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Using an electronic discussion list for teaching

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Using an electronic discussion list for teaching

Abstract

I first experimented with using an electronic discussion list for teaching in Spring Session 1995 and have been using them since then. They offer a very useful way to keep in touch with a student group, generate a body of often very useful material and can promote a strong sense of group feeling.

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I first experimented with using an electronic discussion list for teaching in Spring Session 1995 and have been using them since then. They offer a very useful way to keep in touch with a student group, generate a body of often very useful material and can promote a strong sense of group feeling.

My first experience of such communications technology was as a subscriber in the early 1990s to discussion lists which had an international focus and were used by scholars and researchers to talk about electronic publishing and scholarly editing. The only student input came from a few postgraduates. As a result of my growing research interest in the field of electronic texts and culture I designed a new subject, ENGL368 Introduction to Electronic Texts, for the then English Department's curriculum and offered it for the first time in 1995. I had seen some pioneer work in the use of new technologies in teaching while on study leave in the US in 1992 and Autumn 1995, and came back determined to trial them for myself. I knew that Wollongong had the majordomo software to run a discussion list and thought it highly appropriate that a subject dealing with electronic texts should be used for the trial.

The people in ITS were very helpful in organising the list for me and dealing with the kinds of routine problems with postings to the list which caused majordomo (the list software) to send messages to me as list owner. The only decision I had to make in setting up the list was whether it should be open, so that anyone could subscribe automatically by sending a request to majordomo, or closed. In the latter case, subscriptions have to be approved by the list owner who can exercise discretion in deciding who is an appropriate subscriber. I chose an open list and experienced no problems. Occasionally people who were not known to me would subscribe, often with email addresses on commercial servers, but they never posted anything to the list and may have been bemused by the kind of traffic it generated. Nowadays junk emailings are much more common and ITS has decided that its majordomo lists will be closed lists, so new list owners no longer have to make this decision.

Discussion lists work in a very simple way. Once the list has been set up and the appropriate people have subscribed, using their email accounts, then discussion can begin. This happens by someone posting a message to the list address. In my case the list name is 'Geekspeak' and the address is 'geekspeak@uow.edu.au.' I had first used the subject code as the name of the list, but decided the second time I ran

ENGL368 to give the list a snappier name. Once the majordomo software receives the subscriber's message, it sends a copy of that message to every subscriber's email address. Any subscriber can respond to the message and, by sending that response to the list, can make that response available to everyone in the list. Messages are not vetted by the list owner before being distributed to the subscribers.

The beauty of a discussion list for teaching is that discussion and the transmission of information can take place outside class contact hours, so that matters of interest can be raised and problems dealt with as they arise, rather than being kept until the class meets each week. Students can stay in touch with both the teacher and each other at any time they have access to their email accounts, whether on campus or off campus.

In order for the list to work successfully, students must have active email accounts, be able to use their email program (either ELM, the University's standard mail program for students, or Eudora, a more user-friendly program), and be prepared to read their email on a regular (ideally daily) basis. This is easy enough for someone who is on campus most days and who can get access to a machine in the Faculty lab or in one of the ITS labs (though the queues for these machines can sometimes be rather off-putting). It's not so easy for someone who comes on campus only once or twice a week and has no access to their email off campus, either from home or from some local internet service point such as a public library or internet cafe. Until such time as access to email is as readily available as access to a telephone today, teachers will need to be mindful of equity issues relating to the place of a discussion list in the work expected of a student. In the meantime, work with discussion lists must remain a supplementary rather than a core activity in a subject.

In my experience it's necessary to spend some time in class early in the session taking students through the basics—activating their email accounts, subscribing to the discussion list and sending a message to the list,

together with making sure they are aware of the University's policy on the use of computer facilities and email accounts. Once they are confident with that, I then give them information about some of the other discussion lists they might want to subscribe to, from the scholarly to the more popular. Many students have had technical problems of various kinds, but, with patience and with help from the Faculty Support Officer and ITS, those problems have usually been resolved fairly quickly. Early problem resolution is crucial. Students quickly lose interest if they find that taking part in a class discussion list is more trouble than it is worth.

The list was used by me as teacher for several purposes. I found it invaluable for passing on information to students that couldn't wait until the next class, an upcoming relevant TV program or an article in the newspaper for instance, or posting from one of the other lists I subscribed to. Often I'd use that material as I would in a class discussion, drawing attention to what seemed to be a significant issue it raised and asking for comment. Students used the list for similar kinds of purposes, passing on items of interest, asking if someone in the class had a particular book on loan from the library, and so on. It was noticeable that some students who were quiet in class were more ready to post to the list, but there were still a number of students who seemed reluctant to post messages. I haven't yet worked out a way of ensuring that everyone in the class feels comfortable in taking an active role in the list. Those who did contribute were well-behaved in their postings to the list and there were no problems with inappropriate postings or comments.

My general impression was that students enjoyed the experience of having a class discussion list, even if they didn't use it as much for lengthy discussion on one particular topic as for posting matters of mutual interest. I want next to come up with some kind of way of archiving the discussions, so that they can be available as a resource to the students. I know there are programs which can achieve this. List owners can

use the MajorCool front-end to majordomo (<http://www.uow.edu.au/cgi-bin/majorcool>) to enable the production of archives and digests, while programs like MHonArc can convert email postings to a list to HTML files, which can then be viewed with a web browser. I

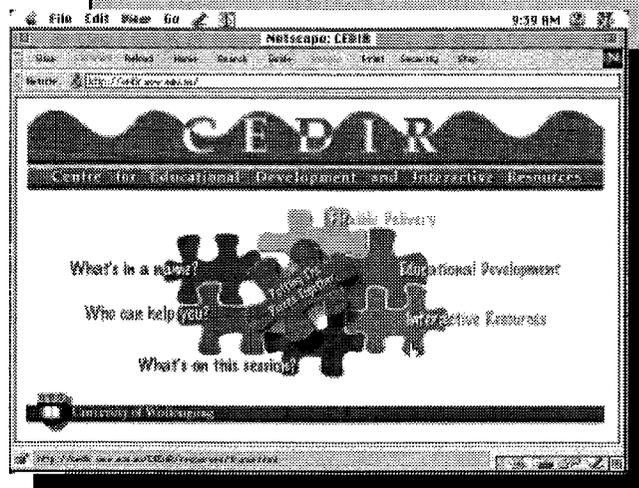
also want to extend the use of discussion lists into all my subjects, especially now that students' computer literacy skills are more widespread and sophisticated. I would recommend discussion lists to any University teacher. I'm sure the experience will be rewarding.

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