

## **ALT Labs Group Special Interest Group – Notes of Founding Meeting held 25/9/2003 at Birkbeck College in London**

### **1 Attendance**

We introduced ourselves and an attendance list was circulated. Attendance was as follows:

Association for Learning Technology (ALT) – Seb Schmoller

**BBC** – George Auckland

**BT Exact** – John Seton

Centre for Educational Technology and Distance Learning (**CETADL**), University of Birmingham – Dan Corlett

Centre for Learning and Teaching (**CELT**), University of Wolverhampton – John O’Donoghue

Creative Learning Lab (**CLL**), Westminster Kingsway College – Mandy Berry

Derby University – Chris O’Hagan

DfES – Diana Laurillard

DTI ITEC Skills Team – Peter Revill

Institute of Educational Technology (**IET**), Open University – Robin Mason

Institute for Learning and Research Technology (**ILRT**), Bristol University – Alison Allden

JISC – Daxa Patel

**JISC Techwatch** – Brian Davies

Knowledge Media (**KMI**), Open University – Peter Scott

London Knowledge Lab (**LKL**) – Richard Noss and Sara de Freitas

**LTRI**, London Metropolitan University – Tom Boyle

**MIT Media Lab Europe** – Carol Strohecker

**NESTA Futurelab** – Martin Owen

**Microsoft** – Caroline Phillips

Scottish Centre for Research into On-Line Learning and Assessment (**SCROLLA**),

University of Glasgow – Erica McAteer

**Ultralab**, Stephen Heppell

### **2 Apologies**

Apologies had been received from the following organisations:

Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies (**CARET**), University of Cambridge – John Norman

HP – Clifford Harris

**Orange** – Paul Phillips

### **3 Welcome from Sara de Freitas (Birkbeck) and introduction from Stephen Heppell (Ultralab), Co-chairs.**

#### **3.1**

Sara de Freitas opened the meeting, drawing attention to Birkbeck’s role as a computing pioneer in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She thanked ALT, Birkbeck, Ultralab, and the JISC for support in getting meeting organised. She outlined the Agenda, highlighting her research finding that the absence of “a Labs Group SIG”, linking researchers in industry and in tertiary education represents a significant gap at present, which we are poised to remedy.

#### **3.2**

Stephen Heppell distributed T-shirts, and summarised the thinking behind the decision to convene the meeting, specifically that:

- most learning technology lab people know what is going on in only a handful of other labs;
- very few lab people have any overview of UK-wide work in the field;

- the situation is even more opaque for people outside the lab world, for example DfES, DTI, or the JISC, which makes it difficult for people in policy and procurement roles to gain a strategic overview of what is happening on the ground, to get rapid responses to requests for information and guidance, let alone to target such requests appropriately.

If there is broad enough support for its formation, a learning technology labs Special Interest Group – a.k.a. The Labs Group – would fill this gap, provided such a group operated in a collegiate, open way, with a focus on sharing ideas and know-how, rather than, as Stephen put it, “strutting”.

The purpose of the Founding Meeting is to test support for a Special Interest Group of this kind.

Stephen then welcomed Diana Laurillard, Head of the DfES e-Learning Strategy Unit, who had kindly agreed to deliver a short keynote, as well as to participate in the Founding Meeting itself.

#### 4 Diana Laurillard

Diana provided an overview of *Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy* (TAUELS), a consultation document which Charles Clarke had launched at the ALT Policy Board meeting on 8/7/2003 here at Birkbeck, upon which consultation will end on 31/1/2004, and in which the Secretary of State is taking a personally particularly committed interest. Starting with a power-point version of the diagram inside the front cover of TUAELS – the presentation is accessible from the ALT web site under

<http://www.alt.ac.uk/documents.html> – Diana highlighted the research and development threads that run through each of the 7 “key strategic actions” contained in the strategy. Whilst she acknowledged that R+D is relevant to all of the 7 key strategic actions, Diana put special emphasis on the **assessment** and, particularly, on the **supporting innovation** strands, highlighting the benefits which would flow from the “real inter-working and collaboration” which the SIG could provide. Particular R&D-related areas for action which Diana highlighted, and to which the existence of a SIG would contribute:

- establishing appropriate evaluation methodologies;
- capturing high quality case studies, and winning the argument that case studies are a legitimate source of evidence;
- encouraging practice-oriented research;
- increasing the number of e-learning specialists which the market will require as e-learning increases in importance in main-stream provision;
- aligning assessment and finding ways of using learning technology to “do some of the work” in formative assessment, which is so crucially important in raising educational standards;
- “thickening” the relationship between software developers and the education workforce.

Diana ended her keynote with a final slide containing this list of issues for discussion.

- Subject-specific aspects of e-learning pedagogy
- Action research pilots for e-learning assessment
- National databank for e-learning resources
- Intensive evaluation studies
- New approaches to cost-benefit analyses
- Community of practice for e-learning research and evaluation
- Guidance on e-learning for each discipline
- Generic learning design tools for teachers

#### 5 Workshop session (chaired by Sara de Freitas)

##### 5.1

Participants provided a short thumbnail sketch of the work of their lab(s). Rather than recording each thumbnail as narrative, participants were sent an information

capture worksheet after the meeting. Those which have been returned (signified by their owner being identified in bold in the attendance and apologies lists above) have been amalgamated into a single workbook, for reference purposes, covering the activity of 19 organisations. This is ready to distribute once a couple of confidentiality issues have been resolved.

In addition to thumbnail presentations, Daxa Patel, JISC Programme Director for the Development Area, briefly outlined the JISC's role as a funder of R+D into the use of ICT in education across the HE, FE, Adult, and Work-based Learning sectors. She indicated that currently the JISC lacks an overview of the learning technology research that is taking place in academia and industry, hence the JISC's interest in the establishment of the SIG, and its willingness to fund the Founding Meeting.

## **6 "Way forward" session (chaired by Stephen Heppell)**

### 6.1

There was general agreement (ranging from slightly sceptical to strongly supportive!) that a learning technology labs SIG would serve a useful purpose and that some effort should be put into getting it established, a "lightweight background organisation", with as a minimum:

- an annual meeting, which should include an opportunity for labs to "show and tell" each other what they are doing, and provide a "non-casual" way of talking to each other;
- a simple web-site on which SIG members could summarise the work of their lab, and the expertise of their people, and from which labs/funders/commissioners/industry/journalists can locate expertise, and get a coherent overview of the work of SIG labs, including overlaps and complementarities, with participants' introductory statements (as subsequently developed) being a useful starting point;
- a focus on learning technology research policy and funding, with the SIG aiming, for example, to raise the profile of learning technology research with the funding councils;
- a closed (low volume!) email list to enable communication within the SIG.

### 6.2

- Other possibilities, on which it would be stretching things to suggest there was consensus included:
  - "x-lab" visits;
  - use of RSS to feed out changes to the SIG web site;
  - organising the web site under the action headings of "Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy";
  - making a learning technology research oriented response to the e-learning strategy consultation;
  - using the ALT annual conference – <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2004/> – as an opportunity to present research papers;
  - a focus for collaborative projects and programmes of research and development.

### 6.3

- There was a strong feeling that whatever happens we should not over-reach ourselves, and avoid grandiose plans.

### 6.4

- Concerning funding, a number of options were touched on, including approaching the JISC for a small amount of "lightweight background funding",

perhaps on the basis of the JISC matching a collective contribution from each SIG lab.

## **7 Next steps**

- ALT to establish whether or not a 2004 Annual Meeting and “Show and Tell” session could be held at HP Labs somewhere between 6 and 8 July 2004, to precede or follow the ALT Annual Policy Board meeting (which will be on learning technology research policy) which is already scheduled for that time and place.
- All to respond to request from Seb Schmoller for a more detailed overview of the work of their lab. (19 responses have been received to date.)
- Sara de Freitas, Stephen Heppell, and Seb Schmoller to meet to consider how to take the SIG forward along the lines agreed in 6.1. above.
- Seb Schmoller and Sara de Freitas to discuss with Daxa Patel the possibilities of some modest financial support for the SIG from JISC.
- Sara de Freitas and Seb Schmoller to discuss with DfES the scope to develop a SIG web-presence in conjunction with DfES.

## **8 Links**

<http://www.alt.ac.uk/sigs.html>

<http://www.lonklab.ac.uk/projects/labgroup.shtml>

Written by Seb Schmoller, 26/9, 7/11, and 2/12/003

Checked by Sara de Freitas, 10/11/2004