

Q and A

Joe Harless

Q: "Aspects of your current work you are most enthusiastic about?"

A: Enthusiastic? I suppose I have been around too long to be enthusiastic in the sense of going around evangelizing and giggling, but my current interests are much the same as they have been for years: (1) To develop the technology to a level of detail where it is usable and predictable. (2) To teach others # 1. (3) To make yourself competent enough not to be dangerous. I have had some success on these counts, he said modestly.

The pattern in our field is similar to any emerging technology. First comes the "big idea," then the painful working out of the how-to's. Skinner, Gilbert, Homme, and maybe a couple of others made the conceptual breakthroughs. In other technologies, it very often takes a generation to convert theory to predictable application. And, it may take another generation for us to have a widespread effect. I think we are facing unusual barriers for widespread application of our craft. The biggest of which is that the benefits of our process are not immediately apparent to the users of our services. When we begin to sell benefits and not bore our clients with the features of our technology, then we will make quicker penetration. Perhaps then I will be "enthusiastic."

Q: "Innovations/improvements on the horizon?"

A: There are several promising avenues. I really do not know which, if any, will develop into sound, usable strategies. For about the third time a couple of years ago, I was beginning to be seduced by computers-in-training. For about the third time I was sorely disappointed. The hardware lets us do more tricks than before; and, so they say, lets us do more things cheaper—but in the instructional strategy-delivery arena, still not as cheap nor



any more effective than we can do with less sophisticated media.

I believe that computers-in-training can be cost-effective especially in administrative matters, but the programs I have seen loaded on them thus far are still based on a 1960 instructional model, continue to be subject-matter-based rather than performance-based, and are about as boring as those funny looking little booklets, which some called "programmed instruction," were/are. I have not seen *all* the programs recently developed, of course. But why would anyone wanting to interest me in computer-assisted instruction choose to show me their *worst* examples of teaching programs?

I am also interested in the neuro-linguistic arena and the possibility of more precisely prescribing instructional strategies, activities, and media depending on individual differences of the learner. But thus far, again, they have not shown me much that I can use as a practical matter. Their diagnostic techniques are a little shaky; and, their recommended prescriptions must always be weighed against what is really practical in today's instructional environment. Perhaps, however, I am just ignorant and maybe without vision. But I doubt it.

Probably the widespread innovation is a long neglected sub-set of our field:

Use of job performance aids in lieu of/or in addition to training-for-recall. Job performance aids are not as sexy as other things in Performance Technology, but graduates of our course in job aid selection and construction report considerable impact on their organization. But it is a very quiet revolution. And that is the best kind.

Q: "Obstacles, impediments in the application of our craft?"

A: I have mentioned the major one already: We have made a fundamental mistake of trying to sell the beauty of our process to the potential user of our services, rather than the potential benefits of the process. The user does not buy analysis. The user wants results. And, unfortunately, the user too often uses criteria for measuring success which run counter to the criteria we use. (More training vs. less training; time invested in development vs. time invested in analysis; subject-matter-based vs. performance-based, and so forth.)

As part of the above obstacle, the turnover in training organizations drives me up the wall. By the time we get an in-house staff ready to take off, the key people go to other jobs. Also, by the time we help them "educate" their clients, a new set of management comes on board with the same old, and perhaps new, biases.

As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and it is us." One of the biggest obstacles to applying our craft is that insufficient numbers of us have not learned the craft sufficiently. Now, in my experience the NSPIers I meet at the annual conference and elsewhere are a very intelligent lot, remarkably so. However, the act of joining NSPI does not automatically overcome deficiencies of skill/knowledge. Nor does reading a couple of books by Mager, Markle, or even Harless. Our technology is still emerging, but there is still an evergrowing data base, and a

wealth of experience existent. Those of us who have been around for 20 years have a devil of a time keeping up. It is doubly difficult to catch up, but necessary.

Q: "What statement would you like to make about our craft?"

A: First off, it is a craft. It is not a religion. To me a technological craft exists when the practitioners of that craft have a common set of goals, common procedures to follow, and a common parlance to communicate about it. And, common goals come first. Are we sure we are all about the same thing fundamentally? I think so, and I believe that it is the "Improvement of human performance in cost-effective and humanistic ways."

But our field tends to break down a bit when we get to the commonality of procedures and its language. One can see this by a simple test. Go ask five NSPIers to define these terms, "front end analysis," "programmed instruction," "instructional objective," "job aid," "validation," and even "performance." The probability that you will get five fundamentally different definitions for each is high.

Q: "What other questions do you wish we had asked?"

A: Well, not any questions particularly, but let me give you some of the frequent answers I give . . .

- Yes. "Soft skills" is a euphemism for "hard skills" which we have not worked hard enough to define as yet.
- Because Newnan, Georgia is small, has a warm climate, near a good airport, and is cheap.
- Try a job aid before you spend all that time and money.
- Let us just say Claude Lineberry is two months older. So, go ask him if you must know.

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Fighting the Educational Revolution

Susan Markle

Confronting yet another request for a statement, I am reminded of one of Skinner's better lines: "Those who have had anything useful to say have said it far too often and those who have had nothing to say have been no more reticent." (That was 1965 in Glaser's *Teaching Machines and Programed Learning*.) As the third decade of the "programed instruction movement" draws to its close, it is hard to generate enthusiasm for the educational revolution. Progress is so slow. Yes, there now are a few schools that take objectives seriously. There are even a few that have individualized their curricula, at least taking account of rate of learning if not other aspects of individual tailoring. And there are some excellent instructional materials around, in many media. But remember that my environment is a college campus and there the wasteland seems as vast as ever. Indeed, the situation is worse than "as ever"—"desertification" is growing as budget cuts reduce the resources available to those few professors who care, who have any energy left over in the scramble for grants. Grants to support research in our area are minimal; grants to support development, the real love of an instructional developer, are close to nonexistent. It takes a degree of toughness, perhaps even sheer obtuseness, to continue in the face of an extremely strained reinforcement schedule.

Being obtuse, I still find things to do. In my role as Head of Media Production, I managed to grab at the opportunity to videotape live jazz performances, ending with a series which has had some use on campus to enliven a jazz history course and which promises to have a future life in wider distribution. Educational? Maybe. Fun? Of course. In my other role as Head of Instructional Design, I have been playing for several years with thinking skills, designing materials for all kinds of students from Upward Bound potential engineers to graduate students. This fun activity has been the source of a dissertation (Sally Droege's), several papers, and approval of the administration, all of



which professors are supposed to seek, even if they have tenure. It is easy to deplore the state of student thinking skills; data which bring a chuckle or a groan (depending on your stance) are plentiful, but the problem remains—what to do about it. And that, of course, is a big enough problem to keep anyone busy. As I look at who my colleagues are in this issue of the Journal, I have to wonder what became of the educational revolution—I am the only one in the system. But then, I can remind you all that if WE all do not crack the problems we are facing, YOU all will have to get involved too. We will simply pass the students through the old system and let the training revolutionaries deal with our deficits.

It should be mentioned that one of the greatest pleasures in this environment is the continued existence of students who have the faith. There are some, in our Doctor of Arts program, who put in long hours mastering the techniques of instructional design, with the almost foolish hope that their efforts will have some effect, and perhaps even some reward, on their own campuses in their own departments.

Like many others, I am toying with the microcomputer as a possible step forward in our craft. I still find that a great deal