

Distance Learning and Asian Studies An Experiment at the East-West Center

By Gordon Patterson

John Dewey once observed that it is one of the characteristics of genuine philosophical work “to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future.”¹ Roger Ames, the distinguished University of Hawaii sinologist and philosopher, is fond of quoting this passage. Ames has earned a reputation for his unrelenting efforts to remove the “useless lumber” that impedes serious consideration of China. It is perhaps because of this that in the spring of 2001, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) asked Ames and his colleagues at the East-West Center, Elizabeth Buck and Peter Hershock, to take part in an experiment utilizing the Internet as a means of broadening the scope of the NEH’s venerable Summer Seminars and Institutes programs for college teachers.

This pilot study has implications for future NEH programs for both college and secondary teachers. On one level, the NEH experiment at the East-West Center raises important questions about both the opportunities and limitations of distance learning. Distance learning can take many different forms. Earlier NEH grants have established digital archives and explored different ways to use the Internet for research and teaching. The summer 2001 experiment indicates that the NEH hopes to extend the use of technology in its programs.² In this program the East-West Center and the NEH sought to create a virtual classroom which incorporated video and audio broadcasts on the Internet. The program’s advocates believe that distance learning can be used to increase the number of high school and college teachers who can participate in the NEH’s summer seminar and institutes. Though it is too early to reach any final conclusions, it is possible to identify some of the issues raised by the experiences of the distance participants in Roger Ames’s NEH Institute for college and university teachers, “Continuities and Crises: The Interplay of Religion and Politics in China.”

THE BACKGROUND

The NEH distance initiative grew out of a directive from William Ferris, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Barbara Ashbrook, NEH program officer in the Division of Education Programs, explained that “Chairman Ferris encouraged staff members to explore possibilities for using new technologies to extend the reach of the Seminar and Institute Program.”³ Ashbrook recalls that members of the NEH’s Education Division, which houses both the Summer Seminars and Institutes Program for college and university teachers, were “excited about devising a small experiment to facilitate non-residential participation” in a handful of summer institutes which

had already received funding. Ashbrook and her colleagues developed a set of likely criteria for what should be included in the distance initiative. High priority was given to finding ways in which the new technologies of the Internet could be used to “extend the resources and benefits of these wonderful summer programs.” The goal was not to replace the summer institutes but rather to devise a means to expand their reach.⁴

Ashbrook thought that Roger Ames’s China Institute was a particularly good candidate for the distance learning initiative. In 1990, Ames and Betty Buck, Director of Education Programs at the East-West Center, had launched the Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP). During the 1990s Ames and Buck were in the vanguard of those working to bring Asian Studies into the core curriculum of American colleges and universities. Ashbrook believed that the NEH distance initiative would advance the ASDP’s curricular objective.

In March Ames agreed to take part in the experiment. Ames had not considered the idea of having off-site participants in the China program. “We were pleased to be asked,” Elizabeth Buck explained, “but unclear on how to go about it.” Buck, however, had reservations. Preparations for the China Institute were nearly complete. Chief among her concerns was how to resolve the myriad technological questions involved in such an experiment. “You know that Roger, Peter, and I are pretty far down on the technological scale. We thought it would be a challenge but something we would be able to do with help from the IT (information technology) people at the EWC (East-West Center) and UH (University of Hawaii).”⁵

Ames was more direct. “The NEH has been very good to us, and if they think an experiment is in order, we ought not to refuse.”⁶ It was Peter Hershock who had the greatest reservations.⁷ Hershock, a philosopher and author of *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist*

Response to the Information Age (1999) in which he analyzed the relationship of Buddhism and technology, acknowledged that the Internet might provide a useful vehicle for disseminating information. Hershock was, however, concerned about the effect technologies such as the Internet have on the development of a sense of community within the learning process. Ames and Buck shared Hershock's concerns. Ultimately, they agreed to take part in the experiment. Their goal would be to find a way to integrate technology into the China Institute without sacrificing the "intimacy" of the on-site experience.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The selection process was nearing its conclusion when Ames and Buck agreed to participate in the distance initiative. It was too late to issue a call for distance participants. Instead, Ames and his colleagues at the East-West Center solicited the help of the faculty members who had been chosen to be on-site participants. The on-site participants were asked to contact colleagues at their institutions who might be interested in taking part in the off-site, distance experiment. Ames, Buck and Hershock limited the distance participants to the first twelve people who responded. One of the twelve dropped out before the institute began, leaving eleven professors to take part in the off-site experiment.

The guidelines for the institute were straightforward. The Honolulu participants received a \$3,250 stipend. They were responsible for their airfare to Hawaii and housing costs. Each of the on-site participants agreed to attend the sessions, prepare an evaluation of the institute, and develop a project which would be

presented during the final two days of the institute. All of the participants were housed in Lincoln Hall, the East-West Center's residential facility on the University of Hawaii's Manoa campus.

The NEH gave Ames an additional \$12,600 to finance the distance initiative. Each of the eleven off-site participants received a \$500 stipend. The distance participants agreed to view all of the sessions, which were transmitted over the Web, and complete an evaluation of the institute at its conclusion. The distance participants did not prepare individual projects.

More than half of the off-site participants came from two institutions: Johnson County Community College in Kansas (3 faculty members) and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (3 faculty members). Kirtland Community College in Michigan had two off-site participants. There was only one distance participant who did not have a member of his college taking part in the on-site program. All of the off-site participants taught in programs which required them to teach survey courses in the humanities and social sciences.

Once Ames issued the call for off-site participants, the immediate challenge was designing a format for the distance initiative. The NEH did not provide guidelines. Late in March, Ames, Buck and Hershock met with Erica Aloang and Royd Liu from the University of Hawaii's Distributed Learning and User Services Division. Aloang and Liu recall being "overwhelmed" when they learned of the project. The length of the institute placed tremendous demands on the university's resources. Moreover, \$5,000 was not very much money for a project as complicated as the China Institute. Aloang estimated that rental of the equipment alone would have cost \$50,000 if Ames had had to rely on commercial vendors.⁸

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Left to right: Erica Aloang, a student aide and Gordon Patterson.
 Photo courtesy of Gordon Patterson.

THE PROCEDURE

The format that emerged from the discussions with Aloang and Liu centered on how to record the sessions. It was decided that all of the sessions would be videotaped. The tapes would be digitally encoded and broadcast on the Web in streaming video and audio. These broadcasts would go out live over the Web as well as being archived by the University of Hawaii. The on-site participants would be asked to pass a microphone around the room during discussions and question-and-answer periods. This would insure that the off-site participants could follow the discussion. Aloang and Liu would set up a listserv for the distance participants where they could post questions and interact with one another. Overhead projections would be displayed by a digital imaging device known as Elmo. Finally, slides and Power-Point presentations would be integrated into the streaming video.

While the technical details were being finalized, Virginia Suddath, a UH philosophy graduate student and project assistant for the institute, copied and collated binders with the weekly readings for the participants. At first, the institute directors planned to place all of the reading materials on the Web. The amount of reading, the tardiness of some of the presenters' submissions, and the shortness of the time period before the beginning of the institute forced a change in this plan. Suddath mailed each of the distance participants their binders in late May. The on-site participants received their binders on the first day of the institute.

On June 4, 2001, the twenty-five on-site participants gathered in the seminar room on the fourth floor of Burns Hall at the East-West Center on the campus of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. During the next five weeks, members of the China institute met between 9:00 a.m.-12 noon Monday through Friday. Additional afternoon sessions were held between 1:30 and 4:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A University of Hawaii film studies professor organized weekly screenings of Chinese films which took place one evening each week. Finally, thirteen of the twenty-five in-house participants met each morning at 7:00 a.m. for an institute-sponsored Tai Chi exercise program.

Other participants praised the quality of the reading materials and added “it was rewarding . . . to learn something interesting and relatively new from the comfort of home and my office, being able to read the articles (printed) on my own time, and supplement with discussion. It was in that sense much better than reading about the subject on my own.”

THE DISTANCE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE

A twenty-one question survey was sent to the eleven distance participants three weeks after the institute's conclusion. Nine of the participants replied. The twenty-one questions covered four broad areas: technical issues (computer platform, software used, and quality of streaming video); experiential issues (whether the sessions were viewed in their entirety or in segments, as live broadcasts or asynchronously); interactive issues (when and how questions were formulated, contact with other distance and on-site participants); finally, evaluative issues (what the participants found most rewarding and frustrating).

The technical aspects of the survey were the most straightforward. Six of the participants worked on PC platforms and two used machines made by Apple. One individual used both platforms. Five depended on 56k dial-up modems for their connection to the Internet; one had a cable modem connection; one a DSL line; and three a direct connection. All had technical support at their local campuses, but no one found it necessary to look for assistance. Eight of the nine respondents used RealPlayer to download and display the streaming video. As might be expected, those connecting by using dial-up modems had far more interruptions and disconnects in viewing the sessions. One participant had “too many interruptions to count.” Five participants experienced one or two interruptions per session. Two of the off-site participants with direct connections (T-1) to the Internet never experienced a break.

The second and third groups of questions sought to examine the experiential and interactive aspects of the distance experience. The majority of the distance participants (six) viewed each of the three-hour sessions in a single viewing. Three of the distance participants chose to divide their viewing of the sessions into segments. There was no clear pattern as to when the distance participants watched the sessions. Given the six-hour time difference between Honolulu and the East Coast, it is not surprising that only two of the participants viewed the sessions on the day they were recorded. Two others watched the sessions the next day. Two of the off-site participants viewed the sessions two and three days respectively after the sessions. Finally, one of the distance participants waited a week or more before viewing the sessions.

Interaction between the distance participants and the on-site participants did not develop. Only one of the off-site participants sent an e-mail to a colleague in Honolulu. Three weeks after the institute had ended, only one distance participant reported

receiving a phone call from a member of the on-site group who taught at her institution.

The interaction between the off-site participants and the presenters was disappointing. A few of the off-site participants actively participated in the listserv, submitting questions throughout the institute. Others remained silent, asking only one or two questions during the five-week period. “We need[ed],” Ames concluded, “a strategy (besides haranguing) to make sure that people participate. Some participants asked lots of questions; others, none. Just like a classroom.”⁹ In the survey the off-site participants expressed a similar impression of the question-and-answer process. The typical turnaround time between posting and receiving a response to a question was two days. Three of the distance participants estimated that they had asked more than ten questions during the five weeks. Three of the off-site participants remembered asking one or two questions. Roger Ames answered most of the questions. One reason for this was that the off-site participants normally did not submit their questions until several days after the session's conclusion. This meant that many of the presenters had left Honolulu and were no longer in contact with the institute. The spontaneity of the on-site discussion did not make its way across the Internet.

The most subjective section of the survey contained questions which asked the distance participants to compare and contrast on-site and off-site experiences. Only two of the respondents had, in fact, participated in an NEH summer program in the past. All of them praised the quality of the presentations. “The most rewarding [part of the summer],” one off-site participant observed, “was simply having the opportunity to hear such great presenters.” Another appreciated having “the flexibility to view the lectures when it was best for my schedule.” Other participants praised the quality of the reading materials and added “it was rewarding . . . to learn something interesting and relatively new from the comfort of home and my office, being able to read the articles (printed) on my own time, and supplement with discussion. It was in that sense much better than reading about the subject on my own.”¹⁰

There was considerable frustration with the distance experience. “If my only experience were as an on-line participant,” one of the respondents wrote, “I would find an NEH seminar not to be a very helpful learning experience.” The majority of the off-site participants identified their inability to actively participate in the on-site discussions as the most frustrating part of their experience. Only one identified technical issues (choppy frames in the streaming video) as particularly frustrating. Eight of the respondents said that

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despite their frustration with certain aspects of the experience that they would do it again.¹¹

The off-site participants offered a number of useful suggestions on how the distance experience could have been improved. Some involved practical suggestions like mailing the reading materials to the off-site members of the institute earlier so that they would have more time to review them. Other suggestions were more general. One individual recommended that once the participants had been chosen that "ALL participants, in person and on-line, write e-mails introducing themselves and initiating discussion." The seminar or institute leader should then follow up with "a few juicy and very general topics" to spark on-line discussion.¹² The benefit of this would be that when the institute began, all of the participants would find it easier to communicate with one another throughout its duration.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The NEH and East-West Center are committed to exploring new ways to utilize technology in education. Recently, the NEH and the East-West Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP) launched a two-year project centered on the Web. As for future summer secondary and college programs, Ashbrook indicated that the NEH "remains open" to any proposal to extend the reach of the seminars and institutes through the use of new communication technology.¹³ New and exciting developments are likely.

The NEH deserves credit for trying to find ways to serve a wider and more diverse population of educators. It is difficult for young teachers and academics to spend five to eight weeks away from their families. There are other professional educators who either for personal or financial reasons could not take part in a summer program. The NEH distance initiative holds promise for these individuals. The experience of the off-site participants in Roger Ames's China program would seem to indicate that the principal value for the distance participants was the exposure they received to new information. The absence of the free play of ideas that grows out of discussion frustrated them.

In the end, the off-site participants remained spectators. They witnessed an intellectual event. Most did not feel they were part of it. Undoubtedly, the pace of technological advance will continue. New software will make the streaming video less choppy and quality of the audio transmissions clearer. The most difficult questions raised by the NEH distance initiative are not technical. They are philosophical. It remains an open question of how distance learning can help clear the "useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought." ■

NOTES

1. David Hall and Roger Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, 1995), p. 1.
2. The NEH supported a second distance learning initiative at Katherine Hayles's summer institute on Literature in Transition: The Impact of Information Technologies at UCLA.
3. Barbara Ashbrook, "Distance Article—BAA Response," July 30, 2001, personal e-mail (August 1, 2001).
4. Ibid.
5. Elizabeth Buck, "Patterson on eval," August 1, 2001, personal e-mail (August 2, 2001).
6. Roger Ames, "Re: Aloha," August 2, 2001, personal e-mail (August 3, 2001).
7. Peter Hershock, interview by author, Honolulu, Hawaii, July 5, 2001.
8. Erica Aloang, "Answers for Article," July 27, 2001, personal e-mail (July 28, 2001).
9. Roger Ames, "Re: Aloha," August 2, 2001, personal e-mail (August 3, 2001).
10. Results of survey questionnaire.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Barbara Ashbrook, "Re: Distance Learning," January 4, 2002, personal e-mail (January 4, 2002).

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GORDON PATTERSON is a Professor of History at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, Florida. Patterson has participated in two NEH summer institutes at the East-West Center. At Florida Tech, Patterson has received both the Faculty Excellence Award for teaching and service and the Alpha Phi Outstanding Faculty Award. Patterson is currently working to provide resources on Asian studies for local middle and high school teachers.