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May 1997

Staff room

Delegate's diary: CAL97



CAL is a biennial conference which met in March of this year at the School of Education, University of Exeter. The focus of the conference is on the use of computers to enhance teaching and learning in all sectors of education. Each conference is organised almost entirely by members of the host institution so there are refreshing differences between each meeting which sets CAL apart from other conferences I have attended.

The first ever CAL was CAL79 and was also held at the University of Exeter but in the Engineering Department. The shift from a niche within Engineering Science to the wider brief of the School of Education is symptomatic of the way CAL itself has changed over the last 20 years. There's also a lesson for users and developers of CAL materials for Maths teaching here: computers are no longer just a tool for doing maths and new advances will require the active participation of mathematicians and maths teachers if our needs as a community are to be addressed. Probably the single most important technology to emerge in the last 5 years has been the world-wide web yet despite its origins in the science education sector we still seem no nearer a solution to the basic problem of representing mathematics with the new media.

In accordance with the emergence of the WWW the theme for CAL97 was "Superhighways, Super CAL, Super Learning?". It was sponsored by BT, Elsevier Science, Xemplar and the Devon & Cornwall TEC which again demonstrates the blend of computers, telecommunications and publishing with the field of education.

The conference started on Sunday 23rd March and finished 3 days later, just in time for Easter. Each conference is deliberately timed to coincide with the holidays to enable school teachers to take part.

The scheduling of papers and workshops was fairly intense with up to 6 parallel sessions at a time but this was carefully balanced with an enjoyable social programme which kicked off on the Sunday evening with a guided tour of Exeter's magnificent Cathedral including an early but beautifully maintained astronomical clock. The tour culminated in a sherry reception in the Chapter House before returning through the darkened streets of Exeter to a sumptuous meal in the campus restaurant. Fittingly, the Solar System itself participated in the entertainment with comet Hale-Bopp clearly visible from the School of Education's hill-top vantage point.

On Monday morning I attended a paper presented by Jenny Brown of the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) on "using public access television to stimulate interest in the use of information technology in teaching and learning". She reported that recent OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) reports painted a gloomy picture of teachers' expertise with IT, particularly at secondary school level. The NCET project attempted to address this by making short magazine-format programmes, introduced by

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Maggie Philbin of Tomorrow's World fame, highlighting teachers who have been able to make effective use of IT in the classroom. The programmes were screened as part of the BBC's late-night learning zone slot. An evaluation study carried out by NOP suggested that over 14,000 teachers had watched the series and that three-quarters of these had gone on to take "some action" as a result.

On Monday afternoon I went to a stimulating paper presented by the Canadian David Mitchell on "making sense of computer aided learning research...". In particular, he focused on the sloppy use of statistical tests in research papers and produced examples of false conclusions drawn in refereed papers from "reputable" journals. Although these papers generally form part of Applied Psychology or Education research they serve to underline the importance of providing *all* students with a good solid understanding of mathematics before they embark on a career in the sciences.

Tuesday morning's message was a cautionary tale from Oleg Liber who compared the interest in the WWW with the early interest in the Viewdata system whose educational applications were never fully realised. He emphasised that education would be better served by "focusing development on systems that support and promote interaction between participants in the learning process". With these participants in mind I attended an afternoon presentation by Geoff Strack on the "Influences of home and school on pupils' use of computers". The clear message was not to underestimate the availability and subsequent use of up-to-date computing equipment in the home. The Internet provides a way for schools to reach out into the homes of their pupils in an unprecedented way but schools need to harness this effect if they're to take this opportunity to influence pupils' learning.

Tuesday afternoon also gave me an opportunity to change hats briefly as I manned the PASS Maths poster display. The posters provided an ideal opportunity for delegates to discuss their projects informally and these discussions continued on throughout the evening reception, the conference dinner and later on in the conference bar. The people who attended the conference were a highly motivated collection of teachers and researchers and the informal conversation at such events is often as engaging as the sessions themselves. Tuesday evening became Wednesday morning and, with the lights being switched out across the common room it was a tap on the shoulder from the bar manager and we all went off to our campus accommodation.

Steve Lay

The CAL conference proceedings are available on the WWW from the CAL97 home page:
<http://www.dcs.ex.ac.uk/cal-97>

Further reading:

NCET-TV: using public access television to improve teaching and learning with IT

– Jenny Brown, NCET-TV.

Making sense of computer aided learning research: a critique of the pseudo-scientific method.

– David Mitchell, Concordia University, Canada.

View data and the World Wide Web: information or communication?

– Oleg Liber, University of Wales, Bangor.

Influences of home and school on pupils' use of computers

– Geoff Strack, Hackney Education and Leisure.



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Plus is part of the family of activities in the Millennium Mathematics Project, which also includes the NRICH and MOTIVATE sites.