An invitation to AUCEi's first Learned Experts contribute to tell our story for the generation who follow us.

As a respected educator who uses computers
in your professional practice,
you are invited to add to a web gallery
of critical incidents. These are
experiences that present truths about learning
in a different way from truths derived from statistics.
They only happen once but the incident records
new learning through an abrupt change of attitude,
an engaging new insights or a sudden realisation
that you had not understood the significance
of a technology for teaching and learning.

How do critical incidents help us to understand our learning?

The series of critical incidents selection involves the continuous assessment of human behaviour over a period of time by the participant researcher who is also one of the actors in the action research process. Each of these critical incidents only happens once and, therefore, the normal research rules about reliability and consistency have to be suspended. This is justifiable in controlled conditions because a single unrepeatable incident or event can sometimes offer vital insights into a person or a situation that will never be repeated (Wragg 1994).

The importance of the irregular that Wragg perceives is sometimes ignored by quantitative research when it relies too much on predictable, traceable patterns. In addition, the telling of stories can also involve the research audience in greater ownership of the results because they relate to similar experiences. In this paper insights are drawn from the unusual as a means of providing a novel perspective on the slow introduction of a new phenomenon, the computer, into the fabric of learning.

Reference: Wragg, E. C. (1994). An introduction to classroom observation. London, Routledge.

As a baby boomer the first critical incident was in 1955 when I saw my first mainframe at a Christmas party at an American bank in London where my father was data-processing manager. Donning plastic hats and shoes to enter the computer laboratory gave the computer a mysterious attraction from which I have never quite recovered. In addition my father often had to answer a summons in the middle of the night to ensure that millions of dollars lost 'by the US computer' were found before customers woke up in the UK morning.

As part of programmed learning my father also tested out the theory of 'time and motion' in family activities like the washing up. Although this was fun it also reinforced my impression that computer enthusiasts thought that all life could be easily coded, sequenced and flow-charted. I resolved to have nothing to do with computers (Preston 1994).

The mystery of computers 1950s

Over the next year I became an under-trained IT teacher, learning on the job. However, the understanding of computers as a key tool in the teaching portfolio was important when I accepted an invitation to join a major collaboration between the Educational Computing Unit (ECU), King's College, University of London and the BT Education Service developing educational software.

Although my group of six cross-curricula teachers from Croydon had no formal computer science training, we designed a game about investigative journalist called Scoop in partnership with a professional programmer; the first educational adventure to include location graphics. The international newsroom simulation which followed, called Newsnet, linked three databases, desktop publishing, electronic mail, word processing and a networked wire service like Reuters. My teaching skills were enhanced by the opportunity to trial the programme I had authored in schools as well as presenting to teachers and writing articles.
(Preston 1994).

Authoring resources – Scoop, Newsnet, 1980s

Scoop

an educational adventure game

A partnership between BT - Kings College, London University

The record shop 1987

The original project with which I was involved happened in 1994. MirandaNet and Toshiba got together to see what would happen if you gave teachers laptops. At the time this was a very radical idea indeed. Toshiba provided the laptops, paid the cost of an online training course for the scholars (as we were called) and also paid for some conference time. A lot of people were interested in the findings and it is probably no surprise that NCET, as was then, sponsored a larger scale project based on the MirandaNet findings

Teachers working with developers as a CPD event

The spin-offs for the scholars were numerous. We had suddenly been plunged into a very different world from the narrow horizons of our individual schools. We found that we actually knew more than some of the experts. We were even asked to write chapters for books. Now anything seemed possible - eight years on and everyone involved in that original project is now a significant figure, to a greater or lesser extent, in the world of ICT. It comes as a pleasurable shock to be told you are regarded as an expert in your given field!

Ben Franklin, MirandaNet Fellow, 1997

How MirandaNet Fellows saw the community of practice process in 1995

Many of us were very keen to develop the use of a learning platform as a means of encouraging staff to discuss teaching and learning in a meaningful matter. At the same time there was a growing emphasis on the quality of the learning experience for our students.

However, the drive to develop teaching and learning did not have a coherent context in terms of the operation of the whole school. The school had been persuaded to invest in a network which did not work reliably for two years. There was no broadband access. The staff were, therefore, very suspicious the time it might take to master any technology. Many of them could use think.com from home or on their laptops. However, after an initial flurry of activity from the learning and teaching group it became clear that the time required to master the software was difficult to justify when the advantages were not clear. The staff also had problems with the interface which was really designed for young children. Again the programmers were changing the versions too often for us to keep up. At one point all the pupils work was wiped over a summer holiday when their class teacher was not in school to see the warning.

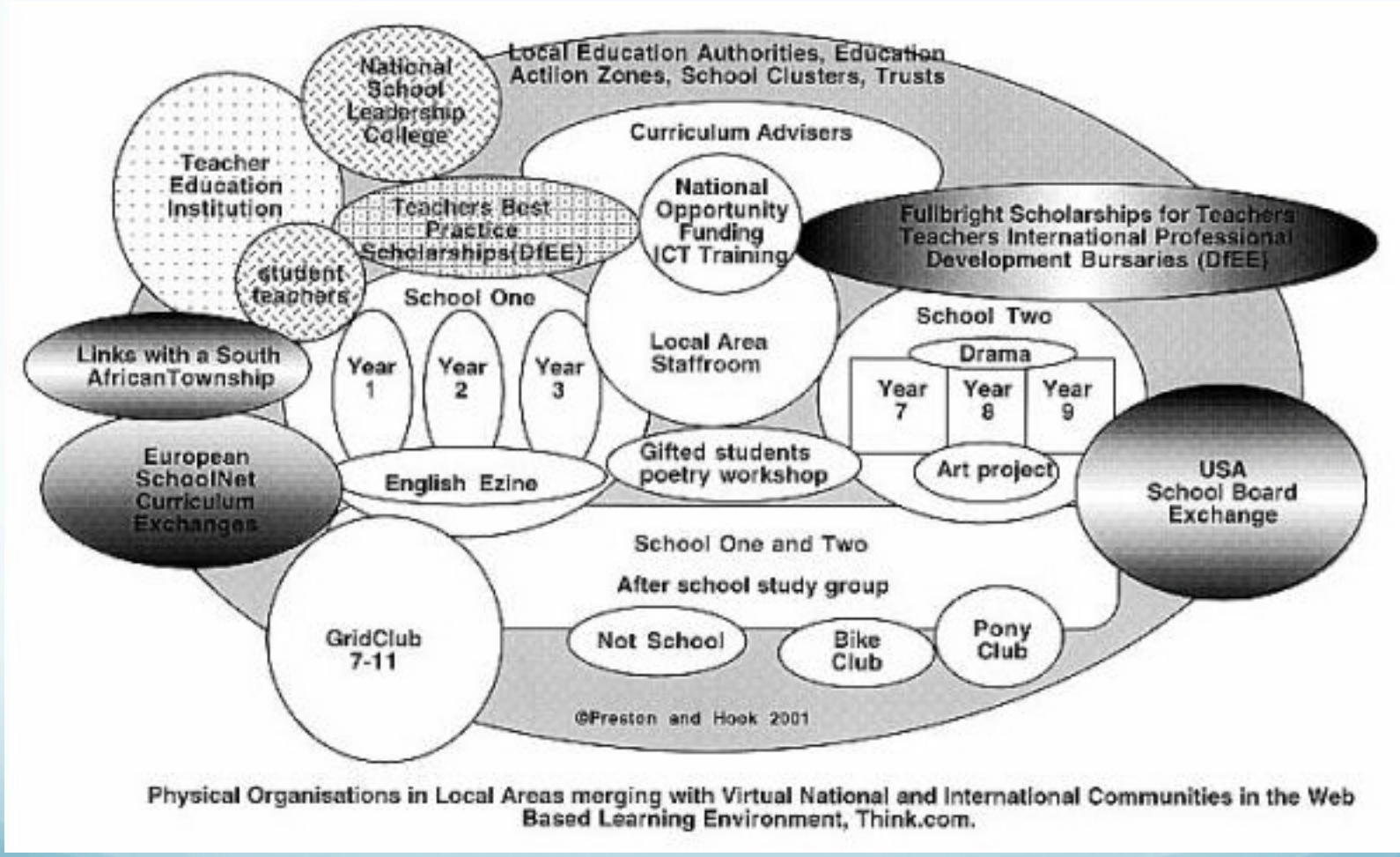
There were difficulties for the students too. Many of them had no internet access at home but were keen to use a number of public access points that had been set up in the area. Unfortunately the form based nature of Think.com meant that they could not use these. Most of the public machines were set up to prevent the use of forms ! This reflected the fears council officers and others about the nature of the internet and its use.

There were other difficulties. Slow access in school proved frustrating and lack of structure in some subjects led to periods of inactivity. They stopped using Think.com for a period and then began to regroup, taking more control of the communities, emphasising the fact that continuous activity is not the only measure of success where students are concerned.

Learning is not represented by a simple ascending curve, but motivation has to outweigh the difficulties associated with piloting these new learning platforms which require a multimodal literacy which staff find difficult to achieve. For the school, the experience represented a step back which would make the introduction of a learning platform harder to achieve.

Figure 8 : David Litchfield's account of a think.com pilot

Building a community of practice in a learning platform: Stage Three



Physical Organisations in Local Areas merging with Virtual National and International Communities in the Web Based Learning Environment, Think.com.

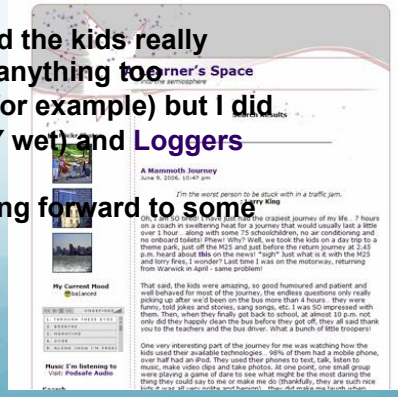
A learner's space in the semiosphere
A mammoth journey

A teachers' blog:

***I'm the worst person to be stuck with in a traffic jam.*: Larry King**

Oh, I am SO tired! I have just had the craziest journey of my life… 7 hours on a coach in sweltering heat for a journey that would usually last a little over 1 hour… along with some 75 schoolchildren, no air conditioning and no onboard toilets! Phew! Why? Well, we took the kids on a day trip to a theme park, just off the M25 and just before the return journey at 2.45 p.m. heard about this on the news! *sigh* Just what is it with the M25 and lorry fires, I wonder? Last time I was on the motorway, returning from Warwick in April - same problem!
That said, the kids were amazing, so good humoured and patient and well behaved for most of the journey, the endless questions only really picking up after we'd been on the bus more than 4 hours… they were funny, told jokes and stories, sang songs, etc. I was SO impressed with them. Then, when they finally got back to school, at almost 10 p.m. not only did they happily clean the bus before they got off, they all said thank you to the teachers and the bus driver. What a bunch of little troopers!
One very interesting part of the journey for me was watching how the kids used their available technologies… 98% of them had a mobile phone, over half had an iPod. They used their phones to text, talk, listen to music, make video clips and take photos. At one point, one small group were playing a game of dare to see what might be the most daring the thing they could say to me or make me do (thankfully, they are such nice kids it was all very polite and benign)… they did make me laugh when they whooped with laughter after I made a funny face at one of them who promptly caught it on camera… amid some mention of Bebo… I wasn't too worried - the photo was funny but not too grotesque! That'll teach me to think twice before I grimace in future. *laughing*

Anyway, it was quite fascinating to see this emerging communications network, which only increased as the journey grew longer - as they communicated with friends in the coach in front, with family and friends at home and even with their friends downstairs or even at opposite ends of the bus (they had to remain seat-belted and couldn't walk up and down).
Others used their iPods to listen to the radio - some to follow news reports on the accident on the M25, others to catch up on the latest gossip from the docusoap "Big Brother" (these students were initially on the back row of the bus in front and they began using a notepad and pencil to relate news back to the girls in the front row of the bus behind). *grin*
[Aside]: Searching for the Big Brother link, I found another, amusing one - a parody you might say… all about fish in a fish tank!
It was funny (and immensely interesting) to see such a visual representation of my students' communications methods and contents. When one of the other teachers came up top to amuse them for a bit (as their spirits were flagging around the 5 hour stage)… several immediately snapped some video clips as he sent them off into an action-based music song, imitating all the instruments - piano, trombone, etc. *smile*
You know what, actually, being around them all for that length of time really reminded me of what it's like to be young and, for a while there, my 13-year-old self was very much with me - although the only portable technology I would have had back then was a walkman.
The actual theme park trip itself was fun and the kids really enjoyed themselves. I didn't dare to go on anything too adventurous (like the newest ride, Stealth, for example) but I did enjoy the water rides, Tidal Wave (got VERY wet) and Loggers Leap (screamed like a banshee).
An interesting day - but, well, I'm just looking forward to some good sleep now.
Wilma Clarks blog
http://www.itbubble.com/?p=440



very interesting this should arise now, my technology literate 13 yr old daughter has just joined it, I knew she was because she asked me how to convert a .tiff to a .jpeg and I asked her why - of course I wasn't supposed to see the images, but my eyesight is not that bad. Then one of my colleagues told me he'd received an invite to join her Facebox online friends - ah, not so tech savvy - she'd just invited everyone in her address book, forgetting that it contained the addresses of old fogies like me and him and her gran (!) so off I went.

seems she's 17 and looking for love (the provocative poses in the pictures also make that clear), also belongs to a single parent family - her dad and I - did wonder which one of us she was planning to bump off - ah but then her worst experience was a 5 hr car journey with me and her favourite make of car is his - hmm clearer now.

she sensibly did not use her full real name, but did say which town she lived in and where she went to school (thinly diguised) - her listed friends, also school mates, have given full real names and the name of the school. (maybe someone will think it odd that this sexy 17 yr old seems to list a lot of 13 yr old boys in her friend's list?). She's already had comments on the images from a 19 yr old in Belfast and a 20 yr old in Doncaster. She put the site up on Sunday night.

my tactic so far - monitoring and a bit of testing her responses by putting an entry in her guest book from me as a 17 yr old boy... I need to know if she has really taken to heart *any* of my lectures on safety - and they wonder why I won't let them have internet access in their bedrooms!

The 15 yr old has a Bebo site I found (they are not creative in their use of aliases) but she clearly prefers the real life dangers of going out on the town with her mates.

At some point I will also talk to the school about how they tackle the issue..... but it is, of course, much much wider than a school issue.

A critical incident for a MirandaNet Fellow as a mother as well as a teacher. (Discussed on mirandalink in a debate about pupils access to social networking)

Each incident in the examples that follow has been confined to one presentation slide with perhaps one or two illustrations on another slide.
MirandaNet Fellows will analyse this data to understand more about how adults learn about computers.

You can send your contribution to Dr Christina Preston christina@mirandanet.ac.uk as one or two Powerpoint screens or fill in the comments section on our action research blog *Critical incidents: experiences as research data* http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk/blog/?page_id=310. You will find here the preliminary study, *Building Etopia here,* and more about critical incident methodology on this page. Do please add to it if you can.

Name: can be anonymous

You age or stage (primary, secondary, university, 20s 30s 40s etc) at time of at incident

Decade when incident happened or the wave? Mainframe, personal computers, web 2.00 or web 3.00

Title

Explain the incident here including the significance for you

Hand write your comment here or send a Powerpoint file to christina@mirandanet.ac.uk or fill in the comments section on http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk/blog/?page_id=310.