

Scholarly inquiry and flexibility

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The changing role of UniServe Science

As many of our readers will know, UniServe Science was established in 1994 by the Department of Education, Employment and Training (as it then was) through the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching. It was to be part of a nationwide network of clearinghouses, UniServe Australia, whose job it would be to offer support and advice to teachers in Australian universities, particularly about the use of Information Technology. The concept was modelled on the Computers in Teaching Initiative in the UK (which has latterly been transformed into the Learning and Teaching Support Network). Right from the start international links were established, specifically with the UK and Sweden.

The original funding was for three years, the hope, at least on the part of CAUT, being that the network should become self-funding. Some hope. Although other universities seemed willing to make use of the services of the network, they were not willing to fund it from their own, ever-tightening resources. When the funding stopped the network withered and the various nodes went off in their own directions. UniServe Science was able to survive owing to support from The University of Sydney, and has been running completely on that support for six years. It means however that we have become one part of the local infrastructure, and our long-term survival, if it exists, is irrevocably bound up with the needs and interests of The University of Sydney.

Where then does that leave our national focus? So far as we are concerned, it is still there, but of necessity it is a smaller part of our business. This is reflected in several changes. We have, for example, found that our national newsletter no longer fills a need. It is being discontinued. We will, however, still produce our international newsletter, *CAL-laborate* which attracts articles from Australia, the UK and Sweden.

Of immediate interest here are the changes that have taken place in our annual national workshops (or symposiums, as we will call them from now on). Whilst our other national activities have contracted somewhat, these have increased. For the last three years we have hosted a two-day conference, the first of which is a First Year Experience Forum and the second is the Symposium. The First Year Experience Forum has taken the place of the show-and-tell element of the workshop and allows for discussion of teaching and learning issues pertinent to the needs of first year students and the academic staff who teach them.

This is also the second year that the Pearson Education UniServe Science Teaching Award has been made. This award recognizes teaching that improves student learning through the use of information technology. It is also the second year that papers in the Symposium Proceedings have been refereed.

Right from the very beginning we believed one of the main reasons for our existence on the national level was to promote a sense of community among tertiary teachers of science. We know we have done that in the past. We aim to keep doing it in the future.



What happened at the symposium

The theme of this year's symposium was *Scholarly Inquiry in Flexible Teaching and Learning*. This followed on from previous workshops: *Education Research* in 2001, *Evaluation* in 2000, and *Flexible Learning* in 1999. We felt that these issues are still right at the forefront of where important work is currently being done, and worthy of a follow-up symposium.

There were two very different keynote addresses. Beryl Hesketh is Dean of Science at The University of Sydney. Calling on her background as an academic cognitive psychologist, and her experience in the field of training in the business world, she spoke on the 'Science of science teaching and learning'. In her talk she highlighted an interesting dilemma in the area of training and transfer: the disparity between methods of training that foster long-term retention and transfer and those that students rate highly and find enjoyable. See page 3. On the other hand, Paul Francis is an astronomer at the Australian National University, who has developed a technique of using role-playing games, borrowed from the corporate world, in science lectures. His talk also demonstrated by his method of delivery, how an enthusiastic delivery can enhance the lecture experience. For further details see page 7.

There were ten contributed papers from all over the country, and even one from a university in Thailand. There were also twelve posters, short papers or abstracts of which are included in this Proceedings. Following a 'tradition' established last year, the posters were divided into those which could be given in standard poster format, and four special ones which were presented as show-and-tell sessions. This proved popular last year in that it allows developers of extended software packages or formally structured innovative teaching techniques to have enough time to show their wares.

Pearson Education UniServe Science Teaching Award

This was the second time this award has been made. This year there were seven entries, and the judging panel, Associate Professor Bob Hewitt (chair), Professor Shirley Alexander (UTS), Professor Richard Gunstone (Monash) and Lori Hales (Pearson Education) again had an extremely difficult job in making the final decision but in the end they were unanimous.

The winners were an inter-university team headed by Robert McLaughlan (UTS) and including Denise Kirkpatrick (UNE), Holger Maier (Adelaide) and Philip Hirsch (Sydney). The project involved the construction of a cross-disciplinary electronic role-play simulation ('e-sim'). The particular project that that team worked on was an exercise in decision making concerning environmental management of the Mekong region in South East Asia: but the technique can be used in many other discipline areas. (See page 13 of this Proceedings for a fuller description.) Our most sincere congratulations to the winning team, and to the other entrants.