Conference of the European
Distance Education Network
(EDEN)

Location and date: Budapest, June 16/19, 2004.

Theme: New challenges and partnerships in an enlarged European Union

Papers: available on Internet (www. eden-online.org). Contact me if you have problems.

2005 conference: Espoo (outside Helsinki), June 20-23, 2005.

The conference had about 350 participants from 36 countries. These included policy-makers, educational technologists, computer scientists (informatics) and a variety of teachers and researchers in higher education. The conference was held in Hungary, symbolising the extension of the European Union. The EU also co-sponsored the conference with Microsoft (who are also in dispute with the EU over the Microsoft learning portal).

Overall, the EDEN conference was about social integration and marketing. It was not a conventional academic conference like NFPF or ECER. Rather, it was more medieval trading fair (mässa), where people come to advertise their wares, buy and sell their home grown products, look for partners, make deals, and have fun.

My own judgment is that the fields of ICT and distance education are changing in important ways, and that the main problem for Peddan is with the managment of the initiatives that are flooding the market(s). The problem is not so much how to learn with ICT but, rather, how to live with ICT.

The conference was held in the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, and commenced with welcoming speeches by a vice-president of Microsoft and a pro-rektor of the Upen University (UK). We missed these speeches but managed to get to the reception that followed (i.e. the fun!).

For an extended version of this report see the project website: www.onlineassessment.nu

The daily programme included paper sessions, plenary sessions and workshops. Bertil Roos and I were in Budapest as part of the dissemination and evaluation phase of our EU project on Internetbased Assessment.

We organised a symposium on our project with presentations from Umeå, Ghent, Sussex, and the Swedish representative for Questionmark software. I rounded off the presentations with some reflections on the whole development process (as project co-ordinator). In addition, I started our Presentation in Swedish as a symbolic protest against the discursive domination of English at the conference.

To conclude: here, are some personal reflections provoked by the conference sessions, together with and some quotations that I felt worth recording.

1. The new keywords in ICT include learning objects, telepresence, didactic cyberspace; and ICT is usually presented as a plural (ICTs).

2. Besides the linguistic dimension, gender and ethnic dimensions were largely missing from the sessions I attended. An Irish man mentioned gender in his discussion of training programmes in rural areas; and a Hungarian presenter mentioned programmes for the 800 000 Roma in Hungary. These dimensions are important since I feel that ICT is sometimes seen as an educational technology for second-class citizens (while first class citizens enjoy face to face education).

3. Many of the paper sessions focused on dreams and wishlists, not experiences and problems. In general the tone of the conference was marked more by euphoria than realism. One Internet- and school-based project reported that it could not organise a synchronous meeting in April 2004 because the schools were closed for religious holidays (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish). This is the same problem of organising a conference call that includes Finland and Portugal. For cultural and time-zone reasons the Finns have gone home before the Portuguese are back from lunch.

4. I felt, too, that the conference lacked self-critical awareness. Why, for instance, does a distance education network need to meet?

5. Power point rules - and the audience are its subjects.

6. The conference sessions also missed the distinction between information and meaning. ICTs act on (digital) information but, in the process, transform the meaning of such information. Likewise, is learning about information or about meaning (and identity)? I suspect that exploration of this issue might reveal serious splits in the educational community (between the informatistas and the identitistas).

7. Although the language of commerce was strongly represented at the conference, there was little discussion of economic questions (e.g. can the investment in educational systems be justified, except on venture capital grounds?).

8. Is educational practice being 'improved', or merely 'transformed'?

9. One issue that came up regularly was the Bologna process and its implications for distance education and its globalisation.

10. Repeatedly, I was drawn to think about the EC's innovation strategy. It has an integration component, using partnerships to harmonise practice across Europe; and it has a 'venture capital' dimension (i.e. investment in promising ideas, many of which will not bear fruit). It also has a 'science park' (Uminova) dimension where projects are funded to bring ideas to commercial partners. It is a sophisticated, pluralist model which is difficult to appreciate in its entirety (and equally difficult to manage at the institutional or corporate level).

11. Finally, a senior government advisor (to a new European country) talked about 'anything, anytime, anywhere' education, a powerful yet sinister marketing slogan (linked, I believe, to Microsoft's marketing strategy). This phrase symbolises the move to what another contributor described as 'one site fits all' education.

12. Another contributor spoke of the toxic dimension in education (e.g. toxic learning, toxic knowledge).

13. The *e* in e-learning (etc.) could be renamed as 'extended'. (cf. Engeström's 'learning by expansion').

14. Are our students 'citizens of a nation' or 'commodities in an economy'?

15. ICTs are authoring tools that are 'authoring' human beings for the knowledge economy.

16. My reflections conclude with the quote which, for me sums up the work of our project. It came from Angelos Agalianos (EC directorate: Knowledge, Economy & Society). In a presentation on 'Reflections on the Use of ICTs in education: Perspectives from EU social science research', he said: ICT in education is socially contextualised, interacting with other situational and organisational cultures, and reflecting elements of the prevailing social relations and context of use'

David Hamilton

Budapest, 20th June 2004.

PS. After finishing the first draft of these notes, I went to a workshop on 'ICT and E-learning: the road to hell or paradise...'. It featured speakers from Scotland, Israel and Sweden and, despite being in the graveyard slot of the conference (i.e. the last session), it was the first occasion I heard anyone discuss the double-edged status of ICTs (as paradise or hell); its use rather than its delivery; active learning rather than passive consumption; Bildung rather than instruction; ICTs and the erosion of logos (learning by bullet- or power-points; that is, with the rationality taken out) ; and ICTs and humanism. Although I did not agree with everything that was said, I found the presentations a breath of fresh air.