Project Code Name: E-Learning

You can thank the Russians for e-learning. Well, in a really twisted way.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Great Space Race (and hula hoops), Sputnik was the world's first man-made satellite, launched in 1957. In response to this Soviet flight breakthrough, the U.S. government formed the Advanced Research Projects Agency to boost technology advancements in Department of Defense activities.

Military and academic experts powwowed on new ways to communicate, way before dot.whatever was cool. The new push for technology spawned packet-switching networks, protocols, email, and LANs that fed into the Internet and an e-revolution.

Governments worldwide are still big players in Net initiatives, and that greatly affects progress in e-learning. Here's a look at some trends in dot.gov and digital learning.

Uptake Down
A new report from Andersen Consulting claims that, overall, global governments are slow to adopt Net services.

The governments of Australia, Singapore, Canada, and the United States are leaders in providing online information, but they rarely surpass 20 percent maturity, according to the report. The French government offers the most comprehensive online services, and more than one-third of its sites are interactive; compare that to 8.3 percent of U.S. sites.

The report identified privacy fears and an overall lack of Net savvy as main reasons for the slow uptake.

FYI *www.andersen.com*

More Broadband, Please
One of the most active areas in U.S. government e-learning efforts is the push for increased bandwidth. The partnership of academia, industry, and government is continuing with Internet2, but the U.S. government's own Internet project is called Next Generation Internet.

The key distinction between NGI and Internet2 is that NGI is led by and focuses on the needs of such federal agencies as the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, NASA, and National Institutes of Health. However, because of the great deal of overlap between universities and federal agencies in terms of network infrastructure, applications, and the researchers working in both communities, there's also a great deal of synergy between the two projects.

According to I2 researcher Alex Latzko, all of the research should begin making an impact relatively soon. "This [I2] technology will be available within the next year. Some of it already is. If you've got fat enough pipes, you can watch a lot of the streaming video [that's] available."

The big question for e-learning proponents is still, "When will we be able to stream TV-quality live training to the masses painlessly via the Web?"

You can sign up for free I2 news updates at www.internet2.edu. NGI updates are found at ngi.gov.

Wired U Gets Gov Backing
Citing Britain's rich reservoir of experience and expertise, government officials in the United Kingdom say that it's time to establish a new virtual university to catch up with American e-universities.

The new institution will focus on instruction, not research, and it may help realize a promise made by Prime Minister Tony Blair to enroll at least half of the country's young people in higher education by the time they're 30.

Sir Brian Fender, chairman of the Higher Education Funding Council says, "I am quite clear about what this will look like. It will not be a correspondence course; this is the Open University of the 21st century." He estimates that the initial cost of the e-university will be $604 million (£400 million).

Consortia of institutions will be invited to bid on creation of the new virtual university, which will offer bachelor's degrees and a new two-year degree under development. Britain's pioneer Open University is likely to lead the bidding, but the government hopes that research groups will also become involved. Partnerships are also being considered with non-British institutions.

Source *Chronicle of Higher Education*

Vital Questions
In November, the Web-Based Education Commission is scheduled to present a congressional report that focuses on 13 policy issues influencing the Web's impact on improving learning. Here are some questions that the commission is scheduled to address:
❏ What content and teaching strategies best use the Internet for learning?
❏ What are the true costs of maximizing the Internet for learning?
❏ How will definitions of content quality conceived in a narrowband world have to be adjusted for broadband technologies?
❏ How should we evaluate the success of new Web-based approaches?

FYI www.webcommission.org

UpData
Canadian Net users have their American counterparts beat when it comes to online surfing, according to Nielsen NetRatings. Recent numbers place the average Canadian online 20 times monthly to visit 18 different sites, compared to U.S. numbers of 18 and 10.

The Lobby: a good place to start

Really Big Site

Coming to a computer screen near you: a supersized Website boasting every online resource offered by the U.S. government.

Dubbed firstgov.gov, the portal will enable people to link to government sites that help them access free educational content, start a small business, and track Social Security benefits, among a crowd of other activities. It's part of an effort to create a "high-speed, high-tech, user-friendly government," according to President Clinton. The site will be created by a team led by Internet entrepreneur Eric Brewer at no cost to taxpayers. Launch is set for fall 2000.

FYI firstgov.gov

Really Big Brother

Forget about taking an e-learning course in Myanmar anytime soon.

The country, formerly known as Burma, has prohibited Net use. According to the Associated Press, unelected military leaders passed a law that imposed a seven- to 15-year prison sentence for unauthorized modem ownership.

Email is allowed, but only a few hundred elite have access. The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications is providing a new email server that will offer email accounts to approximately 600 more users. There are 48 million people in Myanmar; only 50,000 have computers.

The State of the States

State governments are getting in on the e-learning action. Here's a sampling:

Colorado: Governor Owens, joined by academic institutions and the technology community, announced the formation of the Colorado Institute of Technology.

Montana: Ecollege.com gave the Montana University system a $517,000 grant to help five state colleges increase online classes and higher education degrees.

North Dakota: The state's Department of Health is offering online classes for emergency medical technicians, enabling many professionals and rural volunteers to complete much of their classroom training offsite.

West Virginia: Governor Underwood asked other Southern Regional Education Board governors to adopt an "electronic rate" for courses and programs offered over the SREB's Electronic Campus. The electronic rate would be in lieu of in-state and out-of-state tuition for e-learning.

Source *Government Technology*

Back to the Future

Radio as effective e-learning? According to David Walker and Gajaraj Dhanarajan, you betcha, if governments are interested in reaching disadvantaged groups.

In "Education for All: The Mass Media Formula," they write: "If education for all is to be achieved, then the potential for radio as an effective delivery device to disadvantaged groups will have to be harnessed. This can only be achieved with the commitment of governments to allow for the development of community broadcasting. The benefits that radio can bring to the welfare of a nation are potentially great. It is economically the best solution for reaching a large number of people with information and educational content. The tools for education for all and the infrastructure and skills for delivering education are readily available if governments are willing to allow radio to

proliferate at the community level."

What's needed for that to happen? Government deregulation of the airwaves, for one thing. But that may be a challenge in some areas. According to Walker and Dhanarajan, there are proposals in India, for example, to circumvent government regulations of community radio by rebroadcasting Web-

streamed audio via speakers mounted throughout villages.

Source www.TechKnowLogia.org

L-I-N-G-O Update

Here's this month's jargon watch for our techie readers; all definitions are adapted from the Ultimate Silicon Valley Slang Webpage (www.sabram.com).

Big Banging. Creating a product, such as software, that incorporates features from two or more other products.

Five and Dime. The U.S. area code 510 that covers the telecom-intense east San Francisco Bay area.

Lasagna Syndrome. When software has too many overlapping dialogue boxes.

Meeting Engineer. A person who spends more time attending meetings than doing other work.

Screen-Saver Face. A facial expression that reveals someone is bored to the point of brain shutdown.

@Work covers Internet trends, news, and tips. Send items of interest to atwork@astd.org.