
Emphasizing Distance Learning

Orlando Curioso Revisited**Copyright 2000 by Frank McGowan**

Sue and I recently flew back from Orlando (and are our arms tired!). Sue attended a conference sponsored by Syllabus, a monthly technology magazine aimed at teachers at community colleges, 4-year institutions, etc. The major topic of the conference was technology in the curriculum. A major emphasis was on distance learning (or "DL" to those of us "in the know").

While I languished at the pool, Sue labored away at meetings and breakout sessions. The high point of her week was discovering that our hotel (the Wyndham) was directly across Sand Lake Road from Fishbones, our favorite Orlando restaurant. I cannot imagine there's better oak grilled tuna anywhere else in the world – but enough. I'm getting drool all over my keyboard.

Sue was kind enough to share her notes from the conference, so I'd like to share them with the rest of you.

The Keynote: Shift That Paradigm!

As with any conference worthy of the name, there was a keynote speaker, whose task it was to set the tone and overall agenda, as well as expectations for what was to follow. This was the mission of Dr. Dale Lick, Associate Director, Learning Systems Institute, Florida State University ("Go, 'Noles!"). I guess Bobby Bowden wasn't available.

At any rate, Dr. Lick stressed that institutions of higher learning need to switch their focus from *teaching* to *learning*. Recently, this seems to have become something of a rallying cry among those who think deep thoughts about the process of education, and probably not a moment too soon.

At the basic level, in Dr. Lick's view, is the fact of change: not just constant, but chaotic, a fact that many administrators seem oblivious to, or are in denial about. Lick calls for "new organizational cultures, new assumptions, new beliefs, and new behaviors." Fundamentally, this means a paradigm shift to "the learning franchise," as contrasted with the "teaching franchise." He defines the new paradigm as one that provides access to "powerful learning systems, information, knowledge bases, scholarly exchange networks, or other mechanism for delivery of learning."

Call me cynical, but the distinction between learning and teaching strikes me as similar to the distinction between "wellness" and "good health": A distinction without a difference. What Dr. Lick and the other "learning" advocates propose is that schools be more amenable to new technology and eager to include its tools in their systems. This is clearly a "good thing," but it isn't without significant expense, an unfortunate fact that even the dimmest administrator recognizes all too clearly.

Products on Display

As usual, the conference was awash in manufacturers' reps, with booths set up every few feet (it seemed) where the latest in pedagogical techno-goodies could be seen, usually in action. We were especially intrigued by VideoDidact, a system that gives an instructor virtually total control over the student machines in the room; and GyroMouse, a remote control mouse that might be more appropriately pronounced HeroMouse. We liked that one so much, we bought one, and fully expect to put it to good use in the classroom any day now.

VideoDidact: "We Are In Control of Your Television Set"

As any instructor knows, it's very hard to maintain discipline in a room full of computer terminals. While most students are paying close attention to you, hanging on your every word or mouse click, there are always those few rebels who feel it's their teen-aged duty to flout any kind of authority at every opportunity. These are the ones playing Solitaire, sending email, or, in rare instances, surfing porno sites. Given that the amount of time for classroom instruction is limited, and needs to be closely husbanded, it's inefficient and sometimes downright dangerous to waste this precious commodity dealing one-on-one with the "rebels without a clue."

If only there was a product that harried instructors could use in such situations...what a boon that would be! Well, harried instructors, run, do not walk, to your school's administrators and tell them about VideoDidact. Developed in Germany, this marvelous invention hands the reins (not to mention, the whip) to the instructor, who can control every terminal in the room from the instructor's station. While it is rather pricey (info can be obtained from Educational & Business Systems, Inc.), VideoDidact replaces costly projection systems, many of which are less than perfect. It also requires no (NO) software; and runs on any computer regardless of platform.

You, the formerly harried instructor, can see any student's screen. You can display what's on your screen on all student screens, so you can demo procedures with assurance that at least what you're doing is visible to any student who's looking at his/her terminal. You can also put your screen on individual screens to help students who aren't getting it as quickly as the rest of the class. You can even set it up so that a quicker student's screen can be displayed on selected screens, allowing for collaboration within student teams.

But best of all, it allows you to spot the student(s) who are off in la-la land, and send them warning messages about paying more attention to the subject. If, after being warned, they persist in disregarding you, you can display *their* screen on all the other students' screens. This should be done with caution, and only under dire circumstances: it's the ultimate weapon, and shouldn't be used without regard for consequences.

GyroMouse

This nifty gadget, produced by GyroPoint Technology, is another aid for instructors, especially those who, like Sue and myself, work in classrooms that are more suitable for 10-pin bowling than for computer courses. In one room in particular, the students sit in four rows, at 90 degrees to the instructor, each row 7 or 8 deep. This makes moving from row 1 to row 3 or 4 something of a *track and field* event, the only question being, Do I vault over the desks or sprint? Either way, it's time consuming, not to mention tiring.

Then if you have to dash back to the instructor station to do some-thing with the mouse, you consume even more time and energy. It's no wonder that we finish a class feeling as

though we've just completed a decathlon.

Using infrared technology, GyroMouse lets you wander around the room, mouse in hand, and manipulate it (the mouse) as though you were seated at the instructor station. Everything you're doing can be displayed on screen, and even magnified to ensure that those seated in seats 7 and 8 can see what's displayed. Can't wait to see this in "live ammo" mode!

The Real Purpose of the Conference

Okay, so they didn't put on the conference just for vendors: there was a legitimate educational slant, which was – putting technology to work, especially in the area of web-based learning (notice I didn't say "teaching"?)

The centerpiece was a product called WebCT, described as follows by its creators:

"WebCT is [a] tool that facilitates the creation of sophisticated World Wide Web-based educational environments. It allows educators to design the appearance of course pages, it provides a set of educational tools that can easily be incorporated into any course, and it provides a set of administrative tools that assist the educator in the task of course administration."

An Update on WebCT (World-Wide-Web Course Tools) - a Tool for the Creation of Sophisticated Web-Based Learning Environments by Murray W. Goldberg and Sasan Salari

Since the most sophisticated online technology used by most of us at our institution of higher learning is Email, you can understand how excited we get when we read this kind of stuff. After all, if "sophisticated" doesn't hook you, then "learning environments" surely will! Virtual schools...what will they think of next?

I'm being facetious, of course, which is how I usually respond to this kind of hyperventilating rhetoric. Once past the breathlessness of the blurb, however, I discover that the emperor is indeed wearing a nice new suit. From what we gleaned from the meetings and breakout sessions, WebCT looks like the greatest thing since bread, sliced or otherwise, for educators and students. The Web is the place for "asynchronous" learning, meaning that students can log on whenever it's convenient and access lessons, homework, quizzes, syllabi, etc. "Synchronous" learning means having online conversations in real time between student and professor; or participating in chat rooms devoted to course content. ("Course content"? I'm sounding more like a hardcore pedagogue all the time!)

Of course, there's a little "meta-learning" required. You, the instructor, need to learn how to use WebCT before you can start using it, which brings us to...CyberPrimer.

CyberPrimer was developed as a kind of "meta" educational tool at New Jersey City University by Marie Fosello and Betsey McPeake. Its purpose is to prepare students for learning on line: instead of spending time teaching people how to take online classes, the instructor is able to devote most of the time to covering the content of the course. About three weeks before the class begins, students get a letter that tells them where to find the CyberPrimer tutorial. Topics covered include email and netiquette; how to use a browser; how to use search engines; how to download software needed for the course (such as Acrobat Reader); and how to access a communication tool called WebBoard, which allows synchronous and asynchronous communication between student and instructor.

Sue's assessment of the Primer: "Brilliant!"

For more info, visit the site at: <http://newlearning.njcu.edu> The following text is taken from the site's description of the WebBoard:

The WebBoard is the course conferencing system used in NJCU on-line courses. Just like a cork board, the Web Board provides a place for faculty to tack up questions for student discussion. Students tack up their responses and/or post questions of their own. In distance learning terminology, this is called asynchronous (or not at the same time) communication. Although the listserv is also a method of asynchronous communication, the WebBoard provides greater opportunities for interchange since, like a real Bulletin Board, all messages remain tacked up and within your view until someone takes them down. One message follows the next in chronological order, and individuals can respond not only to the original posting, but also to comments made by other students. This is called a threaded discussion.

The WebBoard also provides for synchronous (or at the same time) communication through its chat feature. Just like a party line, it provides an opportunity for students and faculty to log on to the Board at the same time and participate in real time discussion. Instructors may use the WebBoard chat feature for scheduled chats. Students may also use it to get together informally or to form study groups.

As you can see, Distance Learning is rapidly reaching maturity! I wish I could say the same for myself. Maybe there's an online course that would help me...

Sue came away from Orlando loaded with enthusiasm, which still hasn't dwindled; and I came away with an armload of souvenirs from Arnold Palmer's Bay Hill Country Club. Need I say more about "maturity"?

Frank McGowan amuses and teaches us, but never puts us to sleep! The author of the WindowWatch VB tutorial series and ALL of the Office Suites. What next Prof. McGowan?