentially three options. One would be to

have participants send us proposals in email, and another would be to have them respond to an online form which might again generate an email submission. A third way would be to have an online form feed submissions fields into a database off which would run a set of dynamic pages that could help us with our vetting process. The database could then generate a dynamic schedule for the conference. Fernanda Rodrigues happened to be present at the online discussion where I suggested this, and she emailed us back a few days later and said she'd built it and would we like to have a look (latest version at <http://users.prof2000.pt/wia/oc>). We were so impressed with the professional quality of the work that we agreed to adopt her system, but in offering this she had given herself the responsibility of continually tweaking and maintaining this system, usually in dire need and on very short notice, and she met all demands even as stress levels, and her own daytime workload, mounted immediately before the conference.

We still had to decide what to put on the form. This turned out to be the most problematic part of organizing the conference. The team who volunteered for this task set up a YahooGroup to manage its discussions. YahooGroups is perhaps a better manager of email discussions than is Moodle if what you are expecting is straightforward email to which you can reply in your familiar email client, and the group that hammered this one out became the *de facto* organizing and consultative body for much of the conference from then on. Dennis Oliver archived the process of our deliberations in his blog: <http://wia-forms.blogspot.com>.

### *Call for papers and publicizing the conference*

Once the wording of the submissions form was agreed on and the form itself set up and tested on Fernanda's server, then we had to agree on a wording for the Call for Papers. Agreement was time-bound since the vetting team wanted a certain amount of time to judge the proposals, and the call had to go out several weeks before proposals would be due, plus take into account that it was by then summer, and educators in the Northern Hemisphere tended to be on summer holiday. I myself was monitoring these affairs from cybercafes in Guatemala and Honduras.

We wanted to encourage proposals that would be appropriate to the online environments, and worded our call accordingly: "Proposals can be for events in just about any duration or format that can be mounted in the form of a presentation or collaborative event online. Interaction can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous presentations can be held in one of our voice-enabled presentation portals, or given as a webcast, or presented as streamed audio and/or video either as a presentation or panel discussion. Asynchronous events might include bulletin board discussions, online poster sessions, perhaps integrated with a content management system, or whatever the presenter imagines might be effective. The topics can be pedagogical or technical, and can range from reports of research or practical work with students over the Internet, to descriptions or explorations of how interaction takes place over the Internet (technically or socially; e.g., how communities form to effect this interaction)."

Because we were using a software device for collecting proposals that had been designed for us but not thoroughly tested, we monitored our submissions database closely. Fernanda complied with requests for fine tuning as we worked with her system, and we

came to appreciate its elegant simplicity of design as well as its integrity in data collection and preservation. No one complained of having been unable to submit a proposal though some had to retry, and visitors to the form often left empty records there. This was one of the strengths of the system however. Although it was necessary to create a user name and password to gain access to the form even to just look at it, the visitor could return using his or her unique name and password and develop the proposal at any time before the call for proposals was closed. Proposals thus submitted created records in our database, where meanwhile another password-protected interface allowed the vetting team a means of accessing all the proposal records in one place, and then scheduling the ones approved. Once proposals were scheduled, the data entered at time of submission then appeared in a dynamic schedule that Fernanda had built into the system. The system had other features that often seemed to reveal themselves as we needed them. It was a system that worked remarkably well, and was a sterling example of the depth of expertise residing in the Webheads community that enabled the community to succeed in an undertaking on the scale of a world-wide online conference.

### *Vetting proposals and scheduling*

As it became apparent that the submissions system was working and would streamline the work of refereeing the proposals, the vetting team decided that the call for papers could be safely extended. Meanwhile the team created a rubric for judging proposals based on the one used by TESOL to judge submissions to the annual convention but adapting the wording to an online conference. When Lee Baber put the result here: [http://landmark-project.com/classweb/tools/run\\_rubric.php?rbrc\\_id=121913](http://landmark-project.com/classweb/tools/run_rubric.php?rbrc_id=121913) , we were able to tell those submitting proposals clearly what we were looking for. The rubric assigned a number of points required for acceptance, and we agreed that at least two vetters would read each proposal. In most cases both readers accepted the proposals, but in case one accepted and the other didn't, a third reader was brought into play. Readers were assigned to proposals at random by sorting columns in an Excel version of our database, and readers were not told if they were reading proposals in a first or second round scenario. Most proposals were of high quality and accepted in the first round. The few proposals that were rejected were not complete so the submitters were contacted and given the opportunity to augment the proposals. This was not a conference with time or space constraints and our goal was to accept as many quality proposals as possible, and perhaps work with submitters to achieve the desired quality. Presentations could be at any hour of the day or night, because night was going to be someone's day somewhere, and visa versa, in a world-wide event. We did not regard space as a problem either. The team (and presenters as well) were unanimous in wanting to avoid parallel sessions but had it become necessary we could have scheduled parallel sessions hosted by different sponsors.

In the end, this did not become necessary. All those presenting opted to find a free time slot rather than give their sessions in parallel with anyone else. For the three days of the conference almost all the time slots had something scheduled in them, but not all were taken.

On the submissions form, proposal writers were asked for their first and second choice of

presentation times. Scheduling was accomplished in the first instance by assigning each presenter his or her first or second requested time. As it turned out, the fit was almost perfect. Of those requesting times, it was possible to grant one of the times requested in every case. But not all proposals had this information completed, so the writers of these proposals were contacted and asked to choose an available time from those not taken on the working schedule I was maintaining in synch with the dynamically generated one (I needed such a schedule for managerial purposes whereas the dynamically generated schedule was more informative to the general audience where it displayed abstracts directly from the database and gave information about the presenters). It was at about this time that we began to clearly picture the relationships between the submissions forms and the dynamic schedule and so we arranged for presenters be able to go back in the submissions database and alter their proposals as a means of having the schedule more accurately reflect the content and tone of their presentations.

### Coaching

Having put the pieces in motion we began to mobilize to ensure that presenters and keynote speakers would be functional with the technology they had agreed to utilize. We hit on a system of coaching, or peer tutoring to accomplish this. Some who would be presenting were familiar with the online tools we were using, but others had agreed to take part out of a sense of adventure and discovery and were challenging themselves to learn the technologies, and they were assuming that we would assist them in meeting their goal.

The keynote speakers were a case apart because unlike those submitting proposals, all had accepted *invitations* to present rather than self-selecting to make online presentations as had those submitting proposals. They were at varying levels of familiarity with online presentation tools and all were busy in their professional lives and needed to be guided toward a suitable tool and efficiently coached in its use.

Fortunately the tools were fairly easy to learn. The choices were:

1. the Talking Communities chat room courtesy of Alado:  
<http://www.alado.net/Webheads>
2. an Elluminate presentation client provided by Learning Times:  
<http://www.learningtimes.org>, or ...
3. talk on Skype through the webcasting facilities provided by Worldbridges:  
<http://www.worldbridges.com>.

Dave Sperling chose to use the latter format while the other keynote speakers settled on using the other two presentation tools, and became familiar with them through trial and email, plus one or two synchronous sessions with me or directly with the hosts providing the facility. Despite some anxiety to be expected with taking on this level of challenge, all the keynotes speakers managed to become comfortable with the media with the close support of the conference organizers and sponsors.

For the other presenters, we relied on a system of coaching and peer mentoring. It's the nature of a community of practice that its members will constantly scaffold one another,



and so when needs were perceived, the more established members of the community moved to address them. This took the form of helping presenters select the most appropriate presentation tool in the first place, and then finding someone to work with each presenter who needed practice, so that each presenter working within this system became sufficiently familiar with the tool chosen.

As the time of the conference approached yet another need emerged, and that was for *participants* in the conference to understand how to access the presentations through use of the same technology as the presenters. To address this need we called on Webheads community members to write or identify help pages that had been accumulated for other purposes where there had been a need to assist people in learning how to use the tools that would serve as our conference venues. These FAQ files were compiled in a central resource at <http://help.wiaoc.org>. Live online help was set up at Tapped In <http://www.tappedin.org>, and community members volunteered to assist there at all hours for the entire three days of the conference, so that participants could be directed there for live assistance.

Yet another need at the conference was for someone to moderate each session, to be in the room before the session and help the presenter(s) if needed. This person would erase any previously recorded material there, if any, and start the session (and the recording, if the session was at Learning Times). As conference organizer I tried to be present as much as I could during the three days of the conference, but as need to work a daytime job and then sleep briefly precluded my being on call for 72 straight hours, Michael Coghlan and others agreed to take responsibility for moderating events taking place when I had to teach, or in the middle of my night when that was during their normal waking hours.

Meanwhile, Jeff Lebow at <http://www.worldbridges.com> was working marathon hours as well. When not hosting sessions in the conference in their own right, Jeff and his partner Dave Cormier entered the Alado and Learning Times voice chat areas for as many sessions as they could, and other voice chats as well, and relayed the audio stream through their webcasting server in what was in effect a podcast of much of the conference, since these sessions were recorded and made available for download from the Worldbridges website. Although need to sleep in New Hampshire prevented the recording in this way of the entire conference, the redundancy was welcome because not everyone in the world was able to reach all the conference venues. For example, Talking Communities is not available in the United Arab Emirates, but some of us in the UAE were able to follow David Nunan's session in Alado (which uses Talking Communities client software) via the Worldbridges voice stream, and click through the slides that David was showing on Alado using the PowerPoint slide show whose URL was posted at <http://schedule.wiaoc.org>.

### Conference logistics

Organizing all this was a challenge not so much of planning but of reacting, adapting, and evolving. The portals were of course the key anchor points. I set up a page at <http://wiaoc.org> as almost a first step in organizing the conference, though its domain was not set up until much later. This portal was a convenient location to direct people to general announcements, lists of teams and their functions and volunteer members,

archives, and to the working and dynamic schedules. Teams were set up to handle tasks that would sometimes hand off to the next team. For example, one team wrote the proposal form and then passed their work on to the Call for Papers team, which in turn handed off to the referee team, whose decisions then fell in the lap of the scheduling team. As already mentioned, the proposal form team had started a YahooGroup to handle its list traffic. As members of that team tended to overlap with those volunteering for the next task, this group in effect formed a steering committee for the entire conference. That is, decisions that could best be reached through consensus could be achieved through this small but clearly concerned and engaged group. This system worked well for us and email traffic handled through YahooGroups had a straightforward efficiency without the clutter of Moodle. Moodle forums are an excellent means of carrying on discussions, but Moodle is so much more than forums that the email it generates requires some getting used to (who is subscribed, seeing the entire threaded context of the mail, replying in email or by logging on to the Moodle). YahooGroups is also more than email, but its email, when it comes, at least looks and feels like your other email, so it's a comfortable means of communication for groups whose members are accustomed to working with email.

Familiarity with Moodle brings rewards for those who persevere, and all of the functions mentioned above could have been handled from the start through a properly designed Moodle. For this conference, our Moodle portal was developed gradually, as I learned its ins and outs. We had announced from the start that registration for the conference would be through the Moodle, and by conference time, 334 people had registered in the WiAOC "course" running from Venny Su's Open Source for Educator's server at <http://www.opensource.idv.tw/moodle/course/view.php?id=20>. This Moodle was meant as a base for working teams at first, but as the volunteer work was completed and the conference started to come on line, the Moodle was used more and more as a base for the conference. Forums were set up to disseminate announcements and help with organization, and later a forum was set up for each presentation as it was given. A wiki was set up at the Moodle where volunteers could sign up for Tapped In 'Helpdesk' duty and then update for the next person to write on.

A separate Moodle was set up for presenters as a means of making announcements to that group and handling their particular questions as well. Survey results show that many among us (the conference coordinator included) did not fully understand how to use Moodle and integrate it with their presentations, and this is something we can improve on in future convergences, now that we have greater familiarity with the environment. It would be interesting as well to make greater use of Web 2.0 tools such as <http://elgg.net/>. We did create a Frapper photo slide show and copied the code into both our portal and Moodle. Faces and photos are essential to a feeling of community. Through the Frapper tool conference participants could get the feeling of being in a crowd of real people, not just disembodied avatars interacting at a distance, and it was interesting to see the faces change frequently, like running into people at a real on-site event. You can see the show (and still add your photo if you like :-)) at <http://www.frapppr.com/wiaoc2005>.

The conference operated on GMT time. GMT is the lingua franca of international time keeping. To synchronize our watches we used <http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/>. Two schedules were produced for the conference. The one dynamically generated from

the proposals database, at <http://users.prof2000.pt/wia/oc/schedule.asp>, displayed abstracts on presentations and biodata on presenters in popups off the chronological schedule. All the data were retrieved from the database and presenters and organizers became adept at manipulating that database so as to get the dynamic schedule to appear as desired.

The other schedule was an organizational one. Manually maintained, this schedule carried notes on session preparations, coaching needed by presenters and who was providing it, who was introducing the session, who would be on Helpdesk, links and materials pertaining to the session beyond what appeared in the proposals database, and so on. Once sessions were given, this schedule was used to note the URLs of recordings along with links to other memorabilia. This web page thus became our conference "playback" page, where anyone could experience the conference again or for the first time by reading the transcripts, visiting presenter web pages, and playing back the recordings, at <http://schedule.wiaoc.org>.

### *Liaising with sponsoring partners*

Liaison with sponsoring partners was vitally important where they were providing platforms for conference presentations. When we were setting dates for the conference we had to make sure that the Alado and Learning Times people could accommodate us. With the general understanding that we would be welcome to use the facilities at those times, there was little in the way of liaison until conference time was near. Alado were hosting a partially online Tutor Mentor conference that would overlap with ours, though Andy Pincon had long ago provided a separate Talking Communities presentation space for Webheads. Closer to conference time, Andy helped by revising the interface to that space so that people who were not yet Webheads could understand more clearly what to do there.

Hope Kandell and Jonathan Finkelstein handled the WiAOC at Learning Times. Learning Times have also long provided Webheads with a presentation space, but whereas each individual makes his or her own recording of an Alado voice event, recordings in Elluminate are made only to the host server and are not editable there. It would have been impossible for someone at Learning Times to have monitored our one presentation room for three straight days and saved each separate recording as it was made so that the next speaker would neither eradicate nor append to the previous recording. The solution was to create separate rooms, each with its separate URL, for each presentation held at Learning Times during the WiAOC. This information had to be put into the working schedule and relayed to each presenter, each of whom had been told that their presentations would be in the normal Webheads presentation space at Learning Times. Hope and Jonathan created all the presentation spaces, listed them at a URL on the Learning Times website, made sure the recording was retrieved from each presentation room, and then made each recording retrievable at the website for convenient playback.

The WiAOC conference teams worked closely in this way with Learning Times, Alado, and Worldbridges, our online presentation hosts. But the other partners enjoyed liaison as well. Leading into and during our conference, Elder Bob Brannan was giving sessions as coordinator for Knowplace Weekends at <http://knowplace.ca>, and he converged a

number of events celebrating Web 2.0 tools with our conference. The APACALL group convened a panel discussion at the conference and also donated a pair of books awarded to Fernanda Rodrigues and Venny Su for outstanding contributions to the conference. Venny was one of our sponsoring partners in hosting our Moodle portal on his Open Source for Educators server. Our remaining partner was TappedIn. We have had a long-standing relationship with TappedIn and its community that is so well established that liaison seems seamless, but if I could mention just two of our supporters from Tapped In these might be Jeff Cooper, always ready to lend his expertise in that environment, and Sedat Akayoglu from Turkey and Hala Fawsi from Sudan, our most assiduous helpdesk volunteers.

Aside from those mentioned here, there were so many more whose personal contributions were also significant to varying degrees. There were people who worked together to conceptualize the conference, organize the keynote presentations, hammer out the call for proposals, create a rubric to vet the submissions and use it to validate successful proposals, schedule the presentations, set up Web pages and Moodles and create forums, organize coaching for access to what would for most be unfamiliar interfaces, create online help and how-to and FAQ documents, maintain and synchronize schedules through myriad changes and ensure that they pointed to presentation venues, liaise with sponsoring partners to set up and record the presentations, handle last-minute logistics nightmares, provide online help during the conference, thank all those involved, create a survey and solicit and display feedback, and now organize a proceeds. I've tried to document some of these contributions at <http://credits.wiaoc.org>.

### Survey and Feedback

One of the most interesting aspects of this conference is the feedback from the participants. The survey instrument was created by consensus and then mounted at <http://www.surveymonkey.com> by Dafne Gonzalez, who compiled the results at: <http://daf4.free.fr/wiaoc/surveyresults.html>. Response to the survey was respectable, considering there were 340 participants registered at the conference Moodle, and there were 84 respondents to the survey, or about a quarter of the number of people registered for the conference (though respondents were not necessarily all registered participants). Of particular interest are the 'comments regarding connecting to or using any of the technology' and 'other comments' people have made giving their reactions to the event. In case such data were needed, there is strong evidence here that - from a cohort who self-selected to attend an event such as this - the response was decidedly favorable from almost any standpoint.

A key element in these data is that of self-selection. The people who benefit most from interaction such as this are probably those who are predisposed to it in the first place, and for such people, the potentials inherent in the online environment seemingly enlarge with use, as can be seen from the many WOW comments evident in the survey data. The convergence clearly would not have attracted participants who are *not* predisposed to online interaction with peers. Perhaps the features of such an environment that most excite those predisposed are what those *not* predisposed find personally frustrating. Inevitably some attendees at our conference expressed confusion with some elements, or

felt themselves disadvantaged, and these concerns can be addressed in the next rendition, as our goal is to become more inclusive, not cater to just the tech-savvy.

The survey results were preponderantly positive. The highest percentages (40% to 58%) of respondents registered good or excellent against 11 of the specific features of the conference mentioned above, and of the other 6 features, the highest percentages were in the 'didn't use' category. Respondents choosing 'acceptable' or 'needs improvement' numbered between only 1% and 15%. Responses were even more favorable in terms of 'general impressions' with highest percentages rating us excellent in 6 of 7 categories, with 60% rating us excellent in Overall organization and Quality of conference in general, and 72% registering excellent against Benefit to participants. Only 36% thought our 'Clarity of instructions to participants' was excellent as opposed to 40% rating them as merely good (and 10% thought they 'needed improvement' ;-)

But the key issue I think is whether the technology worked and, even more importantly, is workable by people who are novices in using this technology. To elicit feedback on this issue we asked an open ended question: "Do you have any comments regarding connecting to or using any of the technology?" A sampling of responses:

- In general the conference was excellent, but there were many points during the weekend that I was extremely frustrated by the technology.
- I was blown away by how easy it was to connect to each presentation. I loved the relaxed atmosphere and the ability to try things out, like the whiteboard. It seemed if I was lost, there was somebody there to direct me.
- I didn't have any problems connecting to any of the presentations. It was much easier than I expected.
- It's my first online conference and I was worried because I'm not an expert in computer hardware and my PC is rather old. However, now I'm in euphoria because I did it. Thanks to the simple and straightforward process.
- I'm very grateful to this opportunity to know and test in the same time, many technological tools for using in Distance Learning
- This was an amazing feat and I would like to commend all of you who made it possible. It was not flawless (some scheduling issues and technology problems--presenters), but it was nothing short of a miracle that 90% of the activities came to fruition.

Some respondents indicated that the technology wasn't so much the problem as all the convergences. Webheads have always functioned in a framework that Susanne Nyrop, when she was new to it, called "chaos navigation" (and later, when she became more accustomed to the Brownian motion and tendency to entropy, refined her characterization as "intuitive chaos navigation"). Here are some participant comments:

- This was so god-awful confusing as any event I have tried to use!
- I think having so many different tools available was a big plus, although it certainly added a bit of confusion to the mix.
- I liked it even though it was chaotic at times. This was part of the fun.
- I found the learning environments awkward to use. I don't like having to download Java every time I go to a room, and particularly object to enabling popups and

activeX to use a room. I prefer something simple and I think many will agree with me. It was interesting to have the chance to use them at the conference though.

- It was at once exciting using all this technology, listening and watching presentations and at the same time confusing as I jumped from one technology to another with things not occurring on time. Overall though loved the conference, what I saw and heard of it and however chaotic it all was. I'll be there at the next one for sure and I will bring some other people along for the ride.

Confusion is an element in many conferences, including face to face ones, but perhaps more evident in online events. Aside from issues with the technology there are some features of online conferences that set them apart and perhaps give them advantages over on-site ones. These include

1. an ability to prepare for an online conference either in forums (which we'll need to take better advantage of next time) or through *preview* materials such as links to background information and in some cases the presentations themselves,
2. the quality and intensity of assistance and support during the event itself,
3. the archived resources made possible when a conference is delivered digitally, and
4. whereas online and on-site conferences are perhaps equally exhausting, when you're online you're at least in the comfort of your home or familiar surroundings, and you can come and go without embarrassment.

Here are some comments along these lines:

- Being a newbie in the world of English learning+technology it was very beneficial for me to read some of the materials in advance, to have a glimpse at the presentations beforehand (at least partially). I did some more reading on some of the topics, so I could follow the presenter's ideas and discussions.
- What really made this conference enjoyable and impressive were the participants - so many committed, lively, and knowledgeable people involved. The support from everyone was just incredible.
- Having difficulty to access the live sessions, I did a follow-up with the recorded sessions. It was great but of course I missed the fun with the live sessions!
- I think the best thing about this kind of conference is that everything is archived. That's a tremendous resource both for me and the people who couldn't attend.
- Overall, the quality was far, far better than at any other conference I've attended:-) Congratulations, Webheads. There were amazingly few problems with the microphones and technology. It was a wonderful experiment but too long though. We were all very tired by the end.

We also asked for 'any other comments' and some of these conveyed the spirit of this first-ever free and open source online convergence:

- Thanks for all your efforts and keep up the excellent work. You have reached a great number of people and deserve to be acknowledged.
- very brave to attempt to converge multiple technologies.
- I learned so much in such a few days. All of the presentations were excellent. The presenters were organized, knowledgeable, and open to new ideas. I am very

grateful for all the knowledge and expertise they shared. Thank you very much for letting me share this unique and very educational experience!

- Very inspiring and even if there were some technology problems (there always are) I felt technology was used in a extremely good way.
- This entire convergence deeply touches me because it just proves how many truly dedicated, unselfish, thoughtful, eager to help, intelligent, humorous, and all around beautiful educators there are in this entire world. If there was ever a confirmation of the goodness of people this is certainly it!!!
- I was in that WOW-process! How would I ever have a chance to get to learn and meet so many knowledgeable people in so little time? How would I gather so much valuable information and so many precious tips, links, resources, and tools if it weren't for this convergence of bright techie minds trying to pass on the information they have in such a meaningful and applicable way?
- This has been the best Webhead event yet. The community obviously gets stronger every day.
- This conference was very well done. If I hadn't known it was a first-time venture, I wouldn't have believed that it was.

What the Webheads in Action Online Convergence seeks to achieve is to bring professionals together in a happy medium where those with the requisite skills can assist those who would like to learn more to achieve greater familiarity with computer-based communications and social networking media, in order that our community of practice can utilize available technologies to work most efficiently and productively (and in order to be worthwhile, more effectively than if such tools were not used). We plan to do it again, possibly in convergence with the annual TESOL Convention in March 2007.

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