

AROUND THE GLOBE

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This regular column offers reviews of world wide 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.

***CONFERENCE REPORT:
ALT-CONFERENCE, 9-11
SEPTEMBER 2002 SUNDERLAND
UNIVERSITY, ENGLAND***

The large pile of stone books laying in a haphazard manner at the entrance to the Prospect Building makes an interesting sight. A brass

plaque attached to the sculpture declares that the University of Sunderland's St Peter's campus was opened on May 18, 1993 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Set against a stark industrial backcloth, the University of Sunderland's newest campus stands out like a diamond in the mud. The campus is stylish, and projects an air of ultra-modernity, with the roofs of its buildings jutting out at oblique angles, constructed from a combination of chrome and steel, concrete and wood, with imaginative walkways providing connections. Adjacent to the main campus, the building of the new digital multi-media center is well under way, and promises to be a focus of a great amount of creativity and innovation in the years to come.

Along with around 300 other delegates, I had travelled to Sunderland to attend one of the UK's premier learning technology conferences—ALT-C. The Association for Learning Technologies conference is held in September each year and this was the ninth conference in the series. Previously, conferences have been held in Edinburgh, Manchester, and Bristol, and ALT-C 2003 will be hosted by Sheffield.

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ALT-C boasts an international pedigree, but this year, overall numbers were down almost by half, and overseas delegates thin on the ground. Perhaps the surroundings had something to do with this downturn, although visitors from over the Atlantic probably had other reasons not to travel.

There is no doubt about it: although it is valiantly struggling to emerge from its dreary northern industrial past, Sunderland is run-down. (I hesitate here as my wife hails from nearby Washington, home town of the U.S. President of the same name). Sunderland was also a town until the turn of the millennium, when it was finally granted coveted "city" status. Now, slowly but surely, Sunderland is emerging from the morass of an industrial wasteland: the older parts of the city are being transformed as new buildings begin to replace the old and dilapidated, as Sunderland begins to rid itself of its dull and dreary reputation. Gazing out across the river mouth, one can still see the remnants of the industries that sustained Sunderland for almost a century: shipbuilding and mining. These industries are gone now, but gloomy wharf buildings, rusting cranes and poorly-kept back-to-back terraced housing remain, each proclaiming that Sunderland still has a long, hard struggle before it can be recognised as an emerging property of Blair's "Cool Britannia."

ALT-C is an annual forum primarily for learning technologists, and at this conference approximately 80 percent of the attending delegates work in electronic media and Web development, technology support and student services. The remaining 20 percent are mainly academics. My impression of ALT-C was that it was supremely organised but woefully devoid of content. Those managing and organising the event were extremely enthusiastic and helpful, and a credit to the University and the ALT-C team. However, although the conference promised much, for this reporter, it delivered very little. Dianne Oblinger, our first keynote speaker, inspired us all. Oblinger has held several prestigious management positions in the United States, including the post of

Director of the Institute for Academic Technology at IBM. She is now Senior Research Fellow with the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, where she offers assistance to higher education leaders about information technology applications. She also holds a position as Adjunct Professor of Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University, and has a background in distance learning curriculum development. Her talk, entitled "From Connections to Community," explored the mindset of those who respond to using the Internet for the purposes of education. Oblinger listed a number of key characteristics that are emerging as the new mantras of Web users, including: "reality is no longer real," "doing is more important than knowing," "zero tolerance for delays," "staying connected is essential," and "multi-tasking is a way of life." She challenged all those of us who regularly used e-mail to reflect on whether, being away from our bases, we were suffering from withdrawal symptoms yet! Another key characteristic of the Web Generation is that we turn our "remembering" over to technology, and that we are often more comfortable composing our documents electronically than with paper and pen. This certainly resonated with me, as I composed this report at home on my personal computer.

Oblinger ended her keynote by arguing that, for distance education and all forms of technology-supported learning, it is important that we acknowledge and cater for this new mind-set. The future of learning does not reside in technology: it resides in the human mind.

Many of the papers presented at ALT-C were regrettably monotonous in their content and tone. Almost every presentation I heard lacked the scientific rigour and originality that one comes to expect from international conferences. The presenters also generally lacked any flair and professionalism in their presentations, and I observed several reading directly from their scripts. Many of the papers I attended focused on repetitive issues: accessibility and flexibility of technology, the impor-

tance of lifelong learning, and the ubiquitous call for more constructivism in managed learning environments. Although these are important areas, what about alternative models of teaching and learning, or are there none? What about new methods of distributed learning, and what about new approaches to technology-supported learning? These themes, I felt, were sadly lacking, with the exception of a few papers that I will briefly outline.

The first paper worthy of note was presented by Andrew Ravenscroft, a research fellow at University of North London, who presented an interesting paper examining the influence of theories of learning on our current practices in distance education. Ravenscroft identified a number of key influences in the development of online learning, and provided us with a tour de force of the psychological theories that currently inform practice for many distance educators. Ravenscroft contrasted this instructional approach with the cognitive constructivism of Papert and the Intelligent Tutoring Systems of Wenger. He challenged the popular misconception that e-learning started with the Internet, by identifying the roots of the discipline in the teaching machines of B. F. Skinner in 1954. Ravenscroft challenged his audience to put the "learning" back into e-learning.

A presentation by Jules Cook and Sue Timmis from the University of Bristol, UK, explored, in a workshop format, the motivational issues of online learning. Thought-provoking activities and group work facilitated a better understanding of what motivates and demotivates the remote learner, and the role of the distance educator in the continual process of learning management across the geographical divide. Cook and Timmis proposed a new model of motivation in online learning, advancing the previous model of motivation posited by Keller. They argued that motivation in online learning needs to be understood in a wider context than currently conceptualised. A lively debate ensued, with many contributors entering into professional dialogue that persisted long after the session had concluded.

Other paper titles included: Online learning and students with disabilities (Ball, Phipps and Sutherland, JISC Technologies Center), Software agents and Internet learning (Whatley & Beer, University of Salford), "If VLEs are the solution, what was the problem?" (Thomas & Thomas, University of London), and Pedagogical uses of streaming media (Durkin, et al., University of Bath). These papers reflected the upsurge in interest for online learning in the UK, and the immense potential that can be tapped when the will is there to push at the boundaries of teaching and learning. One exceptional workshop conducted by Linda Nelson and Lynne Sadler (University of Teeside) demonstrated best practice in the use of virtual reality systems. Nelson and Sadler have developed a VR-based community using real-time modelling software. Student nurses who are training to be health visitors can simulate their visit to a location that is populated by families and individuals who need health care and advice. Each house can be entered and the case histories of patients examined prior to care being offered. This problem-based learning environment elicits decisions from the trainee nurses, and enables them to transfer solutions to other problems with similar structures.

The final keynote address, by Lord David Puttnam, the doyen of the British Film industry, was at once both poignant and refreshing. Lord Puttnam spoke immediately after 2 pm on September 11, around the time that the first plane flew into the World Trade Centre in New York one year before. The gathered delegates had just sat down after two minutes of silence in respect of those who lost their lives. Lord Puttnam commented that during those two minutes of silence, he contemplated how much we could lose if we went to war, in terms of our cultural achievements in general and our educational achievements in particular. He continued by outlining his vision for the future of education, and the role media, and specifically the moving image, will have on teaching in learning in the years to come. Famed for his work in motion pictures such as *Chariots of*

Fire, David Puttnam knows the moving image industry inside out. His bold claim that the moving image, (in television, film, and multi-media) is the keystone of technology supported learning, is based on more than 40 years of experience, and this view was well received by those present. His call for greater investment into visual media across all sectors of education was apposite, given the current groundswell of technology transfer taking place in the British education system. Lord Puttnam took up a new post as President of the United Nations children's fund (UNICEF) shortly after the conference. His impact on British education has been immense, and UNICEF and the millions of children it serves worldwide will no doubt benefit greatly from his vast experience, deep wisdom, and unassuming character.

The ALT-C 2002 conference closed as all conferences close. Old friendships had been renewed and new ones forged. New collaborative ventures had been hatched and new understandings developed. In hindsight, however, the next meeting of ALT-C will need to be more focused on the burning issues that impact upon the practice of distance educators worldwide. Let's hope that ALT-C 2003 will be better-attended, and with a wider choice of papers and workshops from which to choose.

NOTE

The Web site for ALT-C 2002 can be found at: www.alt-c2002.org.uk. ALT-C 2003 will take place at Sheffield University, England September 8-10, 2003. You can visit the conference Web site (including a call for papers) at: www.shef.ac.uk/alt/