
Editorial

History can be characterised as the overestimation of what can be accomplished immediately and the underestimation of long term consequences. (Strassman, 1984)

My first encounter with computer-based learning was in 1975 when I trialled packages produced by the Chelsea Science Simulation Project while on teaching practice. Access to the minicomputer running the packages was via modem and teletype, and response times were measured in minutes rather than seconds. Three of the four packages were little more than computer-based lookup tables but the fourth, despite the severe limitations of the technology, inspired me to take computers seriously as tools for learning. The application was a simulation of crossing different strains of fruit fly, a technique beloved of geneticists but impractical for school biology. I was impressed by the use of a computer to achieve something highly educational that was impractical by any other means.

There have been many significant advances in computing since 1975: the advent of the eight-bit microcomputer, hypertext, graphical user interfaces, object technology, CD-ROMs, the Internet and the World Wide Web. Prophets of what the latest technological developments will achieve for education have been many, and by and large false. Progress in the short term has appeared painfully slow. Pioneers have felt hurt by the failure of their colleagues to embrace the computer-based learning materials they have worked so hard to perfect, but perhaps they failed to recognize the extent to which they had embedded their own idiosyncratic approach to teaching into their products.

The Association for Learning Technology was founded by a group who believed that the long-term consequences of technology applied to education would be profound. They were keen to create a forum for learning technology practitioners as a way of identifying and sharing good practice. The annual ALT conference has reflected a growing maturity among both technologists and teachers as they gain insight through shared experiences.

The theme of the fifth ALT conference, *Lifelong learning on a connected planet*, was a challenge to delegates to think through the implications for education of a connected planet; one where all points on the global Internet are equally accessible to all other points.

Five years ago the concept of the online course did not exist. Now it is coming to be seen as *the* growth sector for tertiary education. Many new online courses are conventional courses that have been 'ported' to the new medium. If it is done well the pedagogic qualities that made it a sound conventional course will also benefit the online version, but many inappropriate assumptions will also have been carried over. To be as good as, or better than, an equivalent conventional course, an online course needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. The course needs to integrate student interactions with the materials, with tutors and with fellow students, *and* the learning environment has to be flexible enough to recognize and support a diversity of student needs. The same fundamental pedagogic principles apply to all types of course but the peculiar strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as a delivery and support medium require a wholesale reassessment of teaching methods.

A consensus on effective online education has yet to emerge. In this journal you will find documented a rich vein of innovation, experimentation and research. There is imagination aplenty. Not all approaches will prove to be successful but all are helping to develop a better understanding of how to use technology to create more and better educational opportunities for more people.

Reference

Strassman, P. (1984), *Information Payoff*, Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.

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Learning technology is inherently eclectic. Professionals from many areas are involved: managers, courseware developers, teachers in universities and schools, trainers in industry, and, of course, learners. The range of the papers presented at ALT-C98 bears witness to this diversity, and to the way in which the ALT membership represents the UK learning technology constituency. Likewise the papers in this special issue reflect the diversity of this constituency, with papers on the management and implementation of learning technology, discussions of the future role and impact of learning technology and reports of research studies. I think it is essential that ALT-J continues to publish high-quality papers in these areas. The founding editor, Gabriel Jacobs, has established an excellent foundation for developing the journal's profile in all three areas. With Gráinne Conole's help I look forward to working with you to continue this development.

David Squires