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Technical Evaluation Report

35: Synchronous Conferencing by a Community Advocacy Group

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Abstract

The previous report in this series discussed how collaborative tools can be used in the development of formal and non-formal online communities. The current report describes the specific development of an online community advocacy group.

Developing an Online Community

The previous report in this series (#34: Garber, 2004) has shown that social factors play “a critical role in the planning, nurture, and life cycle of virtual learning communities”: a common purpose; a clearly communicated identity defining members and non-members; a shared history; trust and respect; communication and participation. Garber identifies communication and participation as crucial during the formative stages of the community. It is through participation that group members develop a sense of belonging. In the case of a non-formal community-based group, all these factors may be even greater than usual, since there is no tightly defined cohort as in, for example, a formal online classroom setting. Advocacy group members engage in activities that bring people together – acting as a unit to write letters of protest and collaborating on projects – via the same collaborative learning group model found in adult learning for social justice (Cranton, 1998). At face value, synchronous audio-conferencing lends itself to these pursuits well. Jegede, Gooley and Towers (1996) state that high computer literacy is not important for synchronous online discussion; and the type of communication it generates is usually transparent and open. The current group's members contribute to email and listserv discussions on a purely voluntary basis, however. Will the synchronous conference method enhance their ability to participate and increase their sense of belonging to the group?

The Community Advocacy Context

The advocacy group's members are parents of children in the public education system in Vancouver, Canada, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and education levels. They share a motivation, based on their observation and experience in local schools, to force change in British Columbia's provincial education funding policy. Group functions are distributing information, raising awareness, eliciting response, seeking expert information, collaborating on letters and briefs, and networking with other groups in the province and organizing events. The group's usual communication methods included a website, telephone, email and face-to-face

meetings, but these methods had not proved sufficient for sustaining real effectiveness. One member (the writer), with experience in using *Yahoo Messenger (YM)* audio-conferencing in a formal education setting, promoted its use to the group, as a means of facilitating communication. Acting as coordinator, the writer invited the group to commit to two conferences, so as to decide if the *YM* conferencing tool would be useful in its future work. The problems of scheduling meetings involving people with family, professional, and other commitments responsibilities proved ample motivation for the group to test the audio-conferencing suggestion.

Helpful conferencing strategies were found in the “best practices” literature of synchronous audio-conferencing (*see previous reports in this series*). It was decided to set a limit of no more than 15 – 20 participants. Background materials were sent in advance; the importance of eliciting, accepting and adjusting to feedback in the absence of visual cues was recognized, together with the importance of the moderator’s role, the need to delegate moderating duties, and the importance of debriefing. Robinson (in Bates, 1995 p. 129) found that synchronous audio-conferencing was generally effective for discussing mutual problems and negotiating group project work, but not for lecturing, impromptu tutorials, or unprepared topics, or for groups with constantly changing memberships. Although the advocacy group’s conferences would be fairly impromptu, their immediate purpose would dictate the conferences’ structure. It was thought possible that, with experience, the group would develop its own internal structures to deal with conferencing functions – e.g., in session reporting, collaborative preparation of statements, organizing of events, problem-solving, and networking.

Running the Audio-Conferences

To explain the use of the *YM* conferencing tool to the advocacy group, concrete examples of online conferencing in other areas were given. The coordinator proposed possible uses of the method, compared *YM* tool’s features to those of other applications, and gave a realistic outline of time, cost (purchase of headsets), and technical requirements. Once the group had agreed to test *YM*, an informal technical survey was conducted by “phone and email, and a reference chart of the members” technical facilities was prepared for the purpose of troubleshooting. These urban parents all owned computers and have Internet access. Only one had a PC with less than 256Mb RAM and used a dial-up Internet connection. Clear, one-page instructions were sent to them on how to download *YM*, to create an ID, to submit the ID to the coordinator, and to test the headsets. A brief description of how the first session would proceed was included. The effort was made to carry out participant trials before the first group meeting.

First conference: "the best laid plans . . ."

The purposes of the inaugural conference were to raise participant comfort level, to become familiar with the protocol, and to permit some meaningful reporting of the group’s projects. Unfortunately, the conference was impeded by a flu epidemic and a political leadership convention, both on the same day. Six members had intended to participate, but only three actually did so, two with voice and text, and one with text only. The lack of intrinsic motivation often provided in formal education may have increased the gap between enthusiasts with some experience of the conferencing technology and those who were less familiar with it and less “convinced” of its benefits. The non-participating members had failed to complete the necessary pre-conference preparations. Although the coordinator had provided information and encouragement during the two weeks prior to the conference, two members of the group did not download the *YM* software nor set up an ID. Their attempt to do this at the last minute was stressful and unsuccessful. One would-be participant’s computer crashed twice (it had only 64Mb RAM), and another had a problem with *YM*’s pop-up displays. Another participant, the only one using a Macintosh machine, found that *YM*’s voice features are restricted on Macs. This participant participated in the conference in the text box only.

Remarkably, some substantive work was done. The voice participants were able to experiment with the *YM* conferencing tool and traded ideas on moderating technique – thereby creating two potential group moderators. Most, but not all, of the voice interaction was summarized in the text box for the benefit of the Mac participant. This text-only participant quickly adapted to “pauses” in text chat and showed leadership in searching out pertinent supporting information (quotes, pieces of reports, references) and pasting them into the textbox, while the voice participants negotiated a response to be presented for feedback. Reporting and action planning took place on two issues, an agenda for the next meeting was proposed, and strategy for a coming event was agreed. Overall, the interaction by *YM* audio-conference was perceived as useful. Even the participant restricted to text gamely remarked: “This will also seem very cute in 20 years or so when we just ‘mind meld’ or something.”

Second conference: "more than meets the eye . . . "

Five of the six target members took part in the second conference. The three who took part in the first had a clear fluency advantage over the two new participants. Technical problems were still experienced. One new participant could hear everyone but could not be heard, so gave input via the text box only. The Mac user continued to take part via text only, but performed helpful text-based functions in lieu of participating in the full voice discussions. The sixth member had experienced *YM* loading problems prior to the first conference, had unexpected demands on time, and opted out.

The work done in the second conference was considerable. A length of 45 minutes and an end time were negotiated at the beginning. A review of conference protocol and strategies took about five minutes. The moderator cut-and-pasted items from a prepared *Word* document (protocol items, suggested agenda, numbered items) throughout the conference. Also, a customized moderator emote.dat file was used for conference management functions (*to be explained in an upcoming report in this series*). A second moderator helped to deal with user problems, such as inviting participants back in if they were accidentally “kicked out.” Reports were given and discussed. A recent event and its implications to the organization were discussed and a response was written. Some actions were revamped and redirected. A new idea sparked the organization of a specific action, and responsibility for it was designated. The need for a face-to-face meeting three weeks hence was identified and a location and time were negotiated. Response to an informal survey circulated after the second conference indicated that the *YM* tool, even with its occasional technical problems, was “somewhat useful” in the group’s work, and that if all the technical problems could be ironed out and all participants could hear and speak, it would be “definitely useful.” It was decided that *YM* conferences should not affect the number of face-to-face meetings, but should be called “as needed” – e.g., if people were to be unavailable for regular meetings. The role of *YM* conferencing was seen as being most useful in the organization of events, which had been a specific achievement of the second conference.

Conclusions

Synchronous audio tools are potentially useful in extending access to participation in non-formal community education. In unstructured contexts, control of technology use is not in the hands of instructional or technical experts, but depends on the existing group processes. The collective development of group skill occurs at its own pace. Successful use of synchronous audio conferencing depends on the group’s motivation and the technology’s perceived relevance. The more success that is built into the introductory conference, the more quickly a synchronous conference tool can be accepted and used effectively. Building in a feedback system via informal inquiry or a participant survey helps to keep the purpose of the conferences relevant and useful. Participants need to see a direct tie from conference to action. The participant technical survey is

a crucial aspect of conference organization, and a thorough investigation of the chosen software's ability to function on participants' systems must be completed before conferences are held. A testing of ID, connections, and microphone must occur prior to the introductory conference. The most experienced group members should guide the least experienced in the process of developing group expertise through hands-on use.

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N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses become outdated, online references are not cited in these summary reports. They are available, together with updates to the current report, at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/. Italicised product names in this report can be assumed to be registered trademarks.

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