

* On the Internet *

Unarticle: Unleashing the Transformative Power of the Unorganized Internet

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Webhead Link hangs out midwater near a pod of orcas at Meteora in Second Life while over in Breeze, Sean FitzGerald observes that "students are into different technologies than teachers ... teachers are into email, blogs, and del.icio.us ... students are into texting, IM and MySpaces."

Deadlines are a mother of invention. By March 10 this time around I had neither an article in hand for my 'column' in TESL-EJ nor a clear purpose for writing one (hence this *unarticle*). But I'm constantly 'On the Internet', too constantly in the opinion of some, and have in mind unleashing a stream of consciousness on the many convergences I'm playing with there at the moment. I'm not sure if you'll feel enlightened or inflicted upon after reading this but here goes.

The most immediate inspiration for this unarticle came from a community I've been enjoying interacting with lately, a group of engaging Antipodeans who just recently

held an unconference. In case you were wondering, an 'unconference' according to Wikipedia, and these days, what's not according to Wikipedia, is "a conference where the content of the sessions is driven and created by the participants, generally day-by-day during the course of the event, rather than by a single organizer, or small group of organizers, in advance." <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference/> >

In order that their unconference would not be uneventful however, someone did take it upon themselves to set up a wiki for it <<http://talo.wikispaces.com/swapmeeto7a/>>, and watching this wiki grow over time was a lesson in the wisdom of crowds: how a group of people can organize themselves into a viable focus while working through a Web 2.0 online tool which participants edit from computer workstations in countries all over the world, with little apparent editorial control over the process.

For an excellent example of how wikis undergo change over time, and how a distributed network operates to mediate both vandalism and radicalism, check out the fascinating screencast of the evolution of the article in Wikipedia on 'Heavy metal umlaut': <http://weblog.infoworld.com/udell/gems/umlaut.html>.

The impetus for this particular unconference was a "Swapmeet" or face-to-face gathering of teachers in Adelaide, whose participants would fly in from other parts of Australia and New Zealand, but because they convene throughout the year via a listserv (called TALO, Teaching and Learning Online) their group includes many educators in many parts of the world far, far from Adelaide. Some of these people wanted to be included at a distance, *and* since the group's domain of interest is to enhance collaboration through connectivity, they had the wherewithal to do so. So these participants used the availability of online tools which made possible for anyone in the group to write on various free online spaces so that each could contribute something to the unconference agenda and thereby make the on-site events accessible no matter where people happened to be checking in from.

You can easily see where the participants came from by visiting the Frappr map that was until just recently on the front page of the wiki (till someone found it distracting and relegated it to a link in the sidebar <<http://www.frappr.com/teachandlearnonline/>>). A Frappr map is one where multiple participants can place their pins on a world map and then upload a picture and shoutout so that the map displays this information next to where on the planet each person comes from. The site can generate various scripts which anyone whose technical skills have reached copy/paste can paste right into their own website.

OK, granted, you have to have a website, but these days - where with just a slightly higher level of functional computer literacy than copy/paste anyone almost with a mouse and an Internet connection can set up a blog or a wiki (okay, a large number of post-preschoolers under 30) - this is not considered rocket science.

It's hard to describe the congealing power of having people's pictures and shared vignettes start popping up all over the map, but a click on that Frappr map link will illustrate the concept. And the ensuing display is only one of several scripts that one can choose from. It's also possible to enhance your site with a scrolling slide show of people's photos simply by pasting the associated script to your writeable web space. Whatever the display Frappr allows people to then view the show and, if they want to

add their pictures, to do so and so make their personal mark on the collective project. Frappr is an excellent tool when you want to elicit pictures from throughout your community. If the pictures reside with you then other tools such as Bubbleshare will allow you to post them online and then copy scripts to paste to your web space, again giving you various display options.

When I last visited the unconference Swapmeet wiki I didn't see the Frappr map there which I had intended to cite in this unarticle. I was disappointed only for a few moments (I only later noticed its link in the sidebar). It is the nature of wikis that each step in the editing process can be recalled. I discovered that by simply clicking on History I could pull up previous versions of the wiki (yep, every last one) and find the map I was looking for from an edit at about the time I remembered it had been there.

This technique of paging through its wiki revision history allows one to observe the development of the unconference project. Anyone can click on the History tab and see the 200+ iterations of the process since Leigh Blackall started sketching out some ideas for the gathering on Feb 18. You can see how, from Leigh's rough outline, tables grew into which people posted their photographs and proposals of what they might like to discuss. Once the online element became apparent and on-site participants realized they'd have to accommodate numerous time zones, a schedule was posted where people could write-in their availability, and the community discussed various ways of contacting one another synchronously. In the end they settled on Breeze, an enterprise product with a nice interface but many limitations. Learning about the advantages and limitations of such interfaces is one reason that community members find it so important to constantly engage in online experiments with one another.

Second Life (Stevens, 2006) was another place where successful encounters occurred (though speaking of limitations, only for those with the computing power and bandwidth to get in-world and stay there). Participants in the Second Life sessions were able to explore and appreciate the builds of some of the unconference participants, and either text chat to one another in-world, or carry on conversations in Skype on the side. Second Life is rife with scripted objects that can be shared by participants who 'drop' them someplace where others can pick them up and keep them in their inventories. One of these scripts allows avatars to wear small headsets that when in range of others with similar headsets will allow them to initiate Skype calls with one another.

Stephen Downes <<http://downes.ca>> put himself down for a Skypecast at the TALO Swapmeet wiki. His Skypecast was scheduled for 2:30 a.m. my time but another mediating aspect of the web 2.0 is that, unless you wish to interact personally at every such event, you can often attend them asynchronously. Stephen for example can be relied on to record his presentations and post them to his website where they can be downloaded as podcasts (Stanley, 2006). Folks interested in educational technology can avail themselves of an almost endless supply of such materials. Endless is considered here to be more listening material than a human with a job requiring even minimal attention, and interests outside of a profession, could possibly *want* to listen to in a conceivable available listening lifetime.

The principle of podcatching, as it is sometimes known, is that you identify podcasts

online that you would like to listen to regularly and then subscribe to their RSS feeds. In order to access the feeds you run an aggregator, for example iTunes or Juice. The aggregator visits the source of your subscribed podcasts and determines if there are any there you haven't downloaded yet, and if so it fetches these automatically and stores them on your computer as mp3 files. With iTunes you can then synch with your iPod so that collections of files can be transferred to your mp3 player for you to listen to at leisure. If you want less automaticity and more control over the transfer process without having to enter the brain of an iTunes software designer, you might find that another aggregator is more intuitive for your purposes. In any event you end up with a set of mp3 files on your listening device which you can play back later at your convenience.

Listening to podcasts has benefits for those wishing to improve their skills in educational technology similar to those operating in language learning. Harvesting podcasts would be a great way to learn a language, and many such podcasts exist which purport to teach languages. Some of these that I have heard waste a lot of bandwidth with native language as opposed to target practice. For example, I might hear, "Good morning, today we're going to learn more idioms in French," etc. and so on for several minutes in English, which is not teaching me anything about French. The problem in fact is that this *is* teaching. As someone has said, I love to learn but I hate to be taught. Teaching is when someone else decides what you should learn. Whereas it is understood that novice learners might benefit from some degree of control over what is deemed good for them, mature professionals should be at the other end of the spectrum.

John Higgins once defined authentic language as any instance of language not created by a teacher for the purpose of teaching languages, and this is the kind of language that I feel is particularly appropriate to mature learners of a language, whereas the other is inefficient and therefore wastes time for learners who wish to cut to the chase. Therefore, choice of podcast in a target language for me would be dictated by genre and subject matter, with inauthentic instructional materials being appropriate only if I were just beginning to learn that language. Once over the beginner threshold podcasts can be quite valuable. I can listen at leisure. I can replay. The original recordings are on my computer where I can have fine access to them. I can use Audacity for example to trim away parts of the recording that I'm not interested in. I could even compile a collection of edited recordings and podcast them myself. Many source recordings have been put online under Creative Commons license, so that their reuse in this way on a personal, non-commercial site, would be perfectly legal. As a teacher of a language course I might assign my students to locate, edit, and repodcast samples of shareable language that they had found most useful to them personally. I would then encourage my students to share with one another their findings in a system of aggregation of each other's podcasted and blogged content as outlined here: http://www.vancestevens.com/rss_edu.htm.

Generally speaking anyone thinking to use such techniques with students needs to become familiar with the techniques themselves. This is where there are parallels between learning educational technology and learning a language. Not all effective language teachers are native speakers. The same applies to currently practicing teachers using educational technology in almost any context, since the generation that grew up without ubiquitous access to computers has not yet been supplanted by the next. Marc Prensky <<http://www.marcprensky.com>> places a digital divide

between digital natives and digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). The latter he says will always speak with an 'accent' yet most educational professionals today are in this position of having to shift from 20th century ways of "connecting" to 21st century modalities; i.e. online with each other and affectively with students (another of Prensky's mantras: Enrage me or engage me: Prensky, 2005).

Just as a non-native speaker of a language who wishes to teach it would have to become fluently familiar with that language, so digital immigrants wanting to use educational technology need to familiarize themselves with the practices and concepts of what they wish to use with students. Podcasts can play a role in helping language learners become familiar with a language since learners can immerse themselves in (and re-mix, rewind, re-purpose, replay) recorded instances of authentic language. What many teachers of these languages and other subjects are beginning to realize is that the same holds true with educational technology. Ed tech is like a foreign language to many with concepts not immediately grasped. Educators can use the same techniques that they could later pass on to their students to intereract with peers slightly more ahead of the curve discussing these concepts in terms that become more understandable the more one listens to conversations in which the concepts are discussed.

One good podcast site, where one can access a steady stream of conversations that guide interested peers into (the more you listen) the decreasingly arcane world of educational technology, is the Worldbridges network <<http://www.worldbridges.net>> (Lebow, 2006). Another clearly explicated podcast site with a long history of frequent updates is that created by Wesley Fryer, Working at the Speed of Creativity <<http://www.speedofcreativity.org>>. Wesley's job (at AT&T) requires him to travel from state to state in the USA presenting at conferences and teacher in-service gatherings on topics offering advice on practical applications to education of the most popular Web 2.0 tools. His presentations are pitched at practicing teachers, and delivered in terms that presume little prior knowledge. Wesley introduces his podcasts with home-made digital audio snippets in productions that are as slick as they are folksy, making for easy listening on a wide range of weighty yet approachable, current, and pertinent ed tech topics.

Wesley was also one of the organizers of the recent K-12 Online Conference <<http://k12onlineconference.org>>. Unlike the unconference mentioned at the start of this unarticle (which is gradually evolving into an article) the K-12 Online Conference used a wide spectrum of tools similar to those used by the community pulling together the TALO Swapmeet. The organizers of both conferences used free Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, Skypecasts, YouTube, and Flickr and Frappr photos to present content (and SurveyMonkey to evaluate it). But what set the K-12 conference apart from other online conferences proliferating on the web was their extensive use of social networking and aggregated content. Artifacts for the conference were tagged and aggregated in a number of ways; for example using Technorati to create a network of associated blog posts that is still updating <<http://technorati.com/search/k12onlineconference.org>>, del.icio.us links tagged on *k12online* <<http://del.icio.us/search/?all=k12online> >, and David Warlick's Hitchhikr which aggregates artifacts tagged *k12online2006* <http://www.hitchhikr.com/index.php?conf_id=113>.

One highly positive development over the past year or two in use of Internet in

educational technology has been the steady proliferation of opportunities for educators to come together to share and exchange expertise at free events where sophisticated use of Web 2.0 tools is what needs to be understood in order to *enable* participants to interact with one another. These events are about professional development but unlike face-to-face venues where participants could easily take passive roles in sitting back and being told about the latest technologies, participants in online events have to do what is being inculcated. Normally, people who are adept at adapting Web 2.0 tools to collaboration in education try their best to help bring everyone else up to speed in order that all may participate, and a typical reaction of newbies to such sessions is of how positive the experience was, that new friendships were formed, and like-minded peers were found at last from outside the immediate and often constraining confines of the physical walls that still delineate most institutionalized educational settings.

One such event that has been ongoing for several years now is the TESOL Electronic Village Online sessions <<http://evoo7sessions.pbwiki.com/>> (Hanson-Smith and Bauer-Ramazani, 2004). This is another grass-roots effort at professional development through using technology at a distance which has grown in scope and popularity in recent years. Although based traditionally in YahooGroup portals and instant messaging and online presentation tools, the individual sessions have been branching into many other venues lately such as blogs, wikis, webcasting, and Second Life. The most enthusiastic participants express views suggesting transformative experiences have occurred after taking part in these sessions. Less sanguine reactions would still applaud the trend whereby quality professional development is available to interested educators at no cost and at their convenience over the Internet, without the hassle of registration formalities or the inconvenience and expense of travel.

Another venue to continue with this trend for professional development is the upcoming second Webheads in Action Online Convergence scheduled for May 18-20, 2007 <<http://wiaoc.org>>. The first one <<http://2005.wiaoc.org>> was reported in an On the Internet column in Stevens, 2005. This is a free online conference where pretty much anything goes. Whereas the organizers try to make things as clear as possible for attendees, participants and presenters are encouraged to explore as many modalities for communication and interaction as possible in an effort to help each other learn the tools, so there is a tolerance for experimentation at the expense of a simple one-stop interface. But part of what there is to learn about Internet literacy is how to personally organize the morass of information accessible online through efficient aggregation. So the conference will attempt also to show participants how order can be gleaned from what what would otherwise seem chaotic on the Internet by utilizing many of the social networking features so appropriately employed at the K-12 Online conference while carrying on the work of the community largely associated with the annual EVO events.

If you have sustained sufficient interest to read this far into this unarticle you yourself are likely to have undergone many changes in the way you have found yourself working in the past year. Those most prone to staying abreast of educational technology are probably finding themselves adopting new work habits monthly or even weekly. For example, I wrote first drafts of this in Google Docs so that I could access it from any computer on the Internet whereas a year ago I might have been using an application on my local computer and carrying files around on a flash disc. When completed I pasted it to my blog <<http://advancededucation.blogspot.com>>

where it might attract comments; whereas before I would have put it in a static HTML file and posted it to a Web 1.0 page and had the TESL-EJ editors get it from there. That I absorbed these techniques and eventually changed my behavior in this and other ways I use the Internet came about in part from listening to innumerable podcasts that gradually pre-disposed me to try out working in alternative ways that have since become second nature. The other most significant part of my professional development comes from constant interaction with other teaching professionals online, and tapping in to a Venn diagram of numerous overlapping distributed learning networks.

Staying abreast of developments in educational technology requires that you go pro-active and utilize the many opportunities for professional development that abound on the Internet. There is no shortage of such opportunities and they are becoming more numerous and more easily accessible. You don't need to travel to participate, you don't need to pay, and you don't need to wait for someone else to organize an event - you can organize it yourself or in the case of an unconference, unorganize it by letting the participants organize it themselves. New technologies making these scenarios possible have been termed subversive and disruptive because they challenge old ways of doing things and suggest many new alternatives. This unarticle encourages you to experiment and explore, and perhaps we will meet online one day through one of the means mentioned here.

Some time ago I coined the term "[firewall in the mind](#)" to refer to cases where transformative technologies are utilized in ways characteristic of whatever technology had previously dominated, before the potential of the new medium was fully explored. Papert (1980), in his book *Mindstorms*, used the analogy of early movie-makers who shot scenes straight on, to replicate how a viewer might experience a play from an (albeit front-row) seat in a theater. Now, static Web 1.0 pages are considered analogous to a theater view of the Internet, where the audience observes but is not expected to interact. An example of that would be the appearance of this unarticle in the static web-based TESL-EJ online journal <<http://tesl-ej.org>>.

It makes sense to me, as editor of the On the Internet column in TESL-EJ, to push the envelope ever so slightly and blog my present and future contributions to this column. That way readers will have a chance to themselves explore one of the more transformative aspects of the Internet, its ability to foster audience participation in the form of conversations. Blogs invite comments and RSS subscriptions, and both are now possible at the blog location of this post:
<http://advancededucation.blogspot.com/2007/03/unarticle.html>.

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