



Title of Report: Professional Development through TESOL’s Electronic Village Online

Case Report Author: Elizabeth Hanson-Smith

Organization: [TESOL International](#)¹ –Alexandria, Virginia, USA

Date of Publication: February 2013

1. Identify and describe the Professional Development Opportunity (PDO).

The Electronic Village Online (EVO), described in this case report, is a long-standing (since 2002) project of the Computer-assisted Language Learning Interest Section (CALL IS) of the international professional association, [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages](#) (TESOL). The intention of the CALL IS was to acquaint EFL/ESL teachers in the association with the remarkable applications available on the internet and to encourage them to experiment with the new technologies available to educators free or with little charge. Sessions within the all-volunteer EVO are offered during January and February of each year. They are held completely online.

2. Describe the target audience for the PDO.

While at least one teacher of an EVO session must belong to TESOL, participation is free and open to anyone worldwide who has a computer and internet access. Participants are assumed to understand computer basics, such as opening and saving files, and how to use email and word-processors. Most participants are EFL or ESL teachers (with a few TESOL students as well), and they come from virtually every country in the world and from all the inhabited continents.

While the original target audience was other TESOL members, it became very clear in the first years of EVO offerings that a much wider audience of teachers desired free online learning, because many institutions around the world were making a commitment to technology but failing to train their teachers to take advantage of it. The EVO is seen as a conduit for new membership in TESOL, and a steady stream of EVO teachers and participants support the annual convention with their attendance and the streaming of live presentations to a global audience.

3. Describe how you recruit students for your PDO.

Because the sessions are free, the Coordination Team tries to publicize them as widely as possible on professional e-lists (e.g., the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language [IATEFL], and the Argentine Association of Computer Assisted Language Learning[ARCALL]) on social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter), and on personal websites, that is, by virtual word-of-mouth. Of late, recruitment has been amplified by the viral aspect of social media networks, for example, the EVO activities were reported in the

¹ **Terms of Use and Disclaimer:** TIRF is providing this information as a service to our constituents, and no endorsement by TIRF of the program described in this case report is intended or implied. The information is made available free of charge and may be shared, with proper attribution. If you have reprint questions, please contact the training organization identified above.



TESOL.org blog and had their own Twitter feed. Publicity about the course is also provided at the CALL interest section's land-bound Electronic Village at the TESOL Convention, where the EVO usually gives several presentations at the computer fairs, and individual workshops and presentations based on the EVO sessions are frequently offered.

4. Describe the curriculum choices made.

The EVO is perhaps unique in that the session instructors choose the topics they will offer. The Coordination Team selects sessions from among those responding to a call for proposals and provides assistance in refining the syllabus and in choosing online delivery tools appropriate to specific topics. The volunteer teachers are expected to be somewhat experienced classroom teachers, though not necessarily experienced online teachers. The volunteer nature of the EVO has the fortuitous consequence of allowing extremely timely offerings as the world of technology rapidly changes.

Originally, sessions in the EVO were eight-weeks long, but it was felt to be too exhausting for the volunteer teachers (who also underwent a six-week training period from October to November). The EVO is currently five-weeks long, with a four-week training period that helps the volunteer teachers to set up the materials and activities on a learning management system (LMS) and refine their syllabus. Because teachers increasingly come to the EVO with prior online teaching experience, preparation for the sessions is the main topic of the training period.

Online delivery is the only option, because both session teachers and participants are so far-flung and in so many different time zones. Beginning several years ago, sessions started to use more synchronous communication through scheduled text chats (e.g., in Tapped In) and voice chats (e.g., Google Voice or Skype), as well as meeting as avatars in Second Life. While a few sessions are offered completely synchronously in such chat locations, this tendency excludes some potential participants in disadvantaged time zones or because of live streaming restrictions or government censorship. Usually moderators are also far-flung, and so live chats can be scheduled several times over the course of one to two days. Live chats and webinars are usually recorded so that they can be accessed by those who cannot attend live.

5. Explain the PDO's over-arching goals and specific objectives.

The over-arching goal of the EVO is to prepare TESOL professionals to use 21st-century technologies in the teaching of English. The EVO has the secondary objective of supporting professional development by:

- (1) training the instructors offering the sessions to use online delivery systems in imaginative and motivating ways;
- (2) encouraging the development of a community of practice (CoP) for participants trying out innovative technologies; and



- (3) supporting the work of the CALL IS in extending the offerings of the annual convention beyond the land-based presentations and providing free, high-quality professional development for teachers who do not have financial support.

6. Describe the teaching and learning activities used in the PDO and what online applications are used to support these activities.

- (1) An LMS provides a homebase for email service and for archiving of files, links, and other web resources.

While the EVO instructors are free to choose almost any online venue or LMS for their sessions, the training period focuses on Yahoo Groups as a free, convenient LMS. Some instructors have used Moodle, Google Groups, or Edmodo, and still others have offered sessions wholly through wikis, regular voice chat (e.g., Skype), meetings at Second Life, and at other home university-sponsored venues. Venues (and all tools) must be cross-platform and free.

- (2) Each EVO session must have a relatively well developed syllabus, including a means of evaluation.

Because of the ease of revision, many sessions use a wiki (PBWorks is most usually selected) for the syllabus, in addition to or inside of the LMS. Yahoo Groups has a built-in polling function, as does Moodle, and the Coordination Team uses SurveyMonkey for its own needs assessment and post-session evaluations of the instructors.

- (3) A synchronous text chat site where sessions might meet at regularly scheduled synchronous times is used.

The EVO encourages instructors to use [Tapped In](#) , which provides free online offices that feature a space where teachers can meet privately for help or in small groups to plan projects, a message center, a bulletin board, access to educational resources, automatic recording and distribution of chat files, etc.

- (4) The EVO instructors also are encouraged (but not required) to offer synchronous voice/video chat.

The EVO is allowed to use the LearningTimes (LT) Webheads VRoom. The Webheads in Action for EFL/ESL teachers was one of the early offerings of the EVO, expanding and developing as an independent community of practice (CoP) under the guidance of Vance Stevens. Presentations at LT are open to participants from all sessions and are recorded so that they can be accessed later at a convenient time. These presentations help form a sense of a larger EVO learning community or CoP.

- (5) The EVO sessions are usually characterized as (a) workshops focusing on one or more types of online tools (e.g., electronic games, PowerPoint, Second Life, digital



imagery, or multimedia) or (b) discussion groups on a set of related topics (e.g., drama, or teachers as mentors).

Although each session has different goals, the Coordination Team encourages instructors to ask participants to create some enduring project (e.g., a set of lesson plans or a culminating presentation or report), which is archived in their session LMS. Often these products are produced by groups as well as individuals.

- (6) Variants of the same or similar sessions are often offered over three or more consecutive years, as instructors become more expert in their presentation skills and teams of instructors support each other in developing and expanding ideas (e.g., Drama, Digital Storytelling, Gaming or Gamification, MultiLiteracies, Teachers as Mentors, or Becoming a Webhead).
- (7) As the EVO has become larger, the Coordination Team has become somewhat smaller, varying from five to seven members, and a Mentoring Team of about six members has been added to give very specific, personalized help to instructors, particularly those offering an EVO session for the first time. Mentors also assist moderators in developing various aspects of their sessions, such as syllabus refining, LMS technical issues, and a balanced approach to proposed activities.

This change allows for personal preferences – working with the organization and structure as opposed to helping moderators hands-on – and gives Coordinators more time to spend on the training wiki while providing more help over the concentrated periods of the training from October to November and of the sessions from January to February. The Mentoring and Coordination Team members are each assigned two or more sessions to monitor closely during course development and while the sessions take place, and they report back to the Coordination Team. Successful instructors are invited to join one or the other team in order to give back to the EVO for the techniques they have learned and the help they have received.

7. Describe how the PDO helps students understand the local context in which they are studying so that they can work together with other students in the global context of your online PDO. “Local context” refers to the social, material, and cultural dimensions of students’ daily lives.

All EVO presenters are encouraged to begin with a week of personal introductions, often supplemented by short polls, and the creation of online profiles with pictures in the LMS. Participants are encouraged to respond to one another’s teaching situations and to use personal examples from their own countries in responding to each other and to instructors’ prompts. The EVO training session spends considerable discussion time pointing out how local contexts may affect technology access and how trust must be developed within the online sessions to encourage responsiveness from participants.

8. Describe how the PDO helps prepare students for the local contexts in which they will work.



Because the participants are for the most part in-service teachers, they are expected to have self-selected into the sessions of most relevance to their own situation. As mentioned earlier, they are expected to use their own teaching contexts as the basis for parts of the discussion during the PDO, and to share their lesson plans and projects with their fellow participants.

Although some sessions are very narrowly focused on a particular technology tool or application, other sessions' topics require discussion of the similarities and differences of local contexts. Participants are encouraged to try out new ideas and approaches and to seek guidance from each other collaboratively.

9. Explain the characteristics of the teacher educator(s) working in the PDO.

The moderators and Coordination and Mentoring Teams are all EFL/ESL teachers, at a wide variety of levels, from kindergarten to university. They have an equally wide range of technological savvy. They are extraordinary volunteers, who give unstintingly of their time because they are convinced of the value of technology in language education, and they enjoy exploring other cultures and pedagogical situations.

10. Describe the non-teaching support staff in the PDO.

The support staff consists of members of the Coordination and Mentoring teams, all of whom are teachers or educational technology specialists; most of them also teach full- or part-time in educational institutions.

11. Explain the learning assessments used in the PDO.

The EVO does not use assessments in a traditional sense, although many participants produce exciting projects and artifacts as part of the sessions. No certificate or institutional credit is offered. Participants may attempt to do every item on the syllabus, or none, without penalty. The Coordination Team collects an evaluation survey from moderators after the training period, and another from participants after the EVO concludes. These surveys help the team revise the training for the following year.

12. Explain the mechanisms used to evaluate the PDO.

The EVO instructors complete a pre-training needs analysis, and a post-training survey of what they feel the training accomplished. Changes to the following year's training period are made accordingly. These surveys are collected online, using [SurveyMonkey](#).

Individual session participants are asked to fill out a post-session evaluation so that the Coordination Team can determine who might be invited back to do another session. Individual session instructors may also offer a needs assessment to their participants. Occasionally a session is formed almost entirely based on a needs survey or preference assessment after participants



have signed up. (Usually such last minute content selection is only allowed for experienced moderators.) These surveys are collected online using SurveyMonkey, or sometimes through online polls taken via the LMSs.

13. Discuss the challenges involved in offering this PDO online.

Perhaps surprisingly, there always seems to be a sufficient number of instructors volunteering to offer sessions. The Coordination Team puts out a call each summer on professional lists, emphasizing the value of this experience as professional development for those committed to learning about online teaching or desiring to try out some new technology. Team members also encourage instructors of popular sessions to reapply for the following year on a topic of their choice. Most instructors are willing to contribute during the training period. Those who do not finish their syllabus by the December 1st call for participants are not allowed to offer their session. The Coordination Team has found that missing this deadline usually results in a great deal of extra work in helping volunteer instructors prepare, and often the instructors withdraw at the last minute anyway.

An ongoing problem for instructors new to online teaching is the creation of a reasonable time frame for lessons within a session. Interactions by email are often slower than expected, and participants may access the internet from vastly different time zones.

One of the most difficult concepts for moderators to understand is the difference between teaching a credit-bearing course with students and guiding teachers in an all-voluntary PDO. Moderators have to learn new carrots and sticks when no tuition is paid, no grades are given, no certificate is issued, and participants are often torn away from the session by the demands of family and job.

14. Describe the successes of the PDO and explain how they are documented.

Statistics and evaluative surveys from the sessions are collected every year and are incorporated into a report to the TESOL CALL IS. The EVO has expanded almost every year it has been offered since 2002. It now has over 2,000 participants annually from virtually every country on the planet with internet access. Many participants return year after year, eager to try new sessions or repeat old favorites, which tend to evolve as new co-moderators are added. Ties have been forged with several of TESOL's membership groups, who sponsor sessions almost every year (e.g., the Drama E-group, EFL IS, or Video and Digital Media IS), and with affiliate professional associations such as Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), IATEFL, and ARCALL. Perhaps most importantly, through the EVO, participants from antagonistic nations have found ways to work together in harmony while online. In an era of increasing technology use, the EVO meets a genuine need for beginning and expert teachers alike. It provides a high quality educational experience at no cost to participants, largely because of the volunteer spirit of the CALL IS members.