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PLATO Memories ●●●

Looking Back on 40 Years of Serving the Adult Learning Markets

By Dave Newman, PLATO Learning Director, Adult and Community Education

There have been many firsts in PLATO Learning's long and rich history, but the first of the firsts started in our work with adult learners. The course was set when PLATO, as it was then known, was conceived at the University of Illinois. As a proud Fighting Illini who was an undergrad when PLATO courseware was being developed, but safely on the liberal arts side of Green Street and away from the Engineering campus, I am pleased to have been somewhat present at the creation. Unfortunately, I never used PLATO courseware on campus — my introduction to technology and distance education was through the highly innovative videotaped *Intro to Psychology* course.

Years later, my career and PLATO crossed once again when I joined Control Data in 1980. At the time, PLATO software was being delivered on Control Data mainframes and utilized by many universities—Florida State University, University of Delaware, University of Hawaii, as well as several universities in Canada and in Europe—as a learning delivery system (an authoring system for new content and a delivery system for the PLATO courseware libraries), as well as a communication system much like the Internet is today. It was also being delivered at major companies such as General Motors for employee training from basic math skills to management training.

PLATO courseware was also being delivered in Control Data's Control Data Institutes (CDI), a group of private proprietary vocational schools across the country. As job training programs under the Job Training Partnership Act were expanding, Control Data introduced the FAIR BREAK Centers, which delivered basic skills remediation training, job seeking skills training, and occupational training programs such as bank teller and digital electronics training. These programs were delivered under contract to local agencies, as well as in the Control Data Institutes.

In the mid-eighties, PLATO was the largest private contractor to the federal job

training system. Many of the contracts were performance contracts, where PLATO had to meet performance goals to earn payment — a risky business but one in which we were very successful because our courseware was effective and our people were great, a formula that continues to this day.

In the early eighties, the personal computer evolved and PLATO was leading the industry. This was before MS-DOS, when the operating system was C/PM and the computers were integrated CPU, keyboard and disk drive (8" floppy disks no less), weighing upwards of 50 pounds. Control Data used this leading-edge technology in its FAIR BREAK Centers and CDIs, and began to market it and the licensed PLATO courseware to clients. Leading community colleges such as Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio were among our first college clients.

In the early stages of the commercial development of the PC, IBM, Apple and Texas Instruments had the lead. In addition to porting over the newly created PLATO basic skills, life skills, and lower division engineering curriculum for the new MS-DOS/PC-DOS operating system, Control Data created a limited PLATO library for the Apple II and the entire PLATO literacy library for the Texas Instruments TI 99/4A.

Unfortunately, TI pulled out of the PC computer race, but the wide availability of this very inexpensive box enabled a statewide purchase in North Carolina that introduced PLATO courseware to such luminary clients as Central Piedmont Community College. We also gained recognition in Job Corps programs through the support of Bob Taggart, a very prominent figure in the development of youth training programs.

As microcomputers became more available, PLATO expanded into the Corrections markets, with an innovative relationship with Minnesota's Stillwater State Prison, and expanded its role in community colleges, job training, adult education, and workplace training — all of which we continue to focus on today. And, from a technology point of view, we again led the industry with the first non-proprietary network delivery system, then known as the Local PLATO Delivery System. The extensive PLATO courseware library took up a massive 100MB on the server hard drives. In today's PC world, the entire PLATO library would easily fit into RAM memory on most computers.

Throughout the eighties and into the nineties, PLATO courseware continued to be adopted by adult learning programs. As technology became more widely accepted as an effective tool in education, we moved from the bleeding edge (where it can be painful) to the leading edge, where we remain today.

And, as the alternative school movement began and the standards movement started to take hold in K-12, the unique characteristics of the PLATO system meant that PLATO Learning, as the company was now called, was able to introduce learning technologies to these markets also.

Our strong record of achievement in adult learning, combined with the characteristics of our system that made it so effective — the depth and breadth of the curriculum, the highly motivating individualized instruction, the ability to develop custom learning paths to meet program and learner needs — meant that PLATO courseware was

widely adopted by high schools and middle schools, which then led to the company's strength in the K-12 market today.

About the author
Dave has held a number of marketing and product marketing positions with PLATO Learning in the secondary, college and adult segments of the education and training markets for more than 20 years — all focused on the application of technology to learning. He has also managed the development of computer-based learning products for adult learners.

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