

TOOLS FOR ONLINE COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

The Webheads in Action are an online community of practice that actively seeks out and experiments together with new, free, and educationally valuable tools on the Internet. The group holds regular live voice, text, and video chat sessions, and members bring students together for joint sessions using various technologies in real time, as well as participating in collaborative presentations, workshops, and other activities. Sister groups, Real Video Online, and Academic Writing, explore narrower elements of online teaching and learning, and profit from the experimentation of the larger community. Using the recently taught English for Sciences (Kuwait University) as an example, the co-presenters will help participants visualize the tools that make global collaboration possible and discuss the benefits for students learning to read and write in an electronic environment.

For the past 2-1/2 years, the authors have been members of a very active community of practice (CoP; see Wenger, 1998, and 2004) called Webheads in Action (Stevens, 2004b). This group of technology-using language teachers, primarily EFL/ESL, but several who are also teachers of French, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, etc., communicate through an electronic list and meet regularly online in text, voice, and video chats. Over the years, members have also collaborated in teaching projects, online presentations, land-based workshops, and blended activities. (For examples of just a few of such collaborations, see Coghlan & Stevens, 2000; First Tutor/Mentor Leadership Conference, 2004; Hanson-Smith, González, & Zeinstejer, 2004a; Stevens, et al., 2003; Stevens, et al., 2004a; Yeh, González, & Mühren, 2003; *inter alia*). Webheads also delight in meeting face-to-face as well as on the Internet (see Almeida d'Éça, 2004b, for pictorial documentation). This presentation is another such collaboration between a Webhead in Kuwait and one in California, USA. We hope to display some of our collaborative tools, particularly as they are used for teaching academic writing to university students. The English for Science 162 course will be used as the primary example.

Forming Yahoo! Groups

The emphasis in Webheads has always been on free tools. Since teachers around the world do not have access to elaborate and expensive course management systems such as WebCT or Blackboard, one of our preferred venues has always been Yahoo! Groups (YG), which is free to users and compatible with any browser. YG offers a remarkable variety of tools for community building: an electronic mailing list, archives for photos, links, and documents; a polling feature; and a database that may be used as a wiki to edit documents collaboratively. (A

chat feature was not deemed sufficiently cross-platform, and Yahoo! Messenger or Tapped In is used instead.) YG is so easy to use that members of the Webheads often create a new group for a specific and limited purpose, for example, as a locus for discussion leading up to our presentation at the TESOL Convention in Long Beach this past spring. Participants could introduce themselves, get acquainted through a Webpage with their pictures and introductions, and begin using the e-list for questions related to their specific needs and goals for the workshop (see Stevens, 2004a).

It was only natural, then that when Hanson-Smith converted a HyperCard-based program, *Constructing the Paragraph*, into Hot Potatoes exercises, she should start a Yahoo! Group so that teachers could bring their classes to the group to use the files. The Academic Writing group (2004) was thus a direct result of experiences with the Webhead teachers, communications about their students' needs, and realizing the potential of a free resource. (See Figure 1).

The screenshot shows the Yahoo! Groups interface for the 'academic_writing' group. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Yahoo!', 'My Yahoo!', 'Mail', 'Picture Gallery', and 'Your Yahoo:'. The group name 'academic_writing' is displayed in a green header bar, along with the role 'Group Owner'. A left-hand navigation menu includes links for Home, Messages, Pending, Post, Chat, Files, Photos, Links, Database, Polls, Members, Pending, and Calendar. The main content area is titled 'Description' and features a world map image. The text in the description includes a welcome message, a statement that the group is for pre-freshman English EFL/ESL composition courses, and a note that it is not a grammar course. It also lists co-moderators and provides a link to the owner's homepage.

ehansonsmi · ehansonsmi@yahoo.com

academic_writing · ACADEMIC WRITING Group Owner

Category: [Education](#)

Description

Welcome!

This group is a place to allow access to materials I and others have developed for academic writing in pre-freshman English EFL/ESL composition courses.

This is not a grammar course. The focus is on composing--constructing paragraphs and essays that meet academic expectations in English-medium college and university settings.

If you are a student, we hope you enjoy learning and participating!

If you are a teacher, please click on "Join This Group" (link above). If you wish to bring your students here to use the activities and participate in discussion, please send one of the moderators a message and we'll help you.

Co-Moderators are Dr. Elizabeth Hanson-Smith (Sacramento, CA), Aiden Yeh (Kaohsiung, Taiwan), Buthaina Al Othman (Kuwait), Barbara Dieu (Brazil), and Glenys Hanson (France).

Dr. Hanson-Smith's homepage: <http://www.geocities.com/ehansonsmi> and virtual office at [Tapped In](#) (Type "enter Comp_for_Ed").

Legend:
 ★ = Owner
 ☆ = Moderator
 😊 = Online

Figure 1: Yahoo! Group for Academic Writing allows teachers to sign up classes to use exercises and other resources. Individual students may also join, and teachers are welcome to examine the materials at any time (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/academic_writing).

As is typical of the "multiplier effect" in a good collaborative community, once the Academic Writing YG opened, other Webheads began to see additional potential in this venue. Al Othman and a third teacher, Aiden Yeh in Taiwan, began to use other elements of the YG for their courses: they stored links to course syllabi and additional assignments (see Al Othman, 2004d, for the English for Science 162 syllabus). Students could go to the site, find the syllabus and assignments, and complete the exercises all in one place (see Figures 2 & 3). Soon other Webheads, including teachers from Brazil and France, in anticipation of using the course with their own students, began looking in on the group and contributing new resources (see Figure 2, the Links page).

ehansonsmi · ehansonsmi@yahoo.com [Start a Group - My Groups](#)

academic_writing · ACADEMIC WRITING Group Owner [[Edit My Membership](#)]

Links [Links Help](#)

[Add Bookmark](#) | [Add Folder](#)

Bookmarks

Name	Creator	Edit	Delete	Cut
Additional Fun, Exciting Activities!	ehansonsmi	Edit	Delete	Cut
Building the Essay These are Websites directly related to academic essay writing--particularly beyond the paragraph level.	ehansonsmi	Edit	Delete	Cut
Buthaina's 162 Online Lessons This folder includes seven online lessons to practice some writing skills, required for Kuwait University Students enrolled in EfS # 162. The lessons are focused on skills and techniques, like Note-Taking, Outlining, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing.	buthaina_3	Edit	Delete	Cut
Buthaina's EfS # 162 Class, Spring 2004 A 12-Week Syllabus of an Online Writing Workshop for the use of English for Science # 162 students.	buthaina_3	Edit	Delete	Cut
Buthaina's EfS # 162 Class, Summer 2004 This link includes a 6-week online syllabus designed for the use of my English for Science # 162 class, during this Summer 2004 Session at Kuwait University	buthaina_3	Edit	Delete	Cut
Sentence Writing This folder contains explanations and self-tests for writing sentences. Hope you find it helpful!	ehansonsmi	Edit	Delete	Cut
Writing Centers for Online Help	ehansonsmi	Edit	Delete	Cut
Writing a Research Paper A list of links to teacher-created guides to help students with the steps in the research process.	ehansonsmi	Edit	Delete	Cut
Academic Essay Outlining Form Standard Academic Essay Outline Form , (a handout) http://alothman-b.tripod.com/handout_essay.htm	buthaina_3	Edit	Delete	Cut

Figure 2: Links to instructors' course syllabi as well as additional resources are gradually accumulating at the Academic Writing YG site (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/academic_writing).

Al Othman started another YG as a "home base" for her course so that students would have their own electronic list and a place to store shared links and Webpages (see KU Students' Online Community of Practice, 2004). YG has proven itself to be one of the most useful of the free online tools for creating and sustaining a collaborative community of practice. It allows teachers not just to talk about teaching and learning, but also to put those ideas into practice.

From: "Buthaina Al Othman" <buthaina_3@yahoo.com>
Date: Sun Jul 11, 2004 3:52 pm
Subject: Re: Hi everybody.

Great job, XXXXX, :-)

Well you should know by now your strength and weakness in terms of academic paragraph writing. your scores tells us that you need to improve the skill of paragraph ordering. So, I suggest that you go ahead and start the working on the exercises included in the Paragraph Ordering folder. To go there, you need to click on Files, then look for the folder named Pargraph Ordering; open it and start working.

Good luck!

Buth(Ms)

--- In academic_writing@yahoogroups.com,
<XXXXXXXX@y...> wrote:
> Hello everybody,
> I hope you all fine and happy. I am XXXXX from Kuwait University and exactly from faculty of science . First, I want to thank Yahoo groups and Dr. Elizabeth for inviting us and accepting me as a membership in the group. I did the self test and I found it very helpful and useful for me ,and my scores is:
> [deleted to preserve privacy]

Figure 3: Excerpt from the Academic Writing e-list. A student uses the exercises in the FILES area, self-reports the Pre-Test scores through the YG e-list , and is assigned a Tutorial (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/academic_writing).

Using Web-based Extensions in a Blended Environment

Although Al Othman met her students regularly in their classroom, she felt that as science students they should become familiar with the tools and resources available on the Internet. These would be essential in their future careers to perform research, work collaboratively with colleagues (both at home and around the globe), and publish their results in a professional manner using appropriate technologies. Thus, a blended environment (online and face-to-face) was integral to the course, and students quickly became accustomed to a virtually paperless class environment. In addition, Webpages provide a means to fully document the progress of individual students, student teams, and the class as a whole, as well as the instructor's goals and difficulties along the way. (See Al Othman, 2003a, and Figure 4 for an explanation of the problems and objectives in English for Science, EfS.)

EfS 162 Section 4 2004 Final Project Main Objectives

Social and Practical Objective:

The main social objective of this class project is to train students to work Collaboratively and Cooperatively in groups and in sub-groups.

It was observed from last Fall 2003, 162s53 that Kuwaiti students lack the skill of working in groups! Therefore, the instructor of this Spring 2004 class 162s04, Buthaina al-Othman, designed a 10-week Writing Workshop, focused on one main topic to involve and motivate all students to work together in groups. Each group is going to choose and research an aspect of one main topic, agreed upon by the whole class, and then each group will write and present its part of one final *class research/term paper, by the end of the semester.

The idea of choosing one main topic for this project is to facilitate learning in a collaborative group-work. Based on her Social learning experiences at Webheads' Communities of Practice, the instructor or the facilitator of this class, believes that common interests and shared knowledge, besides other factors, exist among a community, for a certain period of time, (a university semester), could motivate, support, and encourage high level of collaboration and cooperation among groups of learners. The Instructor of this 162s4 class will try to implement Vance Stevens's model of an online community of practice for teachers and learners, Webhead in Action, created in Jan. 2002.

Therefore, a portal page for the use of 162s04 students was created, including students and class instructor images and students' work, to create a sense of belonging to a community and to promote academic competition among students.

Pedagogical Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to take notes, outline and organize their ideas and thoughts on a topic to write a final academic term paper and then to present in-class or on-line by the end of the semester.
2. Students will learn how to look for required information using online resources or visiting a traditional Library.
3. Students will learn how to work as a participating member in a community of online learners to share information and build knowledge through the 162s4 Yahoo group, created specially for this purpose.
4. Students will learn how to organize, save, and publish required information on the Internet, using blogs for easy access to their work whenever and wherever.
5. Students will learn that locating, evaluating, and effectively using information on the WWW require critical thinking skill beyond those needed to research traditional library resources.(Learning ways to improve web searching).
6. Students will improve their online reading skill.
7. Students will learn in depth the benefits of outlining and how to use a standard academic outline form for this purpose; (a 5-paragraph essay format).
8. Students will learn how to present face-to-face or online, using various visual aids, effectively.

Figure 4: Social and pedagogical goals of EfS 162 (Al Othman, 2003:
http://alothman-b.tripod.com/162_projobjectives_s2004.htm).

Combining content, writing, and critical thinking, the subject for English 162 was contemporary problems in science, and in the Spring 2004 semester, the student groups were to study the ecology of Kuwait itself. The course emphasized the importance of social as well as pedagogical goals (see Figure 4). The participation of the Kuwaiti National Association of Volunteers for the Protection of Environment (whose president, Sheikha Amthal Al-Sabah, gave the students phone numbers to help obtain information) lent additional authenticity to the entire project.

Other free tools for asynchronous communication were used on occasion:

- Another YG, Real English Online (2004) for teachers using video and audio, had been started a year earlier, and Al Othman used this YG to try out a "video lesson" with an earlier section of EfS students (Al Othman, 2003b). Video can provide an authentic experience of speech, mannerisms, and cultural semiotics--all valuable for students practicing oral presentations whether online or face-to-face. For more on using video, see Hanson-Smith, 2004b. (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Real_English_Online)
- Bravenet Discussion Forum - This free Web-based bulletin board allowed comments both from students in the whole class (rather than sections, as in the YG), and from visiting professors, other Webheads who volunteered to visit student blogs (see below) and respond to their work. Students were thus provided with a unique and authentic audience for their writing (see Al Othman, 2004a, and Figure 5). Another free resource, this Forum did not require passwords or authentication, and so was exceptionally easy for guests to use. Individual working teams each had their own Forum as well to assist in collaborative writing. (<http://www.bravenet.com/>)
- Blogs (Web + log) - These were an important means for students to develop their writing and critical thinking, as will be discussed below. (For a definition and history of blogs, see Blood, 2000; for their use as introspective tools for research, see Suzuki, 2004.)





<p>Dr. Karen Garcia</p> <p></p> <p>IP: 128.119.232.122</p> <p>May 6th, 2004 - 11:51 PM</p>	<p> Re: The final research paragraph</p> <p>Abdul, I read your blog and I posted the following comments:</p> <p>... this looks good.....</p> <p>Although you can give more examples of how:</p> <p>"we (can) take (more) steps and lead campaigns to recover the infected marine life in Kuwait."</p> <p>How can "educational system and awareness in Kuwait" be better?</p> <p>How can Ecological Education in schools be improved?</p> <p>Why aren't sewage water treatment plants used?</p> <p>Also, why should we bother to protect the ecology?</p> <p>The paper is interesting. Please tell me what you think.</p> <p>Karen</p>
<p>abdul</p> <p></p> <p>IP: 62.150.37.9</p> <p>May 8th, 2004 - 12:10 AM</p>	<p> Re: The final research paragraph (Thanks a lot)</p> <p>Hi Dr.Karen</p> <p>Thanks for you effort and I really appreciate this. The sewage water treatment is being used, but the pipes are blocked up, so the water can't reach it, but they already have started sewage pipes changes in all of Kuwait ,which of course a very big step to our goal. For the educational system we need to improve Ecological Educations in schools by adding some topics and</p>

Figure 5: A visiting Webhead comments on a student paper (Al Othman, 2004a: <http://pub3.bravenet.com/forum/193871153>).

Blogging

Journals are often used in academic writing courses in order to help students brainstorm, freewrite, and develop a personal voice or style unfettered by grammatical correctness or a concern for structure. (Many of us no doubt recall the backbreaking work of carrying student notebooks home to read.) Blogs are online journals which allow students (and teachers) access at home or in the lab. Teachers do not have to lug around notebooks to read them, and they can comment directly on the blog page, as can classmates, depending on the access that is permitted. Students in Al Othman's English for Science classes created their own blogs, some uploading pictures related to their project or of themselves as they personalized the online journal, and used them to create outlines, brainstorm, and write down their thoughts as they occurred. Later, elements could be extracted from the blogs and polished as they wrote their research papers. Al Othman also created a Webpage where students could link to each other's blogs as they worked in teams on their final collaborative contributions, and receive a grade for their efforts (Al Othman, 2004c; Figure 6).

Comment on student blog:

<http://angelprinecs.blogspot.com/>

Mohammed, you have done a great job online today.

Mohammed, has met me at MSN, and from there we visited our Group board, we chatted and used the Whiteboard to write welcome messages. Then, he joined 162 yahoo group. After that he created his blog, uploaded his photo and blog at Files and Photos sections in our yahoo group. Later, Mohammed uploaded a lovely story he wrote, in English! The story will be published soon on his blog. All this we did online from our pcs at home.

Thanks, Mohammed for your collaboration and cooperation.

Buthaina

Figure 6: Al Othman comments on a student's progress in creating a blog (Al Othman, 2004c; grade has been deleted for privacy: http://alothman-b.tripod.com/162_blogs_studentfeb04.htm).

Synchronous Tools

It should be noted that part of the course consisted of learning how to present face-to-face online using visual aids such as a whiteboard and oral presentations supported by Microsoft™ PowerPoint slide shows. Live chat, particularly with voice and Webcam, is especially important to the professional community, as this conference itself witnesses. Students in the EfS courses were able to receive help from their instructor directly by using chat facilities as they worked through assignments (see Figure 6). The use of voice chat and Webcams requires considerable additional preparation, though not additional technical expertise, and it is hoped that it will be used in subsequent course offerings as a means to prepare students for presentations at, for example, international conferences.

Synchronous tools used in the EfS courses:

- MSN [Microsoft™] Messenger - live text chat; also allows use of Webcam. (<http://messenger.msn.com/>)
- Groupboard - a suite of interactive applications, including whiteboard, Webcam, and text chat, allowed for synchronous meetings online with the capability of demonstrating a Webpage to the whole group on their own desktops. This resource enabled students to comment in real time on each other's presentations, visit resource pages together, etc. (<http://www.groupboard.com/>)
- Alado voice chat - While the instructor was absent at a professional conference for a week, she had the possibility of meeting with the class at their regular hours. (However,

this turned out to be impossible because of an 11-hour time difference!) Also, students had the opportunity to speak with visiting professors from the Webheads, and thus practice their oral presentation skills in a "safe" environment. (See Al Othman, 2004b, for screen shots and a recording of the session [PC only].) Webheads have been given their own chat room for experimentation with technology. (<http://www.alado.com/>)

Student Webpages and Presentations

Each team in EfS 162 chose a different topic in a related area, The Ecology of Kuwait, and contributed a section to the commensurately longer final paper based on individual students' shorter (5-paragraph) papers with researched references. Teams were also asked to create a Webpage (see Figure 7) , and a Microsoft™ PowerPoint slide show (see Figure 8) to accompany an oral presentation in class. Again, the goal was to mimic the kinds of activities they would engage in through their professional careers.

The screenshot shows a webpage with a pink and red background. At the top left, there is a link for "Kuwait*" and a weather icon showing "33-47 C". Below the weather icon are links for "Sign Guestbook" and "View Guestbook". A map of Kuwait and the Persian Gulf is displayed, showing various locations like 'Abdali, Warbah, Bābiyān, Qasr as Sabiyah, Al Jahrah, Ash Shuwaykh, Minā' al Ahmadi, Ash Shu'aybah, Minā' 'Abd Allah, Minā' Surūd, Al Wātrah, Qasr, Umm al Maradim, and Garah. A small image of a person on a beach is visible in the bottom left. On the right side, there is a flag of Kuwait and a section titled "Useful Links" with links to "download.com", "thefreedictionary.com", "ajeeb dictionary", and "Kuwait Info". At the bottom, there is a "Not Online" status indicator and a signature: "Hi everybody... I'm Abdulrahman Moufeed Krouma (Abdul) a student in Kuwait university the Faculty Of Science . I'm taking English 162 at miss Buthaina Al".

Figure 7: Marine Life Kuwait: The *Kuwait* link at the upper left leads to local weather. The *Not Online* button refers to Yahoo! Messenger text chat status. The *Guestbook* link allows visitors to make comments on the Webpage contents. It is signed by several Webheads. Related pages contain the outline of the paper, links to the students' blogs, their PowerPoint presentation, and the paper itself. (Some links appear inactive on the page, but still function; Marine Life Kuwait , 2004: http://www.geocities.com/abdulrahman_efs/Marinelifeq8.html.)

Microsoft™ FrontPage was used to create the Webpages. (FrontPage is available at many institutions through academic licensing; the Netscape® Navigator browser has a somewhat less sophisticated, but free HTML editor that is compatible with more browsers.) Like PowerPoint, FrontPage is a fairly simple software application that allows the user to easily add graphics, buttons, links, and other pictorial elements, creating a fairly sophisticated looking Webpage with very little time spent in mastering the technology.



Figure 8: Microsoft™ PowerPoint slide show for students' oral presentation (Abdulrahman, Al-Kandary, Moufeed, Al-Najadah , 2004:

http://www.geocities.com/abdulrahman_efs/marine_life_q8.ppt).

Proposed Future Projects: The Value of Community

The Kuwait project has been an encouraging beginning to a new approach to teaching English and creating a collaborative community among students in this country. The use of innovative technologies is a bonus for students in the sciences. Future projects hope to have students from around the globe read and comment on each other's papers and blogs. The

experiment with constructivist pedagogical principles and new Internet communication tools has been supported by the community of teachers that composes the Webheads in Action. In future, it may be possible for students to engage in live chat with visiting guests from the Webheads community and with students from other classes sharing the resources at Academic Writing YG as they work on similar projects (see Yeh, González, & Mühren, 2004, for an example of Webhead-to-student communication). This type of collaboration would give students a sense of what the future holds for them, because increasingly the professional community, especially in the sciences, is employing Internet communication tools to share their work both locally and globally. The practice with text, voice, and video will be valuable for students in their careers, not just for online conferences, but also for those occasions when they would give presentations at conferences to colleagues from around the world. Collaborations with students in Taiwan, France, and Brazil will give Kuwait's future scientists entry into the global community.

The Webheads group has already been the subject of a PhD dissertation, numerous papers, workshops, and conference presentations. Several aspects distinguish this group from a simple electronic list or professional association's discussion board:

- Beyond the discussion of ideas, members freely provide voluntary mutual support of other teachers in sharing skills and mentoring each other--and their students--as they use technology. The collaboration that has taken place as Al Othman developed the EfS courses is just one of many examples. Every January, a mini-course, "Becoming a Webhead," is offered to help new members get up to speed with the online activities and Internet skills the group uses regularly (see their portal page, Almeida d'Éça, González, Jordano, & Nyrop, 2004: <http://www.geocities.com/bawebhead/>).
- Webheads have presented collaboratively at professional conferences all over the world, both online and off. Members consistently document and archive their experiments with new technology in pedagogical settings, thus creating a communal history as well as a record of resources and techniques. Please see the Webheads' Index for documentation of these collaborative efforts (Almeida d'Éça, 2004a: <http://www.malhatlantica.pt/teresadeca/webheads/wia-index.htm>).
- Perhaps most importantly, strong social bonds have formed among members, enhanced by regular live meetings in text, voice, and video chat every Sunday at noon GMT. Facilities used are Tapped In (<http://ti2.sri.com/>), Alado (<http://alado.net/webheads>), and Yahoo! Messenger (<http://messenger.yahoo.com/>), among others. Opportunities to meet face-to-face are always enjoyable--and also well documented (<http://www.malhatlantica.pt/teresadeca/webheads/wia-index2.htm#Meet>).

The social element cannot be overemphasized. As Ebeltoft & Nyrop explain, "It is a safe feeling to meet a patient guide on the net, a live person who is able to introduce, explain and give positive feedback on your first fumbling tentative participation" (2001, n.p.) Just as students need social support, so do teachers learning to use the new technology-based environment. The Webheads group is a unique means for ongoing teacher training in a collaborative, constructivist, peer-to-peer setting. Our experiences with the Webheads have taught us that

- Joining a CoP is essential for professional development.
- Using ICTs to teach ESP in EFL/ESL classrooms offers effective learning and teaching opportunities and prepares students for the future.
- Integrating collaborative student web-projects in blended and distance learning offers effective learning and teaching opportunities.

As a long-standing community of practice, the Webheads in Action expect to continue having a significant impact on teaching and learning languages online. We hope that conference goers at *Reading Matrix* will join us in WiA, and we welcome your participation in this on-going adventure in technology. To join this free group, visit our site at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/evonline2002_webheads.

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