
Editorials

ALT-C 97, University of Wolverhampton

In this special conference edition of *ALT-J*, I would like to say that we have moved forward. And in many respects we have. The technology is progressing at a pace which is increasingly difficult to comprehend. The software 'revolution' continues unabated to produce increasingly complex integrated applications. These daunting developments increase the pressure on academics, their institution and inevitably the student. To this we can add the problem of decreasing finance to universities and educational establishments in general. We, as practitioners in learning technology, must utilize the best features of communications and applications to reduce the pressures on ourselves and our colleagues. Are we succeeding? What is success? How is it monitored, measured and evaluated?

To use the convoluted technology and its associated infrastructure, and to exploit the opportunities afforded to us by the Internet and advanced communications, is no mean feat. The papers presented at this year's conference, under the banner Virtual Campus – Real Learning, presented some apposite developments in the field of learning. This is the crux of any development. It is very easy to blame the technology, or worse still see the technology as the goal of the research development process. We need to be mindful of what we as learning technologists are endeavouring to achieve. Is it interaction (something as yet not really achieved on the Internet)? Is it administration? Should we as academics be researching into this area? Is it simply to occupy? As academics can we afford to teach students on a one-to-one basis?

What am I suggesting is: yes, we have come a long way but there is a long way to go still. In fact, arguably as we consider that we have reached the end, the chequered flag has not only moved on but it has probably moved tangentially to where we wanted or felt that it could go. I quote from an article by Richard Hooper published in 1975:

The computer [...] displays to the learner another frame of text depending on the particular response the learner has typed in to the questions. Each frame of text is

selected by the computer to match the performance of the individual under tuition. The computer is said to be *adaptive* to the individual learner.

We are still striving for this, and now with 'virtuality'. The title of the conference suggested an unreal learning world. I can cope with this as long as the learning and its associated experiences are real. The papers at the conference addressed many of the issues of learning in a world of communications technology. The conference presented many opportunities for collaborative networking of research and development ideas. For this particular issue we received 52 submissions for publication. Yet again, the referees found it difficult to extract the few accepted for this edition. We have increased the number accepted last year to 14 this year, and hope that the diversity of approach, interest and development reflects what is currently happening within our respective institutions. I look forward to ALT-98 and the connected world.

John O'Donoghue, Chair, ALT-C 97

Reference

Hooper, R., and Toye, I. (eds), *Computer-Assisted Learning in the United Kingdom*, London: NCET, 1975.

Real learning: the obstacle

Virtual Campus – Real Learning. Nothing wrong with the first phrase: we are probably moving (if falteringly) towards one. Nothing wrong with the ideal behind the second phrase. Who would argue that false learning is better than real learning, that superficial understanding (or none at all), resulting in being able to repeat things parrot-fashion in an examination or a project dissertation, is better than deep understanding? It is like asking people if they prefer War to Peace. Ask, in a student feedback questionnaire, whether respondents prefer to have at university (i) a real learning experience, one which inculcates critical reasoning and judgement, or (ii) an experience of learning lecture notes by heart ready for regurgitation, and see what the answer is. I know, because I have done it (more or less). Nearly all students say they want the Real Thing, but they also want – above all – high marks. Are the two incompatible? They should not be.

There is a vanishingly vast literature on learning styles, environments for active learning, experiential learning, discovery-based learning, student-centred learning . . . I could go on. Yet what I find among real students (and I know that neither I nor my institution are alone: very far from it) is something different. Here is a revealing little example. A colleague and I teach a course jointly. Recently, I gave some lectures on electronic commerce, in which I tried to get away from the hyperbole surrounding it as far as the Internet is concerned, in order to offer a more detached vision of its future. My colleague had lectured a week or two before on a related topic, and had taken a far more optimistic line than mine. At the end of my lecture, a student asked who would be marking the examination question, if there was one, on electronic commerce and the Internet. When I asked why, he replied that, of course, he wanted to tailor his answer to fit the marker's view. I can perfectly understand his attitude, as also his rather sceptical reaction to my

subsequent (automatic-pilot)) comment that reasoned, structured arguments would always be acceptable whatever the marker's own opinion of the matter, and that this was true of all examinations. But he was, plainly, overwhelmingly more concerned with his mark in the examination than with the arguments themselves. Any tactic which might lead him to a higher mark was one to be adopted: in the real world, he was clearly less interested in real learning than in any kind of learning which would lead to a high assessment of his performance; and, from his standpoint of future employment, etc., understandably so. Could one reasonably argue that this student's learning might have had nothing to do with his examination strategy? That he might well have really learned but that he had decided to put this real learning behind him at examination time? I doubt it. It seems to me that his attitude betrayed a typical young-student learning experience, focused on gaining high marks and to Hell with self-edification which at best might be a by-product of study.

The way out of this problem is, of course, to assess students on real learning. There is less of a literature on that topic. We need not only, in the words of Diana Laurillard, to re-think university teaching, but – it seems to me, more so, since re-thinking teaching would inevitably follow from it – to re-think university assessment. Perhaps the virtual campus will really make a difference.

Gabriel Jacobs