

# Guest Editor's Introduction

## *PROCEEDS OF WEBHEADS IN ACTION ONLINE CONVERGENCE: VOLUME 1*

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It is interesting to consider how the set of papers in this volume came to be. This is not just another proceeds of a conference put on by people who gather together once every year or two but with little connection to one another apart from interest and expertise in a common subject area. I hope you have paused on reading that assertion. What kind of proceeds is it then? What sets this volume apart from other compilations of articles published in the genre of proceeds?

It's not that there is anything wrong with infrequent contact over interest and expertise in a common subject area, and proceeds very similar to this one might emerge under such conditions. But there is latent potential in the quality of collaboration that can be generated through greater familiarity, and it turns out that online environments address this very aspect of human interaction. So, one crucial difference between these proceeds and others is that the conference in this case was organized and run by participants in a community of practice called Webheads <<http://webheads.info>>. Whereas few authors of these papers have ever met face to face, for the most part they know one another quite well through interaction online, and the mutual respect arising through frequent opportunities to interact productively over time has brought these authors to converge on an online conference resulting in turn in these proceeds.

By definition, a community of practice is a loose association of peers who meet to further their knowledge of a given practice, in this case the nature and delivery of online learning using free and open source Internet tools. This community has been exploring these tools with each other for several years now, and its members have engaged in numerous collaboration projects and become familiar with each other's work and more importantly, personalities. It's the personality factor as much as the work ethic that contributes so much to this group's cohesion and which has led it to challenge itself with putting on a completely free worldwide online conference. The significance of that ground-breaking endeavor can be gauged from the quality of papers in this volume, which is part one of a two-part proceeds.

This conference was conceived and implemented in ways unlike most other conferences. Normally, conferences are mounted by entities ranging from universities to professional associations which in most cases put on conferences face to face but occasionally online. In such cases, there are almost always budgetary concerns: either there is a physical plant to rent or maintain, or in the case of purely online conferences money is required to pay staff and support

infrastructure, which means that fees are charged participants and used in part to hire speakers to attract more participants.

Our conference, as holds true for our community of practice in general, relied on no funding whatsoever, nor were any fees charged to participants. All organizers and presenters, including keynote presenters with celebrity status, donated their time and expertise for what turned out to be a remarkably worthwhile cause (see [Stevens 2005a](#) and [2005b](#) for reports on the results of a survey of participant reactions). The data cited in these reports suggest that although presenting and participating in an online conference such as this one was new to most of the interactants (and incidentally, especially challenging to many of the presenters), impressions of questionnaire respondents were predominantly positive regarding almost all aspects of the conference. Questionnaire respondents found the interfaces easy to use, surprisingly manageable, and intuitively navigable. They found live, empathetic help when needed. They thought the quality of the presentations was surprisingly high. If they had not been a part of the Webheads CoP before the conference, they felt predisposed to learn more, to get to know the others in the environment better. If they were already participants in Webheads then they solidified friendships and developed a deeper appreciation for the creative potential of online communities of practice.

The community realized that the presenters whose work appears here would be challenged by some of the unique aspects of online presentations and conferences. The call for papers was put out to the world of academics at large, and was responded to by a wide spectrum of practitioners in addition to Webheads members; but because we had virtually limitless time and space for presentations (72 hours or slots available over three days, option to spill into additional days, no constraints on day or night since it was always daytime somewhere for some of our worldwide audience), the referees were able to accept almost all of the proposals submitted with enough detail for the proposal to be considered a serious one. We then developed a coaching system, where needed, to help colleagues develop their text-based proposals into viable online presentations. In the end we fielded 46 presentations spread out over the three 24-hour days of the conference.

So this introduction is converging on several threads. You have gathered that the conference, or convergence as we called it, was highly experimental. (One of our members, Elderbob Brannan <<http://elderbob.com/>>, suggested calling it a convergence to make the point that we were converging numerous technologies and communities, and the appellation stuck). It was also of high quality, as you will judge when you read these proceeds and those in the next volume. And characteristic of our CoP, it was also friendly in a way that is unique to online environments and generally unfathomable to those who have never experienced one. For the uninitiated the experience was no doubt revelatory. For ongoing interactants in the group, the convergence was a challenging, surprising, reaffirming, yet logical outcome of long-time online collaboration through a CoP.

We hope you enjoy this first of our two volumes of proceeds. Volume Two is due to appear this June as a Special Edition of Teaching English with Technology. And we hope you will join us at our next global, free, entirely online, Webheads in Action Online Convergence tentatively scheduled for May, 2007.

## References

Stevens, V. (2005a). APACALL Co-sponsors Webheads in Action Online Convergence November 18-20, 2005. *Innovative Language Learning*, 8, 2005 (APACALL Newsletter). Retrieved May 2, 2006 from: <http://www.apacall.org/news/Newsletter8.pdf> .

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