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TESOLacademic.org - our ever changing story

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This article describes the development and growth of the website WWW.TESOLacademic.org and related YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn channels. It discusses: our ethos and the need for such a research-based TESOL web initiative; types of talks available; our growth and our move beyond dissemination; going forward with Web2 and social media.

Our ethos and the need for a web-based initiative

We set up in 2008 with an original remit of knowledge dissemination. Our contributors provide free at source YouTube talks where they discuss their work. With the arrival of Web2 technologies we have moved beyond the original dissemination remit to include discussion and interaction via our YouTube channel, our closed Facebook group and our @tesolacademic Twitter feed. We are also on LinkedIn, which acts as a virtual space to exchange contact details. Whilst our original remit remains core, maintaining these social media outlets has been key to our ever changing story.

All our speakers are asked to link theory and practice in English Language Teaching (ELT) in their talks. Our basic premise behind this request lies in the notion of “Praxis” which has been defined as “the mutually constitutive roles of theory grounded in practice and practice grounded in theory. It is a way of thinking about critical work that does not dichotomise theory and practice but rather sees them as always dependent on each other” (Pennycook, 1999, p. 342). However, whilst we ask contributors to make talks relevant to teachers it entirely is up to them how they interpret this request. We do not exercise editorial control and our speakers are invariably also practising language practitioners. Many draw on data sets gathered from their EFL\ESL students. Some focus on classroom practices, whilst others

allude to education policy, for others still such links between theory and practice are far more nuanced and implicit.

The need for such a site in 2008 arose for several reasons which are related to the importance of praxis. As founder of the site, until October 2016, I worked as a TESOL lecturer for 18 years at a British university, where I supported hundreds of postgraduate (MA in TESOL and Applied Linguistics) students. Wishing to go beyond “the how” of teaching (procedures and practices) and to learn more about “the why” of teaching i.e. the rationale behind what they do, these students have often reported that “scholarship” in general and “research” in particular are too dry, too difficult to understand, at times of little relevance and often inaccessible. Many have said that it would be easier if they could listen to and watch authors. This was a key driver in setting up the website. A second driver came from negative perceptions I detected within the university sector towards educational, TESOL-based research. By setting up the site, I aimed to promote the research that many of us do as part of our professional practice. We counter dichotomised theory and practice notions, and in this sense the site has an advocacy role; it is not neutral, it advocates and celebrates teacher research. We believe such research is valuable and should be encouraged.

A further justification for the site is that it is unfortunately not uncommon to hear teachers bemoan the lack of access to scholarship once their university studies are over. Many journals come with paywalls, the published books cease to be available once access to a university library ends, and attending the conferences or special interest group events comes with a price tag. We sympathise with such views, and free dissemination of credible peer-reviewed academic scholarship was a goal. Consequently, I started this web-based initiative with video recordings from researchers and keynote global leaders in our field eight years ago.

Types of talk

Our talks are divided into the following: *Keynotes* from global leaders in the field and *Research papers* from authors whose work has been published in leading TESOL-based peer-reviewed journals. We also include *Featured Publications* with talks about TESOL teacher education texts or course books; these talks are far fewer and are promotional with a small cost to the publisher.

Decisions on who to approach to deliver talks can be a hit and miss affair. For the Keynotes we ask well-known speakers if they are able and willing to provide a dedicated 20-40 minute talk, which we then upload to our YouTube channel, with any minor edits, as required. In keeping with our academic focus we only approach speakers who undertake and publish primary academic research, which gives our site a unique research-based niche and arguably adds academic credibility to what we do. As of November 2016, we have 20 Keynote talks in our collection with our most recent contributors being: John Swales, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Rod Ellis and Stephen Krashen.

Getting copy for our Research papers talks is also somewhat haphazard. All talks are based on specific research papers published in well-regarded peer-reviewed journals, e.g. *TESOL Quarterly*, *ELT Journal*, *System*. Increasingly, the academic community is aware of our presence and whilst we still approach individuals we now get offers as well. Generally, when academics publish research they want it to go into the most highly ranked relevant journals and to be widely read, critiqued and cited. Our YouTube channel disseminates, our social media outlets further facilitate dissemination, but additionally allow for some critique and discussion. Little wonder researchers now turn to us to help them get their ideas shared. As of November 2016, we have hosted 43 talks on numerous topics.

Our growth

The website typically attracts approximately one thousand hits per month worldwide, with busy periods including September and October, when many MA TESOL students start their courses. As and when a new Keynote is posted we publicize it via our extensive social media outreach and we typically see a surge in traffic following this. A mention of the site by a speaker at a well-attended conference session invariably leads to an increase in interest as well.

Our talks were originally uploaded as video (.wmv) files to the website, but in 2013 everything was transferred to YouTube, embracing Web2 and allowing opportunities for greater interaction through social media. This means that our YouTube data do not necessarily reflect how widely viewed many pre-2013 talks really were, as our early contributors are now on YouTube but they were watched by many as .wmv files when

originally posted. Nevertheless our YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn statistics provide ample evidence of interest in TESOL-based research. For the 12 month period October 2015 to October 2016 we received 38,432 YouTube views. As of November 25th 2016 our Facebook group comprised 11,124 members; our Twitter feed had 2,648 followers; and our LinkedIn account recorded 1,691 connections. We have clearly established a unique niche and our statistics point to year on year growth.

Beyond dissemination

Our growth took a significant step forward in 2013 when we moved to being Web2-based. Firstly, as mentioned above, all talks were transferred to YouTube, which provides easy viewing on a range of devices, and for our 1,648 channel subscribers it allows them to add comments and share with others, as well as to get alerts when a new talk is posted. Secondly, we developed a social media presence which allowed for more discussion and interaction.

We have also become smart phone users, shifting from being digital visitors to digital residents (White and Cornu, 2011). Personally, my access to TESOL-based research is now all in my pocket and available 24/7. Twitter has become my filter with Tweets to # tags such as #TESOL, allowing for networking and sharing of talks on an unprecedented scale, some of which allow for ongoing live conversations e.g. during a conference (#IATEFL), or at a weekly online meetings (#ELTchat). Our closed Facebook group has grown bigger, and our growth overall has soared as TESOLacademic has begun building networks through our social media channels, while also engaging in other outlets such as blog sites and webinars.

Embracing social media has also resulted in a broadening of our remit in that we no longer restrict ourselves to discussion of content from our own YouTube talks, although, we do direct people to our content. If, for example, #ELTchat were discussing task-based teaching and learning, we would link to the Keynote by Rod Ellis; if the ReSIG were hosting a webinar on action research we would draw attention, via the chat stream, to our Keynote by Anne Burns. A feature of broadening of our remit is that it has enabled me to take a stance on professional issues. Recently, for example, our Tweets have been part of an ever growing body that challenges native-speakerism in TESOL, on more than one occasion we have questioned the commodification of education with its neoliberal ideology and our stance on what Brexit meant for language education was emphatic. In short, our social media outreach

provides unprecedented opportunities for dissemination, but also allows for practitioners and researchers to actively engage with our talks, and to post and discuss relevant material beyond the resources that we provide and this we see is key to going forward.

Going forward

Finally, let us briefly consider ongoing initiatives with particular reference to TESOL-based research. We have recently extended our remit to actively support new researchers. To do this we offer to Tweet links to online surveys that MA or PhD students might be using as part of their data collection. We also include such links on our Facebook group page, where there are opportunities to post comments and discuss. This is a free service; all we ask in return is that our role in the data gathering process is acknowledged.

In 2008, our website encompassed everything that we did and teachers interested in research simply accessed the talks. Today many do this via free subscription to the YouTube channel, Twitter and Facebook links. These sources provide opportunities for interaction, and encouraging such interaction is a new challenge going forward. Accordingly, we have added a task sheet on our homepage which encourages users to work through some of the keynotes and to critique content via our social media outlets. Interestingly, when we started in 2008, it was never envisaged that our talks would be used as source material in academic discourse, but there is some indication that this is now happening.

Setting up the site and watching it evolve has been extremely rewarding. It has also been a labour of love, although we did generate some income from sponsors in our early years which was spent on purchasing domain names and web hosting fees. We have been approached by several companies to explicitly promote products and services with banners on our homepage, but to date we have resisted such overtures which we feel run counter to our academic research-based ethos. As we move forward, however, with ever increasing content and managing social media outlets, it has become clear that we need to explore ways of generating income and we have recently begun to do this with sponsored Tweets and Facebook posts.

Continuing professional development and ways of accessing and interacting with research are in a state of flux. Digital literacy skills “needed to operate efficiently, effectively and

appropriately in an online environment” (Jarvis, 2014, p.29) are as significant for teachers and researchers as they are for our students. Whereas our remit was once exclusively about disseminating research through the website and encouraging a linking of theory and practice in TESOL via a Web1-based transmission, today this has changed. In addressing our basic remit we have gathered a massive following and become a significant part of a digitally connected professional discourse community who share and discuss a wide range of issues. Join us on our journey.

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Biodata:

Huw has 34 years of experience in language education. He has published widely and delivered many plenary talks. He has recently taken early retirement as a Senior Lecturer, but his work continues with a wider variety of organisations both within and beyond academic institutions. For more information see

<http://www.tesolacademic.org/huwjarviseditor.htm>

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