



ESL MiniConference

Ten Years Later We Still Remember The NYSTESOL Conference in October 2001

Mid
Autumn 2011

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This article originally appeared in the first edition of a pilot version of the ESL MiniConference in November of 2001. Readers can see the original page at <http://www.eslminiconf.net/november/story3.html>.

The 31st annual convention of the New York State Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (NYS TESOL) was held October 19-21, 2001, in Rye Brook, New York.

Whether examining new ESL materials while sipping coffee provided by McGraw-Hill, celebrating at the opening night reception and Saturday's President's ball, or standing outside enjoying the Autumn splendor of the woods that surround the Rye Town Hilton, this year's 600+ conference-goers showed a strong interest in exploring the deeper issues facing our profession, in the somber aftermath of September 11th's World Trade Center, Pentagon and Pennsylvania airplane crashes, the more recent anthrax scares and the ongoing U.S. military strikes on Afghanistan.

The following were just several of the many events and presentations at this year's NYS TESOL convention in Rye Brook.

One of the main highlights of the weekend was a two-day "Cyberspace Technology Institute," with demos and workshops on everything from Longman.com, Longman's new free online companion to materials like Focus on Grammar and the famous Azar grammar books, to ways of building your own online courses using Blackboard.com and Dreamweaver.

In a Saturday morning Cyberspace session titled "Online vs. Face-to-Face Courses," Jennifer Maden, of Pace University, and Tommy McDonell, of ESL Etc., discussed the key issues to consider when designing and delivering pure-play and hybrid courses. McDonell, who designed a course for Pace University using the Blackboard.com interface, reminded participants that certain traditional features of the teaching and learning

relationship--such as the need for instructor feedback--must not be ignored in an online course. Indeed, an online format allows a teacher to individualize instruction by providing multiple F.A.Q.-style feedback loops, to filter student input and queries so that the teacher only has to reply directly to new and unique concerns.

Throughout the weekend, there was an undercurrent of discussions about the tragic events of September 11th, and their impact on many ESI students and ESL classrooms. The post-WTC socio-political environment with renewed patriotism, has increased interest in ESL textbooks which focus on American history and citizenship. One publisher at the NYS TESOL convention in Rye Brook was Book Lab, a family business based in New York City. Their "The History of the United States" (by Robert J. Field) offers "a complete study of the United States from discovery through the first year of the current George W. Bush administration," according to Suzanne Leon, the daughter of Book Lab publisher Maury Leon. "One of the keys to the success of our books," she explained, "is that we include thoughtful comprehension questions after each reading section."

Pro Lingua Associates, of Brattleboro, Vermont, was also promoting patriotic materials, particularly "Celebrating American Heroes" (by Anne Siebert), which Pro Lingua president Andy Burrows demo'd on Saturday afternoon. "In the wake of September 11th," said Burrows at the start of his presentation, "words like 'tragedy' and 'hero' are being re-evaluated." In the face of real tragedies and heroic actions, he explained, "all of us are inclined to scale back our use of these terms, which are no longer trivial."

Burrows said that Pro Lingua is proud of the Anne Siebert book of plays whose heroes "include the usual icons--Washington and Lincoln--as well as lesser known heroes such as Sacagawea and Jonas Salk." He led the audience through "Crossing the Continent to the Pacific," a play about Sacagawea's key role in the success of that journey. Each play in this book has several main characters, a narrator and, for reticent speakers, a Greek-style chorus, allowing everyone in the class to participate. After the Sacagawea play, Burrows introduced another, "The Bravest Man in Baseball," about Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier. Audience participants stood up while reciting their parts, and were able to get a sense for the infectious enthusiasm and interest that drama can generate in an ESL classroom.

"Celebrating American Heroes," and an accompanying photocopyable teacher's book of exercises and background material, are unique for their portrayal of a diverse array of individuals whose heroism is sometimes left out of traditional American history books. In addition to those mentioned above, there are plays about: Betsy Ross, Dolley Madison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thomas Alva Edison, John Muir, Robert Frost, Cesar Chavez, Astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins, and Jaime Escalante.

In the subdued atmosphere that prevailed at this year's NYS TESOL convention in Rye Brook, these were some of the more poignant moments. The fire-orange, red and yellow leaves in the woodlands surrounding Rye may have offered a reassuring signal that the cycle of nature continues unabated, even in the face of horrible experiences such as those of us in New York and America have recently seen. There is a certain predictability to the change of seasons, and participants in the weekend at the Rye Town Hilton likely returned home with steadier nerves and a clearer shared vision of the future of our chosen vocation.

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2011 ESL MiniConference Online



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