

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 4th Annual International Symposium for Emerging Technologies for Online Learning, July 11-13, 2011

Bryan Alexander, National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education, USA

In the summer of 2011 several hundred representatives of American campuses and e-learning industry descended on San Jose in California for the 4th Annual International Symposium for Emerging Technologies for Online Learning (ET4Online). For three days on July 11-13 academics and practitioners from across the United States shared their thoughts, trends, best practices, and challenges pertaining to teaching and learning in the digital age. This was an impressive meeting reflecting well the contemporary mood in American academia: exhilaration at learning opportunities created by advances in technology, concerns about financial stresses and budget cuts, and anticipatory curiosity about emergent developments.

Held in the Silicon Valley, the symposium attracted broad attention, especially given the fact that it was sponsored by both the SLOAN Consortium and MERLOT – Multimedia Edu-

cational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching. The SLOAN Consortium is “an institutional and professional leadership organization dedicated to integrating online education into the mainstream of higher education, helping institutions and individual educators improve the quality, scale, and breadth of education,” (<http://sloanconsortium.org/>) while MERLOT is a partnership program of the California State University with higher education institutions, professional societies and industry aimed to build an “open online community of resources designed primarily for faculty, staff and students of higher education from around the world to share their learning materials and pedagogy” (<http://taste.merlot.org/>).

What follows is a snapshot of the symposium in which I was honored to deliver a keynote address. My purpose is to give the reader a sense of issues that the symposium touched upon over those pleasant summer days. The conference website (<http://sloanconsortium.org/et4online>)

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and the swarm of audience-produced social media around the event (Facebook, 2011) will yield a broader account of emerging higher education technologies.

The program featured a variety of full-day and shorter pre-conference workshops on the topics ranging from Moodle 2.0 to iPad use in education (<http://sloanconsortium.org/conferences/2011/et4online/proceedings>). One especially interesting to me was focused on the Course Management System (CMS): “Emerging Technologies Workshop: An Immersive Professional Development Opportunity!” Ably facilitated by Phylise Banner of American Public University System, this workshop consisted of several expert presentations and a subsequent discussion. Participants and experts alike were primarily CMS administrators and trainers, or staff who worked with CMS platforms while performing other functions (librarians, for example). Overall, the session offered a good vision of the changes in the CMS of 2011.

The CMS platform world has become more common and diverse than it would have been several years ago. Nearly every campus represented maintained at least one CMS. Attendees described supporting and/or using: Blackboard, and its purchased former competitors such as WebCT; open source platforms Sakai and Moodle; an Ontario (Canada) based Desire2Learn; and some homegrown, locally developed systems. I left the workshop with an impression that Blackboard has clearly lost both market and mindshare, and that loss seemed likely to continue. No institution’s representative reported a recent move towards Blackboard, while some mentioned plans to move away from it, typically to an open source alternative. Others maintained separate CMS systems within a large university, e.g., a law school running Blackboard, and a college of nursing using Moodle. Perhaps, the acquisition of Blackboard by Providence Equity Partners investor group in July 2011 will bring some changes to the CMS market and the kind of products it offers.

CMS benefits were not uniformly held. Instead, small constituencies within the larger

group articulated advantages that others did not share. Some were IT-focused, such as the ease of maintaining a uniform system as opposed to wrangling with different ones. Others were inter-institutional, including facilitating digital documents made available by the library, and increasing classroom presence for IT – i.e., working closely with faculty. Several CMS advocates saw campus-wide platform implementation as a way of supporting online teaching and learning. Copyright advantages – namely, compliance with the Technology, Education and Copyright Harmonization Act of 2002 (commonly known as the TEACH Act) – were aired, but not considered significant.

A discussion of CMS usability and currency rapidly became grim. The consensus was that all available systems presented a very different interface and architecture from what today’s digital natives are accustomed to. Discussants saw CMS as distinct from the world of Web 2.0 and social media, and considered this a problem for adoption, training, and the ultimate viability of the CMS software category. Indeed, few disagreed with this writer’s description of a CMS-less future.

After conference participants gathered in a large ballroom for my keynote presentation, “Imagining the Future of Education: Scenarios for Learning after Technology,” I had the privilege to lead them through collective brainstorming to glimpse at the future of technology in higher education. This was accomplished by restructuring the keynote format into a multimodal session: PowerPoint and a Prezi concept map presentation (Alexander, 2011) followed by audience interaction in response to various scenarios. My intent was to use formal multiplicity to maximally engage the audience presumably expecting a noninteractive lecture. This tactic is well suited to scenarios, which are designed to elicit new thinking from listeners.

The presentation (<http://sloanconsortium.org/conferences/2011/et4online/LIVEKeynote>) began with a quick jolt from an Ed Wood’s video, a movie director known for his eccentric and outlandish productions, and preceded to an overview of futures methods. The idea was to

introduce intellectual frameworks for thinking through possible futures scenarios, along with a dose of skepticism (Alexander, 2009). After outlying statistical extrapolation, prediction markets, environmental scanning (finding the factors that could influence technological educational innovations), and the Delphi method, several futures scenarios were summarized. The Nassim Taleb's dreadful "black swan problem," (Taleb, 2007) 2 a moniker to "unlikely events, either unperceived in the present or determined to be statistically improbable—until they occur and have enormous effects" (Alexander, 2009) was not forgotten. The *Horizon Report* (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, & Haywood, 2011) served as an example of Delphi, while a recent talk by Kevin Kelly, editor of *Wired* magazine, exemplified extrapolation (Groeger, 2011).

Those methods were applied, as I outlined several scenarios. These are imaginative narratives of what the world of teaching and learning could be like after technology revolution, based on extrapolating selected present-day trends. Two of these narratives were based on how divergent information architecture policies can reshape the higher education environment. The "Wide Open World" depicted a future driven by continuous sharing of open content, while "Silo World" showed the opposite. "Augmented Nation" assumed a new default setting for everyday life: physical locations with spatially assigned digital content in which augmented reality (AR) technology redefines public and private spaces. The least plausible "Long Great Recession" scenario took another tack, extending the post-2008 American economic malaise forward and seeing an echo of Japan's 1990s lost decade. Last, "Gamified World" posited perhaps the strangest vista, where computer gaming not only becomes mainstream, but also extends its information and behavior practices into daily reality.

The audience perceived each of these futures through a common grid. Graphically displayed with the help of the Prezi Web presentation service, the grid consisted of two domains, "public life" and "the campus." Each was broken down into indicators, such as profes-

sional development structures, state of scholarly publication, role of the campus library, e-book industry health, and so on. Audience members were able to track these indicators across the range of scenarios. They were then asked to nominate which scenario seemed most likely to occur. The open and closed architecture world's scenarios seemed most attractive, both as likely outcomes and, in the case of "Wide Open," preferred. Open educational resources (OER) do not appear to have won general approbation in the community. "Great Recession" won no admirers, unsurprisingly, but elicited its amount of supporters, suggesting instructional technologists expect a dim economic future. Augmented reality and gamified worlds were audience outliers, suggesting that futuristic technologies are remote to schools at present.

It is impossible to fully reflect on the cornucopia of conference threads and themes, and describe all conversations held in a single report. How will changes in digital technology impact scholarly communications? What does the future hold for scholarly publishing? Everyone interested sought of at least a partial answer during the panel in which two digital scholarly journal editors spoke about their experiences. Edward Perry and Michelle Pilati, co-editors of the *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* (JOLT), recounted their story so far. JOLT is, for some a *rara avis*, and for others a logical expression of recent trends: an online, peer-reviewed, freely accessible scholarly journal.

Perry and Pilati described a steadily growing number of submissions from all over the world, the acceptance levels, the distributed review process, and the ever-building audience that JOLT wins year by year. During the past year, for example, the journal website has had over 127,000 visitors (<http://virtualschooling.wordpress.com/2011/03/16/march-2011-issue-of-jolt-is-now-online/>). The editors also described JOLT's gradual recognition both by scholarly community and campus administrators. Echoing the futures scenarios discussion, Perry and Pilati expressed economic concerns. As the broader economy's malaise intensifies,

scholarly publishing starts to experience a chronic financial stress. The problems of supporting a journal like JOLT have neither been solved in the past nor vanished. The editors engaged the audience in a wide-ranging discussion of economic support models, including private and state grants, donations, “gold” open access, and institutional subvention. Extending JOLT’s output to mobile devices was also aired, both as a way to widen readership and a response to budgetary challenge.

Overall, the conference planning committee performed an outstanding service by addressing the conference theme “Empowering Next Generation Teaching.” The committee arranged an impressive assortment of plenary, featured, network, and poster sessions, as well as workshops. True to its name, the conference included a virtual attendance option (<http://sloan-consortium.org/conferences/2011/et4online/> streamed), which granted access to live streams of the keynote, plenary, and featured sessions, as well as a number of regular information sessions from each track and vendors’ showcase. Vendor Showcase sessions included presentation from Blackboard, Adobe, Embanet-Compass, iParadigms, SoftChalk, Atomic Learning, and Fig Leaf Software among others. The research and best practice presentations were divided into five major tracks: pedagogy; instructional design and support of online classes; the new learning communities; inventive uses of media

and tools; administration, infrastructure, and support services; and finally, the cutting edge technology. Of particular interest were six sessions that featured winners of the MERLOT Awards for Exemplary Online Materials. The awards were bestowed on a competitive basis to the authors of exemplary digital learning resources.

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Bryan Alexander (PhD, University of Michigan) is a Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE). He writes and speaks about emerging trends in the integration of inquiry, pedagogy, and technology in higher education. His current research interests include futurist methodologies, the transformation of scholarly communication, and the learning outcomes associated with digital technologies. Dr. Alexander is the author of The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media (Praeger, 2011). He runs the NITLE futures market, a crowd-sourced prediction game; is active online, combining research with communication across multiple venues; and contributes to Techne, NITLE’s blog. He also tweets steadily at @BryanAlexander.