

Preface

This volume of reading is the result of the first AECT Research Symposia. It represents some of the best thinking by leading scholars in our field. Before you begin to read the text, I would like to provide a bit of background that may help you, the reader, to better understand how this all came about and why the contributions in this text are important.

Starting in the summer of 2005 with the generous help of Phil Harris, Sharon Smaldino, Jim Klein, and Rob Foshay (among others), a plan was formulated to remedy common shortcomings that I felt were not being addressed at our typical conferences and gatherings. Specifically, at the large conferences, I observed scholars presenting their work while the audiences were often only passively involved and not engaging in any type of dialogue. While the reasons for this undoubtedly varied, the end result appeared to be a mode of discourse that actually discouraged real conversation from taking place. Yet, away from the sessions in more relaxed surroundings, fantastic conversations were happening.

Additionally, we have all heard the phrase that academics tend to be “an inch wide and a mile deep” – meaning that our academic training forces us to work in very small areas. Thus, we build new knowledge in isolated ways that is often disjointed or, at best, only tangentially connected to the work of our colleagues. These observations inspired those of us interested in the symposium to look for a new format to share information and ideas as well as foster dialogues and other relationships.

So, the idea for a research symposium was born. The organization was different from a typical conference. First, all presenters had to write on a singular topic, and papers had to be made available for sharing. Second, a deadline was established that allowed for sufficient time (prior to the symposium) for other participants to read and to consider each other’s contributions. Third, all proposed sessions were longer than usually allowed at conferences, and the presenter only had a few minutes to “present” thus retaining the overwhelming majority of session time for intimate conversation among all the attendees.

Initially, the goal of the first symposium was to explore current research and new ideas in order to develop a response to *U.S. Department of Education’s National Technology Plan*. The plan stated in part:

To enable such important and sweeping changes to take place will require not only a rethinking and realignment of the industrial age factory model of education, but a rethinking of the tools available to support such change. Increased access to technology alone, however, will not fundamentally transform education.

(<http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml>)

While this is a noble goal, too often, in my experiences as an academic and a practitioner, I encounter the thinking that more or better technology is the solution to improving education and reform seems to stop there. There is no denying the importance of technology. However, many might argue that technology's main advantages lie in its ability to enable advanced learning designs and emerging paradigms as well as to evolve learning interactions. In short, without sufficient consideration to the *process* of learning and all that it involves, technology, by itself, is not going to make a real difference. If we accept the words of Secretary of Education Dr. Rod Paige, quoted here from his introduction to the 2004 *Visions 2020* report, (and also included in the DOE plan) that

... schools remain unchanged for the most part despite numerous reforms and increased investments in computers and networks. The way we organize schools and provide instruction is essentially the same as it was when our Founding Fathers went to school. Put another way, we still educate our students based on an agricultural timetable, in an industrial setting, but tell students they live in a digital age (US Department of Commerce, 2002)

In light of Dr. Paige's remarks the magnitude of what we are trying to accomplish becomes clear. We should not just be adding more or better technology to an existing system; we should be *starting over and creating an entirely new system*. The seeds of an educational Renaissance are finally being planted. In that vein, the first symposium's goal was to answer the DOE's call by identifying specific research-based learning and instructional technology ideas which could rethink learning, reorganize schools, redirect technology, and provide new forms of instruction as well as a vision for the future.

One of our initial hopes was to condense all these ideas into one specific response to the perceived weaknesses (particularly regarding instructional design and the learning sciences) found in the DOE's *National Technology Plan*. Our desire was to create a "white paper" that AECT would consider as a public statement or policy.

Unfortunately, even though the symposium was a tremendous success, breaking new ground in the way it was conducted, reaching impressive levels of participant interaction, and resulting in the outstanding papers contained in this volume, we failed to develop a consensus or formal white paper. As the organizer, I take full responsibility for this. In hindsight, it becomes apparent that I should have given greater attention to the consensus building aspect of the symposium. However, within these covers, you will find great essays and innovative ideas that begin to tackle the challenge laid-out by the DOE. This book presents the "best of the best" in the fields of technology and learning. To help breathe new energy into the concepts presented here, we asked Marcy

Driscoll and Rob Foshay to each add a chapter where they reflect on the thoughts and ideas contained in this volume. Marcy and Rob's contributions are not typical; they were given the freedom to reflect, to improvise, and to free-think about what they had read. Their important contributions invite the reader to reexamine what he or she learned in the previous chapters.

As this book goes to the publisher, the second symposium is taking place. It is my deepest hope that AECT will continue to host this biannual event and that we will continue to improve upon its effectiveness and spirit of collaboration. I firmly believe improving education requires a collaborative effort. We cannot move forward like the proverbial three blind men trying to describe an elephant: each of us fixated only on our tiny piece. After all, how can we reach an understanding of the whole if we never investigate the total of the parts?

Transforming education is no small task, but it is a necessary one. As you read through the pages of this book, it might serve to remember The Roman Rule: "The one who says it cannot be done should never interrupt the one who is doing it."

In closing, I want to thank some individuals and groups of people who made this book possible. First, I am very grateful to Jason Huett and Douglas Harvey for helping to edit and to organize this book. Without their significant work and help, you would not be reading this.

Elizabeth Boling and the faculty, staff, and students of the University of Indiana deserve acknowledgement and praise for welcoming the symposium to their campus and for their help running the numerous day-to-day activities that go on behind the scene.

I would like to make a special point of acknowledging the contributions of Tom Duffy and David Jonassen. Tom and David served as inspirations, motivators, and problem solvers in the best traditions of academia. The symposia and the resulting book would not have happened without their guidance and attention.

I hope you enjoy the book!

Peace,

Vermillion, South Dakota

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