FROM SIMPLY TEACHING TO TEACHING WITH EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract

This narrative will reflect on my personal journey from a teacher of English formed in the pre-Internet era to a higher education (HE) teacher of English facing the challenges of no formal training, limited financial resources, and skepticism about technology-supported learning involving e-platforms and online tools in order to meet the expectations of the new generations of digital students.
A brief survey of free professional development opportunities available worldwide includes hands-on peer learning workshops for English teachers wishing to teach with emerging technologies such as the Electronic Village Online (EVO) sessions of TESOL USA, followed by suggestions for developing an adequate professional learning network for further learning and consolidation.
This narrative is likely to support other teachers of English to overcome similar difficulties and make them more aware, confident and prepared to employ emerging techologies successfully in their practice. The novelty of this narrative rests in bridging the gap between the peer-learning sessions and the power of professional learning networks.

Keywords: English teaching, professional learning network, emerging technologies.

1. Remaining an island versus becoming a connected teacher

Whether you are a teacher of English as native or foreign language and are doubtful and apprehensive of employing emerging technologies in your practice for reasons of distraction, safety and lack of relevance for your students, and especially because you lack the knowledge and confidence, not knowing where to set off, this narrative can be a starting point for your own journey.

The unprecedented development of the emerging technologies and their impact on teachers and, in turn, on teaching and learning English is perceived as highly positive by the teachers and learners alike. However, for me, a teacher formed in the classical school of methodology during the late 1980s, teaching with technology was looming ahead like an insuperable ideal. Not only did I disapprove of new methods, but I also considered the students' use of mobile devices during class activities or their possible work on social networks, irrelevant for language learning. My assumption was, therefore, rather similar to a commonly held opinion in the more senior category of the English teaching community, that what the teacher needs is a sound pedagogical and methodological background and that tech adoption may only represent a diversion and a hindrance towards meeting the curricular goals. Whether this division between the younger – technology geeks, and the older - technology Luddites, originated in the digital native/digital immigrants divide (Prensky, 2001) is probably less significant than its impact of making myself and similar-minded teachers reluctant to adopt and adapt technology-based teaching in our practice.

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Still, attendance of international events and the research in the field of education and English language teaching was contradicting my skepticism and conservative attitude. To this factual evidence, pressure from the school management towards engaging students in digital projects, out of class autonomous work through employment of virtual environments and blended learning was superimposed, since curricular reforms in which the educational entities are engaged, require teachers to employ technology-driven methods and exploitation of e-platforms (Moodle), possibly with little support for systematic teacher training in this respect, though. Other stumbling blocks, such as the lack of funding, busy schedule and various professional commitments, can also prevent teachers from attending formal courses for professional development. The acute dilemma whether to change and keep abreast technology developments in English language learning or continue with classical methods can, therefore, turn out to be particularly complex and to have only few, very limited options.

The most profound impulse towards changing and being part of the continent of connected teachers came, however, from my students and their extensive use of technology in everyday life. They made me realize that I was being anachronic and that in order to capture and maintain their interest, it was me who had to explore and become part of their world, meeting them where they were, whether this would involve presence in social media environments, multitasking, or sharing and being connected with the virtual reality and with the world. However, the question of how to change and face this challenge, remained on my own responsibility and means.

2. Great expectations – TESOL-EVO

The answer to my dilemma came about a decade ago, in 2009, when I received an invitation from a TESOL friend to join the Electronic Village Online [5], with warm recommendations for *Becoming a Webhead* (BAW) **-** a hands-on workshop on how to use Web communication tools for language teaching and learning. It was a completely free, five-week peer-learning professional development workshop for teachers throughout the world, TESOL or non-TESOL members alike.

I joined *Becoming a Webhead* [3] session with great expectations of learning, but also full of doubts whether I would be able to face the challenges of online learning. Since the only requirement was to have a computer and good Internet connection, and of course the desire to learn and invest time, which I had from abundance, I was soon busy creating an account, reading and answering messages. I still remember my first week, the nice and warm welcome in the BAW2009 Yahoogroup, the positive messages, as well as the great support and encouragement received from the coordinators. Participants were invited to invest some time every day at their most convenient hours, learning and preparing their assignments. Every question was important, treated with great interest, and almost instantly answered, every step was guided and there was always someone at the other end who would scaffold, suggest and exemplify. I was slowly making feeble, but in my eyes huge, progress: I learnt for the first time to create a .jpg photo, resize it and upload it on

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the Wikipedia, to post comments in the forum and follow instructions word by word in creating my first blog and my first wiki - my crowning achievements! I was further encouraged to use writing and speaking tools and began to realize that these were incredibly simple and required no sophisticated IT programming knowledge as I had mistakenly believed. With almost just-in-time feedback to queries and adequate assistance, I started to use Skype to connect with my students - which back in 2009 was revolutionary - and *Illuminate* (nowadays *Blackboard collaborate*) – the virtual classroom which helped me attach a voice to the coordinators and other international participants from Russia, USA, Japan, and Europe. Whatever I learnt about – voice tools (Voxopop, VoiceThread), blogs (Blogger), wikis (Wikispaces, Pbworks), quiz makers - I started to use with my students, who in turn responded with maximum excitement so that the whole experience was keeping us exhilarated and motivated. Every week was dedicated to a different tool or platform, and learning continued at an exponential speed, collaborating with the other participants. In the Wiki "sandbox" everyone could experiment and only then upload the final productions in the portfolio area while all the tutorials, examples, conversations and productions were available (and are still there) for us, teacher-learners, to return and revise whenever needed. The whole team was supportive, engaged, dedicated, professional, and the entire learning atmosphere encouraging and rewarding.

Besides the basic introductory knowledge and support coupled with hands on application, BAW 2009 gave me the comfort and confidence that I can and that collaborative learning is an invaluable asset for today's connected teachers. This is how I started "growing techological wings". BAW2009 represented the one small step for me and a giant leap for my students: the beginning of whatever I know in teaching English with technology and what I am now.

3. TESOL EVO - current opportunities

Every year TESOL EVO offers a wide range of professional development opportunities for those eager to apply technology in their English language teaching. While some sessions focus on research, i.e. *Teachers as Designers* (2016), *Classroom-based research for professional development* (2016), most of them have a tech focus: *Flipped Learning* (2016), *Using Moodle - Bridge to Blended Learning* (2015), *DIY (Do It Yourself) Online Assessment* (2017). *ICT4ELT* (my former BAW) is the EVO session about using technology in the classroom that I would always wholeheartedly recommend, whether you are an already experienced applicant of emerging technologies in English language teaching and would like just a novel touchup, or a technology newbie, as I was.

4. When one teaches two learn - Life after BAW

It was now my turn to fulfil the BAW motto that 'sharing is caring', and I should add 'learning', because by sharing we also discover, assimilate and gain new understandings. For the next two years I became a volunteer co-coordinator of one week in BAW2010 and 2011, which encouraged me to learn even more about using online

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platforms and to consolidate my tech knowledge while sharing it with newly enrolled teachers. Little by little, I started a passion for exploring new paths of rekindling my students' motivation through technology-based English language learning. This led to the next phase of my professional development: staying connected and learning from to the right people.

5. The power of Professional learning networks

In no other field is there such an utter need for continuous updating and lifelong learning than in teaching with technology, a desideratum that can only be achieved by staying connected with the right source. Therefore, in order to energize and refresh my technology use, I gradually began to extend my professional learning network by meeting some of the specialists personally at international conferences, but also by remaining on virtual terms with others.

First, I became a member of *Webheads in action (WIA)* [13] - the group of education technologists, successive generations of BAW and ICT4ELT participants who are granted membership upon course completion, and other teachers interested in technology-related English teaching. WIA is one of the most wonderful communities of practice where questions or dilemmas in the field are promptly answered by knowledgeable experts who offer support in the most competent and effective way.

Oftentimes, finding the right resource in this era of information abundance can be challenging. Below is a brief review and recommendations of some professionals, their sites and free resources that have been reshaping and refining my tech skills:

1) **Russel Stannard** – an award winning educational technologist, is also the founder of *Teacher Training Videos* [11]. This site contains a wide collection of free, short and clear video tutorials with audio narration that take you systematically through the process of creating and using different online tools such as *Edmodo*, blogs, wikipedias, Jing (screen capture), flipped classrooms, *Prezi*, e-portfolios, Google tools, and a lot more. A free monthly newsletter is available upon e-mail subscription. Among others, I learnt from Russell how to organize and adopt *Edmodo* and about the flipped class concept.
2) **Nik Peachey** is a course designer, teacher trainer and materials writer who provides similarly excellent technology resources meant to support English language teachers and give them practical ideas for using a range of new technologies with their students while also offering a solid and sound pedagogy for their application in class. Nik's *Learning Technology Blog* [8] for English language teachers is just one such great resource that provides a topic-based presentation of the posts so that each teacher can select the topic she is interested in. In the reading skill area, for example, you can learn about using Word clouds and micro-blogging, whereas in the speaking skills section, several tools such as Mailvu, Skype for synchronous online tutoring, mixing images and animations on the mobile phone (Tellagami), are presented. Each presentation includes details about the

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platform/tool, how it can be used with students, the likes and the doubts, as well as links for further exploration.

Nik's other online resources are *Quick Shout Technology Tips* [6], a free introductory minibook entitled *Web 2.0 Tools for Teachers* and a twice monthly *Educational Technology Newsletter,* freely available upon e-mail subscription. Should you be eager to learn more, *Learning Technology News* [9] which Nik Peachey is curating is an excellent resource. One of his insights with a bearing on our topic refers to the use of backchannels in the English class : „if the students aren't going to change to suit us (and after all, why should they?) we need to start changing the nature of the classroom and how we work within it, to exploit this ability to work across these parallel planes of digital and physical reality that our students inhabit" (Peachey, 2017);

3) **Claudio Azevedo** is a passionate EFL teacher at Casa Thomas Jefferson Brasil and a must-follow for those interested in using movies in the classroom. His two blogs - *Movie Segments to assess grammar goals* [2] and *Movie segments for Warm-ups and Follow-ups* [1] - present an impressive selection of movie segments that can be downloaded and are accompanied by activity sheets for highly inspiring and fun exercises. I have used several such movies, e.g. on culture shock - *The Good Lie*, animal testing - *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, autism - *Temple Grandin – Learning Disabilities*, and clown care - *Patch Adams*. Such activities are essential in making the online learning environment, be it a blog or a platform, more captivating and definitely for boosting involvement through the impact of visual images.

Alternatively, by joining *The Digital Teacher* Facebook group [12], provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment, you will become part of a wider teaching community who share ideas about teaching with technology help members increase confidence and skills in using digital in teaching, learning and assessment.

6. From simply teaching to teaching with emerging technologies

If staying attuned to the right source is crucial for collective learning in this field in full-swing, willingness to share openly yourself, once connected, is pre-requisite for progress and mutual accomplishment. My contribution to the field so far has been the creation of adequate materials and customization of tools and e-platforms to the needs of my learners. In order to function as a source myself, I presented these contributions at international meetings or published the results, reflections and the impact these tools have had on my students' learning, so that other teachers could benefit from my experience. Some such enhanced outcomes in English learning pertain to:

- extension of use and exposure to the real language use versus the artificial, limited class use of English (pronunciation, different dialects);
- improved accuracy and fluency in speaking through the use of asynchronous tech tools, which allow students to repeat, revise and record only when satisfied with their production, which is crucial for improvement;

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- optimized writing skills (spelling, grammar, cohesion and coherence), since online tools allow frequent, customized, and meaningful feedback, both written and oral;
- creativity and other higher order thinking skills, which help students become more confident users of the language;
- student autonomy, responsibility, empowerment and a voice;
- transparent reflection, collaboration and cooperation in the online platforms, which make English language learning memorable and conducive to deeper learning, preparing students for the lifelong learning.

To conclude, John Dewey's (1944) words are more topical nowadays than ever: "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow". There may be only very few like me nowadays but for them, my advice born from experience is simple and clear: Do not hesitate! Free, online opportunities and tech tools for teachers are becoming simpler and more user-friendly. It is my conviction that this narrative will be a one-way road for your self development - the mature, less confident English language teacher's connectedness and engagement with exploring digital tools. Integrating technology in English language learning with foresight and addressing growth-oriented goals will definitely increase collaboration and make your students' learning experiences relevant, richer, more motivating and engaging. The rest is continuous individual feeding from and into your personal learning network, application, reflection, grit and passion.

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