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# Teacher-Librarians Claiming their Territory in Cyberspace: The 1996 ITEC Virtual Conference

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*The first international Virtual Conference (VC) for teacher-librarians was held during June 1996 as part of the Schooling and the Information Highway Conference organized by the Information Technology Education Connection (ITEC). Twelve topic strands were included in the VC but the strand entitled "The Internet and the Teacher-Librarian's Role in the School: Possible, Probable and Preferred Futures" was dominant in the conference dialogue. The conference worked well as a professional forum and opportunity for professional development. Changes in the timing and timelines for the 1997 VC are suggested.*

Many teacher-librarians worldwide have gained a reputation for standing on the cutting edge of educational innovation. This reputation is well deserved, as was evidenced when a cosmopolitan group took to cyberspace to create the inaugural Virtual Conference (VC) for teacher-librarians.

Master writer Lodge (1984, 1995) forged his reputation fictionalizing university life and the conference circuit. Although Lodge wrote about fictional settings, his story line and characterization were always full of life. If you are a conference junkie you know the story. The conference papers and workshops are the sideshow that provides the backdrop for the real agenda—socializing with old friends and meeting new ones. When one does find time to attend a plenary or workshop (in good conferences making the right choice is always time-consuming) it is usual to engage passively rather than actively. One wonders what Lodge would make of the notion of a Virtual Conference. And what would he do with the social interaction?

## *What is a VC?*

So what is a VC? Is it a conference that isn't? Well, yes and no. Certainly you don't go to a VC—it comes to you! The fact is, before June 1996, not too many people in the teacher-librarian community worldwide knew what a VC was but, thanks to the vision of Mal Lee, director of the educational consulting firm Information Technology Education Connection (ITEC), the first international VC for teacher-librarians was launched on June 3 as part of the ITEC

Schooling and the Information Highway Conference. The "real" conference was in Sydney, Australia, while the VC was in cyberspace.

The VC consisted of two main elements: a WWW site and a series of listservs. The ITEC WWW site <<http://www.itec.com.au/>> was home base to 52 papers prepared by an international cast of practitioners, those involved in the professional associations, writers, and academics. The VC organizers decided not to advertise a call for presentations, but invited leading players in the teacher-librarian community to present. Most of those invited were able to commit to the conference.

One could argue with some confidence that the presenters, who included Steve Cisler of Apple Computer Inc., Silicon Valley; Anne Clyde of the University of Iceland; Barbara Poston-Anderson and Ross Todd of the University of Technology, Sydney; Don Hamilton of the University of Victoria, British Columbia; Mike Eisenberg of Syracuse University, New York; Paul Lupton and Lyn Linning of the Queensland University of Technology; Ken Dillon, Ashley Freeman, Ken Eustace, James Henri, and John Messing of Charles Sturt University, New South Wales; and Dianne Oberg of the University of Alberta, represented the cutting edge of thinking in the field.

Presentations were made in 12 topic areas. These were:

- Censorship and the Internet in Schools: Problems and Solutions;
- Hot Spots on the Web for Teacher-Librarians;
- Children's Literature and the Internet;
- The Internet and the Teacher-librarian's Role in the School: Possible, Probable, and Preferred Futures;
- Creating and Managing a Library Web Page: The Practicalities;
- What Students Produce from the Net: Assessing their Work;
- Meeting the Professional Information Needs of Teacher-librarians;
- Home-school Links: Networking the Learning Community;
- Evaluating Internet Information Services;
- Access—Forget about Ownership;
- Cooperative Planning and Teaching: A Collaborative Teaching Model for the 21st Century;
- Moving around on the Net: The Educational Potential of MOOs.

### *Ways of Participating in the VC*

Each of the presenters was asked to provide a paper or WWW presentation that explored these major concerns and issues and would generate discussion and debate regarding teaching and learning opportunities on the Internet and the impact of the Internet on school library and information services. Papers could be written in scholarly form or in a chatty style, but the papers were to force participants to think. Some writers managed to achieve this objective through the use of controversy, others through the use of humor.

Participants were given password access to the papers and could download those they wished to keep. Once participants had examined the

papers of interest and/or followed up the hyperlinks to other WWW sites, they could register interest in any or all of the topics by joining a listserv dedicated to discussion on that topic. Software needed to access some interactive papers (those that linked with other Websites or involved MOOs) was available for downloading. The participant could pursue the dialogue about each selected topic using e-mail via the topic listserv, sending and receiving comments about the issues raised in the papers.

Discussion on some topics was lively, whereas some gained no interest. A moderator was appointed for each topic, and this person was charged with responsibility to keep discussion on track. Some were more successful at this than others.

The timeline on the VC included an initial day of access to the WWW site only and then eight days of access to the topic listservs. Following the conclusion of discussion, participants could continue to interrogate the papers on the WWW site and follow up on the discovery of linked sites.

Participants from all areas of education were able to select the strands to which they wished to register. The very existence of the conference strand "Information Services: Teacher-Librarian" in the list of choices would place teacher-librarians in the minds of educators as part of the electronic learning environment. The opportunity to go in and check out the papers and the discussion provided a chance for all educators to see the value of the contribution that teacher-librarians were making and could make to learning with the Internet. In this way, teacher-librarians were perceived as being an important part of the bigger educational picture.

### *Topic D: A Sample of VC Interaction*

A window into the life of a VC can be provided through a summary of the interaction in one of the topics. A pattern took shape with Topic D, "The Internet and the Teacher-Librarian's Role in the School: Possible, Probable and Preferred Futures." The main concerns were learning more about the Internet and its effects on the learning environment and the transformation of the teacher-librarian's role by this new electronic environment. The dialogue in other strands overlapped with the issues that were developed here, and ultimately this strand dominated the dialogue.

Teacher-librarians were most concerned about their futures in the rapid change ignited by the Internet. This exchange covered issues as wide-ranging as the *raison d'être* of the teacher-librarian to what needs to be rethought, reconceptualized, and reinvented in the education of the future. The need for teacher-librarians to be proactive, "to be a propeller rather than an anchor," flavored the dialogue. Doing, rather than navel-gazing, seemed to be a strong emerging theme. Getting involved in the Internet and developing a positive presence for learning on the Net was underscored.

The content of the dialogue offered a large picture of the changes that are occurring in teacher-librarianship, particularly in Australia, the United

States, and Canada. Examples of situations where school systems recognized the importance of the teacher-librarian in the new environment and were hiring additional teacher-librarians and expanding their roles rather than reducing them were shared. Strategies for marketing with information technology people, principals, and decision-makers were examined. The education and training of teachers and teacher-librarians were explored. The strength of transformational leadership was discussed. The need to challenge traditions and make change was suggested. The vision of the teacher-librarian that seemed to be evolving was one of a teacher who was knowledgeable and skilled in working with people, information, and learning in the emerging information environment, one who could leave the print versus electronic information issue on the back burner and deal with the issues important to student learning for the 21st century.

Not only were thinkers in teacher-librarianship able to grapple with the issues of becoming—thinkers in education and the Internet were able to see and discuss the issues with those teacher-librarians. A positive professional presence was created. It was particularly strong in Australia where involvement was the greatest in this first Virtual Conference on education and the Internet.

### *Special Features and Challenges of the VC*

A VC is hard work for everyone. Presenters have to deliver their papers in a timely fashion or they simply don't appear. (One help here is that the paper can be delivered electronically either via e-mail or through the provision of a hyperlink to a presenter's Website.)

The VC organizers have to be able to process registrations in a timely fashion and ensure that the inevitable technical problems are kept to a minimum. (In this area there is no better teacher than experience!) A number of technical difficulties did present themselves, and these were a distraction from the event although an important element in any electronic experience.

Participants don't have any time to relax either! Imagine trying to internalize 52 papers following up on all the hyperlinks (remembering that this might be your first experience in cyberspace) to the point that you feel confident that you have something to say. And then you have to stay awake for eight days following the debate as it goes around the world through many time zones. (Actually, some participants did take the occasional break to attend to work and domestic matters although the adrenalin rush is hard to hose down once discussion heats up!)

Involvement in a VC is an intense affair, but participants are able to tailor their learning to their own situations. Some participants were online while they were at work, others while they were at home; others followed the discussion or investigated hot spots (it seemed!) 24 hours in the day. And, of course, people came to the task from a number of time zones, from both hemispheres, and at varied levels of expertise using the Net.



It is interesting to compare the VC with other conferences at the level of social interaction. As we know, teacher-librarians often suffer from professional isolation, and one of the purposes of any form of professional development is to address this issue. How does a VC attend to this issue? It might seem on the surface that a VC is far less rich in its social interaction than a real conference, and for some this is undoubtedly so. By its nature, a VC involves the interaction of an individual with a computer screen, and this seems almost antisocial! On the other hand, the VC allows people, regardless of geographic location or time of day (or night), to touch hands. And the beauty of the event is just that—people are able to get involved at their own level and in their own comfort zone.

But a VC can be much more. In this VC, teacher-librarians in one school used the event as a school-based pupil-free day where each person took responsibility for one or two topics and provided feedback to the group regarding the papers and the discussion. In other situations, teacher-librarians who did not have electronic access got together with those who did and used the VC as the basis for a local inservice program. Another regional teacher-librarian group in Western Australia organized a social afternoon and evening to continue VC discussions in real life. Not only was electronic comment being generated but also significant local talk.

### *Changes for the 1997 VC*

Feedback has been positive, with a number of helpful critical suggestions for the 1997 offering. It is clear that June is a bad month to run a VC. In the Northern Hemisphere, educators are contemplating vacation and rest rather than extended learning, and it is therefore difficult to recruit writers, let alone participants. In the Southern Hemisphere it seems that the June period is already saturated with conferences, and one more (whether real or virtual) is one more too many. For these good reasons, the 1997 VC will be held at the end of April, which will be a better time for all concerned.

The VC organizers underestimated the time required for participants to access papers, follow up on hyperlinks, and undertake considered thought about the issues raised. Participants did not have time to begin to construct their own meaning on the issues prior to the need to become involved in discussion on the listservs. This was especially true for those teacher-librarians who had to undertake their participation during their day-to-day activities. Participants at a regular conference expect to have a break from their regular commitments, and this would be a good way to approach the VC. In fact, a number of participants indicated that their employer had not only provided funds for registration, but had also provided the participant with leave to attend the VC. The VC organizers recommend delegates attempt to ensure work release arrangements are made for some time during their VC participation.

In 1997, a period of one week will be provided for the important initial task of reading the papers. This will have the benefit of linking discussion more closely with the issues raised in the papers. Some moderators made an attempt this time to draw participants back to the papers, but this was clearly difficult. This is not to suggest that participants should not be able to take discussion where they would like. It is to suggest that the more informed the debate, the better it is. The lack of preparation time was also a factor in the high predominance of "lurkers." The evidence also suggests that some would have been better served to be more ruthless in their choice of topics. Just as participants have to make hard choices between competing sessions at real conferences, so do VC delegates.

### *An Invitation to the 1997 VC*

The 1997 VC will be held at the end of April. It is hoped that in excess of 400 participants will get involved. If you feel that you have something to contribute, please contact the organizers <lhay@csu.edu.au> or <jhenri@csu.edu.au>. In 1997, there will be an opportunity to offer informal papers, refereed papers, and other forms of electronic participation. The 1997 program will include the following topics:

- Censorship: More Problems. Possible Solutions?
- Children's Lit and the Internet: Issues and Services;
- Critical Thinking in the Electronic Age;
- Electronic Collection Development: Selection and Management Issues;
- More Hot Spots for Teacher-Librarians;
- MOO Trek: Guided Tours of MOOs Around the World;
- Multiple Personalities? Teacher Librarian, Cybrarian, Director of Information Services;
- Partnerships: Teacher-Librarians Building Influence in the School;
- Process and Product: How Do We Assess Students' Work?
- Professional Electronic Networks for Teacher-Librarians;
- The School Library Home Page.

Consider how you might involve your school, your school students, or your graduate students in this professional electronic forum. Take the opportunity to provide leadership at the cutting edge.

### *References*

- Lodge, D. (1984). *Small world: An academic romance*. London: Secker & Warburg.  
Lodge, D. (1995). *Therapy: A novel*. London: Penguin.

### *Conference Proceedings Available*

If you would like a hard copy of the VC '96 Proceedings, please e-mail your request to David Dawe on <asladow@atrax.net.au> or Chris Skrzeczynski on <cxyz@gil.com.au>. The cost is \$A32 (which includes postage within Australia) or \$A40 outside Australia.