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ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING TECHNOLOGY NEWSLETTER

Virtual Learning Environments and librarians - what's it got to do with them, anyway?

JACQUELINE CHELIN

Librarians have a long tradition of working with academic staff and integrating information skills teaching in to the curriculum as well as dealing with online systems and services. Librarians are frequently the first (or only) port of call for students needing help with a variety of queries, often outside normal working hours. That help is increasingly focused on queries relating to e-learning resources and virtual learning environments (VLEs). In 2001 the JISC funded the INSPIRAL project (INveStigating Portals for Information Resources and Learning), which focussed on digital libraries and VLES and a year later, established the DiVLE (Linking Digital Libraries with VLEs) programme. So, not surprisingly, library involvement in VLEs is happening across the sector in many different and exciting ways.

Linking the VLE and the library

Many libraries already have sophisticated Web sites, packed with information about services offered and resources available. Having a Library tab within the main frame of a VLE's pages, which links to these Web sites, is a popular approach. Another option is to use a standard icon within each course on the VLE that can form a consistent link to the library resources irrespective of the subject area. Such links might be to materials like subject guides or instruction sheets for e-resources, customised from the output of JISC-funded projects such as Hylife (Hybrid library of the future) and Informs (Information skills).

Integrating information skills materials into the VLE

The main debate about integrating information skills materials within VLEs focuses on whether to create a generic set of materials for access by all students or to customise them for individual courses. The relationship between subject librarians and the faculty team is crucial in the latter. The added effort of customising materials to different subject areas and loading them into separate parts of the system probably adds to their effectiveness because students use them in context and at the appropriate stage of their studies. In some institutions library staff have been running credit-rated information literacy courses for some time; one library has recently transferred theirs onto a VLE. This course takes place over a number of weeks and utilises most of the functionality of the VLE including multiple choice questions and discussion groups.

Quality control and validation procedures

In a Welsh institution, the Learning Resources Centre (LRC) is fully integrated into the quality control procedures. As the approval of the programme content includes all associated learning resources, detailed consultation takes place with the LRC to ensure that all access and digitisation rights have been negotiated and costed. This demonstrates another aspect of libraries' work pertinent to VLEs. Many librarians are using HERON to license and digitise published materials for inclusion/linking to VLEs. Their expertise can prove invaluable on managing the electronic rights, copyright implications and options for deep linking.

Staff development

To ensure staff are competent to support users with queries about their institution's VLE, some libraries are setting up specific modules to supplement in-house staff development programmes e.g. "Using the Internet", "Health and Safety", "Disability awareness". These provide a new method of reaching staff who have missed training sessions or need updating on certain areas. A valuable by-product is that all library staff become familiar with the VLE and thereby better understand students' needs and queries. In addition, some libraries are using the VLE to support project work and cross team/campus working, eg, by displaying presentations on key topics and providing direct links to useful sites as well as using the discussion area.

e-learning teams

The introduction of VLEs has affected support structures within universities; academic, administrative, library and technical staff are working more collaboratively on developing a framework for learning. For those institutions who did not already have one,

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a small team, variously named e-learning/academic development, has often been established to co-ordinate e-learning activity and to spearhead the development of the VLE. Many of these teams are based in libraries since they may provide a non-political environment and offer an opportunity to take advantage of existing communications channels between library staff and colleagues in faculties and in computing/IT services.

Future system integration

Producers of VLEs and Library Management Systems are developing their products to improve integration. Similarly electronic reading lists products and e-resources authentication systems are positioning themselves in relation to VLEs, well aware that integration is the key.

Activities at the University of the West of England (UWE)

At UWE the library staff contribute to the VLE's Management Group and its Support Group. We are currently working on creating a library area within the VLE containing information skills materials and linking out to e-resources and the library catalogue. The way the student data is automatically fed into the VLE mitigates against attaching all 25,000 students to a specific library module/course. Some creative thinking is helping to overcome this and to ensure that UWE staff manage the system rather than vice versa!

Ultimately, the creativity necessary to develop a VLE is generated through the dynamic collaboration between a whole range of staff. All are becoming involved in a more lively and public debate about learning, teaching and meeting student needs. The interdependency of learning technologists, academics, systems administrators, administrative staff and librarians is challenging, but the enthusiasm to realise the opportunities provided by the VLE and to engage students in a variety of exciting ways is almost tangible. Groups of staff are sharing their knowledge and expertise in such a way that the whole organisation is learning, too.

Related links

- CILIP Update - various articles from 2002-3 *www.cilip.org.uk/update/*
- DiVLE -*www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_divle*
- Heron - *www.heron.ingenta.com/*
- Hylife project - *http://hylife.unn.ac.uk/*
- INSPIRAL - *www.bangor.ac.uk/cldt/site/elearning/reports/Inspiral2.pdf*
- Informs project - *http://informs.hud.ac.uk/cgi-bin/informs.pl*
- SCONUL Newsletter - various articles from 2002-3 *www.sconul.ac.uk/pubs_stats/newsletter/*

Jacqueline Chelin, Deputy Librarian
University of the West of England, Bristol
Jacqueline.Chelin@uwe.ac.uk

Meet the new team at ALT!

We are delighted to welcome three new, full-time staff at the ALT office, who all started on 5 January, 2004. They are:

Marion O'Dea, Operations Manager
marionodea@brookes.ac.uk

Marion was Office Manager for 3 years with the International Centre for English Language Studies at Oxford Brookes University. This is where she also completed her Business Management Degree. She was previously Distance Learning Administrator at Oxford and Cherwell College. Marion's role is to establish and maintain effective and efficient procedures to support the smooth operation of ALT, with a particular emphasis on financial management, business planning, membership services, and on operational support for ALT committees.

Sue Garrett, Administration Officer
sgarrett@brookes.ac.uk

Prior to joining ALT, Sue spent 6 years as Administration Officer at Tilsley Park, an Oxfordshire Leisure and Sports Complex. Before she had a career break she was with the Electricity Council at their Appliance Testing Laboratory in Surrey. Reporting to the Operations Manager, Sue's role is to support the smooth running of the ALT central office, primarily in the areas of administration and finance.

Hayley Willis, Events Administrator
h.willis@brookes.ac.uk

Hayley joined ALT from CD Marketing Services, a Berkshire-based subsidiary of Royal TPG Post (the national postal operator in the Netherlands), where she was Payroll Administrator. Reporting to the Director, Hayley works on the planning, running, and evaluation of ALT workshops, one-day events, and ALT's annual international conference.

On-line learning in the polymer industry

JIM WILSON

In 2001 the Polymer National Training Organisation, supported by the Department for Education and Skills and other partners, embarked on a pilot project to examine the opportunities for on-line learning within the polymer industry. This project was highly successful and has paved the way for an industry-wide initiative to deliver tutor supported on-line learning and assessment, enabling learners to gain access to vocational qualifications at level 2.

The polymer processing industry sector consists of approximately 3,000 companies, mainly small and medium enterprise's (SME's), with a combined workforce of around 400,000. The sector needs a well-trained and well-qualified workforce; therefore, any programme of learning must lead to an approved industry qualification for both learners and their employers. The Polymer National Training Organisation (PNTO) offers a number of training courses to meet the needs of the sector. For example, a programme of short courses, up to ten days duration, run at the PNTO Technical Centre in Telford, the network of regional centres, or in-company, is well established. However, new working methods within the industry make attendance at such traditional courses increasingly difficult.

Market research carried out by the PNTO found the perceived high cost of conventional training programmes and the difficulty releasing key people for courses discouraged potential customers from developing their staff. These constraints were particularly applicable to smaller companies, with the least resources. What clearly was needed was a cost effective and accessible training solution that would encourage employers to develop their staff, and employees to develop themselves. Therefore, during 2001, PNTO, supported by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and other partners, embarked on a project to examine on-line learning, as an approach to meet the training needs of the industry and overcome some of the difficulties being experienced. Injection Moulding was selected as the topic area.

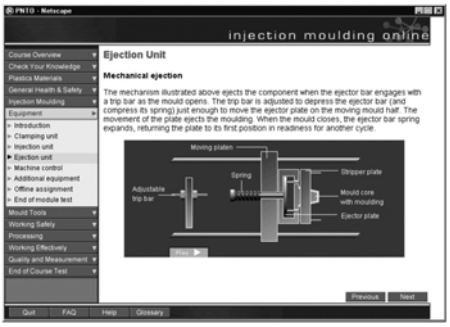

Figure 1: Example screen to illustrate the operation of an Injection Moulding machine

Figure 2: An example of the conversational mode used to convey to the learner some of the more mundane aspects of the material

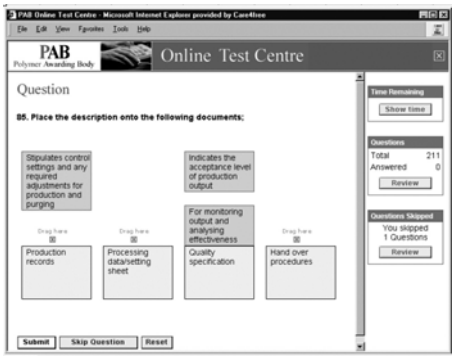

Figure 3: Example of a drag and drop question from the End Test. Please note that in the 'live' version of the End Test the Menu Bar is not displayed

Tutor support issues

Significant levels of learner support were considered essential; this would range from administrative support on how to access the learning materials through to tutorial help with the learning content. Experienced tutors were available at the PNTO Learning Centre in Telford and at the educational institutions, which provided the industry specific training courses. However, providing support to on-line learners requires different skills from traditional teaching and therefore a programme designed to enhance skills of existing tutors was required. The LeTTOL course (Learning To Teach On-Line), developed by South Yorkshire Further Education Consortium, was chosen to develop tutors' skills. The LeTTOL course provides not only experienced but also prospective tutors with an on-line learning experience.

The learning material

To meet the needs of our learners, we worked with low technical specifications. It was anticipated that Internet connection would be via a 56kbs modem dial-up line and therefore no file should exceed 40kb in size. This clearly had an impact on the design of the materials but we had to ensure that everyone could access the materials.

The on-line course was structured on very traditional lines and included a course overview, a pre-assessment module, several instructional modules and a final test. Each of the modules contained several sub-modules, an end of module test plus an off-line assignment. The pre-assessment, the end of module tests and the final test were all presented and assessed on-line and the scores passed to the learner and the tutor. The on-line materials also provided a glossary of terms, frequently asked questions and a readily available on-line link to the tutor in case of difficulty.

The off-line assignments were downloaded, printed by the learners and undertaken in a more traditional learning format. When the assignments had been completed, the results were e-mailed to the learner's personal tutor who assessed and commented on the

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CASE STUDY

The ongoing design of Lancaster University's Advanced Learning Technology (ALT) programme

Please note Lancaster University's Advanced Learning Technology (ALT) programme has no formal connection with the Association for Learning Technology (ALT). Only in this article ALT refers to the Advanced Learning Technology (ALT) Programme.

CHRISTINE STEEPLES

The Advanced Learning Technology (ALT) programme at Lancaster University has been running continuously since 1989, offering a highly specialised distance learning programme for people wanting to acquire and extend the knowledge and skills needed to create and manage high quality e-learning resources, services and environments. It is first and foremost a programme for professional development underpinned by principles of collaboration, constructivism and reflection.

The ALT programme offers opportunities to reflect on, and improve, the way we work with learning technologies. It enables people to create bridges between their professional experience and interests and ideas, evidence, concepts, methods and theory to be met in the research-based literature.

1999 saw the biggest overhaul of the programme since its foundation, followed in 2003 by a major redesign of the online environment used on the programme. We have not only updated the 'content' of the modules, but also significantly expanded access to electronic resources. We have restructured and broadened the whole programme, and switched its emphasis in two important ways.

Firstly, we have shifted the balance between (a) participants' experience, expertise and interests and (b) our conceptions of what is worth knowing in any field.

In the past, we started each module with tutors marking out the boundaries and key ideas of the module, prescribing the syllabus and presenting participants with a stack of readings. We

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assignment before returning the work. These tutor marked, off-line assignments were considered a valuable part of the training. They allowed the tutors to gauge the learners' progress during the course and also to identify, both individually and collectively, any areas of difficulty, which could immediately be rectified.

The course itself was highly prescriptive and learners were recommended to work through it, in order, from beginning to end. The on-line instructional modules took a very didactic approach but a range of presentational styles were adopted. For example, interactive animations (Fig. 1) were used, within the limits of the technical specification, to illustrate the operation of machinery. A conversational mode (Fig. 2) was used to support the learning of basic knowledge and a wide variety of questioning techniques (Fig. 3) deployed in the end of module and the final test. See accompanying figures on page 3.

The final test

It is very important, to both the learners and their employers, that the on-line learning leads to an approved industry qualification, in this case, National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 2. The award of any NVQ qualification, however, requires the learner to demonstrate understanding and proficiency in both the knowledge and practical aspects of the subject but on-line learning in this case can only deliver the knowledge requirements. Therefore, our successful learners are awarded a Vocational Related Qualification (VRQ), which is accepted by the polymer industry. This can lead to a full NVQ for our learners when they have demonstrated on the job proficiency.

To gain the VRQ, learners must complete a final test, consisting of 80 online questions, within a prescribed time limit. Generated from a question bank, the test is taken under the supervision of an invigilator in order to maintain standards and security. The Polymer Awarding Body (PAB), which supervises qualifications within the polymer industry sector, has been responsible for setting the final test questions and for establishing a methodology, which has required approval by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

The outcomes

Independent evaluation concluded the pilot was a success with some minor issues to be addressed for wide-scale deployment. All the learners reported learning something from the pilot even those participants who had considerable experience found that they either learnt about something they took for granted or that it provided some reinforcement to what they already knew. The increase in scores between the pre and final test were evidence of the knowledge acquired. The pilot material also won the World of Learning Conference and Exhibition (WOLCE) award for the 'On-line course of the Year' in 2002.

The main outcome was that the pilot material demonstrated the potential benefits of on-line learning to the polymer industry sector. On the basis of this, a new programme of work is in progress that will deliver on-line learning and assessment in five more key polymer and allied industry processes. This will be a major step towards enabling some 100,000 learners throughout the industry to gain access to vocational qualifications at level 2.

For further information about this project contact Brian Manning, Polymer National Training Organisation at *brianm@polymernto.org.uk*.

An extended version of this article is available on the ALT website.

Jim Wilson
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encouraged participants to tell us about their experience and interest and to do an assignment bridging between their world and ours. But we didn't always help them enough with the tricky engineering work this could involve. In consequence, much of what we did learn about participants' professional interests and experience remained hidden away in assignments and was largely unavailable to other people on the programme.

One of the richest resources available to the ALT programme and its participants is the knowledge and experience or 'know how' of the participants in the programme themselves. The new ALT Online environment enables participants to share experiences and articulate ideas based on their specific context, and it is the 'place' to ask questions and share concerns. Participants are encouraged to think of themselves as constructors of their own knowledge, not as passive receptacles for hand-me-down knowledge.

Secondly, we are promoting independence and encouraging the development of self-direction.

The design of the programme's online environment places emphasis on participants as autonomous, independent, self-motivated managers of their own time and their own learning. It also aims to encourage the acquisition of learning strategies (both individually and collaboratively).

In Phase 1 of each module, we encourage participants to articulate, in considered ways, some of the relevant beliefs they have on the themes of the module. So it's about sharing ideas from their own perspectives. We are not at this stage encouraging them to collaboratively exchange ideas and engage in extended discussions (though they are perfectly at liberty to do so). It is more about responding to the set tasks and presenting ideas in so far as they feel able.

In Phase 2 of the module we do want participants to engage in collaborative discussions online with peers and with tutors. Many of the participants will have met at the Residential and generally this helps people to share ideas and experiences online. Again, tasks are set by the tutors requiring participant responses.

In Phase 3 the focus is individual work, on the formal assignment task that participants have negotiated with module tutors. Work on the assignment may well begin much earlier, of course. In the ALT online environment we encourage sharing ideas about the assignment task including encouraging advice or information from other participants.

Redesigning the ALT programme's online environment

Five purposes underpin the programme's online environment:

1. for sharing information and provision of resources
2. for communication and social interaction
3. for learning assistance and support
4. for cognitive interaction and collaboration
5. for performance support, feedback and reflection

In our major redesign of ALT online in 2003, the online environment has been organised around a number of databases and services, that can be accessed quite seamlessly from a single page available on the internet using a web browser, available at *www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/courses/edres/alt (see figure 1)*

ALT Online consists of general areas relating to the programme and module specific databases for each of the modules. It also gives integrated access to a host of electronic resources such as our library catalogue, reading lists and secure access to full-text electronic journals. Hence we have:

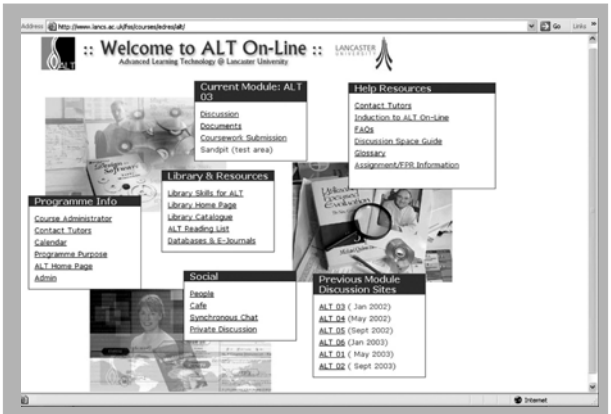

Figure 1: the ALT programme online environment front page

Programme information: including a database for general course information, documentation and communication; links to tutors and administrative staff; and a programme schedule.

Social: including a social, informal area for all participants; links to a synchronous chat space; and a space for private discussions.

Help resources: includes a database for discussing learning technology terminology; a guide to using the online space; a guide to assignments; and a set of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Current module area: gives access to the discussions of the current module; to module documentation; and to advice documents on assignment work.

Archived module databases are the old discussions from when each module was last run. These are resources for current participants, to see previous discussions.

Library resources: includes links to the university catalogue; a guide to searching online for resources, using bibliographies, indexes and information gateways; and direct access to relevant electronic full-text journals.

The ALT programme is a successful, well-established programme with an international reputation, yet we are continually evolving and developing the programme to mirror contemporary understanding of learning and learning needs and technological developments. This article has attempted to describe some recent shifts in the programme that have been aligned to both pedagogical needs and technological capabilities.

If you would like to know more, please contact us at *csalt@lancaster.ac.uk* or on the web at *http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/alt*

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How do you know it's any good? - the changing face of evaluation

JOHN TRAXLER

Some of the most pressing teaching and learning priorities for universities and colleges include widening access, increasing participation and working with new technologies whilst coping with static budgets. These priorities encourage institutions to engage in innovative and exploratory projects across their whole teaching and learning portfolio and turn them all into potential research and development activities. However, making any sense or use of such activities requires evaluation (and then of course dissemination).

Evaluation - the key

Most of us would agree that evaluation is essential. Firstly, it informs the outside world and the wider academic community about the effectiveness of the activities, specifically in relation to their objectives. Secondly, it provides insights to the funders on the utility and cost-effectiveness of their investment in these activities. Unfortunately for many of us, it can also be seen as an inconvenient or uncomfortable necessity and summative evaluation, coming late in a project, can often be at the mercy of contingencies earlier in the project.

The development of evaluation strategies has historically focussed on face-to-face contact with students working in cohorts on courses in classrooms, lecture theatres and laboratories. Evaluation has depended on a small stable repertoire of techniques. Now, as we have said, the changing political, economic and social climate has encouraged educational institutions to address new constituencies of learners, such as full-time students having to hold down full-time jobs and access students without a conventional background of study. It has also encouraged teaching using blends of new technologies, for example, networked computers and mobile phones which are used to teach asynchronously at a distance.

This means that innovative projects working in these environments must adapt and explore more varied techniques in order to evaluate their effectiveness. I believe that the repertoire of conventional qualitative evaluation techniques embracing, usually, observation, interview and focus group may no longer be adequate or appropriate for these varied constituencies or for these new technologies. Perhaps we need to go back and identify some basic underlying principles before developing a richer mix of techniques and tools that match the ever-increasing complexity of higher education.

The ideal evaluation

Any learner evaluation is likely to face a number of practical and operational constraints. Nevertheless, I feel that it is useful to identify the characteristics of an ideal evaluation. These, at least, represent a point of departure. In my view, the ideal evaluation should be:

- Rigorous - the conclusions must be trustworthy and transferable
- Efficient, in terms of cost, effort, time
- Ethical
- Proportionate - not more ponderous, onerous or time-consuming than the learning experience itself
- Appropriate - to the specific learning technologies, to the learners and to the ethos of the project concerned - built in, not bolted on
- Consistent - with the teaching and learning philosophy and conceptions of teaching and learning of all the participants
- Authentic - accessing what learners really mean, really feel
- Consistent across
  - different groups or cohorts of learners - addressing generality and transferability
  - time, that is, the evaluation is reliably repeatable
  - whatever varied devices and technologies are used

The ideal evaluation will always be compromised by practical and operational considerations. It will also be constrained by the very nature of students, the subjects they study and the society around them and by the means (that is, the technologies) by which they study

Why evaluation can be difficult

The ideal evaluation will always be compromised by practical and operational considerations. It will also be constrained by the very nature of students, the subjects they study and the society around them and by the means (that is, the technologies) by which they study.

To illustrate these points in a practical way, let's consider the following. Students cannot or will not always be able to tell an evaluator about their abilities, knowledge, values, needs, preferences, goals or feelings, or any changes in them. The students may not have sufficient awareness, may not be able to put them into words and may be too embarrassed to disclose or reveal. In addition, evaluation may raise issues of self-esteem, social standing and status - much of education is concerned with affluence and success signified by qualifications and employment, whilst ownership and competence with technology have a social significance and a fashion dimension (especially for technological 'gadgets'). Basic skills,

literacy and numeracy are core to a sense of personal adequacy whilst marks and grades are the outward sign of academic progress. Furthermore, there may be cultural, ethnic and gender gaps between evaluators and students. The former are likely to be middle-class, possibly middle-aged and the latter young, (thanks to student fees and loans) in debt and occupants of a different cultural space. This means that the two groups will often speak different languages (slang, jargon and txt messaging are literal examples) and dialogue may be flawed by issues that are "not-worth-mentioning" or "taken-for-granted".

Evaluators will not always access the truths they seek, certainly not without using novel and appropriate tools and techniques

With new mobile technologies, our evaluation strategies may seem inappropriate. For example, developments in mobile learning approximate (or aspire) to a style of learning that is spontaneous, unstructured, unpredictable and informal and it may be very difficult to devise evaluation strategies that harmonise with this ethos. Also, projects that employ several different devices to support blended learning, for example phones and PDAs, will find that the pedagogies are spread unevenly. In innovative projects, the devices themselves may be peculiar or idiosyncratic, not stable and perhaps not well understood.

Evaluators will not always access the truths they seek, certainly not without using novel and appropriate tools and techniques. These must be grounded in a principled framework that draws in all the current schools and perspectives and addresses the fundamental questions of "What are we trying to find out?" and "What might be getting in the way?"

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EVENTS

ALT Workshops

PDAs and SMS in education: an overview of mobile technologies

Bishop Burton College

4 March 2004

£85 (ALT members) £140 (non-members)

The workshop will take a basic look at Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and Text Messaging (SMS) and explore some educational uses for these technologies. We will demonstrate the use of PDAs in registration and in class work (e.g. use of images in identification, recording GPS); the use of presentation software; how other 'office' based software can be used and how some can connect to the Internet.We will discuss how text messaging is being used within the sector and explore one free on-line facility. Hardware (PDAs) will be provided.

This is not a master class, but an overview of the way in which such technologies can assist teaching and learning.

Presenters: David Sugden and John Whalley

Booking deadline: 20 February 2004

Click & Go: Video - Access for All

Glasgow Caledonian University

19 March 2004

£95 (ALT members) £150 (non-members)

Participants will explore the issues of digital media and accessibility through a series of informative talks and a hands-on practical afternoon session. The morning session will include expert speakers who will introduce accessibility in the e-learning context, present examples of accessible video and audio materials, and explore the available technical solutions. The afternoon session will be a hands-on look at the tools and processes through which we can make our video and audio resources accessible.

Presenters: Ross Little, Mireia Asensio and David Sloan

Booking deadline: 5 March 2004

For booking forms and more information please visit *www.alt.ac.uk/workshops.asp* or email *alt@brookes.ac.uk*

Spring Conference

ALT-SURF Spring Conference and Research Seminar
Living & learning: ePortfolios and digital repositories

Moray House, University of Edinburgh

Thursday 22 April and Friday 23 April 2004

Conference
Thursday 22 April

Chair: Dr Allison Littlejohn, University of Strathclyde

Keynote speakers:
Lorna M Campbell, Jan van Tartwijk

Collaborative Research Seminar
Friday 23 April

Chair: Bas Cordewener, Assistant Manager, Platform ICT and Education, SURF

Participants must be active in research and development in ePortfolios and digital repositories (places will be limited)

Fees
Conference only £120.00 (members) £170.00 (non-members)
Both days £150.00 (members) £200.00 (non-members)
Research seminar only £50.00 Dinner Thursday evening £25

For further information go to www.alt.ac.uk/conferences.asp

ALT-C 2004: Blue skies and pragmatism

Eleventh international ALT conference

14-16 September 2004 Exeter, Devon, UK

Second call for papers
Please see the web site for full details of themes and session types: www.alt.ac.uk/altc2004

Keynote speakers
Wendy Hall, University of Southampton
Vijay Kumar, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Ron Oliver, Edith Cowan University

Deadlines
research papers: Friday 5 March 2004 other streams: Friday 26 March 2004

www.alt.ac.uk/altc2004

Association for Learning Technology

ALT

ALT-N

Articles, comment, reviews and previews are welcomed for the next issue. Please contact the Editor for further details and a style guide.

Please note that any articles submitted for the newsletter may be published in parallel on the ALT web site.

Advertising rates
£300 for quarter page advert or to insert a one-page flyer (no VAT)

Deadline: **12 March 2004**

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