Rural Isolation and Electronic Communities of Practice

This round table will concentrate on the creation and facilitation of electronic communities for the rurally isolated. The OK-RMSP (Oklahoma Rural Math and Science Partnership) has such a community already in existence and it can be used as model for this kind of participation on a national level. There are school districts in Rural Oklahoma that have 86 students K-12. These school districts are connected by the community of practice concept to help teachers connect and collaborate. Some sample communities that that exist from a group of students programming a colony of autonomous robots over the internet, to classroom teacher support groups, to student organizational support, to groups of enthusiastic senior citizens that are totally separated from schools. The common bond is that these people are spread over a 12,000 square mile area.

This roundtable will focus on the use of technology, and the potential for coordination and collaboration as a result of this effort. During this roundtable discussion we will create a special electronic community designed to connect roundtable participants and the isolated communities that they deal with together into a community of practice designed to help alleviate this isolation. It will help establish a standard means of communication and how user will interact with this community.

The keyword here is simplicity and participation. Each participant will be expected to be willing to contribute to this electronic community for the upcoming year. This roundtable will be for user participation and could potentially lead to the building of a nationwide electronic community of rurally isolated teachers.

Skills of tomorrow will have little to do with how to operate computers and a great deal to do with how to use augmented intellects, enhanced communications and amplified imaginations. Learning as it normally occurs is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it is situated. The purpose of this roundtable is to stimulate the enhanced communication and to amplify the imaginations of teachers and educators that deal with rural isolation.

This will not involve federally funded grants, grand educational design, traditional standards-based classroom instruction, or research-motivated educational agendas. It just requires users willing to share day by day activities, issues of common concern, and their amplified imaginations.

Communities of practice can extending the lessons learned from classroom or hand-on activities, and these communities now span large areas. During the years 1995-2005 the community of practice idea was becoming legitimate in the educational community there was tremendous growth in the Technology of Distance Learning and the World Wide Web. Communities of Practice and Distance Learning are two technologies that can provide a rich platform learning to the everyday practice for rurally isolated teacher and educators. The focus of attention in this roundtable will be on user-created and user-supported communities of practice.

Distance education technologies are expanding at an extremely rapid rate and too often instructional designers and curriculum developers have become enamored of the latest technologies without dealing with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs, the influence of media upon the instructional process, equity of access to interactive delivery systems, and the new roles of teacher, site facilitator, and student in
the distance learning process. The questions addressed here will be 1.) How to start, 2.) How to organize the technology for effective utilization, 3.) Who is in control?