

From the President

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What are we doing? I mean, really, what are we doing? Two recent events have prompted me, once again, to ask this question.

Toward the end of 1999 an attempt to land a probe on Mars failed to yield the desired results. Immediately cries of protest arose asking why we were spending millions of dollars in such a useless pursuit. The second is more a moment in time than an event. Finding ourselves in a millennial year inevitably causes us to reflect on the past as well as on the future.

I believe both hold significance for those of us involved in language learning technology.

First, I strongly believe that the pursuit of new knowledge and understanding is extremely important. Such an effort requires a substantial investment of time, talent, and financial resources. Obviously, knowledge is not a simple commodity on which one can place a price tag. As any scientist will tell you, failure is an expected and necessary part of research, and even failure produces knowledge (I suspect the NASA program knows things it didn't know before.) When it comes to the application of technology for language learning, we too can expect bumps along the road. We must remain committed, however, to discovering just how we can improve language learning.

Second, I ask again, what are we doing? Although we'd all probably say we're trying to help students learn a second language, can we also say that what we're doing makes a difference? Have we helped people understand each other better? Has this understanding helped prevent war, alleviated pain or suffering, reduced hunger? Has our use of technology brought people closer together? Has our pursuit of the most effective methods resulted in anything more than just knowledge? Perhaps this is an opportune moment in time to step back and ask ourselves what we're really doing. Perhaps we can't answer these questions any more clearly than we can answer those related to the effectiveness of technology. But we should try, and I invite you to join me in striving to better our planet as we move into the new millennium.

From the President

On the one hand we must continue to research more effective ways of learning a second language. On the other, we should remember the admonition found in Proverbs: "...and with all thy getting, get understanding." (Proverbs 4:7)

Your comments are welcome. Email me at read@lss.wisc.edu. ♦