

AEP Content in Context Conference (June 6-9, 2010; Washington, D.C.)

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For 2010, the Association of Educational Publishers changed the name and approach of the venerable AEP Summit to focus on the inevitable transition to digital educational content. As a result, the Content in Context Conference was created with the defining tag line, “education beyond the book.” CiC was held at the Capital Hilton in Washington, D.C. and attracted approximately 360 attendees (approximate, in that number also includes those who only registered for the AEP Awards Banquet on Tuesday night).

AEP members tend to be traditional supplemental educational publishers who started with print publishing, not personal computer or Web technology. That makes the CiC audience almost a mirror image of the attendees at the Software and Information Industry Association’s Ed Tech Industry Summit, held three weeks earlier, which was primarily populated by technology companies in education. While this is a broad generalization of each conference and there is overlap, it provides perspective on how two conferences can differ in their approach to the same subject (as seen in the SIIA ETIS notes).

These notes represent highlights and brief analysis/commentary. They’re based on the live-tweeting of the conference by @FrankCatalano and additional observations, and only represent sessions attended (all keynotes and several breakout sessions; the full agenda is at <http://bit.ly/cjixEp>). Any analysis, commentary or errors are his alone.

General Session: From the Field

In order to set the stage and the tone for the refocused AEP conference, the opening session took a unique tack. Months earlier, AEP had decided the best way for traditional publishers to understand what teachers needed and wanted in digital resources in the classroom was to hear from the teachers directly – using the digital tools already at the teachers’ disposal.

So AEP, working with the session organizer/moderator (who is also this note taker) and the social networking site edWeb.net, solicited teacher videos to be submitted via YouTube and played 20 of the short videos during the opening session. It was called the Teacher Video Challenge. The two-minute videos were asked to address three specific questions, in whatever manner the educator chose:

1. “What are you most in need of to teach effectively in the digital age?”
2. “What one request would you make of those who create instructional materials to make them digital-classroom friendly?”
3. “How would better digital technology and content in the classroom help you and your students?”

The videos (still viewable on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/user/edpublishing> in the Teacher Video Challenge playlist) came from K-12 educators in Texas, California, Oregon, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Alabama, Missouri, Connecticut, Florida, Louisiana, Kentucky, South Dakota, Georgia,

Saskatchewan and Alberta. They were clearly from a tech-savvy, self-selecting group and not a scientific sample in any way. However, several common themes emerged:

1. Make technology use in the classroom seamless – all digital content should work with all technology devices;
2. Provide collaboration and content creation tools for students to use;
3. Provide teacher training for both using and integrating technology tools and resources;
4. Make digital materials editable and searchable;
5. Include more video and music in digital resources.

One pervasive presence across the videos was interactive white boards (which, in the footsteps of Kleenex and Fiberglas before them, are getting the generic name “smart boards” – probably much to the consternation of competitors such as Promethean and even SMART Technologies’ trademark lawyers).

A panel offered comments from the administrator/state policy perspective after each group of three-to-four videos. The panelists – **Dr. Elizabeth Molina Morgan**, superintendant, Washington County MD Public Schools (also American Association of School Administrators 2010 National Superintendant of the Year); **Ryan Imbriale**, principal, Patapsco High School & Center for the Arts in Baltimore (also board of directors member for ISTE); and **Douglas Levin**, executive director of the State Educational Technology Directors Association – made cogent observations. Among them:

- Traditional, paper methods are still needed for some instructional areas, notably reading.
- There are generational differences among teachers on the willingness to use digital resources; to get an idea of how open a teacher is, see what their current classroom looks and feels like.
- There are still many “chicken or egg” policy issues that need addressing at the state and district levels to allow for full freedom to even start using digital resources.

Weekly Reader Awards Luncheon: Ron Suskind, Journalist and Author

As has been the tradition for the past several years, a noted journalist offered brief comments during the annual Weekly Reader Student Publishing Awards Luncheon (winners and their work at <http://www.aepweb.org/student/index.htm>). Among the observations offered by Ron Suskind:

- He is optimistic about journalism’s future: “We’re at the dawn of an extraordinary new era.”
- We’re now at a time when student writers (and presumably adult writers) can carry not just their notes, but all the content they’ve ever created with them at all times.

Session: Your Invisible Competitors

The conference featured not one, but two, sessions on “invisible competitors:” a general session and this more-focused breakout session about where traditional commercial educational publishers have to be aware of non-traditional competition. Data points and highlights:

- **Neeru Khosla, CK-12 Foundation:** Non-profit CK-12 foundation has created free textbooks in physics, calculus, trigonometry, biology, chemistry and more, which can be quickly updated because they’re in the cloud (<http://bit.ly/96FLJb>). They’re collaboratively written by teachers, districts, students and states. The textbooks are used in virtual high schools, and they’re working with 30 districts, apparently primarily in California.
- **David Glover, Learning Media:** Learning Media is New Zealand’s government-owned educational publisher. It creates textbooks that are free to schools, and co-exists with commercial publishers because commercial publishers provide materials that are more focused (e.g., ELL, special education). He advises delivering the content customers want anytime, anywhere on any device, while acknowledging it’s about fashion to some extent. The challenge? Content has to not only work on the new stuff, but the old stuff. Otherwise: “We might make the mistake of choosing the technology over the teaching.”

General Session: Your Invisible Competitors

The larger general session on invisible competition featured presentations from three different speakers on adjacent areas of competition, **Peter Levy of Levy Associates**, **Seth Meyers of Simulation Curriculum Corp.**, and **Mike Shatzkin of The Idea Logical Company**. Levy is a consultant, has worked with Curriki extensively, and was formerly with Scholastic, Wireless Generation and bigchalk.com. Meyers develops science simulation software and curriculum, and also has been at Scholastic and bigchalk.com. Shatzkin consults trade (not educational) publishers and is conference chair for Digital Book World.

- Levy noted that innovative textbook approaches are trickling down from Higher Ed to K-12; examples include Flatworld Knowledge and DynamicBooks (DynamicBooks was covered in detail in the SIIA ETIS notes).
- Meyers said, in general when it comes to the market, “education is much easier than consumer,” in part because educators always pay you and are grateful for your support. He also cited the benefits of small companies over large companies when it comes to being nimble and competitive: “While you’re having meetings, we’re going to put a product out.” And, he said, big publishers should beware that there are lots of small competitors like him focused on specific slices of the market, employing technology to address those slices.

Part of the reason small companies can be competitive is that big publishers have lost their monopolies on market intelligence (easy to find on the Web), the development process (tools are off the shelf, in the cloud and far less expensive), the sales channel (again, Internet), and the capital required to build products (digital delivery is less expensive than printing and shipping physical books).

- Shatzkin, who comes from trade publishing, started by saying competitors for educational publishers are “lurking in the weeds growing in the consumer space.” He cited that, by 2012 at the latest, half of all books will be sold online. Half of those will be ebooks; the other half, paper books ordered online. And Amazon and other online sources are actively aggregating and promoting used books. Finally, a lot of new digital infrastructure makes what he called “micro-publishing” easy, and named Author Solutions, Smashwords, Lulu, Scribd and others as examples.

The oft-cited “long tail” of the Internet is also “a disaster for publishers,” because it means Amazon and other resellers can carry deep backlists and used titles so new editions may compete with a publisher’s own previous works. Then add in competition by customers who use micro-publishing tools. Everything described, he said, is now happening to consumer trade publishing – and is coming to educational publishing.

It was interesting that no one in either invisible competition session named Google Books as a competitor; it’s either the elephant in the living room or the industry still has some blinders. Or both.

General Session: There is No Future Without “E”

This unusual session was a single, fast-paced presentation and discussion about all the issues a company transitioning from print to digital has to consider, helmed by **Michael Johnson of Full Potential Associates** (formerly with Follett and founder of Follett Digital Resources) and **Linda Andries of Marketing Genius Group** (consumer and educational market consultant). Data points and highlights:

- Andries, in a rundown of statistics, noted that of the jobs posted on publisher sites, 38% are technology jobs, mostly senior level.
- Johnson said that “partnering is absolutely necessary” to ensure products interoperate, and it’s better to partner now than wait years to figure out how to build it right yourself.
- “The people who are spending the money don’t care” if an educational technology product comes from traditional educational publishers or someone else entirely, according to Johnson. And for those traditional publishers who are worried about what delving into digital will do to their traditional product business, “Don’t think about cannibalization, think about starvation. Because in cannibalization, at least someone is eating.” He notes that cannibalization of existing product sales is inevitable when going digital, yet it doesn’t have to mean extinction.
- When moving to “e,” Johnson said, “figure out what you’re going to do and do it with measured aggression.” Don’t study, plan, or tweak it to death before releasing it. Do create products that will appeal to a 14-year-old. And plan for digital upfront – a lot of boring and bad e-products happen because digital is only treated as an afterthought, at the end of product development.
- Johnson pointed out that Sheboygan just handed out 200 iPod Touches to students, and that, “if it comes to Wisconsin, it IS part of your business.”

Session: Marketing & Sales Through Alternative Delivery Systems

This session focused on newer methods of marketing and distributing educational resource products. Panelists were **Kevin Davies of TecKnoQuest** (a digital product/ebook distributor), **Roland Lange of Google** (of Google Books and its purchase and distribution subset, Google Editions), and **Christopher Ziemnicki of MDR** (a market research and marketing services firm). While much of what was said in this session would not come as a surprise to those approaching digital education from a personal technology background, there were some interesting data points and highlights:

- For stat fans, Lange noted there were now, in the market, four million e-ink devices (including Kindles), two million iPads, 75 million iPhones, and 100 million other kinds of smartphones. All could be used as ebook devices.
- Google Editions, said Lange, allows both retail sales of ebooks directly from Google or via wholesale partners. Powell's was used as an example (but Lange pointedly noted that this doesn't mean Powell's had signed up as a partner). Google Editions will allow syncing a purchased ebook across devices, public or private annotations to ebooks, and a "bookshelf in the cloud." And, Lange noted, Google has not charged publishers one penny to convert their books to digital to take part in Google Editions.
- Lange, in Q&A, noted that Google generally allows an ebook to be 20% browseable, but if someone wants to distribute free materials the browse-ability can be set by the publisher to 100%.
- Davies said TecKnoQuest has 22,000 products and 190 publishers now distributing their wares digitally, and is ramping up fast. His advice to publishers? Don't stop doing print, but start doing digital now on a small scale with attainable goals. He said publishers should use XML and then export from XML to the various ebook formats – whatever customers happen to be using. As to price, Davies says some publishers are now selling print or digital individually at the same price, but then selling both together for only \$5 more. He suggested publishers be wary of exclusive digital retail deals and open up as many digital retail channels as possible.
- When it comes to whether a publisher should use digital rights management techniques to lock down content, Davis only suggested that publishers need to realize that customers can easily create digital PDFs out of existing print materials with newer photocopiers – and then decide.
- Ziemnicki started with his own stats (and frustrated some in the audience by saying his slides would not be available, perhaps unaware that many in the room had cell phone cameras that worked nearly as well to capture the projected information). Among the statistics from a recent MDR survey: About 30% of supplemental/basal materials in surveyed school districts are already digital. For the first time, 100% of teachers have school-based email addresses, and a third check them all day long. And the email open rate from educator email campaigns is at 10%, with a click-through rate of about 2.5%, even with a 50% increase in email volume over time.

Additional thoughts

At many recent conferences – and this one was no exception – the increasingly tired bromide that “all content will be free” was repeated by speakers, likely assuming they were being provocative. Perhaps to uncritical thinkers. But all “content” is not alike; timeliness (in terms of when it’s needed and delivered), currency (how new and up-to-date the content is), and perceived value are all factors, and there are other considerations. Water is free, too, but some people still buy it in bottles.

Though the conference emphasis was on the transition to digital, during the closing general session (a pure Q&A with industry execs on what they learned during the conference, moderated by this note taker) panelists emphasized that there is still a strong, healthy printed materials business which, as **Lee Wilson of PCI Education** commented, paid the ways of most of those attending. So existing business shouldn’t be abandoned, but pursued in tandem with digital.

One good video, produced by DK and Penguin about the student view of books and the future of publishing was featured during “There is No Future Without ‘E,’” is at <http://bit.ly/9OvqHh>. As **Neal Goff of Egremont Associates** tweeted about the “There is No Future Without ‘E’” session upon seeing a slide of Michael Johnson’s, Scribners published an article about the end of books – in 1894.

Presentations and other materials are expected to appear on the conference Web site (www.contentincontext.org) over the next several weeks. Additional resources may be at the sites of those who live-tweeted CiC: In addition to @FrankCatalano, they included @360KID, @paulamaylahn, @nealgoff, @RandyWilhelm, @Embir, @edwebnet and @tizra.

The next AEP Content in Context Conference will be June 6-9, 2011, also in Washington, D.C.

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