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# Online Teacher Communities and Continuing Professional Development

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**ABSTRACT** This article describes and analyses the first year of a pilot project undertaken by a large examination board in the United Kingdom to investigate the teacher support and development opportunities afforded by email discussion lists. Discussion lists were set up to support teachers of two of its United Kingdom examinations. The author describes how these lists have, over the lifetime of the project, built into two lively online communities and how these communities are contributing to continuing professional development for their members, and discusses the factors that may have led to their success.

## **Introduction**

### *New Ideas about Teacher Training*

The context in which teachers work is undergoing rapid change: political, educational and social changes mean that teachers need more and better continuing professional development in order to keep up. However, the shortcomings of traditional in-service training are well recognised and documented (Little, 1993). It is too fragmented, unproductive, inefficient, unrelated to practice, and lacking in intensity and follow up. Traditional 'sit-and-get' training sessions or one-time-only workshops delivered by outside trainers have generally proved to be ineffective in changing teachers' practice and have little, if any, effect back in the classroom.

In response to this many attempts have been made to define the characteristics of a more effective form of professional development that takes into account these changes. This has led to the view that effective professional development should, among other things:

- be ongoing;
- include opportunities for individual reflection and group enquiry into practice;
- be school-based and embedded in teacher work;

- be collaborative and allow teachers to interact with peers;
- be rooted in the knowledge base of teaching;
- be accessible and inclusive.

Professional development, therefore, is no longer seen as something ‘visited’ on teachers from outside, but something in which they actively participate, and from which they take usable skills and knowledge that have immediate currency in their classrooms.

#### *Teacher Communities and E-mail Discussion Groups*

One way in which this conception of teacher development can be supported is via teacher networks or communities. These networks foster the conditions in which the collegiate, reflective, practice-based development can take place, allowing teachers to share experience, information and good practice. Teacher communities are a ‘form of their time’ as Lieberman (2000) points out:

*Although a few networks have existed for some time, their numbers and influence have increased dramatically in the last few years. Perhaps their loose structure and flexible organization are more in tune with the rapid technological and socio-economic changes of this era, providing the kinds of knowledge and experience that teachers need to be successful with their students. By providing avenues for members to deal with real problems, work collaboratively, and to communicate more effectively with a diverse population, networks are uniquely suited to the development of learning communities that are both local and national.*

E-mail discussion groups have a number of features that make them particularly suited to building teacher networks. They:

- support many-to-many communication, facilitating inter-group communication;
- are asynchronous – they do not require the participants to be ‘online’ at the same time. They can log in and read messages at their leisure. This gets around the problem of having to bring participants together, and also facilitates communication over long distances and time zones and allows the creation of international communities. Asynchronous discussion also allows reflection and can lead to better quality contributions;
- are ‘push’ rather than ‘pull’, i.e. the information comes to the user, rather than the user having to go and get it. E-mails arrive in the user’s mailbox;
- are text-based. Text allows structured discussion, and, coupled with asynchronicity, can promote reflection;
- allow the creation of searchable archives, allowing messages and discussions to be saved for future reference.

#### *The Project*

The University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) is a major provider of examinations both within the United Kingdom and

internationally. UCLES is committed to providing high quality support and training to teachers of its examinations, and has an extensive programme of INSET and other activities. As part of this commitment UCLES has been investigating the use of email discussion groups to create online communities as a way of facilitating effective, yet informal, professional training.

In February 2000, two pilot lists were set up, one to support teachers of Media Studies and another for teachers of Psychology. The two e-lists became 'live' in February 2000 and have been running since then. Both lists were open in the sense that anyone could join, and both were moderated, meaning that any messages submitted to the list were checked by a moderator for appropriateness of content.

Records of the numbers of members and the numbers of contributions to each list each month were kept. At the end of the first year of the project 3 months' messages were retrieved from the archives and coded according to the schema in Appendix 1. Messages were coded according to their content and their function. A questionnaire was sent out to every member of each list via the list itself (Response – Media Studies:  $n = 39$  (17% of total membership); Psychology:  $n = 28$  (28.5% of total membership)).

## Results and Discussion

### *List Membership*

Since February 2000 the membership of each list has grown steadily and in June 2001 the membership stood at: Media Studies – 292 members, Psychology – 132 members (Fig. 1).

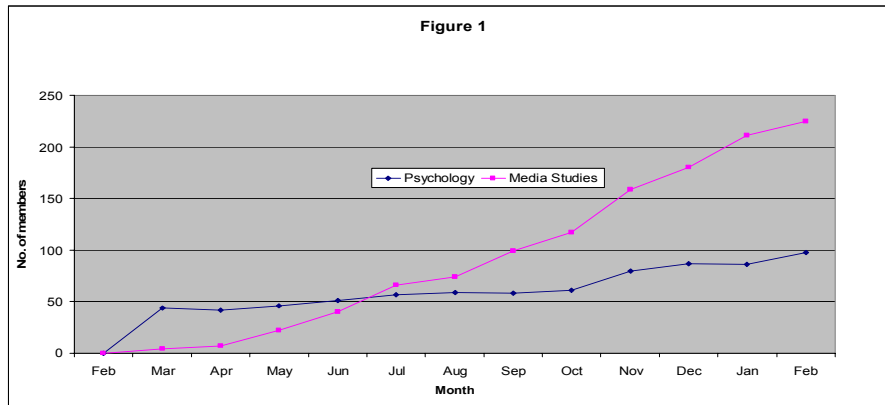


Figure 1. List membership (Feb 2000 – Feb 2001).

Our estimates suggest that the lists could contain between 60 and 70% of teachers of the particular examination, although this is difficult to estimate

with any accuracy, since we do not know the exact number of teachers 'in the field'.

### Contributions to the Lists

Since the lists membership has grown, the number of messages has increased and now stands at around 60-80 messages a month for the Media Studies list and around 30-50 messages for the Psychology list. There is a marked pattern of contributions, reflecting the dynamics of the school year, with dips around the holidays at Easter, in the summer and at Christmas (Fig. 2).

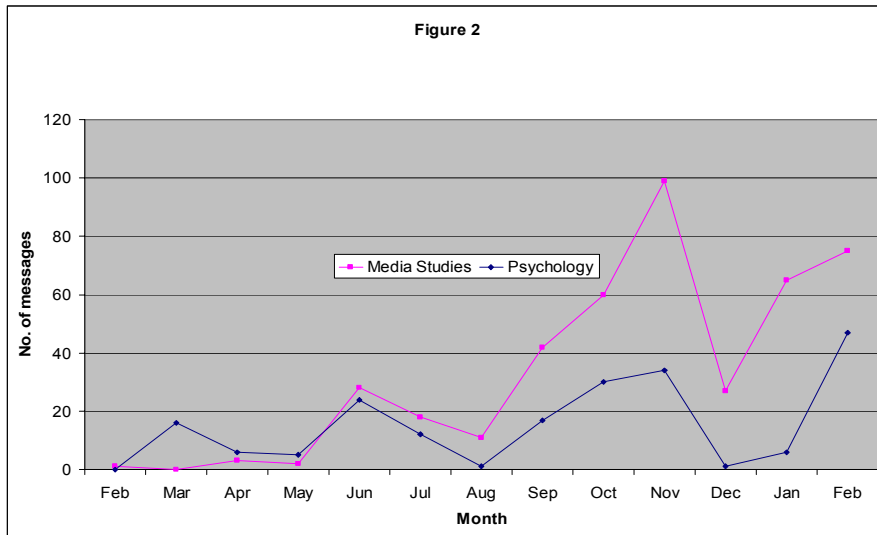


Figure 2. Contributions to lists per month (Feb 2000 – Feb 2001).

Our analysis of the contribution rate (number of messages sent per member) shows that the average rate over the year is about one message a month for every three members of the Media Studies list and one for every four of the Psychology list. This rate is increasing, and compares well with other teacher lists, for example, the well-established United Kingdom schools list ([uk-schools@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:uk-schools@jiscmail.ac.uk)) that has a membership of around 500 (personal communication with the list owner). This list receives around 60 messages a month, about one message for every eight members.

*'Lurker' rate.* Two in five of the Media Studies and one in three of the Psychology list members reported in the questionnaire that they had never contributed to the list (i.e. were 'lurkers', in the standard terminology of e-lists). About half of the Media Studies respondents and two-thirds of the

Psychology respondents had made some contribution. A small number of Media Studies contributors had been more prolific.

The 'lurkers' were inevitably rather apologetic about the fact in their feedback, saying that they will contribute in future. Their reasons for not doing so ranged from being too shy, feeling that everyone else knew more than them, or simply that 'someone else always managed to ask the question I was going to ask'. Despite this, their enjoyment of the list was not affected – 90% of Media Studies list members and 85% of Psychology list members said they had found the list very valuable. Simply reading other teachers' comments, it seems, was enough:

*Although I have never contributed to it I have found it to be an excellent resource and have very much enjoyed reading people's views, comments, etc.*

*I'm enjoying the experience of being part of the 'net group'. One reason for not contributing earlier is because other people have asked questions I was considering.*

#### *How Did Teachers Use the Lists?*

*Message content.* The overwhelming majority of messages to both lists are concerned with classroom teaching and teaching resources (76% of the Psychology messages (Fig. 3) and 70% of those to the Media Studies list (Fig. 4)). Examination related messages make up 14% of those sent to the Psychology list and 23% of those sent to the Media Studies list. List administration messages made up 6% of messages sent to the Psychology list and 7% of those sent to the Media Studies list. Job advertisements made up between 1 and 4% of the messages.

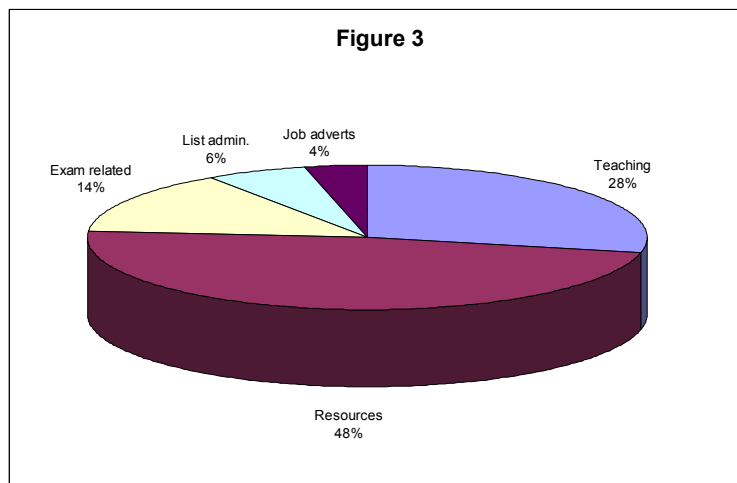


Figure 3. Message analysis (content) – Psychology list.

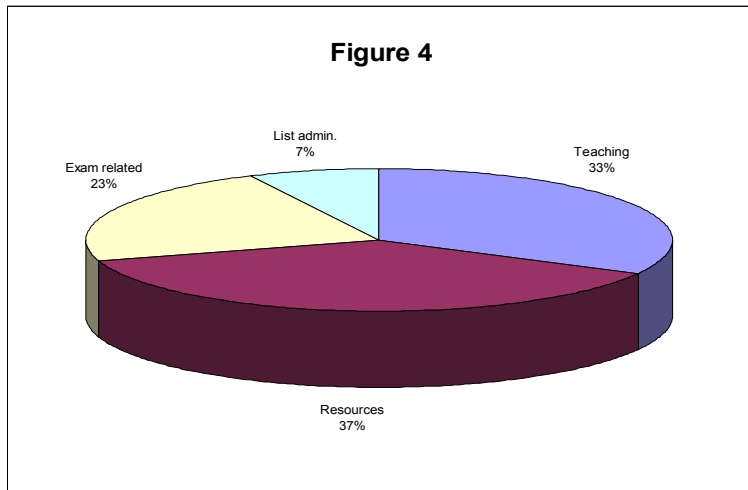


Figure 4. Message analysis (content) – Media Studies list.

*Message function.* For both lists the majority of messages were responses to queries put to the community.

Queries to the Psychology list were mainly concerned with resources, with a few queries concerning the examination itself (Fig. 5).

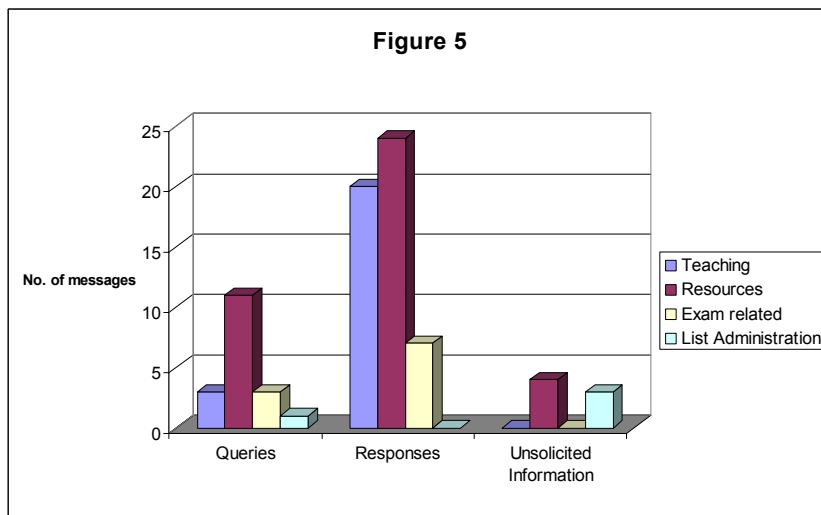


Figure 5. Message analysis (content and function) – Psychology list.

In contrast, the Media Studies list attracted a greater proportion of queries about classroom teaching ideas, and also more about the examination (Fig. 6).

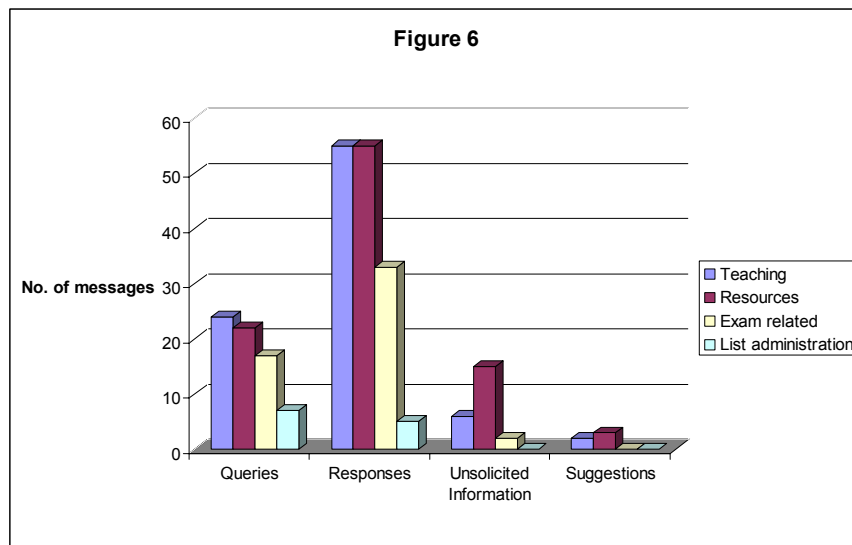


Figure 6. Message analysis (content and function) – Media Studies list.

There was a relatively small amount of unsolicited information given on both lists, but where there was it mainly concerned teaching resources. The information provided on list administration was reminders to the list members about certain rules ('netiquette') that they had to follow as members.

Further analysis of the messages shows that teachers have used the lists:

- to share resources and ideas;
- to ask about the examination;
- to talk about professional issues;
- to advertise things and jobs;
- not to argue, or talk about computers.

#### *To Share Resources and Ideas*

The data shows clearly that list members were very willing to ask for, and share expertise and resources with others. The majority of the messages to both lists were questions and answers about classroom teaching, and about teaching resources, and there were, on average, two responses per query.

Requests and responses about teaching materials and ideas:

*I'm trying to plan activity B (an observation) for my Y12 groups and wondered how other teachers are intending to go about it [...].*

*Where can I find some material on the concept of the 'American Dream'?*

*How do I get hold of the free newssack published by Sky?*

*Does anyone know of some good web sites for core study topics?*

*Can anyone help me find some interesting places to take a large group of psychology students (around 100) whilst on a day trip to London?*

*Does anyone have a simple definition of a chat show? I'm preparing students for the textual analysis module. We've identified many and varied programmes which could possibly be described as 'chat' show, from Jerry Springer to Newsnight, from the Priory to Parkinson. A narrower definition would be useful.*

Requests and responses about buying hardware and software needed to teach for the examination:

*The College have decided that we need to have digital editing facilities and after a period of whining about current equipment, I need to spend the money on offer quite quickly. Basically, I have £1500 to spend and very little idea about the exact specifics of what to look for [...]*

Resource suggestions:

*the current edition of New Scientist has an article discussing the unconscious origins of thoughts etc.*

*For those involved in radio can I also suggest <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/radio-studies> as a useful resource.*

Teaching suggestions:

*I managed to get some work experience for my students doing educational psychology at a local special school. They help with IT or painting and various other activities.*

*The Napster affair is a useful area for study. It encompasses emerging technology (internet, MP3, peer-to-peer networking), the effects on existing laws and business practice (especially copyright and ownership) as well as highlighting the massive implications of a 'networked' world.*

Questions and responses about policies and legal issues:

*Does anybody have any effective and practicable paperwork for keeping students out of trouble on shoots – and covering liability issues?*

Teachers trying out their ideas on others:

*It's tough going, but this is what we have done so far, and plan to do [...]*

*I am teaching psychology for first time this year. I am on my own with 26 keen students and I'm very keen to share ideas with anyone out there. My plan is [...]*



### *To Ask about the Examination*

These messages covered some administrative issues (coursework date queries, for example), but the majority were questions about the examination, and whether a particular case study would be appropriate or whether comparing two films would be acceptable, etc. This ‘demystification’ role of the e-lists was seen as one of their major benefits of the lists. Conversely, by receiving these types of queries directly from teachers UCLES is getting extremely valuable feedback as to clarity, the effectiveness and the acceptability of the examination ‘in the field’:

*[Query] Is the Sainsbury’s magazine suitable for study as a ‘lifestyle magazine’?*

*[Reply from senior examiner] We do not stipulate which titles Centres should use.*

*In my opinion, it is perfectly conceivable that Sainsbury’s Magazine may be defined as a lifestyle magazine as it does construct a lifestyle (or lifestyles) through which it sells its products [...]*

*[Query] I am currently in the process of preparing students for the comparative textual analysis unit, examining lifestyle magazines. I have a query. When students are sitting the exam will they be able to take any material into the exam: the magazines studied, their comparative study or a board supplied notebook, as with current A level[1] exam?*

*[Reply from examiner] yes – let’s be absolutely clear – the only unit for the new A level where anything can be taken into the exam is the new A2 Critical Research Study – the specification is perfectly clear on this [...]*

### *To Talk about Professional Issues*

List members used the lists to discuss professional issues and delve into more esoteric areas of theory. A number of issues captured the imagination of some members. A good illustration of this is ‘The Written Word Debate’ that took place during November 2000 on the Media Studies list:

*I have been prompted to a response by Bill’s[2] query (exasperation?) about why practical work must be described and legitimated by the written word – is this model/version of literacy acknowledged/questioned by teachers & students of Media. It seems a shame that a subject which strives to read against the grain should indulge in practices that leave the unequal status of oral/visual/written forms of representing the world ultimately unchallenged [...]*

*I am the Principal Moderator for the AS Production Unit. On a personal note I could not agree with you more (and Keith and other colleagues) about the place of other forms of communication in the support of an evaluation/log, for the Production work [...]*

*[From Chief Examiner] This issue did enter our thinking when designing the new spec and we debated whether to have the AS production without a piece of*

*accompanying writing. However, we knew we had to provide it for the A2. I consulted some colleagues who felt that as this was already in place at GCSE it would not make sense to not have it at the in between point in some form [...]*

*I appreciate the dilemma, and as an ex-English teacher have too much experience of the political dynamic at work and I agree that the HE environment is often (usually?!) hostile to alternative versions of representation [...]*

#### *To Advertise Things and Jobs*

Some members took advantage of the 'captive audience' to advertise – either their own books or job vacancies. Although, strictly speaking, this was not allowed on the lists, the view was taken that such advertising was acceptable if it were deemed useful to list members.

#### *Not to Argue or Talk about Computers*

Interesting, too, is what members have not used the lists for. They have not used them to attack each other – there have been no 'flame wars', as angry exchanges of e-mail are called. This is no guarantee that it will never happen, however. Moderators are able to intercept any overly negative or personal messages. There has, interestingly, been very little talk of ICT and computers (except in the context of digital video on the Media Studies list). It seems, then, these lists are not attracting just the 'techno-zealot' teachers.

#### *How Much Time Do They Spend on the Lists?*

The great majority of respondents reported spending less than half-an-hour a week reading and contributing to the list. This is particularly important in view of the extreme time pressures that teachers find themselves under. Time pressure is often given as a reason for teachers not to engage in professional development activities. While the lists do not give them more time, they are non-compulsory in that teachers need not engage in them should other time pressures intervene, and therefore they offer a flexible way for teachers to engage in professional development in which they may not otherwise engage.

#### *The Lists as Professional Development*

Although membership of a list does not provide formal professional development, the lists do provide effective informal professional development. Going back to the characteristics of effective professional development listed earlier we can see that email lists fulfil many of them:

- They are *ongoing* – they do not rely on teachers leaving the classroom or the school to attend meetings.

- They provide opportunities for *individual reflection* and *group enquiry* into practice.
- They are *school-based* and embedded in teacher work – queries and messages to the list are firmly linked to every day problems.
 

*I am getting little support from my school, am still waiting for equipment that I ordered back in September and have an A level group of 28 students in one class. Therefore, every bit of information is extremely helpful to me [...]*
- They are *collaborative* and allows teachers to interact with peers:
 

*[...] the website and the mailing list have been excellent to help me and my small team at school keep on top of developments quickly and also to feel part of an ever-increasing body of subject specialists. This sense of community is especially important when so many media teachers are essentially lone wolves in splendid isolation in a school.*

*As I am the only teacher of psychology in my school it's great to have others to communicate with, I am a new subscriber but I love It.*
- They are rooted in the *knowledge base* of teaching – in fact, the community could be said to be creating its own knowledge base:
 

*[...] I've also found feedback from other experienced professionals who have contributed really useful, especially in areas such as the digital video debate and suggestions for texts/approaches.*
- They are *accessible* and *inclusive* – access to e-mail is the only technical requirement for taking part in the lists.

#### *Possible Success Factors*

These lists were very successful in attracting and holding onto members, in creating a sense of 'club membership' and creating high quality messages, as well as providing effective professional development opportunities. Many lists have been set up for teachers, but very few have been successful. These lists have a number of features that we believe have contributed to their success:

- The lists were e-mail based and messages went directly to teachers mailboxes – teachers did not have to remember to visit a website to check for messages as is the case with some bulletin board type systems.
- They were focused – lists that fail may do so because many of the messages are irrelevant to many of the members, who then have to filter out the 'noise'. These lists had the focus of the examination, so the members knew they were part of a community of people with very similar aims and interests.
- They were facilitated – a member of the subject team at UCLES monitored the messages sent to the list and could intervene to keep the 'conversations' going – they could 'feed in' topics for discussion, deflect negative or distracting messages, and answer questions.

- They had a wide-ranging membership. The list members were not 100% classroom teachers or lecturers. There was a smattering of teacher trainers and 'interested outsiders'. The Media Studies list sported a number of well-known Media Studies personalities who were happy to have their identity made public to the list. If members know they have access to 'experts' it makes being a member more attractive.
- The Media Studies list had a supporting website and this could have influenced the membership of the Media Studies list. It could have encouraged more people to join since there is a link from the site to the list, and the site provides a 'virtual centre' supporting the list. It provides a repository for information sent to the list as well as a place for UCLES to publish any Frequently Asked Questions, many of which are taken from queries sent to the list. It therefore provided a more rounded 'community experience'.

### *Correspondence*

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### **Notes**

[1] A level, AS, A2 and GCSE refer to the various United Kingdom school examinations that are administered by UCLES and other examination boards.

[2] All names cited in unpublished sources have been replaced with a fictional alternative.

### **Reference**

Lieberman, A. (2000) Networks as Learning Communities – shaping the future of teacher development, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, pp. 221-227.

Little, J.W. (1993) Professional Development in a Climate of Educational Reform, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15, pp. 129-151.

## APPENDIX 1 – Message Analysis Criteria

Key	Criterion	Example
Teaching	Messages about classroom teaching techniques/approaches	<i>'What's the best way of approaching the unit on ...?'</i> <i>'I've got a load of lesson plans on xxx if anyone wants them.'</i>
Resources	Messages about teaching resources, where to get them, what works, etc.	<i>'Have a look at <a href="http://www.homeworkhigh.org">http://www.homeworkhigh.org</a> for some great resources on ....'</i> <i>'Has anyone got a copy of xxx that I could have?'</i>
List administration	Messages about the running of the lists, subscribing, reading the archives, etc.	<i>'How do I get into the archives?'</i> <i>'I'm getting lots of gobbledey gook in my messages from the list – what's going on?'</i>
Introductions	Introductory messages	<i>'Hello, I'm xxx and I work in xxx. I'm new to teaching and need as much help as I can get.'</i>
Theoretical issues	Messages about theoretical aspects of the subject	<i>'An interesting piece espousing pervasive playfulness ('soulitarianism') and suggesting that 'an education for creativity which wanted to be truly 'inclusive' would have to listen to this elemental and popular desire for playfulness [...].'</i>
Examination related	Messages about examination administration – dates, etc., interpretation of the specification, etc.	<i>'When is the final date for submission of coursework for xxx?'</i> <i>'Am I right in thinking that xxx is acceptable for the xxx unit?'</i>
Job advertisements		<i>'If you look in the Times Educational Supplement this week you'll see that we are looking for a xxx teacher'.</i>

Table I. Message content analysis criteria.

Key	Criterion	Example
Query	Questions to the list members/UCLES	<i>'What's the best way of approaching the unit on ... ?'</i> <i>'When is the final date for submission of coursework for xxx?'</i>
Response Information	Responses to queries Unsolicited information offered to list	<i>'In my experience I've found that...'</i> <i>'Check out New Scientist last week for a very useful article on xxx.'</i>
Discussion	Messages designed to start discussion	<i>'I think Paper 5 is too difficult. What do others reckon?'</i>
Suggestion	Suggestions for activities on the list, etc.	<i>'Are there any xxx teachers in the Dudley area who'd like to meet up and share ideas?'</i> <i>'How about an on-line seminar on xxx?'</i>

Table II. Message function analysis criteria.

