

This briefing sheet is based on our experience with the Making-IT-Accessible mailgroup during the period July 1999 to September 2001.

This is the twenty-fifth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

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Introduction

There are many ways of using communication technologies to support learning. One approach that has been extensively used is an electronic mailgroup. This is a system in which by sending an e-mail to a common address all participants who form the group are sent the message. It is therefore possible to use the system for many purposes:

- Simply sending a message to a large group of people
- Obtaining help and support by asking a group of people with similar interests a question through the mailgroup
- Discussing issues of common interest

There are no particular limits to the size of a mailgroup and examples exist of groups of less than 20 participants and ones of many hundreds of members. The initial applications were mainly to support groups of researchers and scholars who were separated by distance but shared areas of interest. Initially they were specialist discussion forums but have now developed to cover a vast range of topics and groups. There are many related to Further and Higher Education but they continue to spread across all sectors.

Mailgroups provide both visible and invisible discussion forums. In that you are aware of e-mails sent to the group but since each e-mail reveals the address of the sender it is perfectly possible to respond directly to the sender. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a great deal of all mailgroup traffic is invisible in that it is directly to the sender rather than to the group. The other phenomenon is lurking or simply reading the messages and never or rarely sending a contribution. It is difficult to estimate the volume of lurking but estimates suggest that for each contributor there are three times as many readers or lurkers. This suggests that like an iceberg a lot is hidden beneath the surface in both lurking and direct e-mails.

In June 2000 NIACE relaunched an existing mailgroup to provide a forum for participants in the DfEE's Adult and Community Laptops Initiative. Membership was open to all participants and anyone else interested in the topic. The mailgroup was therefore an open forum aimed at the entire community but mainly intended for people working in some form of Adult Learning. The mailgroup is called Making-IT-Accessible.

Joining and leaving the group

The normal approach to joining any mailgroup is to send an e-mail to an address with a standard message. The mailgroup software then automatically enrolls you as a member.

For Making-IT-Accessible participants had to e-mail Listcaster@niace.org.uk with the message subscribe Making-IT-Accessible. Once they were enrolled they communicated with the mailgroup by sending e-mails to Making-IT-Accessible@niace.org.uk.

Some people found it difficult to enrol through a variety of reasons and they were enrolled directly onto the server. The problems are difficult to classify but were probably due to a lack of experience with e-mail communication or some small error with the enrolling message.

Moderation

All mailgroups have a moderator. This is not a role that exists outside of electronic communication but has features similar to facilitating a workshop, refereeing a sports event and managing a resource. It involves:

- Sorting out problems with joining and leaving the group
- Providing information to prospective members
- Welcoming new members
- Encouraging discussion
- Answering questions
- Providing information
- Protecting members from offensive messages and essentially policing the Group
- Facilitating discussion

Styles of moderation vary but a great deal of the communication is by direct e-mail contacts so that it is hidden from the whole group. However, the

moderator is also an individual member of the group so has a role simply as a participant.

An analysis of the moderator's contribution in Making-IT-Accessible showed that during the mailgroup's first month a quarter of all messages came from the moderator. These were mainly attempts to start discussions or answer queries in relation to the group. This high level of participation rapidly declined in subsequent months and was in the range of 1:10 to 1:15 of all messages. A majority of these messages took the form of providing information that the moderator judged would be interesting.

Good manners

It is important at the start of a mailgroup to agree some general rules to ensure that individuals are not offended or the group abused. Over time these are developed and enhanced and the group moderator needs to play a part in arbitrating when members ask for changes. Typical areas to consider include:

- Offensive language – messages will not make personal attacks on other members
- Advertisements – do you allow them? Often members want to inform the group about events, publications or services which they provide. Most groups agree that information can be provided so long as it is not excessive.
- Attachments – large attachments often take a long time to download so groups often discourage members from including attachments
- Virus – attachments can be a source of virus infections so members need to ensure they do not send infected files and members also need to protect themselves against them

Membership

The Making-IT-Accessible mailgroup had 278 e-mail addresses on 31 January 2000. However, the volume of messages does not closely relate to overall number of participants, with 17% of all messages being sent in the first month when membership was less than 100. Many group members have expressed satisfaction with the discussions and messages while admitting they rarely contribute. Anecdotal evidence from other groups tends to agree with this generalisation that many people gain from the group by simply reading other people's contributions. In January 2000, 45 different members contributed to the mailgroup.

This is probably a higher proportion than in many other forums.

Nature of contribution

The individual contributions took many forms including:

1. Individual questions
2. Answers and suggestions to resolve problems
3. Comments on issues which ranged from a single sentence to detailed response covering several pages.
4. Many contributors offered information or advertisements
5. Contributions to discussions

Volume of Mail

The pattern of Making-IT-Accessible group mail tended to be influenced by factors such as public holidays so that the month with the smallest number of e-mails was December while January was the highest.

July 1999	17% of total communication
August 1999	14% of total communication
September 1999	12% of total communication
October 1999	16% of total communication
November 1999	9% of total communication
December 1999	9% of total communication
January 2000	23% of total communication

Wide ranges of topics were discussed but information and communication technology issues were frequent areas of debate. This is not surprising given the nature of the mailgroup. However, this covered specific technical issues, good books, ICT qualifications, curriculum matters and personal views. Other topics included funding of adult education, outreach, many practical issues and messages seeking assistance.

Appendix contains an update of this information for 2000 and 2001.

Benefits

The benefits of participating in a group have been reported (Rojo and Ragsdale 1997) as:

- Keeping updated
- Getting materials
- Getting answers

- Learning about the medium
- Feeling of belonging
- Possibility of expressing themselves
- Enhancing contacts

Other potential benefits include:

- Support
- Advertising (within the limits of group acceptability)

Individual Experience

The number of e-mails a member receives each day varies from none to many. If you have been away for a day or two you will find a lot of messages to read which may not fit into the work pressures you face. Since each participant is free to read and respond to messages when it is convenient messages can arrive in strange sequences. There can be long gaps in discussions and responses can move in several directions simultaneously. This can be confusing but most people find it a refreshing approach and have few problems following the discussion.

Conclusion

Mailgroups are a very useful way of sharing experience and providing mutual support.

Alan Clarke, NIACE

References

Rojo, A and Ragsdale, R.G (1997), A process perspective on participation in Scholarly Electronic Forums, *Science Communication*, 18(4), p320-341

Appendix - Update of Volume and Types of Mail for 2000 and 2001

Comparison between the same month in different years on: volume of mail received during the months and nature of the e-mails.

Definition of each category :

Communication – New people joining the mail group and introducing themselves, people who have worked on a project, usually write about their work, and some people tend to write about their area of work.

Information – This area consists of people mailing useful web sites to one another, usually regarding a specific discussion topic or report. E-mails informing people about forthcoming events, i.e. Laptop events, availability etc.

Other - People advertising job opportunities, recruitment taking place, etc

Questions / Answers - Any questions that people have asked, which usually attracts on average 3 answers to one question

Jan 00 – 21% of e-mails sent during 2000

6 %	Communication
35 %	Information
31 %	Questions
21 %	Answers
7%	Other

Jan 01 – 17% of e-mails sent during 2001

11.5 %	Communication
20 %	Information
16.5 %	Questions
43 %	Answers
9 %	Other

Feb 00 – 9% of e-mails sent during 2000

17 %	Communication
25 %	Information
32 %	Questions
21 %	Answers
5 %	Other

Feb 01 – 23% of e-mails sent during 2001

8 %	Communication
20 %	Information
16 %	Questions
51 %	Answers
5 %	Other

March 00 – 16% of e-mails sent during 2000

17 %	Communication
25 %	Information
17 %	Questions
38 %	Answers
3%	Other

March 01 – 14% of e-mails sent during 2001

18 %	Communication
37 %	Information
16 %	Questions
29 %	Answers

April 00 – 12% of e-mails sent during 2000

25 %	Communication
14 %	Information
13 %	Questions
48 %	Answers

April 01 – 11% of e-mails sent during 2001

10 %	Communication
19 %	Information
17 %	Questions
47 %	Answers
7 %	Other

May 00 – 8% of e-mails sent during 2000

21 % Communication
 8 % Information
 23 % Questions
 48 % Answers

May 01 – 3% of e-mails sent during 2001

16 % Communication
 50 % Information
 16 % Questions
 16 % Answers
 2% Other

June 00 – 6% of e-mails sent during 2000

5 % Communication
 23 % Information
 31 % Questions
 41 % Answers

June 01 – 10% of e-mails sent during 2001

15 % Communication
 42 % Information
 10 % Questions
 26 % Answers
 7 % Other

July 00 – 4% of e-mails sent during 2000

43 % Communication
 25 % Information
 16 % Questions
 16 % Answers

July 01 – 15% of e-mails sent during 2001

16 % Communication
 19 % Information
 23 % Questions
 42 % Answers

August 00 – 1% of e-mails sent during 2000

40 % Communication
 60 % Information

Aug 01 – 7% of e-mails sent during 2001

7 % Communication
 38 % Information
 7 % Questions
 48 % Answers

Sept 00 – 5% of e-mails sent during 2000

15 % Communication
 28 % Information
 15 % Questions
 42 % Answers

Oct 00 – 7% of e-mails sent during 2000

20 % Communication
 35 % Information
 20 % Questions
 25 % Answers

Nov 00 – 5% of e-mails sent during 2000

18 % Communication
 37 % Information
 8 % Questions
 37 % Answers

Dec 00 – 6% of e-mails sent during 2000

10 % Communication
 47 % Information
 10 % Questions
 26 % Answers
 7 % Other

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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