

# Commentary on the 9th International Precision Teaching Conference

by

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## Purpose

As newcomers, we were introduced to Precision Teaching in the usual business networking way. We had personal contacts with Precision Teachers who instilled us with a curiosity and excitement in a proven but revolutionary method of teaching. We were both anxious to attend the conference since we thought it would be an excellent and thorough learning experience. We weren't disappointed.

After spending four busy days with our eyes wide open to the newness and power of this educational technology, we were engaged enough to become active participants in this "movement." By contributing our expertise in communication, new product marketing, and strategic planning, we hope this commentary helps bring the benefits of Precision Teaching to market more rapidly. Specifically, we would like to offer a thumbnail "audit" of the Precision Teaching field, discuss how to market innovative products and services, outline some challenges facing Precision Teaching in promoting innovation, and suggest possible action steps. This article is the first in a series.

## Impressions

First of all, the Boston conference was well organized and carefully planned - a remarkable job considering the scope and magnitude of the events spread over four days. What struck us immediately was the extraordinary energy, intelligence, and camaraderie of both speakers and attendees. This energy was harnessed and magnified not only by the wide range of hands-on presentations, but also by the Cracker Barrel sessions, the Special Presentation of the Terry Harris Story, and the Celebratory Luncheon with surprise "info-tainment."

We also noticed the scarcity of newcomers, outsiders, suppliers, and "customers": the kind of diverse audience who attend conferences and trade shows of more "mature" technologies - some of which may even be younger than PT. Given the impressive amount of information and expertise shared at this conference, this was a surprise and disappointment.

Most importantly, the conference confirmed our belief that Precision Teaching is a powerful, revolutionary technology that offers the potential for quantum leaps in learning, productivity, and social harmony. However, because PT appears to discard so many traditional notions about motivation, aptitude, responsibility, and achievement, potential consumers or "adoptees" will require very careful cultivation and much time in order to "sign on."

## Great Moments

Over one hundred presenters showed how Precision Teaching can be applied to students in any classroom to produce the most effective learning experience. The conference involved dozens of exceptional presentations. However, we highlight just a few great moments. These PT "success stories" would appeal directly to people from all walks of life and could be used in marketing PT products and services.

\* Dr. Ogden Lindsley, founder of Precision Teaching, discussed over 100 key charts which have challenged his preconceptions and led to discovery over the past 25 years.

While the details of the charts were outstanding, Dr. Lindsley also presented several key issues relating to educational policy. Among them is the dramatic result that students can double their performance on a given skill each week and allow them to master skills and knowledge at rapid rates. Initially, Precision Teachers aimed for a x1.25 (25%) increase weekly - already far higher than the norm. They then learned that when students were involved in their own decisions, they could average x 1.5 (50%) increases weekly. We also learned that if students leap far enough up a curriculum, where their errors exceed corrects by six to one, acceleration is steeper, and they've jumped over those time-wasting intermediate steps.

Other lessons were: the degree of bounce in a behavior is unrelated to the slope of the learning line. In other words, you don't have to first "stabilize" a behavior to accelerate or decelerate it. Also, the level of civil disturbances has gone up dramatically in the U.S. over the past 30 years, but have re-

mained stable abroad. Noting that only one in every ninety-seven charts produces enough insight to be worth publishing, he urges listeners to chart as much as possible, be prepared for surprises, and welcome them!

\* The multimedia, personal presentation of the Terry Harris Story was a powerful testament to courage and triumph in the face of tremendous adversity. Through Precision Teaching, Terry Harris, his mother, and his teachers, Eric and Elizabeth Haughton, refuted the repeated dismal prognoses given by various experts to Terry, an infant with severe cerebral palsy. Today, he skis, is preparing for university, and presents eloquently to large groups.

\* In Seattle, Kent Johnson's Morningside Academy has rocketed sixty-five semi-literate men (two dozen were homeless) from 4th to 10th grade performance levels in three months. And the results literally leapt off the chart! "No," Kent grinned, "It's not a mistake. The data's real." When one participant commented that the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) should be here, the representative from DOE raised his hand and said, "We are."

\* P. Kenneth Komoski, Executive Director of the Educational Products Information Exchange (E.P.I.E.), startled attendees with data showing that fewer than one percent of educational materials are actually tested and validated with learners before publication. Textbooks contain huge amounts of extraneous material irrelevant to the objectives of the teacher. With the advent of electronic publishing, publishers can tailor textbooks to the needs of small groups quickly and economically. Precision Teachers can both contribute to and benefit from this flexible publishing technology.

\* Bruce Griffin and Steven Kukic, top administrators in the Utah State Office of Education, urged the audience in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., to avoid gradualism and challenge the status quo head on. Working with the country's smallest educational expenditure per student, Utah is expanding its statewide commitment to Precision Teaching. "Now is the time!" they said. "There's much to be done."

### **Reality Check**

After two decades of spectacular, documented

achievements with elementary school children, the disabled, homeless men, college students, corporate trainees, and many other student populations, Precision Teachers told us that they sometimes feel further than ever from their goal of influencing U. S. education. In accounting for this disappointment, it may be useful to consider perspectives from other disciplines, in particular a branch of marketing known as the Diffusion of Innovation (Rogers, 1962).

Precision Teaching has the feel of a young movement: a network of independent individuals who are enthusiastic about their technology. You share a special language and envision endless possibilities for Precision Teaching as did "techie" in other industries before you, such as developers of personal computers in the seventies or proponents of internal combustion in the nineteenth century. But, people buy concrete products and services not technologies, philosophies, or possibilities. They buy train tickets and automobiles, not internal combustion.

At this point, the basic technology has been proven. Developing effective and widely accepted applications now depends upon successful mastery of two marketing processes:

- 1. The Product/Service Innovation Process, and**
- 2. The Consumer Adoption Process.**

These processes are quite different from Precision Teaching's initial research and development phase.

### **The Product/Service Innovation Process**

The first challenge in bringing a new technology to market is to create a well-defined product or service which satisfies the perceived need of a person or organization (Kotler, 1985). People can't tell you what internal combustion is, but they buy cars. Why? Among other things, they have a need to get places quickly, freely, and on short notice.

A corporate executive may tell you she wants her customer support staff to learn more, learn it faster, or remember it longer. Why? Because this would allow them to answer customer questions better and faster, while decreasing the cost of training and the risk of giving out inaccurate information. If you then tried to sell her on "fluency", you would not be addressing her need. However, a training package which promised a

faster, more effective learning experience, followed by measurably higher performance would respond to her need -- and would indeed be fluency based.

The truth is, there are only a few PT “applications” which offer clear benefits and deliverables at a stated cost, for example:

- \* learning centers: Morningside Academy, Ben Bronz Academy, Houghton Learning Center, The Quinte Learning Centre
- \* instructional software: Behavior Tech
- \* corporate training services: Precision Teaching and Management Systems, Inc.

The challenge is to continue to identify and develop appropriate applications in a timely fashion. Possible new Precision Teaching products or services might include:

- \* Precision Teacher training programs (such as Dr. Lindsley’s Trainers Short Course)
- \* system-wide nursing and paramedical training in third world countries
- \* adult career assessment and development centers
- \* pilot flight training simulation programs
- \* weight reduction centers and
- \* technical training materials for CARE, OXFAM, and other organizations doing technical assistance abroad.

But wait! Designing good, relevant PT-based products and services is necessary but not sufficient to generate widespread adoption of this innovative technology. This brings us to phase two: the Consumer Adoption Process.

### **The Consumer Adoption Process**

Successful innovative products or services spread through the marketplace in layers. The first layer, the Innovators, is composed of people willing to truly take a risk on products *they perceive* as promising but unproven (Rogers, 1962). Trend setters and opinion leaders, Early Adopters, follow, and then, once the market is established, the large mass market (layers three and four) follows.

Since the mass market is not yet educated about Precision Teaching, we must first focus on the Innovators’ perceived wants and needs. In other markets, Innovators are venturesome. They have been at the forefront of their field. Their focus tends to be on possibilities and potentials; they are

not strongly motivated by cost considerations or by guarantees. This explains why a money-back guarantee, a promise of security, is traditionally not an important factor in marketing to Innovators.

Moreover, Innovators are characteristically willing to invest in achieving their vision. For example, the first layer of consumers to adopt new electronic products (color TVs, calculators, quadraphonic stereo, VCRs, FAX machines) paid ten times what the mass market paid for those products several years later. Incidentally, for various reasons, some innovative products do not make it to the mass market--quad stereo, for example.

As a result, Precision Teaching products and services must appeal to the imagination of the Innovators. In order to appeal to Innovators, it will be necessary to find out what’s meaningful to them and will require two-way communication in their language rather than the language of Precision Teaching.

Who are these risk takers, and how do we find them? To begin with, they are a small fragment of the marketplace. Broadly speaking, they are people and organizations who are, for some reason, unconstrained by tradition. They include those who have previously moved quickly to adopt educational innovations, or who are now disposed to do so.

Japanese and Swedish automotive manufacturers have spent heavily on progressive employee job design and training for years. In America, Polaroid was at the forefront of corporate human resource development training in the 1960’s. Both could be potential Innovators. And the emergency medical technician (EMT) field, which is young and growing rapidly, is probably still unconstrained by tradition and might be willing to “bet” on PT.

In the next article of this series, we will explore these and other market possibilities.

### **Next Steps**

If Precision Teaching technology is to be diffused successfully from the universities and learning centers into broader acceptance by society, the Precision Teaching movement must ensure its continued ability to train people in the basics of PT, while building its capacity for product development and marketing.

We offer some options, while underscoring that this will be a long term project.

- Preserve and enhance your numbers and your knowledge base by:
  - developing a trade or professional organization;
  - further developing and understanding teacher training and train-the-trainer programs.
- Understand the core of what Precision Teaching offers: to most customers, it will probably not be “precision” or “fluency” but speed of learning and retention.
- Start to develop and market PT products and services:
  - request articles and PT conference sessions on new product development and marketing;
  - study case histories of the adoption of educational, medical, and service industry innovations;
  - invite innovative organizations like Apple Computer to PT conferences;
  - recruit product development and marketing professionals;
  - publish articles about successful PT products and services in the *Journal of Precision Teaching*, in business media (e.g., *Inc.*, *Wall Street Journal*), and leading newspapers.
- Search out innovative organizations and learn from them. Don't limit the search to North America!!

## Summary

The importance of Precision Teaching as a powerful, effective tool was obvious to us as newcomers. We found the International Precision Teaching Conference to be an excellent learning forum. It also stands as an ongoing means of communicating and sharing work from the PT field.

However, to attract and maintain the attention of a nation in an educational crisis and to promote the widespread use of Precision Teaching, we have suggested the use of the Diffusion of Innovations model as a step toward successful adoption of PT practices.

By designing additional products or services that can offer clear benefits and deliverables at stated costs, and focusing on people and organizations who are already inclined to adopt educational innovations, the importance of Precision Teaching may be communicated to a larger and more receptive audience.

## References

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