

# Four Conferences and a Seminar Series

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Floods in the United Kingdom and drought in Australia: this last northern hemisphere summer was as wet as the corresponding winter in Australia was dry. I had been prepared for the 'typical summer's day' but did not really imagine that the most useful item of clothing that I had packed would be an anorak. All of the 'wet' metaphors and analogies came to life during the 2007 Design and Technology conference season: dipping one's toes in research, wading through theory, moving with the tide of innovative design... I went with the flow and dived into three conferences and a seminar series. The exercise did prove exhausting but it also generated energy and renewed passion to continue my work in this field. This is the value of real conferences: they encourage and support research sustainability. The fourth conference suggested in the title occurred during the not-so-wet Australian summer and completes a significant Design and Technology package.

## PATT 18: International Seminar on Design and Technology Educational Research (Glasgow)

John Dakers and Wendy Dow, from the University of Glasgow, organised a two-day seminar series where educators were invited to listen to philosophers and their interlocutors from around the world discuss their theories of technological literacy. All presenters were contributors to the recently published book, *Defining Technological Literacy: Towards an Epistemological Framework* and they were either presenting their chapter or, as an interlocutor, relating the chapter to an educational context. This style of presentation was particularly significant given the pressing need to develop technological literacy in students who inhabit a world not only shaped by technology but increasingly fashioned by market forces.

The audience members were not going to be mere spectators. This seminar series was designed to encourage thinking *and* responding. Apart from lively discussions occurring after each presentation, around the lunch tables and at the obligatory after-session drinks, all attendees were invited to be involved in the discussion groups organised after the last presentations. Here the philosophers, their interlocutors and audience members met to discuss not only *why* the thinking behind each chapter is important as part of an holistic technology education but to ask *how* we can best engage students to recognise their own strengths, understand their technological world, and to differentiate between the competing philosophies of the current technological world.

It was heady stuff and quite frankly, I was glad that I had adjusted myself to the northern hemisphere time zone as

I needed all my energy to listen, absorb and respond to these extraordinary presentations. To have the opportunity to listen to and discuss the essence of technological literacy with Don Ihde, Joseph Pitt, Leonard Waks, and Andrew Feenberg was worth the travel and an energising way to start the conference roundabout. One of the analogies that will stay with me was given by Feenberg where he likened humans and technology to fish in water. We, like fish, don't know that we are wet! I knew that I was really wet a bit later during the stay in Glasgow, but the next day after the seminar series saw the beginning of the PATT 18 Conference, across town in the Hilton Hotel.

## PATT 18: International Conference on Design and Technology Educational Research (Glasgow)

An early start heralded the beginning of the first of the three conferences – PATT 18. John Dakers, Wendy Dow and Marc de Vries had burnt their respective candles at each end and in the middle to backup from the seminar series into a comprehensive conference program. There were parallel sessions – unfortunate if you wanted to attend simultaneous sessions – but that is often the case at well-attended, well-regarded conferences. With over fifty presentations being programmed over two and a half days, the need for a time-keeper is essential and, with all good grace, John managed to keep everyone to the clock. This is particularly important when planning your programme. Reading abstracts and choosing sessions are delights of attending conferences and missing out on even a part of a presentation that has been selected for its relevance to your own work or interest is disappointing.

Thirty minute presentations are lightning-quick and can give but a taste of what the conference paper addresses in much more detail. The knowledge that the paper from which the presentation comes has been peer-reviewed is also validating, particularly if you are packing an international case with a volume of conference papers sitting there waiting to add to your excess baggage costs. Such are the joys of conferences, particularly ones where the international line-up is so varied. Europe, Asia, the Americas, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand were well represented and the interaction of this diverse delegation made for very lively discussions, dinners, and bus tours and a worthwhile text to take home.

Ah, the joys of Glasgow. Virtual conferences cannot compete with real ones on so many levels. A compelling strength of the real conference is when delegates are allowed out to play. Such was the force of international community spirit when we climbed aboard two double-decker, open-topped buses for the 'Texas' tour of Glasgow.

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Not even the torrential downpour, that accompanied us for the afternoon as we moved around this great city, could dampen the spirits of the group. Whisky tasting, highland dancing, and addressing the haggis added a true Scottish flavour to a conference line up that needed no frills to make it a rewarding and stimulating experience.

### CRIPT (Birmingham)

I was certainly not conferenced-out at the end of the Scottish leg of the tour, but a couple of days rest before the next conference experience was welcome and provided an opportunity to explore some of the delights of the Lake District. I was fit and ready for the next five days in Birmingham for the 6th International Primary and Design and Technology Conference, organised by Clare Benson and her marvellous team at the Centre for Research in Primary Technology, University of Central England. The team was celebrating ten years of CRIPT and this, their 6th biennial conference continued their commitment to the inter-relationships between theory or research and practice within curriculum development and design.

The enthusiasm was ignited during the opening session where children from various schools presented their winning designs from the *Conran Design Challenge*. This enthusiasm spread as parallel sessions were run with paper presentations in one room and workshops in the other. Many delegates from PATT had moved onto CRIPT, particularly some of the international attendees, who like us, were making best use of their visit to the UK. Many of the workshops were presented and attended by local teachers which highlighted one of the disappointing aspects of such 'dual' conferences. The philosophical or theoretical issues, such as those addressed in the PATT seminar series, rarely seem to reach an audience of current practitioners. We know that educating the profession does not cease upon graduation, and many who do seek professional development seem to believe that a 'good' conference is one from which you can take practical ideas for use in the classroom. How do we confront the real dilemma of encouraging technological literacy when those guiding the investigation into such matters choose to separate the 'useful' from the 'intellectual' or the practical from the thinking?

Again, the pace was intense with many interesting contributors in both sessions. One observation would be that to meet with the workshop presenters' need for an hour for their presentations, there were two hours of research papers. It does require a Herculean effort to stay focussed through four, thirty minute research presentations, regardless of how interesting they are. A 'real' conference in real time cannot be put on pause

and the chair of each session did a great job of moving things along. Also, as in Glasgow, the organisers arranged some delightful visits to 'real' places such as *The Locksmith's House* where the troops were regaled with ghostly tales and paper-wrapped fish and chips. The weather was a bit damp but we managed some 'Brum' sightseeing before heading west to the next conference.

### D&T Association (Telford)

I was almost, but not quite overwhelmed by it all by the final UK conference, the Design and Technology Association's annual conference 'Linking Learning', held at the University of Wolverhampton, Telford. Each day began with a keynote address and then, after the morning break, broke into concurrent sessions. There was an interesting assortment of practical workshops, research paper presentations, and poster presentations on the program. The annual keynote lecture to commemorate the contribution of Professor John Eggleston was presented by Malcolm Welch where cognitive science and design were linked in a quest to better explain, and perhaps plan for, designerly thinking.

The research papers were assigned thirty minutes with a variety of timings for the assortment of workshops being presented. Comprehensive programming creates selection dilemmas where the attendance at a one- or two-hour workshop may preclude you from attending two to four research papers. This can be quite a daunting problem-solving exercise, particularly if you are a practitioner keen to investigate new theories but eager to sample new ways of working with technologies. But how do organisers 'organise' a conference that has a rigorous research focus and a variety of comprehensive workshop opportunities? It is a design challenge to enable attendees to be exposed to the philosophical and theoretical issues such as those addressed during the PATT Seminar Series – that is, thinking as part of a holistic technological education while fulfilling their interest in the practicalities of working with new materials, programs, and artefacts.

The conference organisers succeeded in their endeavour to engage delegates and allowed them to dip their toes into different areas of design and technology. The evening entertainment was equally challenging, particularly the conference dinner held at *Enginuity* at the *Ironbridge Gorge Museum*. Here the attendees were asked to work with others at their table to create a gramophone from everyday materials. The results of the 'contest' were positively skewed by the obvious inside knowledge of the younger attendees and the rebellion exhibited by the older ones. Maybe this type of social constructivist activity could influence themes for future conferences – *Anarchy in design or Radical reconstruction: When to intervene?*

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### ICTER (Gold Coast, Australia)

The fourth conference of the title was held in December 2006 when the team from the Centre for Learning Research at Griffith University, headed by Howard Middleton, Margarita Pavlova and Dick Roebuck, convened a comprehensive conference line-up with the theme 'Values in Technology Education', the 4th International Conference on Technology Education Research. Reading chapters in text books cannot compare to sitting in an auditorium and being challenged by authors such as Andrew Feenberg and Steve Petrina. Petrina discussed his thesis of the existential-spiritual values of technology and this presentation, in many ways, exemplified why virtual conferences will never outperform real ones. The human touch is evident in all technologies, through the dissemination of knowledge, theory, thinking and philosophies in the field of Design and Technology. Removing the human from the equation reduces the value of the exercise.

The value placed on the contributions of an international line-up made this conference a worthwhile experience. Concurrent sessions made the decision-making process difficult but there were many quieter periods to catch up with delegates and discuss theories, issues and research opportunities. The karaoke session after the conference dinner which featured very interesting DVD on dish-brushes, was a time to celebrate voice technologies! but, the off-key singing did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm for discussion that is ever-present when people get together.

From sustainability, through to critiquing, from values and ethical considerations to chair design, real conferences provide an opportunity for the celebration of the field and the endeavours of those who live and work within it. The four conferences and seminar series touched on here offered immersion into a field of study that is unique, challenging, and engaging. The political, social, ethical, and spiritual influences that will challenge the field in coming years can only be discussed, considered and addressed when people come together. Indeed, while no two of the five events were identical they all provided just that – a chance to swim with different schools of thought: a chance to get wet!

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