



how  
the land  
of the **little**  
**grass shack**  
got ready for its  
academic bowl debut

**TECHNOLOGY TO THE RESCUE**

*By Jeff Stabile*

Last year the Hawaii Center for the Deaf and the Blind competed in the Gallaudet Regional Academic Bowl for the first time. The staff, students, and community of the Hawaii Center for the Deaf and the Blind were honored and excited to join the Academic Bowl. However, we experienced a certain amount of trepidation. Our students had never before experienced an academic competition. The other schools in our Western region have long-standing traditions of excellent performance in successive Academic Bowls. Most daunting of all, perhaps, our school is geographically remote and we could not engage in pre-trial matches. We knew we had a very serious challenge.

**The Internet Ends Isolation**

Fortunately, the world has become a much smaller place since the use of the Internet became widespread. In the fall of 2005 an on-line company, Hotu.com, offered us a trial membership in the technology that we would end up using to run Academic Bowl practice matches remotely. I, as the coach of the team, was designated the administrator of our account at Hotu.com. Originally designed for companies to host on-line job fairs, Hotu.com was a site at which teachers and students could hold on-line discussions that included graphics and text. It also provided a means of holding office hours from home during which teachers could help students who sought extra help.

*Photography by Hui Zhang*





**Jeff Stabile**, former math teacher and current educational assessment specialist at the Hawaii Center for the Deaf and the Blind, was a member of his own high school decathlon team.

I discussed the requirements for an Academic Bowl competition and Hotu.com modified its programming to allow for a PowerPoint presentation of 200+ slides, up from its original capacity of 12. Saving an Academic Bowl practice match as individual files, I was able to upload them onto the site and create a slideshow that would appear in a chat room. I created a chat for a certain date and time, students were assigned names and passwords, and only those who were registered could participate.

Once everyone logged onto the site and entered the chat room, I ran an orientation session. First I compared the screens; competitors and administrators saw different screens. While the team members' screens looked like those in a regular chat room, the administrator's screen had a third field where all

messages came in. After a message came into view, I had the control to send the message to the "main room" to be viewed by everyone or to delete the message without sending it on.

After this first step of the orientation, I enabled the competitors to see the practice match on their own screens. I showed them how I could control the movement of the information forward and backward. We were ready to go!

### **Team Members Face Off Round One**

I explained that the competitors would "ring in" during the first round by having Xs ready in their individual text fields. As soon as they rang in, I would move on to the next slide in the slide show, just as in a true Academic Bowl match. Then I would forward all the information so

**Left:** In Hawaii, the author and former teacher scrambled to find the latest technology so that his students could prepare for the Western Regional Academic Bowl and have experiences similar to the students in the Northeast Regional Academic Bowl above.

everyone could see who rang in first, and everyone could type his or her answer and send it on. I would forward the first response to the main screen for all to see, then judge it correct or incorrect. Meanwhile, I would delete the other responses, as I would never have seen them were this a real-life match. If the respondent answered correctly, we'd move on to the bonus question. For the bonus questions, players could use a private message function to confer, or, if they were in the same room, they could confer in whatever manner they chose. As the 20-second clock ran down, I would record the final five seconds into the chat room, "5...4...3...2...1...I need your answer now."

If the respondent answered incorrectly, I moved on to the next slide and showed the question again, giving the opposing team the opportunity to answer the question following the same procedures. In the event that no one answered the question correctly, I would forward through the slides until the next question, pausing on the answer for a few seconds. Then I would move on to the bonus question, again pausing for a few seconds. Finally, I would move on to the answer for the bonus questions and pause a few seconds. This had to be done, as one of the aspects of the Hotu.com programming was that no slide could be skipped. Thus, I showed all bonus questions and answers regardless of whether they were played. Rather than considering this a drawback, I felt this gave players more opportunities to gain knowledge for future games.

For the mathematics questions, I told everyone they had 30 seconds to perform their calculations and submit their answers, and then I counted down the same way I did for the bonus questions. I forwarded only the answers from the first respondent from each team.

### **Round Two**

For Round Two, I asked the captain of each team to tell me the order in which the players would respond. Then, in my

prompts, I named the two players who were to respond to the question at hand. For example, if Team A had Kevin, Britney, and Beyoncé, while Team B had Christina, Ricky, Lance, and Justin, I would say, "Question number one: Kevin and Christina get ready." Then I would say, "Question number two: Britney and Ricky get ready." I would continue through the rotations in such a manner until all 16 questions were posed and answered. I followed the same 20-second countdown procedures for the bonus questions.

### **Round Three**

The dynamics of Round Three required some more thinking. We couldn't fit all the questions onto one screen and make them large enough for the competitors to read easily. Neither could the team members confer adequately within two minutes if they were each attending to their own screens and trying to use private messages to talk to each other.

Our solution was to have hard copies of Round Three questions as well as an answer sheet and run it as a real-life Academic Bowl match. This solution worked well when all members of a team could be in the same room. If everyone were truly remote, we decided to add time for the conferring and typing in of answers, allowing five minutes instead of two.

### **Online Against Other Schools**

At our request, our contact at Hotu.com asked the Academic Bowl coaches from outside of our area—the Rochester School for the Deaf in New York and the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind—to check out what we were doing. They liked what they saw and we set up times and dates for practice matches.

Everyone got login names and passwords, and I gave the coaches administrative access so we could check each other in the process of sending responses to the main room. We also designated an assistant coach to be the official score keeper. We decided that

each school would suggest a complete set of questions and answers for Round One and Round Two, as well as a full set of questions and answers for an agreed-upon category for Round Three. The Hotu contact selected the questions, picking half from us and half from the competing teams.

I compiled all the questions into a PowerPoint presentation and produced a word-processed script. I sent all of this via e-mail to the head coach for the other teams, as well as word-processed documents for the Round Three questions and a Round Three answer sheet. Once the opposing team's coach had reviewed the documents, I uploaded the match for the agreed on date and time. We decided to trust each other to run Round Three independently and type in the answers as written on the answer sheet (including misspellings) for the opposing team to check and give the appropriate credit.

We enjoyed the practice matches and considered the experience helpful. All of us became very comfortable with the rules and procedures for competition and with how smart deaf kids from around the country are. We added a third team to our virtual competition roster. Two of our three competitors made it to the nationals and the other one made it into the final rounds of competition in the Regionals.

### **What Will the Future Bring?**

The experience led us to wonder: Wouldn't it be great if we had an on-line version of the Academic Bowl that could allow more than 16 teams per region to participate throughout the season? Maybe it could lead to accurate qualifying and seeding at the Regionals and provide the best chances for success for the best teams.

What a kick it would be if our little experiment could turn into something that enhances the Academic Bowl program by broadening its reach and helping all teams become more highly skilled.