Chapter XLIX
E-Mail Distribution Lists in Adult Learning:
A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Online, e-mail-based discussion groups are contemporary examples of an historical tradition of voluntary, informal, learning groups used by adults for topical discussion, fellowship, and learning. Because the discussion among group members takes the form of e-mail exchanges, they are also been likened to historical correspondence networks. This chapter sets the historical context of the e-mail-based discussion groups that preceded the extensive use of bulletin-board style discussion forums in contemporary learning management systems.

E-MAIL DISTRIBUTION LISTS IN ADULT LEARNING: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Asynchronous discussion is the backbone of online learning and is now, in formal educational settings, usually conducted in bulletin board style discussion forums in comprehensive learning management systems (like Blackboard, eCollege, Desire2Learn, etc.). This was not always so, as this chapter will discuss. E-mail distribution lists have existed since the mid 1970s when AR-PAnet was the province of scientists, educators and the military. E-mail and e-mail distribution lists were the first online tools commonly used for educational communication among faculty and students and learning was conducted using these very basic tools. E-mail distribution lists are still common today in informal educational and social settings, like Yahoo Groups (http://groups.yahoo.com) where groups are designed to allow individual or digest distribution of messages to individual subscribers or subscribers can log on and view messages displayed on a Web page. Their primary benefit is that membership is usually free and messages from the list arrive in the member's

e-mailbox where they can be read and responded to along with other correspondence.

E-mail-based discussion groups using computer mediated communication (CMC) are commonly referred to as simply online discussion groups (ODGs), or more recently referred to as online communities. They can be situated as a contemporary example within the historical tradition of voluntary, informal, learning groups used by adults for topical discussion, fellowship, and learning. Because much of the discussion on online discussion groups takes the form of e-mail exchanges, they can also likened be to historical correspondence networks.

How E-Mail-Based Discussion Groups Work

Participation in public online discussion groups is open to all persons who have a networked computer and an e-mail account, and participation is voluntary. Membership is usually by subscription, rather like a magazine subscription. When a member joins a discussion group their name and e-mail address is added to a "list" of e-mail addresses held by a computer running some variety of "listserver" software. When a message is received by the listserver it is either sent on to a person–usually called a "moderator"-who approves, or disapproves the message for distribution, or it is distributed directly to the subscriber list, with members each receiving their own copy.

Group members can post or read messages as they choose. The membership of many online discussion groups is now internationally dispersed and participation continues regardless of time zones and distances. With the proliferation of personal computers and the increasing availability of low-cost Internet connectivity, participation in online discussion groups and the exchange of e-mail and chat messages is, indeed, available to entire families.

The subscriber base of any online discussion group usually has one or more areas of interest in common. On the Internet public discussion groups can be found for people interested in everything from AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) to zymurgy (chemistry dealing with fermentation processes) and every possible area of interest or study in between (for lists of discussion groups see, for example, http://www.lsoft.com/lists/listref.html or http://groups.yahoo.com).

BACKGROUND

Cremin (1977), when discussing traditions in American Education, points out that, from the earliest colonial period, much education took place, not in formal settings, but within the family, church, work, apprenticeships, voluntary associations and used contemporary forms of media, from broadsides and newspapers to radio and television. Cremin's definition of education is broad: "the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities, as well as any outcomes of that effort" (p. 134), with no element of this definition limiting education to formal schooling. His definition takes us out of the realm of formal educational settings to the multiplicity of informal settings in which learning has taken place. Cremin's definition of education is used in this chapter because online discussion groups, as occurring in a cyber-location where group members converse, fit logically within it.

Historical Correspondence Networks

Conversation in e-mail-based discussion groups is conducted by the distribution of e-mail messages to a group of subscribers. Electronic mail is also analogous to earlier forms of paper-based communication and e-mail plays a similar role that letters and other documents have historically played in informal adult education. Prior to the American

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