Introduction to the Special Issue on Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (this generic term includes computer communication, e-mail, bulletin board systems, etc.) is in its infancy, and as such, is attempting to find its way — its most effective educational application and its ideal placement as a facilitator of the teaching-learning process. In the short span of ten years, computer-mediated communication has been applied, misapplied and modified on the basis of faith, trial and error and quasi-research, so that now there are a number of operating educational computer facilities in existence which offer this form of discourse and still more being developed.

As communicating via computer plunges headlong into the future, some have come to realize that its full potential is not being reached. Rather than seeking its own unique niche, many applications, such as computer conferencing, often function as surrogates (in many cases improved surrogates) for other more conventional delivery systems (e.g., face-to-face conferencing, the postal system, the phone company). This is due in part to limitations of the existing hardware and software. Another more substantial part is based upon the limitations of current conceptualizations of its educational potential.

This special issue, devoted to addressing the educational potential of computer-mediated communication, is presented in sequentially arranged sections designed to bring the reader to the point of active participation in the restructuring and refocusing of thought about this medium. The first section presents an overview of past and present applications, using these as a springboard to future applications which may more fully realize the potential of computer applications *(The Potential: Beckwith — Group Problem-Solving via Computer Conferencing: The Realizable Potential)*. The second section features a descriptive analysis of two current applications of computer-mediated communication *(Current Applications: McCreary & Van Duren — Educational Applications of Computer Conferencing; and Harasim — Teaching and Learning On-Line: Issues on Computer-Mediated Graduate Courses)*. This provides a bridge to the third section in which you will find two cutting-edge applications, illustrating constraints and suggesting ways of overcoming them *(Next Steps: Hart — Towards a Third Generation Distributed Conferring System; and Kaye — Introducing Computer-Mediated Communication into a Distance Education System)*. Section four focuses on a much-needed theoretical perspective that may be useful in bringing together some of the seemingly disparate strands from previous literature *(A Theoretical Perspective: Boyd — Emancipative Educational Technology)*. Finally, section five, in the form of a computer conference between the six authors of the first four sections, attempts to build from the multiple perspectives expressed in individual papers to a reconceptualization *(Towards Reconceptualization: An Edited Transcript of CoSy 'bcjec')* — the authors' view of the current nature of computer-mediated communication, what could be possible as it enters its second decade and discussion of the educational potential of this medium.

It is hoped that the reader, following the progression from the ideal, through the problems that have been encountered with established and not-so-established applications, to the

proposed theoretical orientation and then into the forward reaching discussion, will be able to enter the collective mindset of the authors and share in the reshaping of computer-mediated communication for education.

The editorial staff of *CJEC* would like to express sincere appreciation to the authors for their hard work and perserverance in writing to our deadlines and conferencing as vigorously as time would allow. As a result of the conference we have come to know them as individuals in a way that could never have occurred through the mail or on the phone. Gary Boyd, Don Beckwith and Jacques LeCavalier added many thoughtful suggestions and are as responsible for the overall conceptualization of this issue as is the staff. Jacques kept up with the details of the conference and spent many hours entering and editing papers and comments. In addition, we would like to thank Bob McQueen and the staff at CoSy for generously donating two trial CoSy accounts for the purposes of this conference. Without these partners, all working together to consider the reshaping of computer-mediated communication, this special issue of *CJEC* would not have been possible. Finally, we would like to apologize to the authors and columnists whose valuable contributions, that are so necessary for the on-going success of *CJEC*, were delayed to the next issue as a result of this special issue.

As a final note, if you care to explore the world of on-line conferencing via CoSy, contact: CoSy Systems Group, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON N1G 2W1 Canada (519) 824-4120 Ext. 3068.

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