

## AROUND THE GLOBE

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This regular column offers reviews of worldwide distance learning developments. It provides reports of international conferences and workshops, news of innovations in technology, and reviews of events, people, and institutions connected with open and distance learning practice and theory. Have you been to a distance education conference recently and would like to report on it? Do you have news on a new innovation or event that is significant for the world of distance education? Your news, conference reports, and reviews of international events will be considered for inclusion in future issues of this journal. Please e-mail your contributions to: [swheeler@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:swheeler@plymouth.ac.uk).

### *London, England*

London, for those who live in any other part of the United Kingdom, is referred to as the "Big Smoke." Most non-London Brits visit the city for meetings, or to use as a staging post to travel through to other places—London's Heathrow International Airport is the busiest in the world, and there are three further international airports serving the city. London has

the same unenviable reputation as many capital cities around the world—that of an impersonal, sprawling, frenetic, sometimes dangerous, polluted metropolis that is probably best avoided. And yet, as many visitors will confirm, London has its own peculiar charm, and many areas of outstanding beauty and historical interest. The list is a long one, including the Houses of Parliament—brooded over by St. Stephen's tower and its resonant "Big Ben" bell, the West End theatre district, Buckingham Palace ("Buck House" to the locals), Westminster and St. Paul's Cathedrals, and of course the old Father Thames—a river that "keeps on rolling along," meandering like some drunken serpent, dividing the city north and south. London is a place to visit, but for many Brits, not a place to live or raise a family. Many of us prefer the quieter life of rural Britain. London never sleeps, never rests, and yet it has an inherent magnetism. "Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner, that I love London so" goes the old song, and of course there is plenty to do and see in the Big Smoke.

London was the choice for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* sponsored New World Learning Symposium in November

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2001. The event, a prestigious gathering of technology specialists and distance educators was jointly sponsored by *Polycom-PictureTel*, and the venue was fittingly salubrious; an impressive edifice known as the Royal College of Physicians, in Regents Park. The Royal College has enjoyed hundreds of years of history and is situated close to the famous Madame Tussaud's Wax Works museum, and a stone's throw away from London Zoo. It was here that more than 100 leading distance education practitioners gathered. In this report, together with Cheryl Burton, a delegate at the event and a previous contributor to the *Quarterly Review*, we provide highlights of the conference.

***Conference Report: The New World Learning Symposium, London, England. November 12, 2001.***

*By Steve Wheeler and Cheryl Burton*

A cold and overcast morning in London saw the opening of the New World Learning Symposium, a one-day conference set up to spotlight new learning technologies. The symposium was opened by the conference Chair, Professor Peter Goodyear, from the University of Lancaster. Goodyear welcomed specially invited delegates to the luxurious surroundings of the Royal College of Physicians and outlined the programme of papers and discussion panels. PictureTel and Polycom staff were well in evidence, as was the latest technology they had on offer. In his opening address, Goodyear made the point that good pedagogy for distance educators and those who rely on technology to bridge the distance gap, must ensure that there are sufficient collaborative opportunities and interaction between students and teachers. Goodyear amplified this by providing his audience with several examples from his own experiences, and bemoaned the fact that although we need them greatly, there is currently a lack of experienced educational designers and technicians. He concluded by

reassuring everyone that we are all experiencing the same kinds of problems in education, but we are all, in his opinion, moving in the "right direction" by placing the student first in the learning process.

The first keynote presentation was provided by Professor Robin Mason, of the British Open University, and author of *Mindweave*, amongst other notable publications. Mason began by describing some of her most recent research into student experiences, including the delivery of courses at a distance through the Open University. She told the assembly that Open University learners fall into one of two categories. There are those who like to learn alone, and shy away from most forms of interaction, whether face-to-face or electronic, and there are those who crave interaction of any type, and are disappointed when this is not forthcoming in a course. Mason argued that teachers and instructors should try to encourage both and provide for each learning preference accordingly within course design. Her research into videoconferencing goes back more than ten years, and she outlined some of the advantages and disadvantages of the systems currently in use. These included the ability to explore areas that would otherwise be impossible, such as a trip to a nuclear power plant or other inaccessible venue. She cautioned that teachers need to invest a great deal more time into designing courses around technologies such as videoconferencing, and there need to be a great deal of supporting resources if learning is to be effective. Technical difficulties, she claimed, perhaps rather pessimistically, although probably realistically, are inevitable at present. She cited audio problems as the most prevalent and also the most damaging of technical problems, but she concluded by promising that "good learners are media-proof!"

During the parallel invited papers sessions, a useful overview of telematic surgeon training was provided by Andrew Kingsnorth and Adrian Vbranch, of the University of Plymouth. Kingsnorth told the audience that there were currently 35 hospitals in England, Scotland,

Wales, Northern Ireland and Eire that were taking part in the SANTTSUR project, a Royal College of Surgeons-sponsored and European Space Agency-funded project to provide live distance education to trainee surgeons. These are qualified medical personnel who wish to become surgeons, and who receive their theoretical training by a combination of live satellite television, videoconferencing, and Web-based training. The television pictures are beamed direct to a room near to the doctor's clinical practice areas, and they interact with the expert studio guests via a combination of videoconference, audioconference, and e-mail questions and answers. Kingsnorth and Vranich reported that the project is now entering its third year, has been tremendously successful to date, and will be extended to 50 hospital sites. Kingsnorth emphasised, however, that the success of the project was now, and would continue to be, as reliant on local hospital-based clinical facilitators as it was on the delivery technology combinations.

Other invited papers by John Burns, of DeMontfort University, and Chris Stephens and Jules Cook, of the University of Bristol, detailed a variety of technology-supported learning techniques for computer science in the Far East and dentistry throughout the UK respectively. Again, the point was made strongly that the technology is merely a means of connecting experts and learners; it is the human interface that is vital if successful delivery and quality learning outcomes are to be achieved. A paper by Henry Hughes, of UKERNA (United Kingdom Education Research Network Agency), the UK Government's academic networking body, provided a useful technical overview of current connectivity issues throughout the country.

From the University of Plymouth, Steve Wheeler's invited paper on the delivery of a Master's level course using a combination of Web-based learning, face-to-face, and videoconferenced session provided a mix of theory and pragmatism for the work achieved. He provided a history of the development of the project, a theoretical (constructivist) basis for

the use of visual collaboration and an introduction to the concept of "multiple mode" learning. Wheeler argued that "dual mode" expressions of delivery are no longer adequate, given that greater flexibility is now increasingly available to many distance learners. He suggested that we should consider other bipolar contexts beside local/remote, including synchronous/asynchronous and independent/collaborative study. He detailed the use of ill-structured problem-based learning approaches and how these have been used successfully throughout the course to encourage students to think through important issues, and decide on their own solutions before debating these online with the rest of the group. The power of this type of approach, Steve claimed, was in the mix between monitoring and reflecting, and wholesale engagement within the learning process.

A commissioned paper by Michelle Selinger, formerly of the University of Warwick, now with Cisco, provided the audience with a corporate perspective on electronic delivery of learning materials. She outlined the work currently being done by the Cisco Academy, and emphasised that Just In Time training has now superseded Just In Case training as the most important area of lifelong learning. Michelle talked about video-on-demand and downloadable materials as the way forward for "learners on the move." She reported that a great deal of Cisco's in-house staff training is achieved through the use of videoconferencing and, echoing Wheeler's earlier thesis, argued that many modes of learning are needed.

A plenary presentation by PictureTel after lunch had the audience inspired by its technological breakthroughs, including a live, full-motion videoconference link to Boston, USA, with a demonstration of the new generation of interactive whiteboard systems. There was no noticeable delay, a very high quality audio and video signal, and a perfect demonstration of what can be achieved using standard ISDN broadband technology.

A further scheduled multi-point videoconference link between the UK, Jersey, and the

USA was unceremoniously cancelled due to an unfortunate event we later learned was a further tragedy for the already devastated American city of New York, when yet another aircraft was reported to have crashed in the city's Queens area. The conference was hushed for several minutes as we contemplated yet another terrorist strike. Our fears were alleviated when we later learned that although the crash was calamitous, with many lives lost, it was not related to terrorist activity. The air disaster nevertheless encouraged us all to reflect upon yet another practical aspect of telecommunications technologies; reduction in the need to travel.

The final session of the symposium was a keynote presentation by Professor Steve Molyneaux, of the University of Wolverhampton, who is the director for the British Government's National Grid for Learning Center. The NGfL is responsible for wiring all UK schools and providing access to Internet- and Web-based resources. Professor Molyneaux talked about his work with the Telford and Wrekin Project in the UK's midlands areas. Telford and Wrekin is the first attempt in the UK to establish an inclusive "learning society" within a local community. It is a large-scale project connecting many of the schools within the area, and providing 482 videoconference units to schools, civic offices, hospitals, museums, galleries, and community centers. Each child is

provided with his or her own e-mail address, which stays with them throughout their entire educational career. Parents and other community members are also encouraged to participate. Videoconferencing in Telford and Wrekin is already addressing the current shortage of specialist teachers, providing those who wish to take part with the technology to reach and connect with distributed groups of children and adult learners. Molyneaux concluded his paper by remarking that the delivery platform does not invalidate sound pedagogic and didactic methods, and boldly claimed that "we will never do away with paper text just as we will never do away with good teachers." A plenary panel session followed, with many of the presenters fielding questions from the floor. Debate centred upon the use of technology-supported distance education and the effects upon learners today and in the future. There was lively discussion, and many favourable comments from delegates about the high quality of the presentations.

Selected papers and a brief report from this symposium can be found at: <http://www.polyspan.com/ps/xx/en/picturetel>. This conference was a "must" for those interested in all aspects of distance learning technology, and it was apparent that many delegates went away from this event determined to apply to their professional practice the new ideas and knowledge they had acquired.