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'Digital dimensions' of publishing explored at conference

By **Marc B. Geller**, Journal and Courier

With writing increasingly being produced, distributed and read through digital means, literacy may no longer mean simply being able to read and write.

That's one of several issues 350 students, academics and publishers from across the country are exploring during the four-day Computers and Writing Conference hosted this year by Purdue University.

The conference, which was first held in 1983, is organized around the theme "Discovering Digital Dimensions" to reflect the sense that there's more to computers and writing than meets the eye, organizers say.

"The publishing world is changing dramatically now. And once the hardware catches up with some of the creative ideas and possibilities with the software, people are going to be reading a lot of e-books," said program chairman David Blakesley, a Purdue associate professor of English.

He predicts electronic books, or e-books, will be in widespread use in 10 to 15 years. Though digital publications are expensive to produce because of the human resources required, they can be distributed extremely cheaply, Blakesley said.

Proving the point, a team of conference participants on Thursday published a multimedia e-book in four hours and eight minutes.

Working in the Digital Learning Collaboratory at the Hicks Undergraduate Library, the team designed the e-book, created their own content, combined it with existing content and published the completed work. Digital Publishing F5|Refreshed is available for free download in Night Kitchen (tk3) format at www.parlorpress.com.

The implications of such publications are significant, Blakesley said.

"It makes available a lot of content that you'd otherwise have to buy or you couldn't find," he said. "So I think it will be interesting for that reason, the same way that the Web has had an impact on people. The process of reading -- how we read and what we read and who gives it to us -- is going to change, I think, quite a bit."

Whether it will be a change for the better is uncertain, although conference participants are exploring that question.

"We're studying how technology influences reading and writing practices and literacy and ways to make it do what we want it to do, to help people learn to read and write and get comfortable with technology rather than letting it control them," Blakesley said.

With technology increasingly becoming integral to literacy, conference participants also are addressing the danger of people getting left behind, he said.

"There are people who don't always have equal access to the technology," he said. It's a problem that goes hand in hand with "ubiquitous computing," the trend toward increasingly pervasive

computing devices in the environment, and growing expectations about how "wired" an individual should be.

One of the most popular panels at the conference addressed all the hype about Web logs, or blogs, a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual.

Panelists explored the use of blogs in first-year college composition courses as an alternative forum for discussion and examined the importance of persuasion in blogs as a precursor of real-world political change.

Matt Smith, director of writing and assistant professor of English at the 1,800-student University of St. Francis in Fort Wayne, was among the conference participants who attended the blog sessions.

"One of the things that I was interested in is people are starting to use Web logs and blogs in their classes, and I've never really been too familiar with that," he said. "The two sessions I attended ... were specifically about that."

In addition to learning what blogs are and some of the theoretical implications they have, Smith also learned practical applications of blogs in the classroom, including how they benefit students and fit into a curriculum.

Purdue "super senior" Rob Heise, 22, of West Lafayette, said the conference is providing a valuable networking opportunity. A double major in public relations and professional writing, Heise also is vice president of the Professional Writing Club at Purdue.

"What the conference is for us is an opportunity to meet other professionals in the field outside of the institution," he said.

The positive reception Purdue student portfolios have received from conference participants is encouraging, Heise added. "It's a very positive reinforcement as to what we're doing as students and where we're going," he said.

Heise said he was looking forward at the conference to learning more about using emerging technology in argument and mass communication.

"That's what I hope to gain anyway," he said, "is at least a better understanding of the way that the fields of technology and communications can be merged, because technology is so crucial in our world today."

On the Net

•Computers and Writing 2003: www.cw2003.org/

•Digital Publishing F5 | Refreshed: www.parlorpress.com/

•Definitions of blogs, e-books and other computer and Internet terms: www.webopedia.com/

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