

New Trends in Astronomy Teaching, edited by L. Gouguenheim, D. McNally, & J. R. Percy (Cambridge University Press), 1998. Pp. 352, 25.5 x 18 cm. Price £45/\$69.95/Euros ? (hardbound; ISBN 0 521 62373 1).

In their preface to this Colloquium volume on the teaching of astronomy, the editors indicate that eight years have passed since the first IAU Colloquium (No. 105) on astronomical education. Seldom in human history, have eight years been so packed with change. The computer, the Internet, and the electronic-detector revolutions over that interval have created a genuinely paradigm-shifting opportunity regarding our methods of astronomy teaching (as well as many other aspects of life). John R. Percy, in his opening lecture in this volume, points out that about 100 research IAU conferences occurred between the two Teaching Colloquia, and he calls for a better balance between research and teaching as inspirations for IAU meetings. I strongly support his view. Is the purpose of astronomy, research? I maintain that it is not; the purpose of astronomy is human advancement, and teaching is probably an even more critical element in this than is research.

Let me illustrate the amazing power of the new technical methods: on page xii, this book lists the email addresses of most of the participants. I have transcribed those addresses and I have created an “exploder,” *eduAstronomy@eta.pha.jhu.edu*. The reader of this review, should s/he wish to do so, can, with a few keystrokes, tap a world-wide bank of experts in astronomy teaching. I am comfortable in taking this minor (but I hope important) action because this review is appearing in a highly respectable publication which is read only by the finest people, who will use the alias only for purposes that will be welcomed by the recipients of the email, but my action also highlights the flip side of the electronic revolution: too much information; too much interaction. How do we cope with it all, and how do we separate the wheat from the chaff? This affects astronomy teaching, where it is intensified by the tremendous rate of astronomical discovery. The answer is, that we are at the moment only on the *leading edge* of the revolution that is to come, and the technology is appearing for dealing with the difficulty. For example, I have just installed System 8.5 on my Macintosh computer; this advanced operating system incorporates “Sherlock,” a search engine that intelligently searches, on request, the content (not just the file names) of my own computers files ... plus the Internet! And this System 8.5 is already an antique—Apple’s System X, to appear shortly, will blow it (not to mention Windows) away. So to some extent, at least, the technology will solve the problems that are created by the technology.

Do you feel the rush? Well, it is worse than that. The volume that I am reviewing gives us the results of an IAU Colloquium, No. 162, that was held in 1996 July! While many of the papers deal with timeless aspects of astronomy education, many others are already obsolete as this book appears. You will find much helpful information in this volume, but you are advised to use the new *eduAstronomy* exploder to find the latest updates to what is presented. And you can subscribe to (become a member of) the new exploder simply by sending an email message to *eduAstronomy-request@eta.pha.jhu.edu*, with nothing in the subject line and with this *two-line* message: *subscribe* end. You, or anyone on the exploder, can remove yourself (unsubscribe) at any time simply by sending an identical email message to the same address, but with *unsubscribe* in place of *subscribe*. To find out who is on the list at any time, the address is the same; the message is *who eduAstronomy*, with the same second line: *end*. It is charming that this review, and The Observatory, can so easily become a significant part of the advancement of astronomy education.

The volume ends with a thoughtful essay by Martin Rees that includes cautions about cyberspace that deserve attention. Revolutions do sometimes end with eating their own children; this only, however, calls for more careful and intense effort on the part of all of us in our educator roles.—RICHARD C. HENRY