

Scholars and Friends

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As SALT® Evolves

The passage of a friend triggers bittersweet memories. Members of the Society of Applied Learning Technology (SALT®) forge friendships on multiple levels. There are personal connections that come from sharing days together over time and intellectual friendships that come from a core of common interests. People for whom technology in the learning process is a passion have had a home in SALT® for almost 40 years. Membership is open, members are friendly and welcoming, and participation is the key to belonging.

Each August, the executive board of the society meets the day before the beginning of the summer conference. In August 2009, the meeting was commemorated with a picture:

very beginning. On October 5, 2009, Raymond G. Fox, founder and president of the society, passed away. An in memoriam column, written by John Fox (2009), was featured in volume 23, number 2. On March 8, 2010, Stanley Winkler, Ph.D., co-founder and vice president of the society, passed away. A column memorializing him is presented in this issue (Fox & Abramson, 2010).

Changing of the guard is always a nostalgic time but it need not be a sad one. Mr. Fox and Dr. Winkler led long, productive lives. Together and separately, they advanced the state of learning technologies over more than half a century. The society remains strong and viable under the leadership of John Fox, executive director, with the



L-R: Stanley Winkler, John Fox, Trudy Abramson, Raymond Fox, Frank Hart, Bill Walton

Of the six people in the picture above, I am the newcomer having joined the society in the late 1980s. The others have been involved from the

ongoing support of Carrie Vespico, operations manager and Thomas (Tod) Morgan, systems manager. Raymond Fox made all necessary arrangements for a seamless transition of leadership.

Two other outstanding academics, long-standing visible members of the SALT[®] family were Sylvia Charp, Ph.D., memorialized in volume 17, number 3 (Abramson, 2003) and Gabriel Ofiesh, Ph.D., whose in memoriam was published in volume 21, number 4 (Abramson, 2007). By example, Gabe taught me how to hold the attention of an audience and Sylvia taught me what people want to hear and read. As I type, I hear Sylvia encourage me to make my remarks personal as she so often did: "Trudy, you have done so much with so many and for so many. Let us share your experiences." And so I shall. What follows is a quasi-personal history as it relates to the society and some of its long-standing members. I extend Sylvia's remarks to all our readers and urge everyone to share personal histories within the SALT[®] family that we will be delighted to publish in the journal.

The Executive Editor and SALT[®]

Although I began teaching almost fifty years ago and started teaching to adults in 1977, my life as an academic began in 1985 when I completed my dissertation in communications, computing, and technology at Teachers College, Columbia University and moved from a community college to a graduate, teacher education program. Shortly after donning my new hat, I was invited by the Center for Advance Studies in Education (CASE) of the Graduate Center of City University of New York, to evaluate the educational technology component of a major grant program that used technology with largely-illiterate adults. The program was called PALS (Principles of Alphabetic Literacy Systems) and was an IBM product. The subjects were members of the civil service who were employed in state psychiatric facilities located throughout the state.

As a new academic, before the proliferation of the World Wide Web, I searched scholarly journals and surface mail for presentation opportunities. Everyone tells new academics how important it is to establish himself in the greater academic community but few open doors that make doing so possible. Although I managed to have proposals accepted by other conferences, I knew in my soul that my presentations were not going to get me on the map. While preparing my evaluation report for CASE, a postcard arrived from SALT[®]. The call for presentations and my report were a good match so I submitted a proposal. That was the beginning of one of the most meaningful relationships of my professional life.

A Little SALT[®] Chronology

We need to step back a minute and reflect on the evolution of computing technologies in education and training. The field of learning technologies has existed since the 1960s but has exploded

since the 1990s. The number of journals and of conferences has multiplied exponentially. From its beginnings in the 1970s, technology-in-learning advocates were drawn to the SALT[®] summer and winter conferences. Other national meetings in the 1970s and 1980s were sponsored by ACM, ADCIS, and NECC; there were some small state and or regional undertakings. SALT[®] managed to be large and small at the same time. The number of concurrent sessions was limited and, although the meeting rooms were large, it was always possible to network face to face. Each session had a chairperson responsible for the decorum and smooth functioning of the six daily presentations in each room. The exhibit hall, again of manageable size, made it possible to get a strong impression of the ways in which technology was evolving. The presentations were all state of the art and the presenters were ready and willing to discuss their work. There was a special interest group in instructional design and members got to visit some state-of-the-art facilities.

In the early 1990s, SALT[®] entered into an agreement with the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) to co-sponsor the conferences. For reasons that are not relevant here, the agreement did not work out well and the uniquely configured society meetings were slowly rebuilt. At this time, we are back to five concurrent sessions, a small but growing exhibit hall, and several hundred attendees.

Back to the Executive Editor

In February 1989, I attended and presented at my first SALT[®] conference. Presentations were typically supported with transparencies and videotapes. During the previous three years, I had made several presentations, conducted panel sessions with my graduate students, and administered a seminar based upon my dissertation effort but still felt very rough around the edges.

The warmth and level of professionalism that greeted me were incomparable. Imagine what it felt like! I was an assistant professor who had not been to the conference before. Upon registration, the president of the society, Mr. Raymond Fox, welcomed me. After my presentation, he appeared once again and thanked me for the excellent work. To make things even better, during the question and answer session, a contingent from IBM offered to build me a half-lab at the college at which I was employed. Best of all, I spoke with David Merrill, Ph.D. and Alfred Bork, Ph.D, two classic educational technology giants whose work greatly influenced my dissertation and began a long-standing friendship with Sylvia Charp, Ph.D., the editor of the T.H.E Journal.

The society sponsors two conferences each year: New Learning Technologies in the Orlando area

in February and Interactive Technologies in the greater Washington DC area in August. The sites were selected because of the ease of access by air. Typically, about 25% of the attendees are regulars; only a few of us attend both conferences. There is an interesting mix of people including academics; corporate trainers; software, hardware, and network developers and vendors; and members of the armed forces who focus on teaching and training. New professional and personal friendships are formed and grow with repeated contact.

To ensure that I am not conveying the impression that members of my network are all deceased, I visited the advance program for the August 2010 conference. On the program are John Hirschbull, Ph.D., with whom I go back forever; Joseph Ganci and Matt Sadinsky, who are regulars and may someday become my dissertation students (although both are too busy and too successful to think about it now); the three exemplary people, David Mylott, Ph.D., Antonio Rincon, Ph.D. and Major Mark Givens, with whom I am sharing a panel presentation; and many others whose work we have published within the pages of the journal.

SALT[®] has been the anchor of my professional life. Between 1985 and 1994, I was responsible for building graduate educational technology programs in two different colleges. The students were wonderful, supportive, and encouraging. The administrations were consistently negative and made unreasonable demands. Technology was moving forward and I was expected to teach at the cutting edge without equipment or peers. Happily, in the greater New York area, there were developers and vendors and many opened their doors to me and to my students. It was they who enabled me to keep my skills current, to provide excellent opportunities for my students, and to have something to present at conferences.

The SALT[®] conference committee was consistently receptive to my proposals; I worked hard and long and never let them down. After a few years, they invited me to serve as one of the session chairpersons – an opportunity that provided additional professional exposure. It was through these meetings, that my current employer, Nova Southeastern University (NSU), found me and invited me to join their faculty. I was hired as a professor at the Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences (GSCIS) in December 1994 and have been here ever since. The following year, I chaired a teacher education conference for the society, and my new dean, Edward Lieblein, Ph.D., was on the program as a featured speaker.

The society, through Learning Technologies Institute, publishes two journals: The Journal of Interactive Instruction Development (JIID) and The Journal of Instruction Delivery Systems (JIDS).

Before I became deeply immersed in online teaching, learning, and administration, my primary field of interest related to software development for learning. Two of my articles were published in JIID (Abramson, 1992; Abramson, 1989). In January 1998, I was elected to the Board of Directors of SALT[®] and have not missed a single August board meeting. In fall 1998, Mr. Fox invited me to assume the executive editorship of JIDS beginning with volume 12, number 4. In each issue is an editorial guided in some way by the spirit of Sylvia Charp, my model for editor-par-excellence. All editorials are available through my home page: <http://www.scis.nova.edu/~abramson>.

The symbiosis has been perfect. Some of the people I met at the conferences, shortly after arriving at GSCIS, had been former students who returned and finished their doctorates as my advisees. Others joined the school as a result of presentations I had made, panels I chaired with current doctoral candidates and recent graduates, and editorials that discussed the work we were doing. Many GSCIS doctoral candidates and graduates have presented at the conferences and have published in the journal.

Last Words

In each of the columns celebrating the professional contributions of the SALT[®] members who passed away, is a personal connection that I will not repeat here. There is, however, a new anecdote to be shared. Last August, I had a house guest, Percy Deift, Ph.D., a research professor at the Courant Institute of New York University (NYU). I remarked that one of my mentors, Stanley Winkler, often reminisced about his years at Courant. The reaction was explosive. It appears that Winkler's dissertation on Hill's Equation, completed at NYU in 1958, was an important part of Deift's doctoral work in mathematical physics completed at Princeton in 1976. Winkler's published work holds a prominent place in Deift's professional library. The following Monday, I sent an email describing the interaction to Stanley who reported that it was the most exciting message he had received in years and he had framed it. Whether the reporting was accurate or hyperbole is not the issue. The professional interaction is what is significant and, on this note, the editorial concludes.

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