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Collaborative Learning for Teachers and Students: Earth Day and Earthbridges

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ESOL Connection

Vance Stevens has been making the argument lately that what we have been calling CALL should more appropriately be referred to as SMALL. In an age where almost every modern communications device contains a computer, the idea of computer-assisted language learning becomes less and less meaningful as what we do with those devices becomes more and more pronounced, not just in language learning, but in learning across the curriculum. And also as the potential of learning in a connected world becomes more social, the social media aspects of what we can do with computers shows itself to have striking potential for leveraging how people learn what is most relevant to them from people most like them, and with whom they are most motivated to communicate. This is why SMALL, or “social media assisted language learning”, is perhaps a more appropriate acronym, the idea of which again crosses the curriculum into all aspects of learning.

There have been many significant milestones in ways educators have learned to connect with one another over the past decade, and it is these connections that inform us how to in turn connect our students. As might be expected, many of these efforts have overlapped as people in different networks have cross-pollinated their respective other networks. From Stevens' perspective the Internet became an important component to the way his own teaching and learning was taking place at around the turn of the century via the network of Webheads in Action, which grew into a community of networked language learners and their teachers from around the world that thrives to this day (Yilmaz & Stevens, 2012).

The Worldbridges Network

In 2005, Jeff Lebow and Dave Cormier started reaching out to educators through Worldbridges (Lebow, 2006). At a time when webcasting was considered a unidirectional broadcast phenomenon, Worldbridges <<http://worldbridges.net>> was inviting all comers to Skype chats and streaming the resulting conversations in a format that resonated with a wide spectrum of educators. Early in this experiment, Webheads and Worldbridges connected and formed ties that resulted in Worldbridges helping stream presentations in the Webheads in Action first global Online Convergence in 2005 <<http://wiaoc.org>>. Worldbridges was also attracting voices from the K-12 community, some of whom even then were planning their own K-12 Online Conference, the first of which took place in 2006, and has recurred each year since <<http://k12onlineconference.org>>.

The impact of Worldbridges on Internet-based learning was not only that it facilitated communities such as WiA and K-12 becoming aware of and interacting with one another through their common approaches to learning with Web 2.0 technologies, but that Lebow realized that his greatest contribution to facilitating conversation among educators was as a multiplier. That is, he offered his server space and bandwidth to any who would utilize it to engage the community in conversations on any aspect of educational technology and 21st century learning skills. In order to create a team of webcasters, he set up a Drupal portal through which participants could organize themselves and train newbies and one another in what became the Webcast Academy <<http://webcastacademy.net>>, a free course in webcasting that might arguably have been one of the first and most goal-directed of many MOOCs to follow (as that kind of learning would come to be known, and it is no coincidence that Dave Cormier was instrumental in this as well as later instantiations along these lines).

Participants in the Webcast Academy produced a Book of Webcasting <http://webcastacademy.net/Book_of_Webcasting>, an online ebook that helped them train one another to perform increasingly difficult tasks that would eventually teach those who followed how to connect their computers through Jeff's server and create their own webcasts (the recorded artifact of which would then be archived and podcast over Worldbridges "channels"). This sparked a plethora of webcast shows that can still be heard on the EdtechTalk channel of the Worldbridges network <<http://edtechtalk.com>>.

The Webcast Academy

The Webcast Academy also created a growing coterie of educators with the wherewithal to stream, and these folks by and large were happy to pay back to the community by helping one another and others stream educational learning events. Jose Rodriguez was one such graduate of the Webcast academy and webcaster on EdTechTalk and Puentes al Mundo on the Worldbridges Network. When the second WiAOC took place in 2007, Jose was one of the many Webcast Academy graduates who volunteered to stream some of the events that Worldbridges had offered to help with in that capacity. Worldbridges had become by now not just one person with a server, but dozens of elves who knew how to broadcast voices and conversations about new ideas in education worldwide through the Worldbridges streaming server.

For educators with a social conscience, inculcation of community-based ideals and values is an important aspect of a mandate for teaching that gives weight not only to subject matter but also to guiding learners to developing themselves as lifelong learners. Netizens with skills stressing collaboration in a digital age are capable of adapting not only what they know but also what they can find out through learning networks as a means of working towards achieving solutions to wicked problems.

Such a problem is besetting the planet nowadays, and finding a way to achieve sustainability for mankind and for our environment needs to be a guiding force in how we conduct all our activities spanning business and leisure in everyone's daily lives. Teachers play a role in helping learners they touch become aware of the scope of the problem and then to work together with others to help develop solutions that will change the behavior of all who share our planet.

As Clay Shirky (2010) suggests in his book *Cognitive Surplus*, it is only now in an increasingly connected world that people have had the wherewithal to mount projects that can scale sufficiently to make an impact on such problems without having to raise money in proportion to the scale achievable (instead, people use their "cognitive surplus" to contribute to causes they believe in, and Shirky's book gives examples of numerous projects that have come together over the Internet and succeeded in creating a difference in the problem they sought to address).

Earth Day

The perception of need for some annual recognition of Earth Day precedes the advent of the Internet. According to Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth_Day>, the idea for Earth Day came about at a UNESCO conference in 1969, with the first "Mother Earth Day" being set for the first day of Spring in 1970. According to the same article, a separate "Earth Day" has been celebrated on April 22 in the USA since that same year, and the concept was promoted internationally in 1990 to 141 countries. Since 2009, April 22 has been officially recognized in 175 countries worldwide as the date on which Earth Day events are coordinated globally by the Earth Day Network <<http://www.earthday.org>>. The Earth Day Network is

planning events at least through the year 2015, which will be the 45th anniversary of Earth Day.

For teachers wishing to make curriculum relevant to the lives of students, Earth Day becomes a natural focus to which almost any topic can be related. And as tools for easily connecting students in one locale to students elsewhere on the planet find their way into classrooms and back out again through communities like Worldbridges, Webheads in Action, and K-12 online, conditions for learning verge on transformative.



*Figure 1. Their first EarthCast – Student webcasters.
Permission to post online granted via school media release*



*Figure 2. Connecting with another school in another time zone! Screen shows the Skype video and the webcast view.
Permission to post online granted via school media release*

Earthbridges

Earthbridges was one of the channels that emerged from the Webcast Academy era, which has sustained itself over a number of years. According to its archives <<http://earthbridges.net/taxonomy/term/4>> Earthbridges got started in 2008 as a part of the Worldbridges network. This link points to the 2008 organizational wiki <<http://enviroscims.wikispaces.com/Earth+Day>> which in turn directs us to Earthcast08 <<http://webcastacademy.net/taxonomy/term/1228>>, the archive of the Worldbridges Webcast Academy webcast facilitated by Jeff Lebow, Jose Rodriquez, Doug Symington and others who teamed together live-stream this first 24 hour EarthCast marathon.

One of the Earthbridges founders, Matt Montagne, says, “EarthCast really was conceived to give people of all ages from around the world an opportunity to get together and talk about environmental issues that matter to them. Bringing youth voices into the mix was a key goal for the community involved in driving this project. We’ve seen a range of student projects over the years, from pre-recorded interviews, to live student led interviews, etc. The work that students have contributed to the project has been inspirational to say the least.”

Inspiration is clearly what draws teachers, who in turn draw in their students, into the Earth Day online displays and EarthCasts. Jose remembers that on April 24, 2008, the regular show <<http://itselementary.edublogs.org/2008/04/24/earthcast08-100-gmt-200-gmt-its-elementary-17-earth-groceries-project>> was devoted to an Earth Day topic, and Mark Ahlness joined Jose and his team to talk about his Earth Groceries Bag Project <<http://www.earthdaybags.org>>. Jose says that his exposure to the Groceries Bag Project, where students designed messages around taking care of the environment on paper grocery bags delivered to their local supermarkets on Earth Day, was what inspired him to proactively become a part of Earth Day. He says the project is “still going strong today, even though this year my students suggested we do designs on reusable bags instead of paper bags.”

Sheila Adams’s inspiration came from Matt Montagne, who had already started doing webcasts with his classroom and other Webcast Academy participants. Sheila and Matt were in the same Webcast Academy class and Sheila “was involved with the first webcast when we spoke with a Pearl Harbor Survivor, Paul Goodyear. We had students from each of the schools ask questions. This was an eye opening experience for me. I started to really understand the possibilities of webcasting in the classroom and how it can open the world to my students in our 4-walled classroom <<http://www.webcastacademy.net/node/1919>>.” Sheila continues,

Matt has always had a passion for sustainability and bringing that into the classroom. I believe it was his idea and he asked the Worldbridges community to help out. In the early part of 2008 it was decided to have a 24-hour marathon. That way each part of the world would be able to stream live, which was convenient for them and showed how we are virtually connected with a common goal.

A brief promo video was put together by Jason Robertshaw to provide a nice snapshot of the project. The way that video was created was quite interesting as well – students and adults who worked on the project recorded a bunch of audio files with students saying things like, ‘Earthcast 2008,’ ‘Earth Day,’ ‘EarthCast,’ etc. Jason took that pile of audio and combined it with some public domain video to create that piece. It was a really interesting experience to work together in a collaborative manner to create that piece (but to be fair, Jason did all the heavy lifting!)”

[the online version includes a video link at this point]

Networked Learning

Learning in a networked environment is vitally important to promoting collaborative learning and critical thinking associated 21st century digital literacies skills. It gets students creating content on Web 2.0 as opposed to merely consuming it. It fits a framework based in Bloom’s taxonomy and Bloom’s digital taxonomy. It helps make learning fun through constructivist, authentic activities in which individual expression leads to individualized discovery learning.

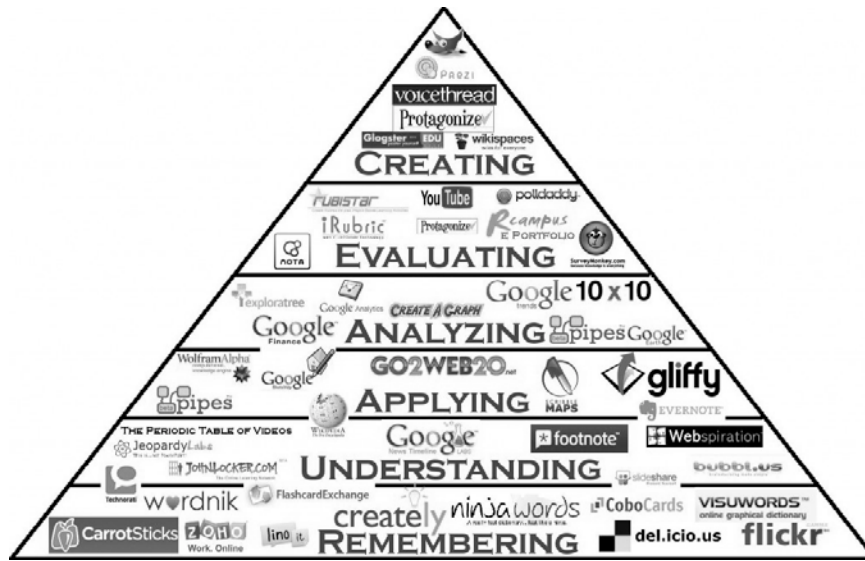


Figure 3. Creative Commons licensing: (source: <http://www.usi.edu/distance/bdt.htm>)

Sheila notes, “The networking communities of the Webcast Academy, Worldbridges and EdTechTalk truly allowed the EarthCast to go global those first few years. As participants have changed, so have those connections.” Those connections form the warp and woof of the Earth Day experience for student and teacher participants. Sheila recalls three vignettes in particular from her Earth Day experiences.

1. “The first was during the first year of EarthCast. Our school presented for the first time and we had listened to some other presentations during the day. During that time I had modeled what to type in the chat room and how to be a good audience. I knew my 7th graders would be off on their own after school, but I try to make every experience a learning experience. To my surprise, I started to see my students using their blog names, which are a code as they are under the age of 13, to enter the chat room. Then I noticed they were participating appropriately in the chat. They were conversing with adults from around the world! I was so proud of them. It was a learning experience for me because it was not the students who I thought it would be [who were the strongest participants in the chat]. Some were my shyest students, who barely interact with me! Never underestimate the power of communication, in any form!
2. “Another was the last hour of the first EarthCast. All the participants were invited to speak about their experiences. That was the first time I felt globally connected and could communicate with so many others from around the globe. It also made me very aware that my perspective is very US-centric and I needed to work on that.
3. “Peggy George! I don’t think she knows how much of an impact she has made in other people’s lives! She has been our audience for **every** EarthCast and EarthCast Echo that we have done over the 5 years. Without her in the chat room, we wouldn’t feel like someone was there and listening. Most parents or other listeners don’t know how to engage the students. It’s a new experience for them. She comments along the way and asks questions that help us to interact with our audience. She validates the experience. All my students know Peggy! She praises them, questions them, rephrases

and really listens! It would be a totally different experience without her in most of our webcasts! Thank you for all your support, Peggy!”

(You can listen to a conversation between Vance Stevens and Peggy George on her work with the K-12 Online Conference and its overlap with the Earth Day and Earthbridges here: <<http://learning2gether.posterous.com/peggy-george-telling-us-about-the-2011-k12-on>>)

Jose especially remembers in 2008 hanging out with other webcasters and contributors Elder Bob Brannan, Doug Symington, and Cristina Costa. “We did a 5 or 6 hour stretch on air (around 6 GMT to 12 GMT) just talking about Earth day and it’s history. We were able to connect with students in Portugal and England.”

Sheila also made contact with the teacher from Argentina: “Through the EarthCast Skype chat, I connected with a teacher, Monica, in Jujuy, Argentina. I would never have met her otherwise. My students don’t know Spanish, but her students are learning English. Our school calendars are opposite; different hemispheres! We’ve done some Skype calls, and as teachers, have connected a bit ... Last year, I was able to go to one of the last Space Shuttle launches as a guest of a NASA Tweetup. We had 2 days of learning before the launch. While I was there, I planned on connecting with my classes through Skype. I ended up with another teacher at the launch, so we webcast the event, enabling more schools to learn. As it turned out, Monica’s class was able to listen and participate in the chat! Such good questions and a great learning experience for all! (Fortunately, I knew a lot about the space program, as I got the inevitable question, how do they go to the bathroom in space!)”

Sheila adds: “Create, communicate, collaborate. The EarthCast was the best experience for my students to interact with others around the world. During the first EarthCast, my school had one hour of the 24 hours. I noticed later on that day and night, my students were logged in to the chat room from home. They were learning about digital citizenship, being part of a global audience, and learning about the content! The live part was the most engaging piece to the project. The students learned their content, but presenting while there’s a global audience in the chat and then responding immediately was a very different experience that they had never had before. All new skills had to be learned and used. I prepared them as best I could but it was new experience for me too. All went well and we were ready to try it again the following year.

“My students learned how to be respectful, share ideas and ask questions in a chat room outside of the class! They were able to witness and learn, and transfer that learning to their personal life at home! That’s what it’s all about! “



Figure 4. Students contributed artwork, songs and poems for the webcasts. When video was not available during the webcast, we played a slideshow of the artwork



Figure 5. Potato Harvest – Planted when the students were in 6th grade and harvested in 7th grade. Permission to post online granted via school media release

Vance heard about and followed the 2008 Earth Day EarthCast via its podcasts on the EdTechTalk channel. Vance carries on the report from here:

As one might get around to listening to podcasts a week or two after the actual event, I simply became aware of how the 2008 event was being organized via a wiki, open to anyone to write themselves in during any of the 24 time slots for Earth Day around the clock. I was impressed with the effective use of wiki in organizing a global event, and with the commitment of the organizers and their passion for education, and with the large number of like-minded teachers they had recruited for their 24 hour EarthCast. Being a vicarious part of that conversation, by virtue of listening to the recorded audio discussions about how it came off and what its outcomes were, helped me make the connections between this event and the Earth Day activities that normally took place at my college in Abu Dhabi so that things clicked into place the following year.

As they did in 2008, the Earthbridges organizers set up a wiki for 2009:

<<http://earthbridges.wikispaces.com/Earth+Day+2009>>. My school, an engineering college training scientists and engineers for the UAE national oil company, was holding its usual Earth Day events program, with speeches scheduled throughout the day given by researchers in sustainable oil and partner company executives in business suits in a plush auditorium fitted out with Kleig lighting and other trappings of a formal occasion, but I managed to get myself on the program to webcast worldwide from one of the classrooms on campus. In order to webcast, I would manage my voice broadcast from the UAE (using Elluminate, now Bb

Collaborate), and a volunteer webcaster from the Earthbridges team would enter that virtual space and stream the sound through the Worldbridges server. Thus participants could join the event at the source or simply go to the stream <<http://earthbridges.net/live>> and access a radio-like broadcast of all Earth Day events from that one URL over the 24 hour period. The process is described in detail at Stevens (2009a).

There was another 24-hour online event taking place at the time, LearnTrends, whose organizers, renowned authors/educators Jay Cross and Harold Jarche, had invited me to take a slot in the program. As I would be broadcasting from UAE, where it is midday when it's nighttime in USA, I requested a night slot at LearnTrends coinciding with the time I had written in on the Earth Day wiki, which again coincided with the time I was scheduled to take part in the live Earth Day program where I worked. The LearnTrends organizers were only too happy to let me occupy that particular time in their program, so I was able to bring an Earth Day perspective into that event.



Figure 6. Vance on the Internet

Meanwhile, back on the ground in Abu Dhabi, students I teach were empowered to join in the conversation as well, despite my not wearing a business suit, as can be seen from the photo above. Although the only other person (apart from the photographer) who came physically to the classroom from where I was managing the event is shown in the photo, the campus librarian had “arranged for students to tune in from the Library. Thanks to her support, the students’ thoughts about our environment became a recorded part of both the LearnTrends and Earthbridges events” (Stevens, 2009b).

On April 22, 2010 my college again held an Earth Day celebration and I again managed to get an online event into both the on-site program for Earth Day where I worked and onto the EarthCast wiki <<http://earthbridges.wikispaces.com/Earthcast+2010>>. This time I had my students to prepare more formal presentations for live online broadcasts via Adobe Connect, which Peggy George attended online and interacted with my students. This time, the student-

presenters came physically to the event, and we retained an Adobe recording of what we recorded

<<http://connect.pi.ac.ae/p79409296/?launcher=false&fcsContent=true&pbMode=normal>>, plus I blogged an account of the event at Stevens (2010).

Earth Day 2011 fell on a Friday, which is a weekend day in UAE so schools are not in session on that day. Some friends and I took advantage of the weekend to climb a mountain and clean up a beautiful remote spot that had been littered by inconsiderate campers,

<<http://justcurious.posterous.com/earth-day-april-22-2011>>.

Earth Day 2012

April 22, 2012 fell on a Sunday this year, which again caused problems for student participation worldwide since the normal webcast day would find few students in session over much of the world, so a skeleton Earthbridges crew formed to commemorate the event as best they could. Vance happened to be teaching a unit in a presentation course on mottos that month, so he taught his students how to use Prezi and had them create presentations based on their mottos (or slogans) for the environment (the Prezi links are online:

<<http://acomunication.pbworks.com/w/page/52696874/earthday22april%23ClassA>>

The situation was not all that unusual for Sheila, who points out:

Earth Day typically falls during our April school vacation, so it hasn't been consistent in my classroom. I have done some smaller, one to two day lessons. Since EarthCast became a reality, I have done more in my classroom. Students prepare presentations in the weeks beforehand. We record material and have some topics to share live on the webcast. Many students will provide extra credit work for the webcast too. This includes songs, drawings, quizzes, how-to videos, and more. Now that we can work toward the EarthCast webcasts, I make it more a part of my curriculum and give it a higher priority.

Fortunately, there happened to be other events scheduled on Earth Day 2012 into which Earth Bridges could segue. This year it was the Virtual Round Table conference, taking place over the weekend, and we managed to get a 2-hour slot near the end of the event. We timed our participation so it would occur at the time of our weekly Learning2gether event

<<http://learning2gether.posterous.com/125618417>> and we shared our time with EVO or Electronic Village Online, which had one hour of the VRT presentation space. For the second hour, Peggy George and Sheila Adams joined in, and Jose Rodriguez made it a part of an Earth Day webcast he was conducting that weekend for Puentes al Mundo. As usual, Vance blogged what happened in greater detail: <<http://justcurious.posterous.com/learning2gether-with-earth-day>>.



Puentes al Mundo

Even non-Spanish speakers might recognize that *puentes al mundo* means Worldbridges in Spanish. Jose is from California and is

bilingual in English and Spanish, and one of his passions in webcasting is in creating bridges between Spanish speaking communities in Latin America, Spain and elsewhere. Accordingly, he mounts 24-hour webcast-athons on Earth Day in Spanish. In his words, “the Spanish simulcast started in 2009 on a sister site to Earthbridges on the Worldbridges network <<http://puentesalmundo.net>>. The biggest difference in the Spanish broadcast (*transmitierra*) is that we do a call for podcasts a month prior to Earth Day. These podcasts are rebroadcast on Earth Day ... with the goal of being ON AIR for the full 24 hours. Here is the archive from 2009: <<http://www.puentesalmundo.net/transmitierra09>>. In 2012 we did our 4th consecutive annual 24-hour radio marathon.

The live aspect is great. On the Spanish side, I have scheduled a keynote the last few years but not at the beginning of the marathon. I do it at around 16 GMT an hour where I can get more live participation from America (North and South) including Europe. I have been able to partner with Radio Aula a shoutcast radio show from Spain to rebroadcast our stream for the full 24 hours. This shoutcast is more friendly for listeners on cell phones with *TuneIn* app <<http://tunein.com/mobile>>.

Jose continues to make contact with some of those initial participants. Making those personal connections and having them return year after year and making new contacts each year is a rewarding part of this experience such as in his recorded broadcasts with:

- a school in Bangkok with a Spanish teacher there who call themselves the Green Panthers <<http://www.puentesalmundo.net/node/1286>>
- some folks in Spain, Taller Radio Via Radio, doing radio with high school students <<http://www.puentesalmundo.net/node/1257>>
- a group of university students in Bolivia that have participated since 2010 <<http://www.puentesalmundo.net/node/1240>>

EarthCast Echoes

Because it is difficult to organize the 24-hour webcast due to school vacations and job changes, etc. to keep things rolling, Sheila came up with the idea of EarthCast Echoes.

These were live webcasts during the year that anyone could do to keep the concept going. We have had a few of them and have used them in the annual EarthCasts as recorded material [when space/time-fillers were needed]. The Earth Day webcast has had its ebbs and flows when participants’ availability varies year to year. I am currently offering a live webcast as close to Earth Day that my school schedule allows so all my 7th graders have a chance to participate live. My students fill in around others who participate ...

This year, I couldn’t change my curriculum to do ‘Earth Day’ projects, so I had the students work on something I felt would relate a bit. We were wrapping up our weather unit. My students did discussions about severe weather and how to prepare for it. I think the content could be anything as long as we all learn from each other.”

Jose adds, “I like the idea of the Earth Cast Echo to give continuity beyond Earth Day. We’ve tried a couple of things; for example, I have connected with folks at ‘350’ <<http://350.org>> and especially this past year with their project in September 2011 with Moving Planet <<http://www.moving-planet.org>> and doing a series of interviews around those events.“



*Figure 7. Speaking with Dr. Clyde Roper, an expert on Giant Squid. This was an EarthCast Echo, an extension of the Earth Day webcast.
(Permission to post online granted via school media release)*



*Figure 8. During our presentation, we watched the chat room to interact with our audience. They were sharing their opinions/experiences on the topic and we answered questions.
(Permission to post online granted via school media release)*

The Future of Earth Day

The Earth Day EarthCast concept is something that its participants would like to see continue. Sheila particularly appreciates

- The ability to webcast live with students
- Continuing the experience throughout the year with the Echoes
- An experience that would have been too complicated for her to undertake alone
- The supportive network of like-minded people
- The sense of community, especially when you get lost in your own little classroom!

Not coincidentally the skills so important to her in making her work meaningful and effective are exactly those that we should be inculcating in and modeling for our students this far into their 21st century learning experiences. Earth day is a means to that end. As Sheila says, “If we can’t have it all on the same ‘day’, I’m hoping we can all be an audience for each other. That’s the value-added for me. My students understand that there are others out there who read their blogs or see their work in the hallways, but it’s not the same as when they can interact with their audience. The best format would be a live interaction, but a virtual one would work too! Perhaps, next year, we can keep a collaborative space where we could listen

to each others' presentations and then respond back and forth. This would validate their work, help us to learn about each other and more!"

Sheila has started to create 'badges' for the EarthCasts which her students put on their blogs <http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=206879>

Cristina Costa created the first badge (below left) from a design by Jason Robertshaw <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/cristinacosta/2436780923/in/photostream/>> and on the right is this year's:



Figure 9. EarthCast badges

Other educators are welcome to visit <http://earthbridges.net> and get involved. When Sheila does her Earth Day Echoes, she does “webcasting for about 7 hours during our school day. It’s not convenient for all time zones but I would love some help in future events to be able to organize it for a more global audience. It takes coordination, publicizing and a risk to attempt something very different with your students. It does take a global community to create a global project!”

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