

Mailgroups

Electronic mailgroups are an effective way of reaching numerous like-minded people in one go, irrespective of their geographical location. This briefing sheet explains what a mailgroup is, and how one works. It contains useful information for anyone considering joining a mailgroup, or setting up a new mailgroup.

1. Introduction

Mailgroups, sometimes referred to as mailing lists or e-mail groups, allow information to be distributed to a group of internet users with a shared interest by using e-mail facilities. Mailgroups have a large role to play in supporting teaching and learning, with many associated advantages to other methods of communication, and can be used to:

- Simply send a message to a large group of people in the adult and community learning sector
- Discuss and share information, experiences, ideas and opinions with adult and community learning providers world-wide
- Collaborate on projects and aid research
- Distribute and keep up-to-date with current news, training and funding opportunities
- Obtain help and support for all manner of issues from other group members who may have had similar experiences
- Conduct polls and surveys amongst the adult and community learning sector
- Create an electronic discussion forum and information source for your learners to support their learning.

2. How mailgroups work

Each mailgroup is managed by one or more list owners, sometimes called mailgroup managers. The list owner will manage the configuration of the mailgroup and the list of its members and will oversee the general usage of the list and resolve any issues as they arise.

List owners do not need to be computer experts, but they do need to have experience of using e-mail and the World Wide Web. The list owner should also ensure they have time available to monitor the list regularly.

Mailgroups are generally free to join and are either 'open' – where anyone who wants to join the list of members can do so, or 'closed' – where a request to join the list of members must be made to, and approved by, the list owner. Once a

subscription to a mailgroup has been made, messages can be sent to, and received from, all the members of the group. E-mail messages are addressed to the mailgroup name, which recipients will see in the message header. Replies to these e-mails will go to the entire group unless the responder decides to reply privately to the sender.

In some mailgroups, every message sent must be approved by a 'moderator' before being forwarded to the rest of the group. This may slow down the posting process as it is dependant on the time the moderator has available, and it may result in the message being rejected if it is deemed inappropriate for the mailgroup. Moderator approval does ensure that all postings are relevant and high-quality, with junk-mail and spam being intercepted. Normally, if a list is moderated, the moderation is carried out by the list owner.

3. Joining and using an existing mailgroup

The first stage involves subscribing to a mailgroup. Open mailgroups may be advertised on a website, such as Yahoo!Groups, or an invitation may be received via e-mail to join a closed mailgroup. To join an open group, instructions are sent via an e-mail to an automated address – specialised software will process the message as opposed to a person. An automated message will be sent to the subscriber confirming addition to the group, followed by another automated message containing instructions on how to use the group – it is advisable to keep this message for future reference. Messages from other group members will then start to appear in the new member's inbox and replies or new messages can be sent to the group.

To join a closed group, a request must be sent to the list owner who may ask for confirmation of the request via e-mail before adding the subscriber to the list of members.

Subscribing to a mailgroup is done by a specified e-mail address. When a message is posted to the mailgroup, the e-mail address will be authenticated and if it does not match the subscription list, the e-mail will be rejected. Therefore, if a subscriber is planning to change their e-mail address, it is important that they remember to update their mailgroup subscriptions as well. This is normally achieved by sending an e-mail request to the list owner.

The majority of mailgroups will not permit attachments to be included by e-mail. This is partly because of the increased risk of virus infection, and partly to prevent users on slow internet connections being forced into downloading information that may not be relevant to them. However, most mailgroups will have a 'file area' that files can be uploaded to by a subscriber, thus allowing other subscribers to download them if they choose to.

Most mailgroups are configured to store all e-mails sent in files known as 'archives'. These archives are usually organised by month and are accessible via the mailgroup's webpage or via e-mail.

Some mailgroups can be very popular and active, and result in a prolific amount of e-mail coming into the member's accounts. To receive fewer e-mails, it is possible to elect to receive a 'daily digest' that takes the form of a single e-mail containing all the

postings made to the group that day. The majority of mailgroups will also allow members to temporarily put delivery to their e-mail account on hold – ideal if the member is on leave and does not want to return to an overflowing e-mail account. Missed postings can then be accessed via the group's archive.

4. Leaving a mailgroup

It is possible to leave a mailgroup at any time – no advanced notice is required. Normally, the automated message containing instructions on how to use the mailgroup will also contain instructions on how to unsubscribe from the group. For web-based groups such as Yahoo!, a visit to the Groups web page and a click of a box will be all that is required to leave a group. Other mailgroups will require the member to e-mail the list owner stating that they wish to be removed from the list of members.

5. Creating a new mailgroup

Web-based providers such as Yahoo! offer a simple solution to creating a new mailgroup by providing a step-by-step wizard to help set up a new mailgroup free-of-charge using their software and server. Some mailgroup providers will set up a new mailgroup upon completion of a request form.

For an individual to host and control their own mailgroup, they will need an internet service provider, an e-mail account that supports the post office protocol (POP3), and a dedicated mail server with the appropriate software installed.

6. Advantages and disadvantages

All forms of communication within teaching and learning have advantages and disadvantages. Online communication is no exception to the rule.

a) Advantages

- Mailgroups can be used by anyone familiar with using e-mail
- Learners can communicate with their tutor and each other in between face-to-face sessions, discuss issues that concern them and work on group projects
- Tutors can send information to all learners with messages being distributed automatically
- Group members do not have to be online at the same time for a discussion to take place

b) Disadvantages

- The lack of visual clues such as body language, make it difficult to determine if members are being humorous or sarcastic, and can limit the development of camaraderie within the group
- Members with strong opinions can monopolise conversations making it difficult for the 'reflectors' within the group to join in
- Online conversations can remain too polite because no-one wants to challenge contributions from their colleagues, fellow learners or unknown contributors in an open forum

- There may be delays while you wait for other members to read and reply to messages
- Members may become annoyed if a large number of e-mails are sent on a topic that is not of interest to them
- Members can forget that messages are, by default, sent to the entire group, which may cause embarrassment
- Whilst all members of the group may read messages, not all members will reply – there will be those that ‘lurk’ (only reading messages and never or rarely contributing), and there will be those that reply directly to the sender and not to the group

7. Network Etiquette (Netiquette)

Successful communication is based on elements of common courtesy and both formal and informal rules being adhered to. With the rapid expansion in using online communication as a tool, a set of do’s and don’ts have emerged that cover both common courtesy and informal rules for online communication. Much has been written on this subject, and the generally accepted rules of netiquette are:

- Before sending a message, ensure that it is relevant to the group and contains a relevant subject title
- Typing exclusively in capitals is the e-mail equivalent of SHOUTING, and should be avoided
- Keep paragraphs and messages short and to the point. Sending long-winded or unnecessary e-mails will waste other members’ time and money
- Be aware that all cultures may have different values and sensitivities. Jokes, irony, idiomatic expressions and sarcasm can all be misinterpreted
- Remember that many people will read the message, and it will be stored in an archive. Cite all quotations, references and copyrights, and do not include personal or confidential information
- Respect the privacy of other group members - do not forward private e-mails or information without permission
- If provided, use a file-upload facility rather than sending attachments to the group that may clog up the recipients’ e-mail facility or be irrelevant to all members of the group
- Be polite even if there is disagreement with group members – try not to provoke angry arguments or be drawn into the arguments of others (known as ‘flaming’), but be constructive with all comments made
- Do not use the mailgroup for direct advertising
- Identify yourself in each message by adding your name
- When using an ‘out of office’ message, consider suspending subscription to the group until you return or exclude the mailgroup from the out of office message
- Limit your use of abbreviations and smileys. They help to keep messages short, but not all internet users are great fans of text messaging abbreviations.

8. Examples of mailgroups currently being used in education

Apollo (Adult Practitioners’ On Line Learning Opportunities): this mailgroup provides a forum for all practitioners participating in adult and community learning to share ideas and practical approaches. Apollo is also used to announce initiatives such as funding

opportunities, training events and conferences. Apollo subscribers also receive a fortnightly electronic newsletter – Apollo's Arrow – that summarises the main topics covered during the previous two weeks. This is a free service but does require registration. Details about how to subscribe and unsubscribe are available on the aclearn website [www.aclearn.net/communicate/discussion/].

Apollo Languages: a mailgroup created especially for adult and community learning language practitioners to discuss ideas, suggestions and issues to do with using information and communications technology to support language teaching. This is a free service but does require registration. Details about how to subscribe and unsubscribe are available on the aclearn website [www.aclearn.net/communicate/discussion/].

JISCmail: a mailgroup service sponsored by the JISC, which aims to support topical discussion, wide collaboration and rapid communications. The main users are from higher and further education and also from research communities both in the UK and worldwide. JISCmail groups are free to the academic community and easy to set up via a vetted application process controlled by JISC criteria. It is possible to subscribe to multiple lists and with many addresses on JISCmail. Details about how to subscribe and unsubscribe are available on the JISC website [www.jiscmail.ac.uk].

9. NIACE mailgroups

Mailgroups currently moderated by NIACE include:

- **Learning and Health:** discussing issues and information relating to Learning and Health
- **Learning For Peace:** discussing ways in which violence and conflict in today's world could be ameliorated through adult learning initiatives
- **Lifelong Learning:** discussing issues relating to Lifelong Learning
- **Literacy, Language and Numeracy:** discussing issues and information relating to Literacy, Language and Numeracy
- **Making IT Accessible:** a support group for the laptop project
- **Older and Bolder:** discussing issues relating to learning in later life – aimed at practitioners/providers
- **Talk Online:** a support group for the Overcoming Social Exclusion Through Online Learning Project, discussing all aspects relating to online learning
- **Update Online:** the default mailgroup for the Overcoming Social Exclusion Through Online Learning Project, discussing changes or additions to the project website
- **Women Learning:** discussing issues relevant to women learning
- **Young Adults and Basic Skills:** discussing literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT provision for young adults.

To subscribe to any of the above mailgroups, visit the NIACE website [www.niace.org.uk/information/Forms/ListSubscribe.asp] and follow the instructions onscreen.

10. NIACE Contacts

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11. Mailgroup jargon

Archive: the history of messages sent to a mailgroup. They are usually stored by month, but can also be stored weekly or yearly. Archives can be accessed from the web or by email.

BTW: a common acronym that stands for 'By the way'.

Closed list: a mailgroup configured so as to prevent new users from joining it, unless they are invited to do so by the list owner.

Digest: a means by which a member can receive all the messages sent to the group, during a day, in one single, large message, rather than as individual messages.

Flame: when a member sends a message calling another or other members names, is overtly rude, or is blatantly sarcastic or condescending.

FYI: a common acronym meaning 'for your information'.

IMHO: a common acronym meaning 'in my humble opinion'.

List owner: (owner or mail group manager) someone who looks after and manages the mailgroup and the list of members.

Lurker: a member who reads messages sent to the group, but never or rarely contributes.

Moderator: someone who reads all the messages sent to the group and decides whether they should be distributed to all members or not. (Not all lists have moderators).

Netiquette: (Network Etiquette) an informal code of manners which should govern users behaviour on the internet.

Open list: a mailgroup that is publicly accessible. Anyone can join and archives of old messages are accessible.

POP: (Post Office Protocol) the way e-mail programs get e-mail from a mail server. Messages are downloaded to the user's desktop machine when the user logs on.

Smiley: (or Emoticon) used in text communications to represent emotions or facial expressions, especially to indicate humour which might otherwise be misinterpreted. They are usually formed from punctuation. Some common examples are:

- :-) a smiling or happy face
- ;-) a wink - often used to indicate that the previous remark was not intended to be taken seriously and that the writer was being witty or sarcastic
- :-(a sad or unhappy face
- :-/ a frown – used to indicate that the writer is unsure or sceptical of the last remark made
- :-D a laughing face

Spam: any e-mail received that no-one wants, especially commercial messages which are sent to a mass audience.

Subscribe: join or become a member of a mailgroup.

Thread: a series of messages on a given topic. One person sends a message, and other people reply to it or comment on it.

Unsubscribe: leave a mailgroup

References and Useful Resources

Albion.com

A site providing links to both summary and detailed information about netiquette, including extracts from the book Netiquette by Virginia Shea.

Website: www.albion.com/netiquette/index.html

Apollo

A general mailing list for practitioners to discuss ideas for adult and community learning. Website: www.aclearn.net

JISCmail

A mailing list service sponsored by the JISC for the UK higher and further education communities. Website: www.jiscmail.ac.uk

The Net: User guidelines and netiquette

A site detailing guidelines for internet protocols produced by Arlene Rinaldi and the Florida Atlantic University. Website: www.fau.edu/netiquette/net/elec.html

Netiquette, Virginia Shea. Albion Books, 1994. ISBN 0963702513

This is the fifty-seventh in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

65. Ideas for using ICT in adult and community learning
57. Mailgroups
56. What is online learning
55. How do I become a teacher of adults
54. Mobile ICT resources for older people
53. Extended schools and adult learners
52. Adult participation in learning
51. The NLN and adult and community learning

Requests for briefing sheets in other formats, such as large print are welcomed, we will be pleased to consider your request. Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE

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Tel: 0116 204 4289
Email: information@niace.org.uk
They are also available on the website at
www.niace.org.uk/information

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 insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.