

A Leisurely Walk through PLATO's History

What's in a Name?

by Michael Stevens

We are PLATO—the Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization. Did you ever wonder how PLATO got its name? Or what other names were considered or used? In its first five years—between 1987 and 1992—PLATO experimented with different names.

When PLATO was founded, it borrowed its name from a California group known as the PLATO Society that was affiliated with UCLA. The UCLA group used the word Perpetual for the initial P, and that's how PLATO's name appeared on its birth certificate. On May 28, 1987, when PLATO filed its paperwork with the University of Wisconsin, it called itself the “Perpetual Learning and Teaching Organization.” Likewise, the brochure for the first event used that name.

5-28-87 OSS PLATO 86-87

1986-87 Academic Year
1987 Summer Session

DEAN OF STUDENTS OFFICE
STUDENT ORGANIZATION REGISTRATION/INFORMATION

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

Name of Organization PLATO - Perpetual Learning and Teaching Organization

Address 433 N. Murray Street, Madison, WI ZIP 53706 Room # _____

Telephone # 262-2115 Advisor (if any) Alice DuBois, Liaison Phone # 262-2115

Primary Contact Norman Jacobson, Guest Student, UW-Madison Phone # 836-5110
(Must be a registered student)

Address 2215 Branch Street, Middleton, WI ZIP 53562

Each organization *must* provide the full names, addresses, and telephone numbers of at least *three current students* who agree to serve as representatives of the organization. Registration will be withdrawn if all representatives are not registered students. The information listed here will be released to any person requesting information about this organization.

PLATO's birth certificate, dated May 28, 1987, forming it as the Perpetual Learning and Teaching Organization.

The planning group had been using variations of that name since 1986. At a meeting held on December 15, 1986, the minutes referred to the “Perpetual Learning and Teaching Obligations” of the program, although most early members continued to use “Organization” for the final “O.” In 1987, some members wanted differentiate the Madison group from the California group. Chuck DuBois suggested that the Madison group call itself STUDENT, an acronym standing for “Studies to Unravel Diverse Enigmas & New Truths.” Fortunately, that name never got traction, and by default the group stuck with the “Perpetual” version of PLATO when it was formed.

Even so, there continued to be uneasiness about the name throughout early 1987. Norm Jacobson, chair of the planning committee and later PLATO's first president, really liked the concept of Perpetual Learning, arguing in January 1987 that it was “a lure for many of us who now have more time to pursue intellectual interests.” At a May 1987 meeting, after the filing of the paperwork, some of PLATO's founders were concerned that the initial word reminded them of “perpetual care” at a cemetery. One person said that it “sounds a bit like

Forest Lawn.” Others suggested the word “Participatory.” It captured the nature of the program, although someone commented that the word “has six syllables, so it doesn’t roll off the tongue too easily.” Still another



THE PLATO SOCIETY

University of Wisconsin-Madison

The PLATO Society name and logo as used in 1989.

member offered “Past-Puberty” in place of “Perpetual,” although perhaps that suggestion was made in jest. The meeting adjourned without any decision. By the following month, a consensus had emerged. On June 30, the first word of the name was changed to Participatory.

YOU ARE INVITED
TO
AN EXCITING NEW
OPPORTUNITY
FOR
THE RETIRED
THE SEMI-RETIRED
AND ABOVE ALL
THE INTELLECTUALLY
CURIOUS
UW-MADISON PLATO*

Still, the longer name did not easily trip off the tongue, and the full wording seemed destined to be forgotten. By 1988, documents started referring to the organization simply as “the PLATO Society” without the full name spelled out. In 1989, the PLATO Society had its own letterhead, and one searches in vain in the early literature published by PLATO to find any reference to PLATO being an acronym. If anyone noticed the redundancy of the words Organization and Society in a formal name, it possibly happened in 1992. Sometime between March and July of that year, the word Society was dropped from the name, and it became simply PLATO. Not until September 1992, did the full name – Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization—appear the materials sent to its members.

* PLATO is an acronym for Perpetual
Learning And Teaching Organization

Division of Summer Sessions
and Inter-College Programs
433 North Murray Street
Madison, WI 53706

You Are Invited document:
PLATO's first brochure, 1987.