

A Whole New Look: 2020 WAESOL Annual Conference

by Naomi Hagen

The annual WAESOL conference had a whole new look this past fall with a full online presence and some exciting new features. In the face of a global pandemic, state-wide regulations, school closures, online learning, and social distancing, the WAESOL board knew it had to do something different to meet the needs of its membership and annual conference attendees as well as the students they serve. Under the leadership of our Executive Director Joan Johnston Nelson and our 2020 WAESOL President Martha Savage, and with the support of a skilled and willing WAESOL board, we decided to host our conference entirely online in October of 2020.

The conference kicked off with a virtual pre-conference on Friday, October 23, with a talented line-up of skilled speakers on topics including Zooming Your Way to Classroom Interaction, Supporting Adult ESL Students with Disabilities: Insights from the Community College Classroom, and Tech with a Purpose: Fostering Virtual Student-Centered Classes. The pre-conference included separate virtual rooms for each of the invited speakers hosted by one of our WAESOL Board members. In addition, and for the first time ever, we added a keynote speaker on Friday evening. To officially launch the 2020 WAESOL Online Conference, Ben Krauss, Director of Equity and Inclusion at Gonzaga Prep, both inspired and challenged the audience with a close examination of Intercultural Competency and Implicit Bias: How Individuals and Organizations Can Improve.

The conference continued on Saturday, October 24 and included two keynote speakers: The morning keynote was Sarah Lynn of Pearson ELT who discussed Transforming our Best Practices for Remote Instruction, and the afternoon speaker was Ester deJong, Director of the School of Teaching and Learning at University of Florida, COE, who addressed (Re-)Envisioning TESOL through Equity. From 8 AM – 5 PM, there were 5 virtual conference rooms with sessions by a wide variety of speakers from across the nation and representing a number of educational institutions including universities, community colleges, and K-12 programs. And to ensure a sense of camaraderie and human contact, we added a virtual gathering place for attendees to meet in breakout rooms to check in, brainstorm, and network with friends and

colleagues in the field. In total, we had 3 keynote speakers, 44 sessions, and 198 registrants, with video-taped sessions available to registrants after the conference from October 30 – December 12.

The 2020 WAESOL Board President, Martha Savage, expressed it this way: “There is a saying that sometimes the result is more than the sum of the parts. In the example of the 2020 WAESOL conference, this was exceedingly true, although in this case the parts were amazing. I was deeply humbled and grateful for the professionalism of everyone who contributed to this conference.” The flexibility and creativity on the part of each individual involved in the conference was commendable. Attendees were willing to navigate yet another online platform on a Saturday, presenters found ways to connect virtually with both the content and their audience, board members gave of their time and heart for days to troubleshoot and set the conference on the right path, publishers found ways to connect, keynotes were excited about sharing current strategies to make our classes equitable and engaging, and our Executive Director’s due diligence to navigate and organize the various platforms and the Executive Assistant’s willingness to operate a live Q and A room for any issues involving registration or platform navigation made the day feel seamless. In a year of great challenges, the 2020 WAESOL Online Conference was one of our greatest successes, and we are grateful to our leadership, our board, our membership, and our many friends for their support in making 2020’s conference one of our best.

