



Technology as an enabler

Interview with John Eyles

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Steven Herder

Steven Herder: *We are very excited to have you as a plenary speaker at JALT2012. Can you give us a little background information about yourself and some of the experiences that have influenced your life?*

John Eyles: Sure, I was born in the UK and educated there. I went to a Rudolph Steiner school from age 3 until about 17. Then I took a year off and went to India. You ask about influences... . One day, I was walking down the street in Delhi and in the gutter there was this strange shape, and as I got closer I saw it was a human form—a person died in the gutter right across from the hospital. It struck me then, the inequality that there is in the world.

I went back to the UK and did four years of study. My focus was on photography and sculpture. After I graduated, I met a fashion designer and we decided to travel to Japan. It was originally going to be for six weeks. This stretched to six years.

SH: *How has Japan, in particular, influenced you?*

JE: I realized at some point that one way that Japan influenced me was from my teaching there. We would bring global issues into the classroom such as global warming or acid rain, but while we felt we were doing something positive in bringing these ideas into the classroom, the students were leaving feeling less empowered than when they arrived. And from that, the whole concept of needing to provide the

students with a pathway of influence and a pathway of action came into being.

SH: *Can you elaborate on what you mean by students feeling less empowered?*

JE: Sure—we would expose them to a text or listening about these huge issues and then they would leave with the weight of the world on their shoulders. They were suddenly exposed to this, the heaviness of all of it, and didn't know what to do. So, my friend, Graham, started doing project work with a high school in Kamakura and the Shiseido cosmetics factory, and put together what we called an “English for sustainability” curriculum. It looked at the main pillars of sustainability, which are economy, society, and environment. It takes the students on a collaborative journey with an organization to do project work, where the students go in and kind of do an environmental audit of the organization. Then, in English, they advise the company as to how they can make more money by doing more with less, and by being more sustainable in their business practices.

SH: *So, do you actually see yourself more as a teacher or more as a businessman?*

JE: Well, whenever I come into New Zealand, or go into another country, I have to fill out the immigration form and I still write teacher as my occupation. I mean, fundamentally, I see myself first as an artist, then the teacher, and then a businessman. But, my great passion is education, and I try to bring in the creative world of art, design, and new media, and also the business side. Of course, governments mostly pay for education, and there is a strong idea that education should be free, but realistically it's also a business and you are a teacher and you expect to get paid. So, there is a kind of business model that underlies education.

SH: *I really like that self-description of artist, educator, and businessman.... In reading about you online, one skill that came up over and over again on your LinkedIn page was that people love working with you. How important is connecting well with people or having people skills?*

JE: I think the people skills set is important. I loved hitchhiking when I was a kid. I started hitchhiking around Europe when I was 15. Being on the open road, jumping into a car, not knowing quite where you might end up or who you were going to sit with, it fascinated me how people would open up and share intimate aspects of their lives over a couple of hours and then you would never see them again. That ability to get on with people, I think I get on with most people, was always meaningful for me.

Nobody does anything that doesn't make sense to them; it often doesn't make sense to other people, but for them it always makes sense. So, I'm always very respectful of that. And as for connecting with people, I'm just curious, really curious to know their ideas and perspective on the world. We are all different and that's the magic of the world. In terms of work, I like things to be fun. If something's not fun, then, life's a bit short and why would we be doing it? Even quite serious things, there's always the opportunity to be playful. I think play is underrated. In terms of creativity, play is absolutely vital.

SH: *Another thing that many people highlight is your ability to see the big picture. Have you always had that skill?*

JE: I noticed early on that I have a visual mind. I perceive things very strongly in pictures and I can rotate those pictures. I also have the capacity to hold a number of different elements, somewhat like a jigsaw, dreaming tendency. And, it's similar in my career and my own skills set as well. It kind of happened in pieces like a jigsaw puzzle. Now that I look at it, my career has quite a strong picture on the lid of the jigsaw box, but when I started there was no picture on the lid and I've drawn a number of different strands together. But that big picture thinking began early on, probably from age eight or nine....

SH: *So, looking at the big picture, how do you see technology at present as it relates to the work you are*

currently doing or to the state of education in general?

JE: Okay, if I stand back, and think about why I'm motivated in the ESL area, it's very much from a humanity perspective. Within the current state of the world we have a lot of issues and a lot of problems. It's the context we all live in and we have to deal with. So, when I think about teaching language students in a classroom, we talk verbs, vocabulary and all of that structural stuff, but what actually are they learning language for? What's the bigger need? What does the world require of language teachers at this time?

As I see it, these global problems that exist are often shared, and so the first step to solving these problems is having a common language where we can articulate what the problems are, identify those that are the same, and build mutual respect, understanding, and trust. Then, work together to find solutions. And that need has never been greater. Right or wrong, English has become the de facto language in the world.

So, through the medium of English, you are teaching all sorts of other things: leadership skills, collaboration skills, and all of that good stuff. And where I see it going is that it's all becoming about co-creation, collaboration, and conversation. The technology is simply there as support, and it has become an enabler in itself. You know, they say, "knowledge is in the networks and the content is in the conversations". And I see, increasingly, that technology is allowing us to speed up our adaptive learning with portable devices.

So the learner and the knowledge are now fluid, so you can be in a situation where you can download inspiration or instruction, or open up a channel to have a live video feed, and bring in a mentor or guide. Wherever you are, pretty much in the whole world, you have that connectedness.

SH: *Well, this naturally brings us into the whole IT technology side of the interview. What projects are you investing your time in these days?*

JE: One is with the BBC, called BBC Janala in Bangladesh. This is a multi-screen, multi-medium English language program using TV

broadcasts with TV soap operas and quiz shows as springboards to learning. This is tied into a mobile application as well as an online website that can be accessed by computers or by mobile phones. It's very much a kind of mass adoption program aiming for the non-formal sector. It's actually targeted at some of the poorest in Bangladesh.

Another project is working for Urban Planet Mobile, an American outfit, which as the title suggests focuses on mobile learning. The first product that we launched was in Indonesia, using simple cell phones (not smart phones) to deliver learning in very bite-size pieces through ring tones. Ring tones are usually used for music, but what we've done is to stretch the ring tone function to three minutes of audio, and created a huge library of phrases and idioms with translation in 12 languages. I'm on the advisory board as a strategic advisor (where I am wearing my business cap), but I'm also down in the engine room working on curriculum development. NTT distributes some of our smartphone programs here in Japan.

And yet another project I'm working on is an artificial intelligence (AI) writing program, which takes students' essays and grades them.

SH: *Wow. You're a busy guy. I think a number of teachers in Japan can relate to the idea of being involved in a number of projects within their classrooms, their schools, and within JALT or their communities. It has been so invigorating talking with you and I hope everyone will attend your plenary address and realize how technology can be such an enabler for learning. Thank you, John.*

John Eyles is currently Visiting Fellow at AUT University, Chair of the EON Foundation, and Managing Director of an Education Consulting Company. He has been a pioneer of technology-enabled learning for the past 15 years. Most recently he is working on projects for the BBC and Urban Planet Mobile that use mo-



bile phones to teach English. Prior to this he was Head of Research and Alliances at Telecom New Zealand—looking three to five years into the future at opportunities and threats for the business, a Senior Lecturer at Auckland University of Technology, and CEO of English-To-Go Limited, which, in association with Reuters news, ran the world's largest lesson in 2001. He has led one of New Zealand's largest English language schools, worked in Europe, the Middle East, and South East Asia, and spent six years in Japan as a university lecturer and consultant to the Japanese government. Visit <www.johneyles.info>.

Speakers at JALT2012

This year's conference brings to Japan five respected plenary speakers from five distinct fields which means that whatever your area of interest, there is something for you. On top of this, there are eight featured speakers and a specially invited Asian Scholar.

Even a brief look at the biographies of the plenary speakers suggests that among them, they have worked in, taught in, lived in, or been to a large percentage of all the countries in the world.

Jeannette Littlemore

... who will give the opening plenary on Saturday morning, is an expert on the use of metaphor and figurative language by second language learners. She comes to JALT2012 from her UK base, the University of Birmingham, having in the past also taught in Belgium, Spain, and Japan. As a Reader in Applied Linguistics and a lecturer on Birmingham's MA TEFL/TESL and Applied Linguistics programmes, Jeannette will be known to many Japan-based Masters students as a knowledgeable speaker whose talks feature the impressive quality of being highly practical but with a solid grounding in theory.



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