Chapter XLIV
Moderating Discussion Groups Using Computer Mediated Communication

Mauri Collins
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Zane Berge
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter online discussion groups will be situated as contemporary examples within the historical tradition of voluntary, informal, learning networks used by adults for topical discussion, fellowship, and learning. Just as the online discussion group is a voluntary, informal learning group in the historic tradition, so the monitor or reviewer of the online discussion group fulfills many of the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of an informal adult educator in their roles as discussion leaders and facilitators. This places the moderators of online discussion groups within the realm of interest to adult education and educators. This chapter will provide the foundations for understanding the complex, dynamic, and multi-textural environment in which online discussion group moderators function.

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This chapter sets the moderation and facilitation of discussion as a means of adult learning in both the classroom and online into a historical context. It also examines the results of the third in a time-series of research studies conducted to determine the motivation, roles and functions of persons who serve as public online discussion group moderators and discusses the changes that occurred over a period of 11 years. The first research study was conducted in 1992, prior to the advent of the World Wide Web when dial up bulletin boards and mailing lists were the main venue for many-to-many, computer mediated communication. Follow-up studies were conducted in 1997 and 2003, by which time use of the World Wide Web was widespread and the Internet privatized. The authors began their research be-

fore the surge of interest in online teaching and learning, the heart of which is the moderating and facilitation of discussion among students. They hoped to determine, from studying those who, like themselves, had experience in facilitating online discussion in voluntary groups, what training should be provided to academics–with no Internet experience—who would be teaching online. Over the years the Internet landscape changed, as did the users. The research reported in this chapter documents some of the changes that took place in the 11 years between 1992 and 2003 in online communication and the consequent changes in the roles and responsibilities of public discussion list moderators.

BACKGROUND

Despite their influence on the voluntary, informal learning experiences of countless adults, very little systematic study has been conducted to describe or understand the motivation, roles, and functions of those persons who serve as public online discussion group moderators. While there were anecdotal reports from individual moderators (MacLennan, 1995), little was known about these persons as a group beyond two research studies of moderators of scholarly discussion groups conducted in 1992 and 1997 by Berge and Collins (Berge & Collins, 2000; Collins & Berge, 1996, 1997b) and a third study of public discussion group moderators conducted by Collins in 2003 (Collins, 2003), the results of which are discussed in this chapter.

Berge and Collins have long been interested in public online discussion group moderators beginning at a time when they, as a group, had the greatest pool of experience with discussion facilitation. The situation in which moderators work has been described as a place where adults learn (Heuer, 1997) and moderators appear to function as adult education practitioners, very much as do facilitators of discussion in face-to-face, informal,

adult education settings. This, Berge and Collins surmised, would be sufficient bridge to determine if moderators' experiences could be used to guide the development of training for new online instructors. This chapter draws comparisons between the roles and responsibilities of classroom adult educators and those of the moderator and facilitator of discussion in public online discussion groups. This will be done through discussion of the time-series of studies conducted over 10 years by Berge and Collins. They examined moderators in the light of their functions as adult education practitioners and indicated how these roles have changed over time.

Berge and Collins' interest in the moderation and facilitation of discussion predated the advent of the World Wide Web, Internet-accessible learning management systems, and the widespread adoption of online learning in higher education. Being more familiar with the roles and responsibilities of moderators of public discussion groups, they wondered what could be learned from public online discussion group moderators that might help those who function in formal online academic settings.

They studied the roles and responsibilities of those who identify themselves as public discussion group moderators and compared and contrasted them with their experiences and what the literature had to say about the facilitators of formal classroom discussion. In both venues the discussion moderator/facilitator is a leader. In the case of the classroom teacher, the leadership is of a formal group and is based on the authority ceded by the learning institution. In the case of the public online discussion group, moderator leadership is more often based on their expertise, and, sometimes, ownership of the discussion list. While they may own the list, membership is voluntary and they lead by "consent of the governed." Next, we will look at leadership in both off-line and online adult learning groups.

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