

Building an International On-line Teacher Community to Support Continuing Professional Development

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Abstract

The following paper describes the initial experience of a major international examination board in setting up and running an email discussion group for teachers of a syllabus taught in more than 80 countries. In it we describe how the group was established, how its members used it, and contrast this with our experience of similar teacher groups in the UK.

1. Introduction

Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) is part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), a major provider of examinations both within the UK and internationally. CIE has an extensive programme of in-service training. Since CIE provides assessments for schools in more than 150 countries, providing support and training at reasonable cost and useful intervals is a continuous challenge.

UCLES, through the Interactive Technologies in Assessment and Learning (ITAL) unit, has been investigating the use of asynchronous e-mail based discussion groups to address this issue. Such groups offer a way of bringing geographically widespread teachers together to engage in the sort of reflective, collegiate and experiential interaction that is increasingly seen as the basis of effective professional development [2]. ITAL has used e-mail based discussion groups to support the creation of on-line communities of teachers in the UK, and shown how these communities can contribute to effective informal teacher development [3]. We were therefore interested in bringing this experience to bear in an international context.

2. Creating the Group

A pilot project was set up to create and grow an email discussion group for one of a range of new modular qualifications offered by CIE. We felt that this would be a

good starting point for the sort of community that we wished to develop, since it is new to teachers, in terms of its subject content, structure and assessment methods.

The group was restricted to teachers at centres offering the syllabus, and was 'lightly' moderated. We advertised the groups in a number of ways; sending a letter to all registered Centres; posting information and joining details on CIE's public website; e-mailing Centres (who often correspond with us by e-mail) encouraging them to join; and including the group details in the signature of all relevant e-mail messages.

3. Evolution of the Group

The group grew in membership quite quickly. In the first 12 months, it had grown to almost 80 members. The membership consisted of a wide range of nationalities, living and teaching in a wide spread of countries, including Argentina, Peru, India, Pakistan, Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Cyprus, Greece, South Africa, Zambia.

4. Message Analysis

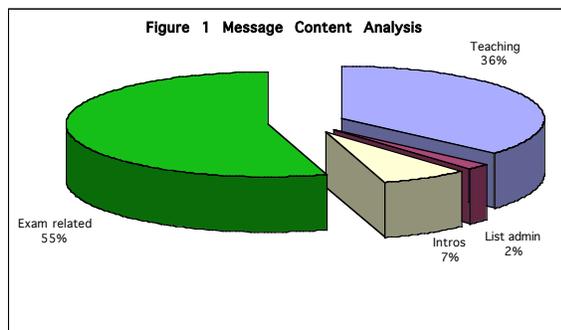
4.1. Method

To get an overview as to how the teachers used the discussion groups, we analysed the messages sent to the ICT Career Awards group over a twelve month period (April 2001 to March 2002), a total of 181 messages. We followed a similar methodology that we had used in analysing the UK teacher groups [3]; i.e. individual messages were retrieved from the archives and coded according to their content and to their function.

5. Results

5.1. Message Content

Figure 1 summarises the results of the content analysis. The majority of messages (55%) were exam related, but a substantial proportion (35%) were concerned with more general teaching issues. Smaller percentages



were introductions (7%) and messages relating to the administration of the group itself (2%).

5.2. Message Function

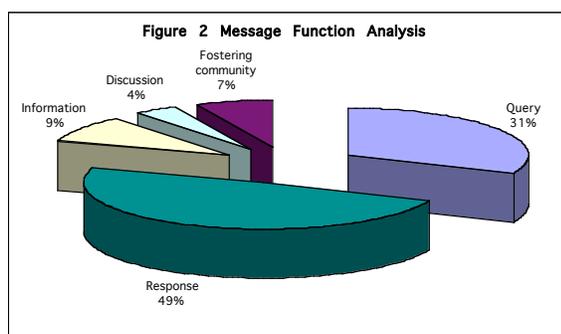


Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the messages by function. It is clear that the majority of messages are queries (31%) and responses to those queries (49% of the messages). Smaller percentages of the messages were unsolicited items of information (9%), messages designed to initiate discussion (4%) and messages whose function seemed to be to foster a sense of community among the group members.

6. Analysis

The proportion of examination related messages (messages directly related to what was expected of students in the examination rather than how to teach it) contrasts with our experience in the UK, where this proportion was somewhat lower (at between 14 and 23%). This reflects the fact that this group was supporting a new qualification, and that many of the messages were queries directed at CIE asking for clarification and information about the examination. We expect the proportion of examination-related messages to decrease once the teachers become more comfortable with its demands. Despite this,

it is interesting to see that some 36% of messages related to the teaching in a more general sense.

7. Facilitating the Group

Facilitator training is an area we are interested in developing, and we have already started a program to address this [1]. We hope to take a similar experiential and reflective approach to this as we have done with the teacher support itself, and create an internal 'meta-group' for facilitators to discuss and share best practice based on their experiences.

8. Issues/Conclusions

The fact that this was a newly established syllabus had a significant impact. Messages tended to concentrate on examination-related issues rather than more general pedagogical ones. Experience of our UK-based groups has shown that those with established syllabuses tend to grow more quickly with discussion focusing more quickly on pedagogical issues.

There was some evidence that cultural differences between members, and also, to some extent, their confidence and ability to write in English did impact on the contributions received to the group. Some teachers were clearly used to using English in their email communications, whereas many wanted to join the groups and observe the discussion without contributing.

There are a number of questions that this work has raised, but not yet answered. What are the facilitation issues that multi-cultural groups raise? Can we expect the same level of participation in such a group as we get in a more culturally homogeneous group? What will the effect of differing philosophies of education in different countries be? Only if the group moves beyond its present focus on the examination will we start to gather evidence to answer these questions.

9. References

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