Summary of thoughts which have grown out of my participation in the NATO Advanced Research Workshop on "The Design of Constructivist Learning Environments: Implications for Instructional Design and the Use of Technology" at The University of Leuven, Belgium - 14 May 1991

The Workshop was set up with a grant from NATO as part of their programme for Advanced Research Workshops. There were 24 participants from across NATO - 5 from the United Kingdom being Professor Ros Driver from Leeds, Professor Noel Entwistle from Edinburgh, 2 from the University of Coleraine and myself; there was a majority of Americans/Canadians but members also from Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Turkey.

In accepting the invitation to participate I had only a general understanding of the meaning of "constructivist" but was pressed to accept by the Workshop Director, whom I had met previously in Chicago, on the basis of the extreme relevance of your work to the future structure of learning. The briefing papers before the workshop introduced theoretical frameworks about which I had little understanding (situation cognition, cognitive apprenticeships, cognitive complexity, functional content learning, dialogical/dialectical thinking, experiential cognition and semiotics).

The Workshop was, however, extremely useful to me - in unexpected ways. I had been scheduled to speak fourth on the first day but, 5 minutes after the conclusion of the first paper I was asked to move up to second place "as the software support systems" for speeches 2 and 3 were still stuck in the airport! So I followed a good opening paper by Noel Entwistle from The Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction at Edinburgh University entitled "Academic Understanding and Context to Enhance It" which I did broadly understand, and then gave my own account about the evolution of the ideas within Education 2000 and the strategies we were advancing to empower young people to manage their own learning. Initially the ideas which I brought to the Trust came from my own personal experience within schools, rather than from any specific academic research tradition; subsequently the Trust is involved in a similar way - the input from "pure" research has been slight. It was this absence of a theoretical base which led to my interest in a possible research input from the Economical Research Council to check the validity of the concepts.

My paper received a very enthusiastic, and to me totally unexpected, welcome. Far from being dismissed it was hailed as a real demonstration of what all the subsequent speakers were wanting to claim was the practical value of the theoretical studies they would subsequently be presenting in their own papers. It was a strange experience to be acclaimed by a group of professionals whose language I find it hard to follow!

The underlying theme was that patterns of learning differ enormously, that they are highly individual, and that successful learning depends upon the learners "making sense" of what is being learnt, and knowing the use and value to which that learning is appropriate. The nearest metaphor I can see is that of Kim's Game, so beloved of Scouts and Christmas Parties!

The active participation of the learner, and the learner accepting responsibility for the progress of that learning, were identified as key factors. Totally open learning environments were advocated only by a few. Much interest focused on "scaffolding"...... limited levels of structure necessary to support a learner reach a point at which he or she would then gain sufficient confidence to move to a further level without extraneous support.

The Workshop was as concerned to promote "rich learning environments" as we ourselves; they were much concerned to explore ever more sophisticated software systems, frequently forgetting, I thought, the need to first evaluate the significance of the intensive use of relatively simple applications.
In the design of "Constructivist Learning Environments" the Workshop was wanting to explore the implications of involving the whole community; members had little idea as to what this involved but were positive in their assertion that learning in the future will need to be community based.

Later I would hope to produce an analysis of the main research findings as introduced, as they could well be useful at various levels within the Projects. Personally the Workshop gave me increased confidence in the assumptions which underlie so much of our work, though I now realise more clearly than ever just what a long-term agenda we have to accept... and, as yet, there appears to be nobody else trying to do exactly this; the American examples so far are not based on such intensive work as we started in Letchworth. But, and its a very major consideration, so far the work being started now in other Projects has not the momentum to take these ideas further forward...... we either have to expand and intensify our activity, or accept that we will not break new ground.

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There was a coincidental, but very valuable, bonus to the whole Workshop. The American participants had all seen copies of President Bush’s "America 2000 Education Strategy" released 3 weeks earlier.

It has enormous similarities to the Education 2000 thinking in its general structure and its emphasis on the creation of communities which support learning. In sending a copy of this to The Policy Unit at Downing Street I also prepared a summary note, which I now append.

America 2000; An Education Strategy
"...... making this land all that it should be"

Washington
April 1991

Explanatory Note:

While British education is highly unsatisfactory, American education - particularly at the High School - is significantly worse. But, I suggest, the Americans are more open in acknowledging their problem and far more energetic in their search for the solutions.

This document is a worthy successor to the other powerful statements of the past 7 years (particularly "The Excellency Report") and grows specifically out of the Governors' Conference of 1990. It sets out a 9 year "crusade". I have been in discussion with 2 of the 6 "excellent projects and inspired initiatives already pointing the way forward", listed on page 15, for some while, and was talking with Ted Sizer in Rhode Island in mid-March when he proposed that his "Coalition of Essential Schools" and Education 2000 should set up a joint Anglo-American Seminar to promote just these ideas.

I commend in particular the first 8 pages, and pages 21 to 24.
In the first of the four part strategy British Government will recognise its own progress through the National Curriculum and legislation for increasing the autonomy of schools, in creating "Better and More Accountable Schools". It is questionable whether Britain has yet found the mechanism to create the new "Generation of Schools" (second part) that "break the mould...... in their search to produce extraordinary gains in student learning". In the third part Britain will recognise the role to be played by the TECs but might doubt if this goes as far as "for our children to understand the importance of their own learning...... we must ourselves 'go back to school'...... using the myriad formal and informal learning means available to gain further knowledge and skills".

The final part, "Communities Where Learning Can Happen" is as yet ill-defined in the United Kingdom. In its explanation America 2000 reiterates in its own idiom what has been developed by Education 2000. "But much of the work of creating and sustaining healthy communities, communities where education really happens, can only be performed by those who live in them...... parents, families, neighbours, community organisations, church, voluntary groups...... such groups are essential to the building of relationships that nurture children and provide them people and places to which they can turn for help, for role models, and for guidance".

During much of last week I was able to discuss this document with some informal and influential American educators. They endorsed the concept in its entirety but questioned (a) The scale and the initial haste within the proposals, whilst some (b) are suspicious that a political initiative will invite confrontation.

Britain, in its own context has to "make this land all that it should be". The four-fold strategy set out in America 2000 is impressive. It does take a whole system approach...... and that is currently lacking as much in the UK as in the US.

Britain ought to be able to initiate a crusade more easily than the Americans - if we once decided to do so. We are smaller, more compact and less diverse; on balance we have better teachers; we have a stronger commitment to a balanced curriculum; and, once the "not invented here syndrome" is overcome can actually rally around a crusade.

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It would, indeed, be tragic if the ideas we have laboured so hard to develop here were to be taken up and fully developed in the US; it would, of course, be an economic tragedy...... not just a matter over which academics could wring their hands.

AJA
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