

From black-and-white TV to rich interactive learning environments

The 14th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning

by Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe

More than 1,000 attendees from countries across the globe gathered to learn, discuss, and debate the rapidly evolving field of distance education at Distance Learning '98, the 14th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, held August 5-7 at the Marriott Madison West in Madison, Wisconsin. Conference participants included representatives from education, business, industry, and government—creating opportunities, dialogue, and networking not easily found in the course of daily work.

In previous years the conference has focused on a particular element of distance teaching and learning, e.g., active learning. Distance Learning '98 broke with this tradition and explored the multiple aspects of a successful distance education system from planning and funding to professional development, learner support services, and program evaluation.¹ The resulting conference program was rich and varied offering useful information for everyone, be they new to distance education or a veteran in the field.

Cracker barrel sessions

The conference began with informal "Cracker Barrel," sessions named in the spirit of the conversations that occurred in the country stores of yesteryear around the cracker barrels. Discussion topics included combining

traditional and distance education delivery methods, evaluating Web-based courseware, affect and impression management, and faculty training.

Workshops offered opportunities for in-depth investigation of specific distance education issues. The majority of the workshops focused on issues related to online or Internet-based delivery of distance education; however, sessions focusing on issues related to interactive television and instructional design were also offered.

Participants in "Teaching Information Literacy Skills in Online Courses" explored different ways of approaching information literacy and developing appropriate research assignments for online students. The workshop group concluded that the most difficult information literacy skill to teach is recognizing the need for information, whereas the possibilities for teaching information-gathering are numerous.

"Converting Training Materials to a Dynamic Learning Environment" led participants through the process of creating a flexible electronic repository of learning materials from already existing instructional materials—a welcome change from other design models that require recreating materials each time new technological tools become available.

About the author

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New technologies

The highlight of the conference was the keynote speech, "Learning in the Digital Age," by Elliott Masie, president of The MASIE Center. With refreshing and energetic enthusiasm, Masie engaged hundreds in a fast-paced, interactive reflection on the changes that technology is creating in education, training, and personal relationships.

Likening the use of current technologies to the beginning of black-and-white television, Masie called for trainers and educators to move beyond merely replicating existing practices, e.g., virtualizing the classroom, to inventing new learning processes through imagination and rapid experimentation. These new processes will be the legacy of this generation of distance educators and trainers.

All conference attendees received Masie's "Continuing My Presentation" CD-ROM with resources, articles, audio and video clips, and Web sites for further exploration.

Keynote speaker Christopher Dede, professor of Education and Information Technology at George Mason University, and Spotlight presenter Ellen Wagner, vice president of Informania, Inc., also challenged conference attendees to think about the implications of new technologies. Wagner argued that new strategies for interaction are needed to create quality distance education. Asking what kinds and how many transactions are needed for interaction, Wagner reviewed and critiqued existing models of interaction. Wagner then presented new outcomes-based design strategies, which particularly attend to cost-justification and effectiveness measures.

Dede explained that because the media employed impact the types of messages created in that media, creators of new virtual environments must attend to appropriate balance if they intend to develop high-quality distributed learning environments.

Based on his teaching experience, Dede encouraged development of hybrid learning environments that include both synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication, as well as face-to-face sessions. Dede concluded with a Web tour of shared synthetic environments and virtual communities such as WorldsAway² and Active Worlds³ to demonstrate the application of technology in building relationships and to provoke thought as to the potential educational applications of the same technologies.

Quality standards

The 80 concurrent sessions comprised the bulk of the conference. In a thought-provoking presentation, Gwen Hillesheim of Walden University discussed distance education quality standards. She asserted that, in addition to traditional standards of educational quality, issues of learner isolation, academic support services, learning outcomes, and the quality of instructional materials are particularly important when judging distance education quality. Hillesheim said online programs must also attend particularly to managing the learning environment, technological resources and functionality, and learner/instructor relationships.

Libraries were well-represented in the concurrent sessions. Sessions such as "Supporting Distance Learners and Academic Faculty Teaching at a Distance," "The Academic Library's Role in Distance Learning Support Services: What Your Library Can Do for You," and "Web-Based Learning: Electronic Library Resources and Instruction" discussed the opportunities and challenges in providing access to library services and resources for remote users and illustrated strategies currently being used.

In most cases, libraries have created Web pages designed specifically for distance education students but have not received additional funding to provide additional services to those students.

The sessions were positively received not only by the librarians at the conference but

also by faculty members and trainers from business and industry.

More than 50 exhibitors provided information about their products and services for distance education and training including First Tier Books,⁴ which offered an amazing selection of current materials on distance learning and Web-based instruction.

Though the irony of bringing people together to discuss distance learning was noted more than once, the energy created during Masie's keynote and the other presentation is perhaps evidence that the hybrid design of both computer-mediated and face-to-face interaction is the most effective approach to developing meaningful human relations.

If the exchange of business cards, electronic mail addresses, and Web sites is any indication, this face-to-face conference was only the beginning of many future professional relationships and collaborative projects.

Most of the concurrent sessions and some of the workshops are represented in the conference proceedings.⁵ The 15th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning is scheduled for August 4-6, 1999, in Madison, Wisconsin.

Notes

1. Christine Olgren, 14th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning. In *Proceedings of Distance Learning '98* (Madison: University of Wisconsin System, 1998), i.

2. <http://www.worldsaway.com>.

3. <http://www.activeworlds.com>.

4. kvanwye@silicon-desert.com.

5. The Conference Proceedings are available for purchase though the Distance Teaching & Learning Conference Manager, University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://www.uwex.edu/disted/distanceconf/form.htm>). ■

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Collecting the publications that document this changing world poses special challenges. Carolyn Brown, Library of Congress Area Studies Section, noted that traditional country-based acquisitions programs are insufficient when faced with colonial and postcolonial writings, publications of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations, and ephemeral documents of refugee and immigrant life.

As Brown observed, "Embedded in these publications are important keys to the future."—Kristin Nielsen, *University of Georgia Libraries*, knielsen@arches.uga.edu ■

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