Dawn of a New Profession: Remembering SITE’s Founder

GLEN BULL
University of Virginia, USA
gbull@virginia.edu

ANN THOMPSON
Iowa State University, USA
eat@iastate.edu

SITE’s founder, Jerry Willis, was born in 1943. He died this year just prior to the thirtieth anniversary of the organization that he founded. Television, computers, and the Internet did not exist when Jerry was born. He was a visionary who saw the transformative possibilities of computers in education. He founded SITE to realize this potential.

Jerry served as the first president of SITE, and we followed Jerry as SITE’s second and third presidents. Along with many others, we established SITE with Jerry and created the organization in the form that exists today. We are at a point in SITE’s history when we may begin to lose many of its pioneers. We are writing this remembrance of Jerry in the hopes of capturing some of his vision and intent for future generations.

Educational technology did not begin with computers. Christian Huygens invented one of the first widely used educational technologies in 1650. Huygens was a Dutch scientist and astronomer who designed telescopes that allowed him to study Saturn’s rings and discover its largest moon, Titan. Huygens used his lens-making capabilities to design the first slide projector. The Magic Lantern, as it was called, used an oil lamp to project images (on hand-painted transparent slides) through a lens.
By the nineteenth century Magic Lanterns were widely used in educational presentations. Sets of slides were developed for topics such as astronomy, zoology, and other scientific subjects. This technology was followed by film, phonographs, audio recorders, radio, and television. Each new technology was greeted with predictions of transformative implications for education. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edison famously predicted that film would transform schools. He later expressed disappointment that the predominant use of film was for “mere entertainment.”

Although previous predictions about the transformative potential of technology in education had missed the mark, Jerry Willis argued that emergent computing technologies were qualitatively different. Computing technologies that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century were personal and interactive. Previous technologies were grounded in a model of one-to-many. The term mass media was used to describe technologies that preceded computers such as radio and television because they employed a broadcast model. Communications were unidirectional, from instructor to student.

Computers and the Internet, in contrast, allowed and encouraged students to interact with their peers and their instructors. Communication was
multidirectional. Jerry foresaw that eventually students would be able to carry the equivalent of a hand-held computer with them, and that this had the potential to change the dynamic of education.

Jerry believed that teaching and learning could be transformed, but realized that this would only occur if the next generation of teachers were prepared to use computers effectively. The first generation of educators that used personal computers were self-taught. No courses, textbooks, or instruction manuals on effective use of these technologies in education existed. He therefore proposed establishment of an association in the field of technology and teacher education. Because he believed in the transformative potential he referred to this transition – perhaps with more hope than realism – as the *dawn of a new profession*.

At the beginning of the personal computing era, there was a great demand for books and guides to the new technologies that were becoming affordable for individual users. Jerry was a prolific writer and developed a series of books that introduced personal computing technologies to novices. The books were well received. Jerry was briefly wealthy from the royalties. The owner of the publishing firm persuaded Jerry to reinvest his royalties in an expansion of the firm. When the company went under as a result of over-expansion, Jerry lost all of his earnings. Jerry did not regret his choice, however. Given a visionary opportunity and a safe route, Jerry always selected the more ambitious choice.

Cleg Maddux recalls a moment at which Jerry first voiced the idea of establishing an organization and a conference devoted to technology and teacher education. At the time, he and Lamont Johnson were faculty members at Texas Tech. They were returning from a professional meeting driving across the plains of Texas together when Jerry outlined a vision for a new organization.

The following year the three of them were at different universities, but Jerry followed through on his idea and organized a new conference devoted to technology and teacher education. His intention was to kick start an ongoing dialog devoted to this topic. Exemplary papers would be published as chapters in a book. This strategy proved effective in attracting a coalition of like-minded individuals who gathered together for the first time three decades ago. Jerry was assisted in the organization of this endeavor by his wife, Dee Anna Willis. Jerry was the visionary one. His collaborative partner, Dee Anna, helped him realize the vision by capably managing the logistics and organizational details.

During its early years, SITE was known as the *Society for Technology and Teacher Education* (STATE). This acronym inevitably resulted in con-
fusion when faculty members in Virginia or Iowa announced, “I’m leaving for the STATE conference in San Diego.” Puzzled colleagues asked, “Why is a state conference for Virginia (or Iowa) being held in San Diego?” Jerry thrived on chaos and confusion, but the other members felt that an adjustment in the name might be helpful. The current name, the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE) was therefore adopted.

The annual conference was so successful after the first two annual conferences that it exceeded the capacity of any one person, even one as talented as Dee Anna, to manage and organize it alone. It was clear that a professional management team was needed. Gary Marks agreed to serve as an executive director of an administrative arm that would manage organizational logistics of the conference, allowing faculty to focus on academic programming. Gary had never organized a conference before, but has served quite capably in this role since the first two conferences.

At the time, and continuing today, there were a number of academic associations that had special interest groups focused on technology and teacher education. However, until SITE was established, there was no organization that devoted its sole focus to this area. In fact, until Jerry was inspired to found SITE, there was not a widespread recognition of the need for such an association. SITE’s continuing success today speaks to Jerry’s prescient vision in recognizing the need for an academic home for faculty members whose careers focused on reconceptualization of teaching and learning through technology.

Jerry believed strongly that technology was a tool that offered a means to a goal rather than being an end in itself. SITE’s governance structure reflects this belief. SITE’s Teacher Education Council brings together pedagogical experts from across the content associations. Its parallel Information Technology Council provides a home for experts across the various educational technology domains. Mishra and Kohler (2006) subsequently articulated the importance of this convergence of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge in their initial TPACK article published in the Teachers College Record in 2006. Jerry had recognized the importance of the concept two decades earlier when he founded SITE.

From the beginning, SITE was designed to foster interdisciplinary conversations. After its first decade, SITE established a journal, Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education (CITE Journal), with funding and support from the U.S. Department of Education. The CITE Journal was unique in one respect: it is jointly published by five teacher educator associations respectively representing technology (SITE), science education (ASTE), mathematics education (AMTE), social studies education (NCSS
When the journal was established, it was noted that the similarity in the way that the acronym “SITE” and “CITE” are pronounced might cause confusion. Jerry’s mischievous response was “Good!” One author (Thompson) is adamantly committed to the belief that the CITE Journal acronym should be pronounced “city” to avoid confusion with the association name, but as a practical matter most authors pronounce the acronyms for the journal and the association in the same way. In this manner, Jerry’s legacy lives on in ways both small and large.

At the same time, SITE established an annual National Technology Leadership Summit (NTLS). This annual leadership meeting (www.ntls.info) brings together the presidents and leaders of a dozen teacher educator associations each year to jointly plan ways of more effectively integrating technology into teacher education programs. This summit remains the only time each year when the collective presidents are in the same room together engaging in cross-disciplinary dialog across associations.

SITE also established joint NTLS fellowships with the teacher educator content associations. Through this program, an award recognizes the best technology paper presented at the mathematics education, science education, social studies education, and language arts conferences each year. The recipients of the award subsequently deliver invited presentations at SITE. SITE and ASTE have jointly named the NTLS Scholarship Award for the Best Paper in Technology and Science Education in honor of SITE’s pioneering vice president and science educator, John Park. (Bull, Slykhuis, Martin-Hansen, & Robinson, 2015)

Jerry participated in many different careers during his lifetime. Many who knew him may have been surprised that at one time he found a calling as a preacher. He also had an interest in stock car racing, and loved to
Bull and Thompson restore old cars and build hot rods. While his varied careers may have been unusual in a single individual, they very much reflected the times in which he lived and the American character. In fact, Brooke Hindle, former director of the National Museum of American History, attributes America’s success as an industrialized nation to this character:

Incredibly, the newborn United States was more successful than any other nation in assuming the attitude of mind required and in transferring any desired technology. How could that possibly be? How could a thinly dispersed people, 90 percent of them engaged in agricultural pursuits, a people whose economy was still colonial and commercial, take over the most advanced technology in the world? More amazing still, how could the custodians of an empty continent, far distant from the economic power centers of Europe and from its busy workshops and rising factories, move on to take leadership in one line after another of mechanization and innovation? (Hindle, 1983, p. 3)

In Hindle’s view, a familiarity with technology and interest in innovation was an important part of the answer to this question:

Americans - particularly the farmers - lived daily with machines, and a small group of mechanics and artisans worked daily with gears and gear trains, cams, ratchets, escapements, bearings, cylinders, pistons, and valves - the basic elements of which the new machinery was constructed. Moreover, the machinery the farmer knew - the seed drill, the turpentine and whiskey stills, the gristmills and sawmills, and the clock - were eminently comprehensible to all who worked with them. (Hindle, 1983, p. 3)

From this perspective, Jerry’s fascination with mechanical technology and his subsequent interest in the field of educational technology were extensions of one another. Once when the SITE conference was held in Washington, D.C., Jerry bought a stretch limousine sight unseen from a junkyard. After the conference, he bought the necessary parts required to put it in running order, and then drove it across the country to the mid-west – with no license plates! He was stopped by a state trooper in West Virginia and asked to account for the lack of license plates. Jerry explained that he
had believed that he had up to three days after purchase of the car to secure plates. Incredibly, the trooper was persuaded and allowed Jerry to continue his journey. Although not recommended as a model for others, the story provides insight into Jerry’s character – undaunted and willing to attempt anything.

Jerry admired the folk singer Woody Guthrie, the political activist who wrote songs like *This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land* that inspired countless generations. Guthrie performed with the slogan “This Machine Kills Fascists” emblazoned on his guitar. In a similar manner, Jerry believed that instructional technology could shine a light into dark corners and serve as an educational equalizer. Jerry explained his ‘can do’ spirit and philosophy of leadership in this way, “I just start marching down the street to lead the parade and just hope others follow.” In the case of SITE, others have indeed followed and remain grateful for Jerry’s vision and willingness to take big chances.

Like Woodie Guthrie, Jerry was a visionary who also had flaws like all humans. His disregard of rules in pursuit of a goal could be trying for administrators. One department chair was startled to glance out a window and see a surplus Army bus in the parking lot. She said, “Jerry, tell me that surplus Army bus isn’t ours.” Jerry explained, “I needed it to transport the international students who are visiting this summer.” After considering this explanation, the department chair said, “Then at least tell me that it wasn’t purchased with grant funding.” In typical fashion, Jerry had by-passed all of the red tape when he made the purchase.

The classic film *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was one of Jerry’s favorite films. In this movie, Humphrey Bogart is a prospector who is accosted by Mexican bandits impersonating Federales (Mexican police). Bogart asked to see their badges as proof of their status. The bandits reply, “Badges! We don’t need no stinkin’ badges!” This, loosely translated, meant that they were not sticklers for the rules. Jerry subscribed to this philosophy and used the phrase often.

A professor emeritus at one institution was so troubled by Jerry’s disregard for the rules that the professor developed a three-page single-spaced list of all of the university’s regulations and guidelines that Jerry had failed to follow, and mailed it to SITE’s leaders. Therefore it was all the more ironic when Jerry became an associate dean in later life. He subsequently complained that he had found in this new role that faculty often did not follow the rules or guidelines. Those who knew Jerry well agreed that there was never a better example of karma than this role reversal.

Like all pioneers, Jerry moved on to new initiatives and projects in his later years in life, and became less personally involved in SITE. Sev-
eral years ago he returned to SITE for one of its conferences, and expressed great satisfaction with the result of his creation. At that time, Jerry acknowledged his role as metaphorical father of SITE, and said to us, “You are now serving in loco parentis.” Jerry explained that he did not view stewardship as maintaining SITE as a frozen moment encapsulated in time at the moment it was founded, but rather as a changing, evolving organism responding to the perspectives of each new generation of members.

Jerry’s most important contribution to SITE goes beyond technology. Jerry had a total commitment to providing a warm welcome and mentorship to newcomers and novices. He was always supportive of new ideas … one of the reasons that SITE’s governance structure is supportive of creation of new SIGs as emergent technologies and disciplines evolve. He generated equal measures of exasperation and love among those of us who were fortunate enough to work with him. It was impossible to remain bored or complacent in Jerry’s presence. We hope that the organization that he founded always remains an exciting, relevant home for those who hope to transform and reconceptualize the way that we teach and learn.

References


Image Credit

Figure 1. Magic Lantern: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magic_Lantern.jpg