INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND HUMAN RESOURCES
INSTRUCTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

by

Richard L. Hannah*

Abstract

Instructional applications of the Internet in the 1990's have been a driving force for infusion of information technology into the academic environment. However, the glitz of the Internet has tended to obscure the full range of potential media applications, such as multi-media product development, and cable TV and satellite delivery. For the professorate to enrich their instructional capabilities through different media requires a clear vision of how specific academic disciplines can best benefit from the available media options. Media facilities and access have reached a stage of development at universities that requires discipline specific thought about their potential contribution to learning. This article describes these possibilities in the context of the related fields of Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management. Strategic considerations, practical applications, and implications for professional associations are presented. The broader objective is to alert readers in other academic disciplines to the possibilities of exploring media opportunities, and conversely generate some thinking as to the consequences of not exploring those opportunities.

I. Introduction

This paper describes emerging instructional opportunities in electronic media that are readily adaptable to discipline specific applications, in this case for Industrial Relations (IR) and Human Resources (HR) learning objectives. Successful outcomes from these opportunities require well-conceived resource allocation strategies to achieve teaching objectives that extend far beyond the traditional classroom, course, or curriculum confines. This is the direction toward which this document nudges thought and action. The sections following the introduction include: (1) commentary about the convenience factor in education, (2) a description of the media spectrum, (3) an in-depth focus on the cable TV example, (4) topical research and online inquiry results, (5) strategies for consideration, and (6) conclusion. Assessment of the quality of teaching and learning through different media, and the troublesome issue of intellectual property rights, are separate areas of inquiry and are not addressed herein. (For an example, see "Distance Education and Intellectual Property," 1999.)

The potential (perhaps necessity) of projecting academic programming through electronic media is considerable, and we academics must expand our role in knowledge sharing in this context. For outreach (or marketing) purposes a more public professorate is important in the increasingly competitive education industry, and media projection of IR or HR academic expertise as a public service is consistent with this emerging criterion for success of higher education institutions. With the right package, discipline specific substance can have a sustained appeal to the public.

Finally, academics whose primary intellectual alignment is with IR may discover an additional philosophic interest in teaching in the evolving environment of information technologies. The prospects for electronic media as a catalyst fusing IR and educational restructuring to accommodate lifelong learning are conceptually intriguing. A globally diffused information environment intricately integrated with economic activity already has attracted the interest of much scholarship examining how work and employee-employer relations have been altered by information technologies. The integrated view of labor markets, socio-economic forces, and institutions within the field of IR (vis-à-vis HR) enables a more inclusive perspective of the environmental factors involved when examining the relationships arising from work. This capacity for the big picture is important for adjusting our teaching frame of reference to incorporate teacher-student collaborations in the design of incremental acquisition of

_____

* Richard L. Hannah, Ph.D. Economics & Finance Dept., Box 27 Middle Tennessee State University Murfreesboro, Tennessee 37132 Email: rlhannah@frank.mtsu.edu Tel: 615-898-2228 Fax: 615-895-7580

education which is implicit in lifelong learning. In other words, our collective wisdom about collaborative (or cooperative, or conflict driven) IR should be turned inward to examine the prospects of forging new learning models with the student collective.

II. The Convenience Factor

While some faculty still teach students who are enrolled full-time and who do not have to accommodate competing life-cycle priorities, those of us with students who work full-time (or nearly so), have family obligations, and spend significant time commuting, have learned that convenience sells. In the education industry, electronic media are increasingly relied upon for this potential. Furthermore, information and instructional technologies are now inseparable from everyday life's work, leisure, and the ambiguous areas between the two. Academic relevance demands that these technologies should be infused into IR and HR curricula, either as an alternative delivery system, or with specific IR or HR courses that focus on the technology developments and applications directly related to the discipline.

Teaching has now reached another turning point within the context of information technologies and this has special relevance to the organization and transformation of the work of higher education faculty. For example, the dichotomy between academic and administrative matters in the networked medium has become very fuzzy in several areas. Many if not most institutions have online registration for classes, and some now have systems allowing faculty to access student enrollment and email addresses as the start of the semester approaches. This facilitates early contact with students to inform them of course web pages or other items the instructor may want to convey. This is perhaps more than faculty could have hoped (or cared) for, but better synchronized electronic integration of academic and administrative information flow is a convenient development.

In such an environment the default action when the student registers can be automatic notification of the instructor's email, course web page, texts required and cost, and student evaluations of the faculty member. This suggests how "electronic relations" have changed our work environment in ways that supplement but are not directly related to instruction. This convenience of information offers numerous ways to save time and/or to improve the quality of instruction. (For additional discussion about these prospects, see Hannah, 1998a.)

In short, the confluence of shifting student demographics, advances in information technologies, and the government, corporate, and educational "buy-in" to the continuous learning philosophy have made convenience of scheduling, contact time, and location pivotal in instructional content and delivery. In this context, media alternatives have become more relevant. Boldly plying optimism does clarify the need for an academic agenda to seize these opportunities, if not as a part of an educational renaissance, at least as a discipline driven one.

III. The Media Spectrum

Distance leaning is an umbrella phrase that captures the application of numerous technologies, but the mix is richer than those dedicated to bridging space and time by recording and transmission variations. These technologies have different infrastructures, designed for different applications. Examples are given below.

Internet--email	Master classrooms
Internet--discussion lists	Integrated Digital Services Network (ISDN)
Internet--web	Cable TV--public access, government, educational
Internet--A/V streaming	Satellite
Internet--document messaging	Desktop Conferencing
Multimedia--CD, DVD	Networked Library Resources

Adding to the above list the intriguing teaching/learning conceptual frameworks, such as ubiquitous computing philosophies of universities (complete portability and standardization of hardware, software, and telecommunications infrastructure) and custom publishing, presents a far more complex array of choices than most academics experienced or perhaps even recognized. A tolerable length of this paper precludes a thorough

description of each of the above, and indeed, there is no need for such attentiveness because many items in the list are now commonly used. An in-depth example suffices to illustrate the prospects for academics in general, and for IR and HR in particular.

IV. The Expanded Cable TV Access Example

Any academic discipline with an objective of reaching K-12 educators, students, or administrators must understand the pervasive and sustained effort to provide Cable TV and Internet access at the classroom level. Mass popularity has been achieved by programs available from such channels as Discovery/Learning, PBS, A&E, CNN, The Weather Channel, The History Channel, and C-SPAN. [See Dirr, 1997.] Are there prospects for more specialized niches for K-12 or higher education? If so, this may come from local level programming, or the networking of locally developed programs to a wider audience via adoption by associated local cable franchises.

The Telecommunications Acts of 1992 and 1996 created as yet under-appreciated opportunities for academic programming. Essentially, local governments that grant a local cable franchise can include provisions for dedicated channels (or bandwidth) to three types of programming: public access, government meetings, and education. There appears no systematic data on the types of channel proliferation and program content at the local level. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that while the public access category has proven problematic because it literally requires open access to virtually any interest group, including those with deviant agendas, government and educational channels have expanded considerably.

At my own mid-sized state university, there are two educational channels carried by the local franchise that reaches 40,000 to 50,000 subscribers. However, there is no "master plan" for media based or networked academic programming. A few credit courses have been telecast, but most programs are simply time slot fillers derived from other sources or athletic shows. Oftentimes, there are only announcements posted on the TV screen. Very few faculty have begun to experiment in this context.

What does all this have to do with IR or HR? Quite simply the emergence of local cable access through universities could be seen as an unprecedented opportunity to educate the public about the subject matter of our disciplines. While this may not be considered strictly in the teaching vein, the modification and projection of what we teach as a public service are essential to generating interest in our subject matter.

Cable programming can also be directly integrated with traditional teaching. For example, in credit courses, special lectures that garner public interest can be given in the production studio and telecast at a later time. Students can be required to develop TV programs based on research papers or projects. Current employment issues can be addressed in a variety of formats, and controversial topics presented in a learned manner (such as international influences on local labor markets or electronic privacy issues in the workplace).

Implicit in the scenarios above is a thought process that incorporates a more public projection of knowledge by academic disciplines. The means have arrived; the requisite actions to seize the opportunities are yet to materialize. If we do not carve out a substantive part of the available programming in these emerging media, then academics will have failed to sustain a learned, credible core in the part of teaching that finds its way into the mainstream of public service media production. Like the Internet, these windows of opportunity may be only briefly open before commercialization pushes academic intent and content aside.

V. Document Research and Online Inquiry Results

Dozens of journals from a variety of disciplines were scanned in a literature search, but only a few references describing higher education programming were identified, such as the Higher Education Channel (HEC-TV) [Klotzer, 1997], and the Economic Development Network (ED>Net) [California, 1995-96]. There was nothing akin to IR or HR. For the U.S. the dearth of higher education related literature is particularly surprising given the potential for programming, especially for rapidly growing K-12 access. At least in concept, the Europeans have moved ahead with the idea of The European Educational Television Channel, a multilingual satellite channel for schools and colleges across the continent [Coughlan, 1995].

Another effort to gather information was the posting of inquiries on four Internet discussion lists that service employment related academic and practitioner subscribers. The lists and estimated subscriber counts (taken between September 1998 and May 1999) are given below. Note that this selection of lists was one of expediency and the number of subscribers represents only a small fraction of employment related lists. (See Hannah, 1998b).

- IRRA: Industrial Relations Research Association List (US)   255 subscribers
- PRIR-L: Pacific Rim Industrial Relations (NZ)   693 subscribers
- Industrial-Relations-Research List (UK)   605 subscribers
- Benefits-L: Employee Benefits List (US)   550 subscribers

The inquiry was whether list participants had produced IR/HR related instructional programming for Cable TV, ISDN, satellite, or CD/DVD--as credit, non-credit, or public service educational activities. Of the ten replies only four fit any of these categories. One was the UAW-Ford University (Root, 1999). The second reported on European developments (Coates, 1999). In this latter case, the European Trade Union College (ETUCO) and Association for European Training of Workers on the Impact of New Technologies (AFETT) have begun initial exploration of online information delivery. (See ETUCO and AFETT, 1999). These programs include Works Councils Training and information technology modules. The third response (Hunter, 1999) described real time Internet connections for a HR course in an executive education program. The fourth reply described videos about negotiation and workplace language use (Fells, 1999).

A third information search was a direct email inquiry of the 66 serviceable addresses identified as IR or HR degree programs in the U.S., Canada, and Australia (IRRA, 1998). The technologies referenced in the email were the same as those posted to the discussion lists. There were 20 responses (as of 6/14/99) ranging from a preference not to go beyond the technology of colored chalk to CD and video tape development. Only one response indicated any activity with DVD technology. Two were actively employing interactive satellite delivery and two had examined the prospect but not yet implemented this service because of prohibitive costs or technical coordination difficulties.

While these kinds of inquiries are not scientific and likely underestimate the activity level, the dearth of responses from a sample of 2000 discussion list subscribers and 66 IR or HR degree granting programs would appear indicative of the lack of discipline specific movement toward the identified technology applications. This does not bode well for a profession that is grounded in the relations of people to work in an emergent knowledge based economy that is increasingly dependent on information technologies.

VI. Strategic Considerations

Integrating Technologies. Figure 1 provides a visualization of the primary strategic integration options for academic programming. Synchronizing these options in a way that works best for the institution, the faculty, and the students is a matter of identifying the best niches (or more formally stated, comparative advantages in the competitive educational industry). An example drawn from experimentation and anecdotal evidence collected from the literature and personal contacts via the Internet is given in Figure 2. This particular logic is very simplistic--replication of the instructional program in different media for different purposes. The integration options have been re-arranged into four categories, and the Figure 2 centerpiece of academic programming is replaced with IR/HR programming. The description of activities to date is given below.

Practical Applications. The top portion of Figure 2 is perhaps the most familiar. The publication of web pages dedicated to employment relations is well known. For academic purposes, these pages generally fall into two categories. One is government. The continuing evolution of online data and documents, especially via the U.S. Department of Labor and state agencies, will likely have profound impacts on the textbook publishing. Why pay the publisher for data or documents that can be freely and easily extracted from the Internet? The lack of many widely used IR, HR, and labor related texts to reflect the electronic media reality is disappointing.

The second category of web pages is derived from academic or professional association development. For academics, pages may serve as a topical resource or reflect specific course content, which is a useful reference for courses in response to pre-enrollment inquiries. Essentially, these web pages also serve as a passive marketing tool in brochure development or other promotional activity.

The right side of Figure 2 identifies an early but still useful telecommunications technology, Integrated Digital Services Network. Specific to IR programming, the most interesting application to date by this author was a live international program feed to Caen University in France, with which Middle Tennessee State University has a partnership. Students there asked for a presentation on U.S. labor markets and employment related benefits. This was the first such connection for our university and has spawned requests for several additional interactive programs in the 1999-2000 academic year.

The bottom portion of Figure 2 describes the newest addition for the author's campus, a direct digital satellite link to seven local school systems. A variety of live programs have been telecast through this medium. (Taping and taped telecast capability is also possible.) One recent program, in the Fall of 1999, introduced K-12 teachers, students, and interested public participants to online resources useful for career choices. The "credit" designation is included here only as an ordering convenience for Figure 2. An IR or HR credit course in this format has not been telecast to date because a target market has yet to be identified. However, with a digital satellite link, a course can be telecast anywhere with compatible downlink equipment. Specialty courses in short supply, such as employee benefits, are good candidates to market in such a medium, particularly if the credit is accepted in other academic programs.

Referring to the left side of Figure 2, during the Spring of 1999 fifteen half-hour programs were videotaped. While many of these were not specific to employment relations, the following eight were directly or indirectly related to the IR/HR instructional program or IR/HR subject matter.

- Program Changes in the IR Concentration within the Economics M.A.
- Discussion of the Mission and Activities of MTSU's Labor-Management Center
- U.S.-Chinese Economic Relations
- European Union
- Instructional Technology Evolution
- Formal Lecture on the History of Pension Systems
- Formal Lecture on Quasi-Property Rights in Pensions
- Three Student Presentations on Research Projects in Employee Benefits Class

These presentations were primarily conceived as a public service. However, the last three were directly integrated into a formal course. The next step is to modify an entire course to fit within this taping format. The objectives are to begin development of a video archive of formal lectures, to encourage student collaboration with the program/teaching design in this format, and to give the public viewers insights into the inner workings of the course and a glimpse of the subject matter.

Finally, keep in mind that the categorizations described above are for illustrative purposes only. Different combinations may be more logical for a given institution. The intent here has been only to facilitate more orderly thought about the possibilities.

Curriculum Changes. We are all driven to some degree to infuse media technologies into courses, either in terms of electronic delivery or skills acquisition by our students, or because we are curious about new possibilities. The examples above illustrate the range of possibilities; however, going to the edge of the teaching frontier now requires consideration of curriculum changes to accommodate the new possibilities for skills upgrading or acquisition. Some are familiar. These include pre/post masters certifications, more international content, collaborative relationships among institutions for greater flexibility of credit transfer, and invited specialist commentary so that scarce knowledge can be more widely shared.

If our teaching future in part depends on student centered learning, then we should speed up our deliberations about best ways to maintain a high quality of learning. This may encompass new pedagogies and evaluative mechanisms that in no way resemble the examinations of centuries past. For example, online learning architectures are at best still in their infancy, and I know of no IR or HR programs that require learning portfolios, which at a minimum would serve as an objective presentation of the continuity of learning. Also, models in which students and faculty collaborate to devise the optimal learning methods for different media technologies are in order. A specific course requiring the projection of learned content through media alternatives is one possibility. There is nothing like the idea of a public viewing of one's presentation to encourage the mastery of content and clarity of delivery. Having

observed many students excel in this environment, I believe faculty should see the wisdom of developing their own professional agenda for alternative media delivery. An example of such a course is the following catalog description. While this course was not designed exclusively for IR and HR students, the author specifically crafted it with the possibilities of those fields in mind.

ECON 649   Special Media Projects. Three credits.
This course is for learning experiences that are either non-traditional or not defined as an option elsewhere in formal programs of study. The conditions for approval include faculty advisor and student written mutual consent and conformance to departmental standards for independent study. This course is an option only for students who demonstrate competency by testing in courses for which a requirement to enroll in the course would be a redundant learning experience. Examples of special projects include the production of IR related CD's, DVD's, cable TV programming, Internet projects, internships that clearly add non-redundant learning experiences to the IR program of study, or highly applied projects that demonstrate the integration of IR into mainstream business or other organization decision making.

A Role for the IRRA? I specifically address the Industrial Relations Research Association (IRRA) because this is the professional association with which I am most familiar. While we justifiably pride ourselves in inclusive and interdisciplinary membership, a more extroverted public agenda has waxed and waned. The possibilities of greater public projection have been described in this paper. If these media outlets are worthy of strategic attention within the profession, then the IRRA is the logical instrument of leadership. Thus, a short review of where the association is and where it might go is in order.

The most visible electronic presence of the association is the IRRA discussion list and the IRRA web site. Next is the educational video tapes such as A Changing World of Work. Third, President Tom Kochan has appointed an IRRA Technology Committee, chaired by Charles Heckscher, to advise about ways to enhance the online presence of the IRRA. IR Teaching Conferences sponsored by Georgia State University have been a rich forum of ideas and experiences reflecting the current state of media applications to IR teaching. Fifth, there are other forums that are broadening the discourse on information technologies in the field. These include the IRRA annual meeting in Boston (2000), which included a working group session on Information Technologies and Industrial Relations, and the IR regional association meetings, at least one of which (Southern Region) has for several years included technology oriented sessions. Finally, more direct discourse among IR/HR academics and publishers in an IRRA sponsored forum would facilitate a broader understanding of the possibilities with custom publishing and infusion of electronic media devises into instructional materials--a possible item for the IRRA 2001 meetings.

As this paper has pointed out, the range and reach of media now available require thinking beyond the immediate profession--and if not mass media, at least "mini-media" strategies. What to do? Use the resources at hand. We don't have to reinvent the wheel in order to progress in this context. An electronic network is in place and the subscribers can be polled to test the demand for media products and foster collaborations for the development and improvement of such products. The association's web page invites experimentation with audio/video streaming. Many of us have educational cable access, through which we can either develop our own programs or encourage the airing of IRRA sponsored programs.

VII. Conclusions

A sketch of media developments and suggestions for practical applications has been put forth in this paper. No doubt, the collective wisdom of academics can produce a much longer list. The motivation to do so should have a deeper connection to our professional roots. If we believe in the doctrine of lifelong learning, then work and education require a unified pattern of thought and practice. Media alternatives are only tools, and expanded media use will not produce new methodologies or pedagogies. However, a strategic pattern of application of these technologies may lower the traditional boundaries of thought and enable a very different vision of what the study and practice of Industrial Relations and Human Resources can be in the next few years.

My original title of this paper contained the verbiage of "instructional adjustments," implying that academics should accommodate technology. As I have re-thought and re-wrote this article, I gradually concluded that "adjustment" was far too timid a descriptor for an intellectual shift to media thinking. We should simply seize the opportunities before us. They were put in place for the public good and should be exploited as a public service.

References

California Community Colleges, Office of the Chancellor. 1995-96. Economic Development Network (ED>NET): Report to the Governor and the Legislature.

Coates, Chris. May 13, 1999. Librarian TUC Collections, University of North London Learning Centre.

Coughlan, Sean. June 30, 1995. Lessons from on High. Times Educational Supplement, n4122, pS23(1).

Dirr, Peter J. 1997. The Use of Cable and the Internet/World Wide Web in Elementary and Secondary Classrooms. A Field Study for Cable in the Classroom by Public Service Telecommunications Corporation.

"Distance Education and Intellectual Property." May-June 1999. Academe, Vol. 85(3): 41-45.

ETUCO and AFETT. Internet extraction, May 13, 1999. http://www.etuc.org/etuco/default.cfm

Fells, Ray. May 17, 1999. Department of Organizational and Labor Studies, University of Western Australia.

Hannah, Richard L. 1998a. "Merging the Intellectual and Technical Infrastructures in Higher Education: The Internet Example," The Internet and Higher Education, Vol. 1(1): pp. 7-20 (February 1998).

Hannah, Richard L. 1998b. Employment Related Discussion Lists. Http://www.mtsu.edu/~rlhannah/erlists.html.

Hunter, Chip. May 13, 1999. University of Pennsylvania, The Wharton School.

IRRA Survey. May 1998. Industrial Relations and Human Resource Degree Programs in the US, Canada, and Australia.

Klotzer, Charles L. July-August 1997. There. St. Louis Journalism Review, v. 27 (198): p. 4(1).

Root, Lawrence S. May 13, 1999. School of Social Work and Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Michigan.
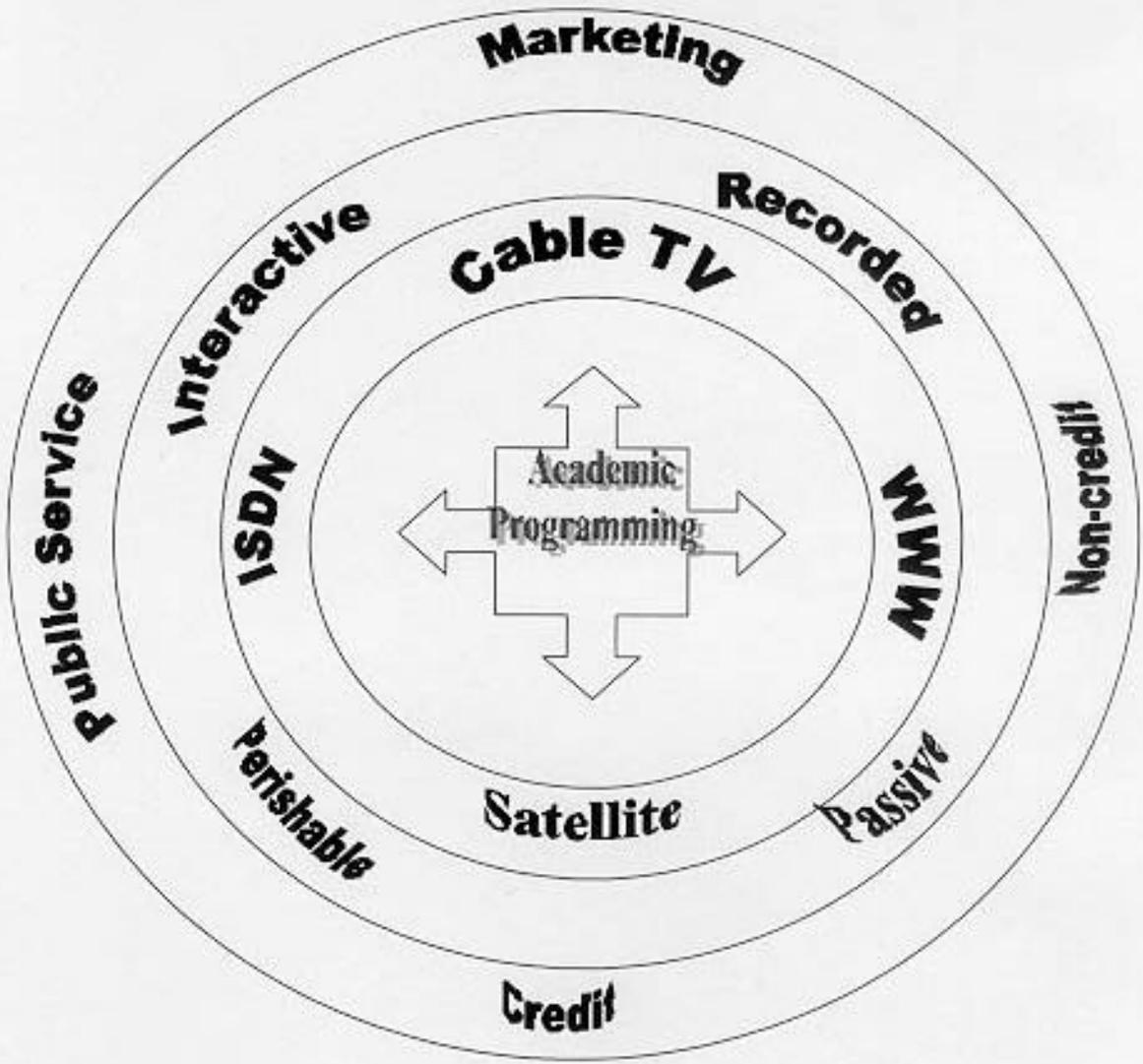
Figure 1
Integration Options

Figure 2
Rationalization Example for IR/HR