

# Beyond Comprehensive Learning Assistance Centers

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## A New Era

TOFFLER, NAISBITT AND others write of agrarian and industrial revolutions past and of electronic and computer revolutions present. Conference and convention themes hype the "third wave" and professional journals abound with the latest accounts of "high tech." Presidents, professors and deans speak of an unmet need and rush to fill the alleged gap with equipment, staff and buildings. Grand processes and designs emerge to implement a still undefined concept while taxpayers and foundations pass judgment on their fortune and fate.

Some associate all computer and/or electronic-related industries with high technology. Others reserve the designation for careers that require a math/science background. Still others would include high school graduates or less who would sit patiently eight hours a day, pore over a microscope and patiently solder platinum wires to silicon chips. The conclusion and definition are obvious. "High tech" is relative to time and place. What is "high tech" to some may be "low tech" to others. And with certainty, what is "high tech" today will be "low tech" tomorrow. For as sure as there is a tomorrow, obsolescence is the nature of the beast.

Manufacturers plan to have upgraded widgets off the assembly line within three years of the introduction of a product or else be prepared to be out-paced by their competitors. Conceivably, some high tech items could be obsolete before they come off the assembly line. By way of

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analogy, one commentator remarked that if the automobile industry had made the same advances as the electronics industry in the past year, a Rolls Royce would cost \$2.45 and get 400 miles to the gallon! Even with these advances the cost of state-of-the-art equipment is beyond the reach of most students and colleges. In order to maintain competitive prices, high technology manufacturers are looking to foreign labor markets to lower the costs of production.

With well-intentioned oblivion, educators have ignored these and other caution signals and have accelerated the training of high technology workers. The number of computer science graduates multiplies while experts tell us that computers will be so user friendly by 1990 that they will program themselves. And at current training rates, robotic technicians will be in oversupply by the year 2000.

I suppose we could ignore the obvious and continue on our merry way. We have done so frequently in the past and usually have come up smelling like a rose. The colleges of education survived their overproduction of teachers in the sixties even though they knew the baby-boom had ended. Other uses were found for the language labs that stood idle after the Sputnik alarm subsided. And the boondoggle called CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) has been entombed and resurrected in yet another life as JTPA (Job Training Partnership Act).

But what if for once we acted rather than responded? What if for once we looked ahead and prepared for tomorrow instead of today? Hardly in keeping with our reputation and our conservative tradition, but certainly a requirement of the times. Even if we could afford to meet the educational needs of high technology industries (which we can't), our developmental time is so entailed and prolonged that the curriculum will be obsolete before it's ready. So why not begin to prepare for the education of tomorrow—somewhere short of science fiction and just this side of high technology? Isolated efforts are probably already underway in the research laboratories of Transylvania and other sinister locales and only need public, political and pedagogical sanction to come out of the closet.

It is time that we become more aggressive about the development, teaching and dissemination of a universal tongue. COBOL, BASIC and RPG are devoid of differences in gender, number, possession, and the like! Why perpetuate this myriad of rules between inhabitants of the same planet, nay universe?

But let us not pause just there. Let this be an intermediary step to communication without words. Just as drone airships can receive communication miles away, so too the transmission of thought should be in

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the offering. And while we are translating communication symbols through ideasonic waves, we should proceed to isolate the physical composition of all knowledge matter into identifiable elements that can be consumed or absorbed as easily as a "Big Mac."

As the smart pills become available at the local supermarket, the physiochemical elements or catalysts of knowledge should be recognizably all about us and, therefore, attractable to that great Knowledge Module(s) in the sky. It would attract, store and disseminate all knowledge matter. It could be the basis and facilitator for the transmission of the anatomical image of our person from one time and place to another. Do not be surprised to open your Sunday newspaper some day and read about a Radio Shack clearance sale on "Time Machines." Beyond this, who knows? We are limited only by our imaginations. Forsaking planetary catastrophe, the state of the art is almost there. Education should not be far behind. Contemporary learning assistance centers have already taken the first step.

### **Comprehensive Learning Assistance Centers**

From television to computer and at all stops in between, the library has been heavily influenced by the tremendous growth and development of video and electronic media. This phenomena of the 1960s and 1970s boasted information storage, delivery and retrieval of the broadest proportions. Periodical indexes went from large printed volumes to microfilm, to microfiche within a relatively short time. During this same period, card catalogs were replaced by "online" computer reference programs. With this new image came a new role. Expanded information capabilities and waning organizational budgets invited a marriage with related services and resources. Linkages with self-paced learning laboratories, developmental studies and audiovisual media coordination appeared logical extensions of this new trend. Using libraries as a home base for computer laboratories and software reduced institutional duplication of costly equipment and materials and modified the image and role of libraries even further.

The title of "library" was no longer adequate. It smacked of books and stacks and artifacts of yore. It recalled a passive user service. Learning Resources Center or its acronym, LRC, more closely described its comprehensive nature, while Comprehensive Learning Assistance Center (CLAC) clearly implied an active effort to meet user needs.

While the offspring was well received, it was not without flaw. Time and again, from school to school, the purpose, function and composition of learning assistance centers were expanded and con-

tracted depending upon the funds, staff and facilities available. The bastard child was in vogue but rarely in tune with its brethren from one institution to another.

As learning assistance centers were accorded more formal recognition, they moved to define more clearly and to expand upon their role in a dynamic and viable organization. The trend appears to be toward quality and excellence, providing as much assistance as possible and as is required to ensure student success. While the requirements necessary to respond to this need vary from one authority to the next, there appears to be an emerging consensus of an ideal learning assistance center and its corresponding function. Broader in scope and nearly all-inclusive in potential services to students, the new college learning assistance center may truly be deserving of the title "comprehensive."

Video- and audio-appointed learning carrels adjacent to computer laboratories now thrive where only books and magazines once dwelled. Microfiche readers and online catalog and reference systems are prominent where the card catalog and periodical table once stood. Tapes, records and films are being replaced by sophisticated instruments of high-speed random access memory (RAM). For the romantic, it appears that the platinum wire and the silicon chip may soon replace the silver screen and printed page. Self-paced instruction at all levels and developmental education in some others are not alien to the scene.

### **State of the Art**

Susan Martin aptly summarizes the state of the art<sup>1</sup> when she notes the use of computers, minicomputers, photocopiers, audiovisual equipment, video-cable and satellites in MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging), OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), online information retrieval, and FACS (facsimile transmission). Hardly library vernacular of the past but certainly a harbinger of things to come.

Perhaps even more symbolic of the times and certainly the greatest departure from the past is the conversion from books to computers. Imagine a library without stacks of bound books! What's this world coming to? Results of such early experiments with this probability are inconclusive,<sup>2</sup> but their arrival appears imminent.<sup>3</sup> Librarians and their assorted kin have already begun to think and write about the possibilities and the impact on their preserve.<sup>4</sup> One in particular, H. Wooster, appears to be one of the more venturesome of the lot. Wooster recounts the demise of the card catalog, transcends current automated information storage and retrieval systems, and speaks to a collective memory of the grandest sort.<sup>5</sup> Connected by sophisticated communication net-

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works, Wooster's prophecy may well be the forerunner of the "Knowledge Module," this author's prediction of the ultimate in learning technology.<sup>6</sup> A satellite to beat all satellites, it would collect and store all knowledge (information) as it occurs throughout time. (Author's note: Entering all accumulated information to date may present a temporary backlog.) Access to information retrieval systems would be personally available to all beings throughout the universe. Existing knowledge facilities—e.g., school libraries—would eventually fall to disuse. During the transition, regionalization and specialization of these twentieth-century artifacts is likely, perhaps as information clearinghouses, back-up storage, or as meeting places for interpersonal alternatives to a mechanized society.

Ralph Conant might agree with this prediction on a lesser scale but for different reasons. He sees current educational, economic and sociological patterns placing different demands and roles upon urban and suburban libraries in the next decade.<sup>7</sup> As demographical distribution shifts from city to suburb and as the economic gap between the classes widens, information repositories (libraries) will respond and adjust accordingly. Their collection and distribution will reflect users, their locations, and the times.

William Webb foretells a similar scenario. Lamenting the demise of our educational system, and presumably its standards, he suggests that a corollary decline or change in library collection standards may be the logical consequence. With a similar undertone of apprehension, he acknowledges that the impact of electronic-based alternative resource media is imminent but measurable.<sup>8</sup> Lest this account invite the darkest of hues, it should be considered that it is doubtful that the evolution from book to computer to "Knowledge Module" will hearken a return to the Middle Ages. To be sure, there will be problems but likely of the surmountable kind.

### **Problems**

Problems of the first order will be dealing with better applications of the technologies that already exist.<sup>9</sup> Fear of the unknown accompanies all change, but gradual use and understanding of current technology can make for a smoother transition into the future. Secondary shock waves are sure to be felt and may be of even greater magnitude for comprehensive learning assistance centers of the future. While users eventually grow to accept the initial change, they will need recurring fortitude to deal with the havoc of jumbled or inaccurate data; of

controlling and monitoring access to certain information and other items of the collection; copyrights and patents; and the frailties and failures of the mechanical element.<sup>10</sup>

Cost is obviously another consideration. Many aspiring librarians have had their innovative fire cut to the quick by budgetary limitations. While the promise and potential of automation seemed unending, the dollars were simply not forthcoming. Daily advances in technology are bringing prices within the range of a broader library clientele, but in the final analysis, the budget can spell doom for those who would dream.<sup>11</sup>

Were cost and change and their secondary impact surmountable (and they are), user satisfaction would always remain an inherent need. Be they libraries, comprehensive learning assistance centers, or some future variation on this theme, their mission has been and always will be to serve the information needs of their public.<sup>12</sup> A disgruntled recipient of garbled information from the "Knowledge Module" is just as disappointed as the researcher of a pilfered collection.

Except for a few select locations and a few distinct locales, libraries and their latter-day kin have always appealed to the entire breadth of the population. From children to adults, the attraction of libraries has stood the test of time. There is no reason to believe that the library role in lifelong learning will diminish. In fact, all signs are that it will only perpetuate this traditional mission. With the tremendous growth of knowledge inherent in this technological age, it would seem only safe to conclude that the need for expanded use of information resource facilities for adults is predictable.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Bergevin listed in detail the basic beliefs which form the basis for his philosophy of adult education. To wit:

1. Adult behavior can be changed to some extent.
2. Adult education should be designed to help people to grow up, mature.
3. Adults must be offered and helped to use the opportunity to act responsibly in the several facets of their adult lives: political vocational, cultural, spiritual, and physical.
4. Adults should assume the obligation to learn to become more productive citizens.
5. Adults have untapped resources of creative potential that should be utilized.
6. Every conscious adult can learn.
7. Every adult can be helped to make better use of his intellectual capacity.
8. Adults need to live together in community in order to grow and mature, and they need to learn how to do this.

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9. Every adult should find some way to express himself constructively and creatively.
10. Traditional teaching procedures and learning facilities are often inadequate.
11. An understanding of freedom, discipline and responsibility promotes the discovery and productive use of our talents.
12. Such vital concepts as freedom, discipline and responsibility can be comprehended by experiencing them through a variety of inspired learning experiences in a host of subjects.
13. What is called a free or democratic society must strongly emphasize lifelong learning for all its citizens if they propose to remain free and to use their freedoms effectively.
14. Each adult participating in a learning experience should have the opportunity to help diagnose, plan, conduct, and evaluate that experience along with his fellow learners and administrators.
15. The civilizing process is evolutionary and will advance in proportion to the number and intellectual quality of the adults who play an active role in that process.
16. Many adults associate education only with school. Adult learning that can cause behavioral change can take place at home, in church, in a factory, on a farm, in any place.
17. The means are as important as the ends.
18. The nature of man is neither "good" nor "bad," but he is essentially an adaptable, educable person in a state of becoming, as well as being, and capable of a degree of excellence he rarely attains. There is room for individual action and will in his struggle for achievement.
19. Behavior is conditioned by feelings and emotions as well as by reason and rational judgment.
20. Human beings seek fulfillment or happiness.
21. Adult education can help condition persons to live in a society and at the same time sensitize them to ways in which that society can be improved.<sup>14</sup>

An analysis of each listed item would reveal a potential or existing relationship between the many tasks of adult education and the role of comprehensive learning assistance centers. Item no. 7, for example, holds that: "Every adult can be helped to make better use of his intellectual capacity." The capacity of a CLAC to assist in this regard is obvious. Similarly, item no. 10's position that: "Traditional teaching procedures and learning facilities are often inadequate," is almost an open invitation for CLACs to step right in and fill the void with their latest in learning gear. And certainly item no. 16's thesis that adult

learning can occur anywhere reinforces what we have known for a long time. Namely that libraries, learning resources centers, CLACs, or what have you are a place for adults (in addition to others) to learn.

Richard Peterson shares this view and acknowledges the changing role of libraries at the same time:

We know that the image and role of public libraries in learning is changing markedly. Formerly seen as sources of books for the bookish, many libraries, especially metropolitan ones, are actively involved in a wide range of adult learning services—information and referral (I&R) concerning all locally available human services, GED preparation, television and video tape learning, and assistance with all sorts of independent or self-directed learning projects....The libraries are an obvious natural resource for lifelong learning.<sup>15</sup>

Peterson is a supporter of libraries, and he made several references to the importance of libraries' roles in adult education.<sup>16</sup> Harrington and Peterson see a lot of this adult activity occurring at the university level.<sup>17</sup>

But where and wherever this interaction occurs, be it university or library, it only serves to further emphasize that times are changing and so are libraries. Many, if not most, have already been transformed into some form of a comprehensive learning assistance center. They are electronically poised for a step into the future. While their basic mission and concerns remain, possibilities for expanded service are unlimited. Their current direction suggests that they are the next logical and appropriate step enroute unto the ultimate "Knowledge Module." With increasing frequency, they are assuming the many responsibilities and tasks of our evolving information society. The charge appears imminent, but the skills required for success are wanting.<sup>18</sup> The accompanying challenges are apparent and exciting and will certainly help to achieve the goals of adult education:

1. to help the learner achieve a degree of happiness and meaning in life;
2. to help the learner understand himself, his talents and limitations and his relationships with other persons;
3. to help adults recognize and understand the need for lifelong learning;
4. to provide conditions and opportunities to help the adult advance in the maturation process spiritually, culturally, physically, politically, and vocationally;
5. to provide, where needed, education for survival, in literacy, vocational skills, and health measures.<sup>19</sup>

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