5.1. Athabasca Team's Japanese site-visit Report

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Report to: Dr. Dominique Abrioux, President: Athabasca University (AU);
Prof. Toshio Kobayashi, and Prof. Hideaki Takahashi,
National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME, Japan)

From: Dr. Jon Baggaley & Dr. Pat Fahy, Centre for Distance Education (AU)

Subject: Visit by Baggaley & Fahy to Japan (16-22 February/2000)

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An exchange visit between Japan and Canada was arranged to explore the possibilities for joint research between NIME (Chiba) and Athabasca (Alberta). In September-October/1999, NIME faculty members visited distance education (DE) institutions across Canada in an itinerary arranged by AU's Centre for Distance Education (CDE). In February/2000, the two CDE faculty members, Drs. Baggaley and Fahy, visited educational media and research organizations in Japan, with their NIME faculty colleagues, Drs. Kobayashi and Takahashi. This report contains the AU members' impressions of their Japanese tour, and ideas generated by it for future collaboration between the two institutions.

ORGANISATIONS AND EVENTS

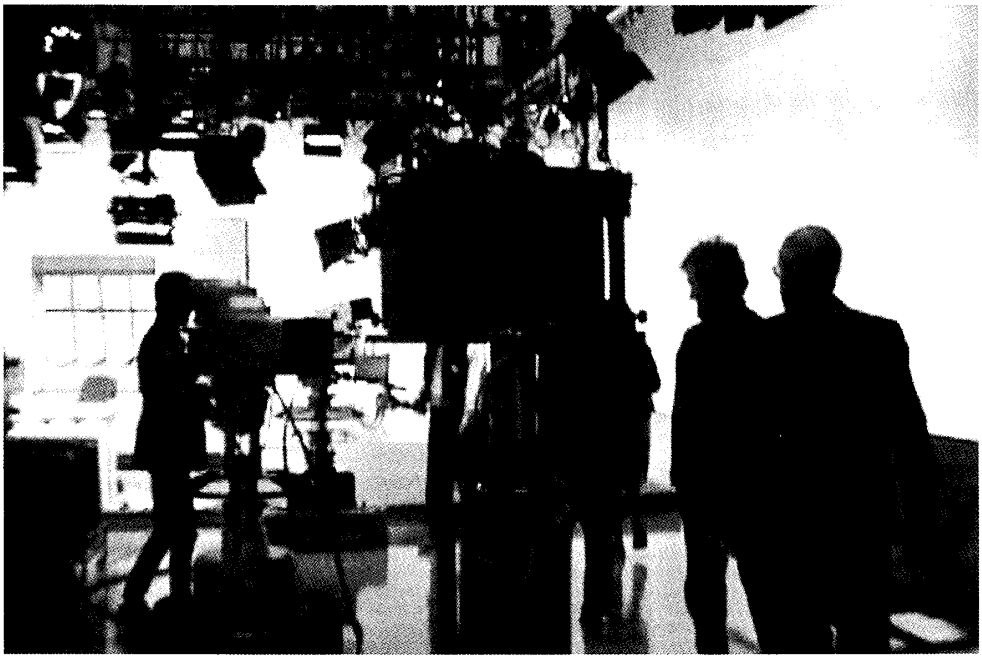

Figure 1. NIME Facility Tour

• The *National Institute of Multimedia Education*, and University of the Air (Chiba). As host of the visit, NIME arranged discussions with its Director-General, Dr. Sakamoto, and with members of its research staff. Drs. Sakamoto and Baggaley have known one another for twenty years, and have seen the educational television industry evolve from a closed-circuit, campus-based initiative to a major satellite-based medium for distance education. The University of the Air is a state-of-the-art facility with the wide reach and community resource base that are essential to educational television's success. Via its partnership with NIME, the University has unique opportunities for research and evaluation, with a level of support that is lacking in many North American DE enterprises. NIME itself has developed a state-of-art interactive satellite system (SCS), and has a refreshing orientation towards social science as well as engineering research, with project results that offer insights to educational broadcasters internationally.

• The *Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute International* (ATR) is located in Japan's major centre for scientific research, Kansai Science City. The visit to ATR covered its eight major laboratories, and demonstrated the future of media convergence, and the potential for applications of new media in distance education. The Institute attracts international researchers to work on applied research with the benefit of exceptional technical facilities. Their current work ranges from imaginative uses of CD-ROM in language teaching, to futuristic applications of 3-D virtual environments.

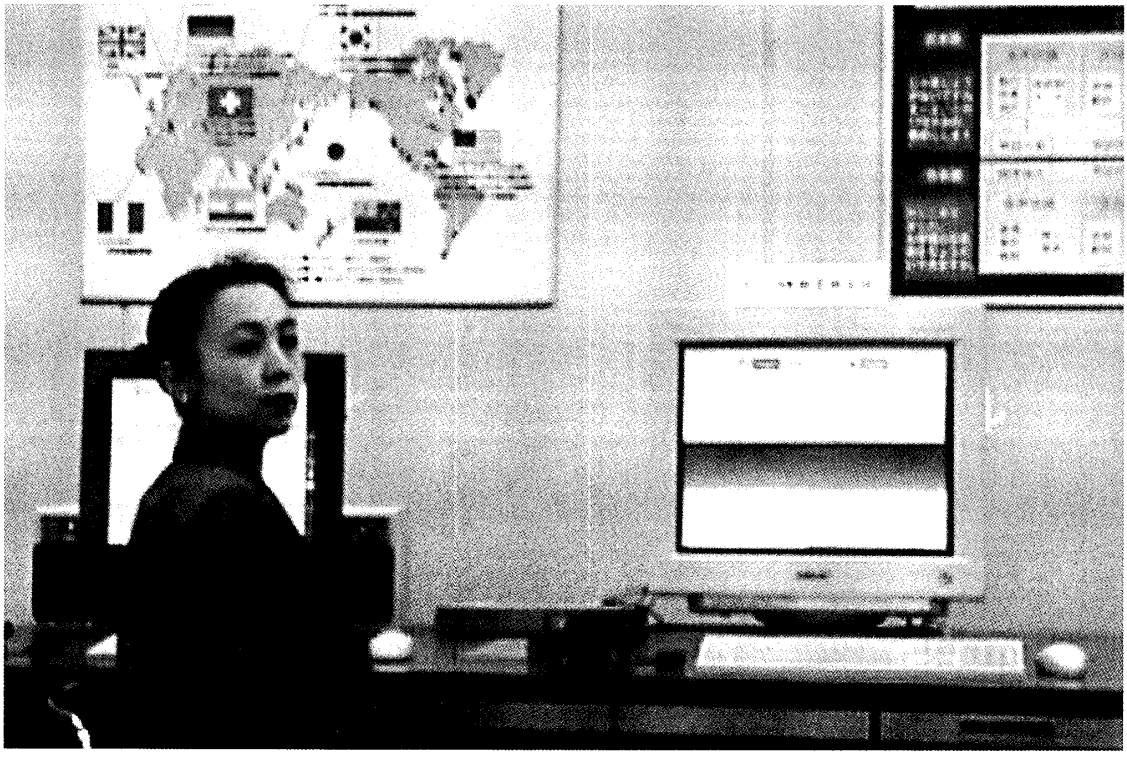

Figure 2. Visit to ATR Language Lab

• The *Nara Institute of Science & Technology* (NAIST) is a set of nine graduate schools encompassing the engineering and biological sciences, connected by the world's fastest campus network system, MANDARA. NAIST's research in the information sciences covers many area of relevance to distance education, including the design of Internet database systems, and the perception and processing of multimedia elements. The Institute has major distributed learning links with universities in Japan and N. America (the WIDE Project)

Figure 3. A Workshop at NAIST

• *Tsukuba University* is a campus-based institution active in educational communications teaching and research. The itinerary contained two opportunities to discuss mutual interests with the University's faculty and graduate school members:

1. a teleconference link between Tsukuba and NIME, in which Drs. Baggaley and Fahy described approaches to distance education at Athabasca University and other Canadian institutions; and
2. a subsequent visit to the campus which included discussions with senior administrators, faculty, and graduate students.

Figure 4. Videoconference via SCS at Tsukuba

- Sateline is a satellite-based educational television system providing 700 secondary education and training programs across Japan. The itinerary included a visit to its state-of-art classroom and videoconference facilities in Tokyo. The 300,000 students receive synchronous instruction via one-way video, with production values ranging from full broadcast standard to the more simple head-and-shoulders classroom style.

- An *international internet-based seminar*. During their visit to NIME, the AU visitors demonstrated some of the 'synchronous' communication methods they use in delivering AU's graduate programmes in distance education. Using the 'FireTalk' internet audio software, they arranged an hour-long 'internet audio' discussion joined by 15 of their students in Canada, the US, Hawaii, and Korea. The seminar was lead jointly by the AU visitors and NIME faculty, and featured uses of simultaneous audio, text-chat, instant polling and feedback, and web-site development created specifically for the occasion.

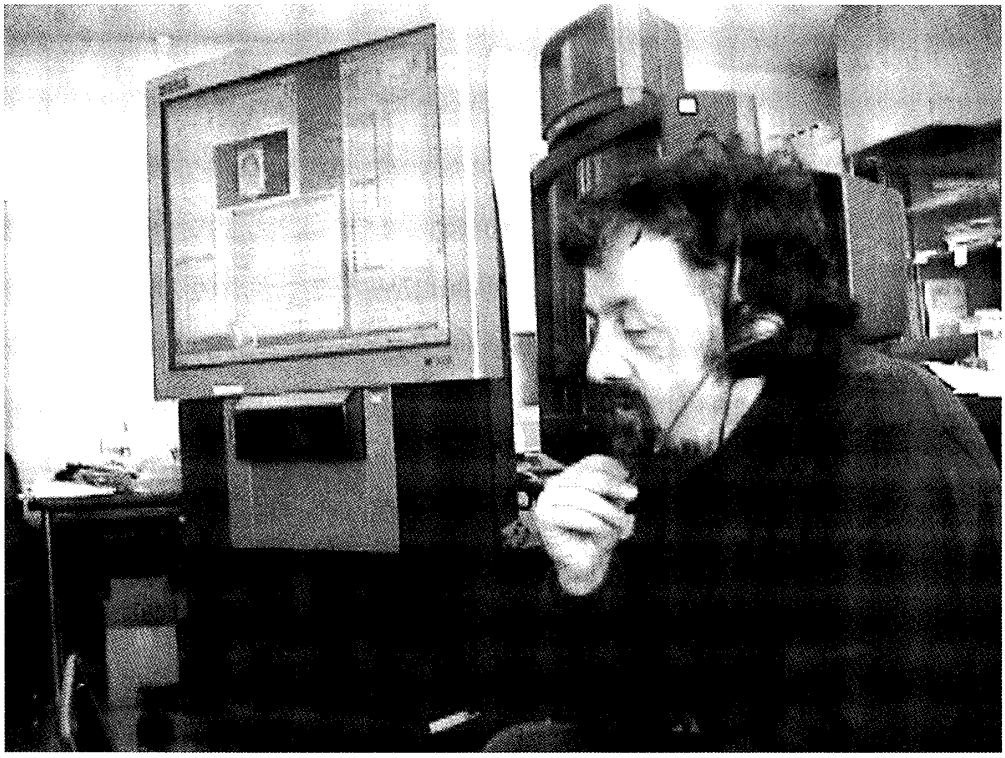

Figure 5. Net-meeting via FireTalk

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS FOR COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

The tour demonstrated the major difference between media-based education in Japan and Canada. Whereas Japan is an international leader in synchronous educational delivery, Canada (largely owing to its spread across five time zones) has developed specializations in asynchronous delivery. The AU visitors were particularly impressed by the wide reach of the satellite-based systems of NIME, the University of the Air, and Sateline; and by the enthusiasm for distance education demonstrated by the faculty and graduate students working in the campus-based University of Tsukuba.

The visit to Sateline illustrated a major difference between Japanese and Canadian styles of distance education: namely, the non-interactive nature of Japan's synchronous broadcast approach, compared with the emphasis of the Canadian approach on two-way communication. Clearly the large numbers of students involved in Japan's synchronous satellite-TV approach make interaction difficult. In theory, however, the synchronous mode offers more possibilities for interaction than the asynchronous mode. A future research possibility might be to examine the effects of combining approaches to teacher-student interaction associated with the two modes.

In general, the visit underlined the crucial need for inter-institutional links between social science and engineering specialists in educational communications, and the steps being taken by Japanese organizations to create these links. Only by such collaboration will the spectacular, futuristic technologies under development at institutes such as NIME, NAIST and ATR be effectively harnessed for educational delivery.

The visitors also noted that DE specialists in Japan tend to lack the understanding and support of the more traditional educators in their institutions - a problem shared by distance educators internationally. The visit prompted ideas for continued collaboration between AU and NIME, that may help to reinforce the DE movement in both countries:

- Teaching initiatives (e.g. Internet-based seminars) aimed at enhancing and promoting distance education internationally. For instance, the 'FireTalk' seminar has lead to ongoing 'Internet audio' links between the visitors, and their contacts at NIME and Tsukuba; and the AU visitors will be pleased to maintain these links.

- Research initiatives aimed at developing new methods of DE delivery, by building on the different pedagogical specializations of the two nations. As the traditional media converge upon the Internet, numerous opportunities will arise for comparing the effectiveness of synchronous and asynchronous communication approaches, and for identifying ways to combine them on different media platforms. For example, the use of broadcast methods in web-based, 'streaming media' delivery could be investigated; and cultural differences in teaching style could be examined via the analysis of conference participation styles and moderation techniques.

The Athabasca visitors will be pleased to maintain and develop the links and ideas that their visit to Japan has generated. We thank our NIME hosts, and in particular Drs. Kobayashi and Takahashi, for organising such a stimulating itinerary for us; and we look forward to further collaboration between our two institutions.

Respectfully submitted,

J.P. Baggaley, Ph.D.; and P. Fahy, Ph.D.