MediaActive conference 1996

The 1996 MediaActive conference was held at LIPA - the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts on 30th June - 2nd July 1996. Over 170 delegates attended the three days which focused on the general theme of ‘Learning Futures’. The conference was organised by the Learning Methods Unit at the Liverpool John Moores University, reflecting their belief that ‘learning environments are bound to reflect the converging worlds being made possible by multimedia and the new means of electronic delivery’.

Keynote presentations were given by a diverse range of people including Brian Eno, Ted Nelson, Gene Teare and Sarah Turpin, representing many view points on the way education will evolve. For many of the speakers interactivity, and the way we interact, were seen as key points. Roy Stringer, Creative and Technical Director of Amaze Ltd, LJMU's multimedia company, spoke about his ‘Faces in the Clouds’ application. In the application the user is presented with an image of clouds, with faces and objects sat in the clouds. On clicking on an object they ‘zoom in’ to that area, and can see other objects around it, and find out more information about them. In designing this application, written for Croyden Museum’s display on weird phenomena, he wanted people to interact with the content, not just the interface, and felt one of the successes of the application was that people could easily navigate through it and retrace their paths.

Commercial pressures were also recognised by many speakers, including Gene Teare, co founder of Cyberia, the Internet Cafe, and Joe Simpson from the BBC’s World Learning Network initiative.

Gene sees the web as an important media for education, allowing people to manage information, rather than having control taken from them. Cyberia have now launched the Channel Cyberia web pages. These are based on a TV model, with scheduled ‘programs’ and advertising, with additional interactivity. To support this they have signed a number of content providers, for example ITN for world news. The pages are free for users to access, as Cyberia do not think subscription WWW services will survive, except for a few very specialist markets. Gene also felt that even given appropriate advances in technology the television (a passive media) and the computer (an active media) will always remain separate, ‘People are not interested in interacting with their television.'
In the discussions that followed, the point was raised that in services such as Cyberia, content would largely be dictated by the advertisers, since they were the source of income. Perhaps not unexpectedly, Cyberia as a commercial company, did not see this as the problem that the academics did.

Joe Simpson also saw education as becoming a business market place with all the normal business pressures, but with a different source of funding, with brands of education (eg

particular institutions) selling their products overseas. Given the current economic pressures he did not think there was anyway UK education could escape from the commercial world. The World Learning Network (WLN) is a consortium, currently including the BBC, Open University and British Council, selling education overseas. The WLN aims to provide a guarantee of quality and will work with partners as a commissioning and retail body to provide WLN goods. He feels that UK universities are too complacent and not marketing their product strongly enough, allowing foreign institutions, particularly US and Australian, to establish themselves in potentially lucrative markets such as India.

Interspersed between the keynote sessions were four parallel sessions, covering a range of topics including currently available software for online learning, virtual learning communities and distance learning, design considerations and the effect of these technologies on female students.

Dr Irene Neilson described the Answerweb, a TLTP project which is freely available to UK HE. The aim is to make 'on-line communications as a learning resource', accessible through the WWW. The Answer web provides an archive of questions which grows over time, encouraging interpretation of the material by students and reflecting their needs. Questions can be placed by students and answered by 'experts' or other students. The archive will not only benefit current students, but allow lecturers to refine their notes and other learning materials to reflect any deficiencies or problems highlighted by the archives.

Prof Stephen Brown of De Montfort University looked at the changing requirements and organisational problems of modern HE institutions. Although new teaching methods, materials and delivery methods are now available, he does not feel they have made much of an impact on teaching methods. However, as student numbers increase and the need for life-long learning is realised, new resource based strategies need to be implemented. This, in his view, will require much more focus on staff development, to change the way people thing about their roles, and also change the reward culture - ie this staff development needs recognition.

David Whittington and Linda Creanor from the University of Strathclyde presented one project which is aimed at providing more flexible delivery of resources. The Clyde Virtual University (CVU) is a collaborative project running over the ClydeNet metropolitan area network (MAN), which includes the Universities of Glasgow, Strathclyde, Glasgow Caledonian and Paisley, the Glasgow School of Art and the Royal College of Music and Drama. The CVU is not developing new courseware, but converting existing courseware, currently in 5 main subject areas, Business, Statistics, Modern Languages, Library and Study Skills and Computing Science. The virtual campus has a assessment hall, lecture theatre, library, admin hall, virtual cafe (with discussion groups using HyperNews). Delivery over the WWW was chosen because it provides ease of distribution, ease of

authoring and updating. Within the MAN there is a high access speed and reliability of connection - external links are not being encouraged.

As the conference was brought to a close, perhaps the best summing up of the feelings of the conference was from Charlotte Corke, commenting on Brian Eno’s session - the teachers should be ‘setting the rules and frameworks, with the user defining the pathways and outcomes’.

In keeping with the theme of the conference, the issues discussed and papers presented are available on the WWW at: *http://mediaactive.livjm.ac.uk/*. This site include links to speakers own web pages and other relevant pages. (Note: the site is largely image based and navigation is not possible without loading the icons and imagemaps)