
Editorial

Quality and targets

I am sure that few people know how ALT started, and I suppose that even fewer care. But how our Association began relates to a basic issue which I wish to address in this Editorial.

ALT began with a meeting of three people. Graham Chesters and I went to see Jonathan Darby to ask if he wanted to be involved in launching a new journal in the area of CAL. The idea of an association grew out of our discussions (as I remember, Jonathan Darby thought of the name). The three of us could see that, beyond the CTI centres, learning technology was creating a loose network of interested parties within higher education, and we decided that this network would benefit from a formal structure which an association could provide. Shortly afterwards, at our first meeting proper of the newly formed Executive Committee, it was evident that all involved were generally optimistic about the use of computer-based learning technology within higher education. On the other hand, we were also very conscious of the resistance to learning technology already being encountered in many higher-education institutions, partly for reasons related to technophobia and fear of job losses, more so because of some poorly designed CAL products that did not fit learners' requirements and/or expectations (not to mention the expectations of university managers).

All the papers and many of the reviews in this issue of *ALT-J* are concerned with this matter to some extent, and two papers directly so. King and Honeybone ask if CAL can be 'the 5th Cavalry charging to the rescue of the beleaguered educational troops'; not, they say, unless student needs are understood and the very purpose of university education clearly defined and accepted. Hopkins and Colombi are convinced that at the centre of the debate lie issues 'concerned with the ability of CAL to offer and deliver a teaching and learning experience which is as effective as more established modes'.

Most higher-education institutions nowadays are either (at least in certain departments) committed to or looking seriously at the use of CAL, for one or more of four reasons. The first is that staff-student ratios have risen. The second is that modularization has brought increased pressure. The third is that it finally seems that the technology can (just about) meet user-expectations. The fourth is that not being able to boast the wide use of CAL carries with it the risk of appearing old-hat. But the fact that Orsini-Jones and Jones, again in this issue of *ALT-J*, can talk of 'the recent backlash against information technology which is becoming increasingly fashionable' in itself indicates that some of the fundamental problems of promoting CAL, of which that original ALT Executive Committee was only too aware, have still not been resolved.

Has ALT, in four years, achieved anything beyond what we hope are excellent information services, useful workshops, exciting conferences, valuable briefing sessions, and so forth? If these are truly achievements, they are not to be belittled. But on the question itself, I claim not the 5th Cavalry but the 5th Amendment. What I will say is that I believe in the effectiveness of good CAL, but that we continue to climb a steep rock-face as its advocates, and that we remain in mortal peril of crashing to the ground unless we face up squarely to the doubts about CAL deeply embedded in many university teachers (even some of those involved in it). It is not that ALT has failed to play its part in convincing higher-education institutions to go down the technological route – on the contrary. It is that not delivering quality and well-targeted goods, and thereby fuelling doubts and alienating decision-makers, may have disastrous consequences.

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