
Editorial

Time for a change

If a new appointment can be made before the next issue of *ALT-J*, this will be my final offering as Editor, which position I have held since the journal was born, with *ALT*, in 1993.

Were I to follow custom and practice in the matter, I would take this singular opportunity to do a sentimental 'retrospective', highlighting milestones in the development of technology-aided teaching and learning over the six years of my editorship, and, in so doing, showing in the best possible light the extent to which the aims of *ALT* have been achieved. I fear that such an approach would lead to irrefutable platitudes, and those who have read my editorials over the years (how few are they?) will be aware that I have never shunned controversy – indeed, I have been accused on several occasions of wilful and unjustified provocation. Unsubstantiated as this accusation is, I would not wish my last editorial to break with its tradition. In this final comment as Editor, therefore, I shall express a certain frustration.

Graham Chesters, Jonathan Darby and I met in Oxford in 1992 and decided to found *ALT*. We met again a little later in York with (as I remember – apologies for any omissions) Neil Morgan and Graham Walker of BT, Peter Goodyear, Nick Hammond, Mike Kibby and Ray McAleese, in order to determine how we might proceed. Had any of us at that meeting been asked where learning technology would be six years hence, I suspect that the prevailing prediction would have been one of an extensive take-up within higher education. The Internet as we know it today did not exist, nor were CD-ROM drives or tens of Megabytes of RAM the norm, but digital technology was progressing with such rapidity that some of us could almost contemplate a HAL, the super-computer in the 1960s film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, up and running in our universities before the new millennium. How would universities be able to resist the marvels which learning technology would soon be able to deliver, particularly in view of the massification of higher education combined with little or no prospect of significant increases in teaching staff?

The reality is that take-up has not been as widespread as we imagined it would be – not by a long way – and neither the hardware nor the courseware are fully able to match user-

expectations. Why? The two facts are self-evidently closely linked, but for the sake of clarity I will deal with them separately.

Those who met in York were not naïve. They were well aware of the attitudes, within most universities, of both senior management (concerns about cost-effectiveness, general caution) and of many academics (resistance to change, not-invented-here syndrome). That is precisely why we thought it such a good idea to create an association for the promotion of learning technology, one of whose principal, if formally unstated, aims would be to help bring about a modification of those attitudes. The plain truth is that we underestimated the strength of the anxieties and the depth of the entrenchment, as well as the future difficulty of producing bullet-proof and well-designed educational software which did not force the tail to wag the dog. Not that ALJ has failed to achieve anything (on the contrary), or that, with or without ALJ's impetus, attitudes have not budged; but it is evident that learning technology, in most places of higher education (with some notable exceptions), is still perceived as an add-on, and often a minor one at that, rather than an integral part of teaching and learning, and that even includes the use of the ubiquitous World-Wide Web.

The failure of technology to meet user-expectations is something we might have foreseen if forecasting demand and development in consumer electronics were not so problematic. Computer technology has forged ahead in the last six years, but so have expectations about what it ought to be capable of. The computer industry is peculiar, perhaps unique, in that expectations have preceded developments, unlike, say, the automobile or TV industries where developments tend to create the demand. The ingenuous user today expects broadcast-quality digital video displayed on a computer screen, as seen on TV and in films (not only science-fiction films). What he or she generally gets is jerky and/or grainy video in a small window, with not-quite-perfect lip synchronization, and constrained, over-structured so-called interactivity. The Internet, with its more or less reliable and well-established email facility and its vanishingly large store of information, does not quite fall into the same category, but even this supposed superhighway has not fulfilled all expectations because of its frequent and erratic delays, and because it is so colossal a haystack in which to find the needle. It will be a long time before user-desires in the domain of learning technology are fulfilled. In the meantime, even (no: especially) the most ambitious courseware, which manages to squeeze the last drop of capability out of the available technology, disappoints those teachers and students who are not impressed by technical achievement *per se*, or who are initially impressed but soon rebel against the constraints the computer imposes on them.

Despite all that, my last word will be what some may see as a platitude, but which, if it is one, is nevertheless meant as sincerely as I can mean it. As I intimated above, ALJ has many achievements to its credit. Its exciting and influential events, its excellent and informative Web site and Newsletter, its outstanding administration, and of course its enthusiastic membership, have together kept our aim firmly on target while moving us ever closer to it. I hope that readers will consider that this journal too has made a valuable contribution. I genuinely envy the new Editor in the challenge he or she is to take up. If only the Earth turned on its axis every 48 hours . . .

Gabriel Jacobs