

IndiaCALL Conference

Report by Pete Sharma

The conference 'Hi-tech, lo-tech, no-tech: learning technologies in practice' was held on 7th-8th January 2012, in the Indian province of Gujarat. This international conference on the use of ICT in ELT attracted practitioners from across Asia.

Although I have revisited the land of my birthplace as a tourist, I had forgotten all about the assault on the senses, the colour and noise and chaos that is India. The venue, the H M Patel Institute of English Training and research in Vallabh Vidyanagar (I had to look it up on the map too!), was a haven of tranquillity compared to the bustle of everyday Indian village life.

The conference started with music and speeches full of that Victorian prose which characterises Indian English. I thoroughly enjoyed the opening plenary speech, a retrospective on the fascinating "hole in wall" project by Professor Sugata Mitra. It is rightfully humbling for us pedagogues and trainers to consider that children may simply be able to figure how to use computers by themselves. The phrase that sticks with me is 'friendly grannies' who can help clarify issues for the inquiring mind - the teacher as facilitator rather than knowledge-provider. If you want a flavour of this talk, visit TED.com

A huge variety of workshops were provided, including: Charles Goodyear from Funsongs education, who had people up and actively engaged; Maureen Ellis, the co-ordinator of the Global Issues SIG, widening the technology debate to include a focus on global citizenship. In Plenary 2 Richard Badger looked at tweets and tweeting. I enjoyed the fact that sessions were banded by topic, so there were simultaneous sessions on similar themes. I confess that I missed the sessions on technology and teens, as jet-lag finally kicked in.

The joy of face-to-face was finally meeting one of the presenters, Anitha Devi, who I once edited for CALL Review. She gave an engaging presentation on Adobe Flash. I then ventured into a session on using the Internet for social development by Pushpa Dixit. I was asked to be the chairman (what could such an honour involve, I wondered). Being chairman involved giving feedback to the speaker, which I duly did.

The evening's cultural offering of singing and dancing was at times a feast for the eyes. Thanks to the camera and video recorder in my Smartphone, I can re-live parts of the event from my armchair at home.

I was delighted to start day two with an intriguing, interactive presentation from Jitendra Kumar Singh on Augmented Learning, unpacking what we need to know about the seemingly ubiquitous QR code. He described how it can make paper 'come alive', embedding a QR code so learners can jump from the printed page to the Internet and listen to an audio-clip.

Next, conference organisers Kalyan Chattopadhyay and Atanu Bhattacharya took us through CALL Research in India: past, present and future, a nicely paced prelude to my own practical plenary which examined teaching in the 21st century. This was recorded and streamed live over the web via WiziQ.

Next, there were a series of sessions on mLearning. There was a sense of irony about holding the conference in an institute which, like many colleges, asks students to turn off their mobiles. I enjoyed a session by Amy Lightfoot who took us through the development of a British Council project to develop content for mobiles in India involving

storyboarding and creating sequences of animations. Looking at the constraints of such a project was fascinating.

Then, on to the 'un-conference' which was a truly memorable event. First, we hooked up across the Internet with Nicky Hockly sitting in the UK. This link forcefully brought home to everyone the power of the web to unite people globally. First you saw her (onscreen), then you didn't as the power failed and the whole auditorium was plunged into darkness. Ahhh, India! A stark reminder that we are in Asia, where such losses of electrical power are more frequent than in the Europe I flew in from. Then we saw her as power returned; then we didn't as once again, the generator failed. Needless to say, the topic of the digital divide cropped up.

As we went into any questions, someone asked about the policies of institutions (such as the one we were in) to ban Facebook and mobiles. After Nicky answered the question, a gentleman sprang to his feet and stated he was in charge of the college's policy on the use of the web and wished to defend the official viewpoint. He began hurtling toward the stage..... I remember saying something like: "Ladies and gentleman, we will now either see policy change in action or I'm gonna be hit!". It was a defining moment - real change in action! The previous generation of education meeting the new. We agreed the description of being 'on task' or 'off task' was highly relevant - and that only by dialogue could things change.

As an avid traveller, I am well aware that time flows in different ways for different people in different places. It certainly flowed in different ways at IndiaCALL! If you entered a workshop, there was a chance that you were going to the session before which had overrun; the session of your choice; or, the next session which had started early! Guessing how close the printed timetable was to reality was one of the conferences more, er challenging aspects.

This was an amazing conference – thanks to Graham Stanley for initiating it, to Kalyan for his organisation, to Nicky in the UK, WizIQ for streaming it, the British Council, and all the local organisers and other sponsors; so many memories, such a great occasion.