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From distance learning to on-line learning

The Internet and especially the Web has provided many challenging opportunities for distance learning. In fact, the term distance learning does no longer apply when 'digital' teaching and learning opportunities are being discussed. A new phrase can even be coined in this context: 'A student is only an e-mail away'! Thus our previous concept of 'distance' does no longer apply. Instead, well-known face-to-face didactic approaches such as interactivity, collaboration, mentoring or practical work are becoming more viable in today's digital environment. Not that these are already incorporated into on-line or rather e-learning programmes. In many instances conventional self-study techniques were simply changed to the digital situation and took advantage of the more direct communication means such as Web publications and e-mail. However, this only represents the first phase of development. When studying the systems that are currently made available by suppliers in this market, it is found that a second phase is providing a credible alternative to classroom teaching and learning. E-learning's phase two is bringing people (tutors and learners) together. It is in the corporate world where these new approaches are most prevailing. Prominent e-learning companies are now working on an international scale and providing private enterprise with e-solutions to their in-service and continuous training needs. They sell their products and libraries of self-study programmes mainly to the corporate world (where the money is), while advocating advantages such as encouraging pro-active 24/7 mentoring, facilitating peer-to-peer interaction, making learners work together, providing for the individual needs of learners, and so forth. Although the tertiary or academic arena should be at the forefront of incorporating interactive learning techniques into digital or e-learning, this has not happened yet. Is it really lack of funding or do academics fail to see the need to fully integrate c-learning with e-learning?

In this issue the three peer-reviewed articles cover various albeit basic aspects of e-learning (one could classify them as phase one e-learning). These articles were adapted from papers delivered at last year's 2nd Annual Conference on World-Wide Web Applications. (The papers were published as part of the conference proceedings at the following address: www.rau.ac.za/conf/www2000). Spurret and Jackson's, for example, represents an attempt to consider the merits of the WWW as a technology for the purposes of education (Virtually incomprehensible: pros and cons of WWW-based communication and education). Drawing on recent work in cognitive science, linguistics and cognitive anthropology, they argue that a range of resources of critical importance for many forms of learning are available in live, situated interaction between people, but this reality is either absent or severely limited in any Web-based learning environment. They also argue that learning is not a process that is indifferent to the technology by means of which it is conducted and that there will be many learning scenarios for which the WWW is entirely unsuited.

Following a more theoretical approach, Lelliott, Pendlebury and Enslin, in their article Online education in Africa: promises and pitfalls, examine the pros and cons of information and communications technology in relation to globalization and the learning society in developing countries. The authors come to the conclusion that a too idealistic view of ICT could obscure the challenges of accomplishing inclusive education. The third article, by De Villiers and Cronjé, describes the results of a comparative study which examined various strengths and pitfalls in digital classrooms (A longitudinal comparison of two presentations

of an Internet-based course for adult learners: a university case study). The study was based on a comparison of two digital classrooms, specifically looking at which aspects of Internet-based learning operate successfully. The results of the study indicated that the 1999 presentation of the RBO digital classroom at the University of Pretoria was inadequate in certain areas, but that the modifications made in 2000 improved the course considerably.

David Raitt's contribution (Applications and trends on the Internet: privacy, Web cams and VR) is published as a special feature in this issue. The article covers three areas of relevant Internet developments: privacy on the Web occasioned by software that spies on users; Web cams that can be used for distraction, videoconferencing and the like with examples of some public and not-so-public cams; and virtual reality (VR) applications that offer 3D simulations of real and imaginary cities and landscapes.

Three student contributions were also included in this issue:

- Information management: human, ethical, and epistemological challenges (B. Brooke-Norris)
- Environmental scanning as a strategic tool or the Department of Foreign Affairs (J. Schoeman)
- Corporate information policy in a large enterprise (P.D. Steyn).

As has become tradition with this journal, only basic editing was done to the student articles. All three of them are in the final year of RAU's Postgraduate Diploma in Information Management, and all three make fascinating reading!

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