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INVISIBLE ADULT EDUCATORS: PUBLIC ONLINE DISCUSSION GROUP MODERTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES, TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past seventy years the study of adult education has professionalized, and some groups of informal adult educators have become marginalized. Despite their daily influence on the informal learning experiences of millions of adults, moderators of public online discussion groups appear to be invisible and irrelevant to the study of adult education.

One hundred and thirty-six moderators of online public discussion groups responded to this study of their perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities as moderators and as informal adult educators. Participant observation of moderators' discussion groups indicated a trend towards the professionalization of this formerly volunteer activity, confirmed, by 13 percent of the respondents, as income-generating employment.

Moderator's composite roles and their indicators have changed over the past 10 years, with a new category of host/hostess added to filter, firefighter, editor, discussion leader, discussion facilitator, administrator, expert, helper, marketer, and publicist. Moderators found their tasks to be a source of personal satisfaction and relaxation; an opportunity for volunteerism and service; professional development; and as a source of income. Formal discussion guidelines were valuable as one half reported they were not leaders, but peers in their groups. Moderators were motivated by making interpersonal connections; facilitating professional development and knowledge sharing; creating community; and receiving personal and professional recognition. The most

challenging aspect of their work was dealing with difficult people. Patience was reported as a moderator's most desirable quality and some form of apprenticeship was considered the best way to acquire moderating skills.

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents believed they functioned as adult educators and when compared with the adult education literature, their activities did closely resemble "best practices" for face-to-face discussion facilitators. Moderators associated together in membership groups in their own milieu, defining themselves by the online tasks they performed. They have developed consistent standards for communication behaviors among group members. They offer training and advice to new moderators, and assist one another in solving problems with networks, software, hosting organizations, and discussion group members. Moderators were found to function as an invisible, professional public of informal adult educators, independent of academic adult education institutions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Professionalization of Adult Education

As the field of adult education was professionalized as an academic field of study, attention shifted from the work of gifted amateurs like those active in the field in the 1930s (Hilton, 1981) and from its historical roots in voluntary associations. Adult Education's history shows a valued, voluntary spirit nurturing transformative social and cultural forms of adult learning, emphasizing adult education as "an adventure that emphasized context, relationship, and learner disposition in community settings" (Grace, 2000, n.p.). Stubblefield and Keane (1994) date the beginning of the professionalization movement to the formation of the American Association for Adult Education, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, in the mid-1920s and Columbia University's Teachers College's formation of the first doctoral program in Adult Education. This led interest away from volunteer practitioners invested in the building of democracy and leading social action to a preoccupation with the study of adult educators as salaried, professional employees of employers generally not themselves members of the

profession, but who could prescribe and circumscribe adult educators' activities (Heaney, 1996).

This preoccupation with professionalization has come at a cost that "largely has to do with whose voices are not heard" (Imel, Brockett, & James, 2000, p. 639) and who are not represented in the current knowledge base of the profession, graduate preparation, or professional associations. Imel (2000) states, "Many who practice adult education do not identify with adult education as a field because they do not see its relevance to their work and to the learners they serve" (p. 632). Many more non-professional practitioners are neither aware of adult education as an academic discipline nor regard it as their profession.

Concern has also been expressed that the professionalized, academic adult education establishment extends and upholds the existing systems of power and perpetuates the inherent contradiction of professionalization: "Because adult educators are themselves beneficiaries of the educational meritocracy, they have a stake in maintaining the status quo, which could affect their approach and responsibility to those outside the mainstream" (Kerka, 1996). Hayes and Flannery (1997) suggest that the idea that knowledge building is only the privilege and right of a select few (for example, those in the academy) must be changed and that more voices and perspectives must be brought into the knowledge base. Heaney (1996) cautions that

> while adult education has remained theoretically committed to democratic values, its knowledge base reproduces the structures and values of a culture which privileges the practices of an

> educated elite over the "grassroots" and academically untrained educators of adults. (n.p.)

Many adult educators in formal academic or training settings have graduate or doctoral degrees in adult education, but that may not be the case with practitioners in informal settings:

> the reality remains that most people who engage in the education of adults have not had specific preparation in adult education. Indeed, it is quite likely that most of these educators do not recognize the value of graduate study in adult education. Even more enlightening and disturbing, is that many educators of adults are not even aware that graduate preparation and degree programs even exist. (Imel et al., 2000, p 633)

Invisible Adult Education Practitioners

These informal, adult education practitioners are not only uninvolved with the academic adult education establishment but, while fully engaged in the informal education of adults, they are, nevertheless, invisible to the mainstream of academic study and attention. Merriam and Brockett (1997) point out that this kind of invisibility is a consequence of who these informal adult education practitioners are, in terms of their gender, race, sexual orientation, age, or class. These practitioners also work in settings that are not usually identified with the adult education mainstream, including–but not limited to–libraries, corrections, senior citizen centers, churches, and every kind of volunteer organization that provides training to their volunteers. These "invisible" adult education practitioners do not come into contact with, nor enroll in adult education graduate

programs. They do not read adult education journals, attend conferences concerning adult education, nor do they join any adult education associations. According to Merriam and Brockett (1997): "The fact that many individuals who practice adult education either remain invisible to professional adult educators or find the profession irrelevant should serve as a wake-up call" (p. 640).

This dissertation study brings to the attention of the academic field of adult education the voices of representatives of just such a group of invisible, grassroots, adult education practitioners: online public discussion group moderators. The setting in which they work is an equally invisible "place"—a cyber-space—where adults go to learn (Feenberg, 1999; Harasim, 1993; Harasim, 1987; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Heuer, 1997; Navarro & Shoemaker, 1999; White, 2001). It is a place of discourse communities beyond institutions and conceptually situated among "the popular social movements, grass roots education, voluntary associations, and communities producing and disseminating knowledge as a human activity" (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 10).

This study is grounded in prior research, conducted by Berge and Collins (2000), (See Appendix D) and elaborates, along the lines they suggested (p. 97), on the study of moderators' perceptions of their roles, tasks and responsibilities. The Berge and Collins research was, however, focused on the moderators of "scholarly discussion groups" (Berge, 1992; Berge & Collins, 1995; Collins & Berge, 1997a, 1997b; Gresham, 1993), i.e., discussion groups that were

populated mostly by members of academic institutions, and where discussion revolved around topics of professional interest.

This study is distinct from prior research along the following dimensions:

1) Respondents were sought from non-academic discussion groups whose membership consisted of online discussion group moderators, thus extending the study beyond those conducted by Berge and Collins among moderators of scholarly discussion groups. The respondents, with only four exceptions, had no connection with higher education, nor were their online discussion groups hosted by academic institutions.
2) Moderators function in an environment in which adults learn (Heuer, 1997) so, in this study, moderators' perceptions were examined using an adult education perspective. Moderators of online public discussion groups fit within adult education's definitions of "adult educator" (Brookfield, 1986; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; M. S. Knowles, 1982; Merriam & Brockett, 1997) but rarely, if ever, claim that title for themselves.

The balance of this chapter will set the background within which moderators function by introducing public online discussion groups, their users, and their leadership. Also stated is the purpose of this research study, and its significance to the field of adult education. This chapter concludes with an overview of subsequent chapters.

Public Online Discussion Groups

The following metaphorical description of public online discussion groups was posted to a discussion thread about building online communities:

> I imagine list-space as a billion campsites, each with its little band of campers–who have already conveniently sorted themselves by common interests–and I imagine people going from one to another seeking common ground and a feeling of connectedness with those who are already there. I imagine hospitable others who decide to build their own warm hearths around which to gather their friends, and passing strangers, and build new communities.
>
> And what do we do when we get there? There has never been a time in human history when we have not bridged our interpersonal distances by swapping stories–from "You should have SEEN the one that got away...and here's what I'll do next time to make sure it doesn't" to "This is what happened this time . . . we'll NEVER make that 'O' ring mistake again" to "My baby used to cry like that! Let me show you what I did . . ." to "I know you gotta set the SOCIAL context up first, THEN you can get on with the work. Tell me how YOU do that, please."
>
> It is all about our needing and building that awe-ful feeling of human connectedness. Even when we are face-to-face, that feeling has always had its existence between our own ears, and is of our own construction.
>
> Resourceful humans that we are, we are just taking advantage of one more channel through which we can reach out and connect with each other, only now we have found a way to cross the proximity barrier, and transcend our physical shells.
>
> Mauri
> Hearth Builder
> (posted to onlinefacilitation@yahoogroups.com, 2/24/2002)

Adults have always chosen to gather together in groups to discuss and reflect on topics and events of mutual interest, for fellowship, news gathering and sharing, and informal learning. Generally, these groups have had two purposes: problem-solving and enlightenment (Jacobsen, 1989). Brilhart (1974) describes enlightenment as "a fuller understanding, a wider grasp of information pertinent to a topic, or consideration of a problem from as many points of view as possible"

(p. 117). With the rising popularity and easy accessibility of the Internet, public online discussion groups of various kinds have become a contemporary iteration of such voluntary, informal, adult gathering places arising from a long tradition of such gatherings. Group membership no longer needs be limited by physical proximity as geographically dispersed persons can gather and share in discussion of topics of mutual interest in a cyber-place, open to all with access to a computer and an Internet connection.

These discussion groups generally have some formal or informal structure that includes a person–or persons–in a discussion group leadership role. These persons can range from those responsible only for the environmental logistics of group meeting spaces to elected or appointed discussion leaders and facilitators. In online discussion groups the term "moderator" is a generic often used by both members and group leaders to describe the persons who serve some of the same functions as a discussion leader in informal face-to-face adult education settings. Such public online discussion group moderators are the subjects of this study.

What Are Public Online Discussion Groups?

Public online discussion groups had their genesis in the electronic mailing list technology that appeared in the mid-1980s (Thomas, 1996). A computer known as a *listserver*, linked to the Internet, stores a *list* of the subscribers' email addresses. When the listserver receives an email message forwarded from the

list moderator (in the case of moderated lists), or directly from a subscriber (in the case of un-moderated lists), the listserver distributes the message to all email addresses on that subscription list. Subscribers can elect to receive each contribution to the list discussion as an individual email message, as they are sent, or once a day, in the form of a digest containing all of that day's messages. Until the development of the World Wide Web, electronic mailing lists circulated only text-based messages among group members:

> Taking part in a conversation in text, distributed to its participants by means of networked computers, is a relatively new group experience. It's just familiar enough to feel like there's nothing to it, and just foreign enough to feel like the birthplace of a new kind of human community. (Williams, 1997).

With the spread of World Wide Web technology, some online discussion groups have taken on a different appearance–that of asynchronous threaded discussion groups. The underlying technology is the same. Members subscribe to a mailing list for their group and the default setting is for discussion list postings to be delivered to their individual email boxes. Subscribers can elect not to receive discussion postings as individual emails, or digested in a single message once a day, but, using their web browser, go to a web page to read the messages that are stored there. This web-based display format is used by commercial discussion group hosting services like Yahoo! at (http://www.yahoogroups.com) or Topica (http://www.topica.com). Both forms of email message distribution (directly to subscribers' email boxes or stored on a server and viewed by visiting a web page) will, in this study, be called by the generic term "online discussion group".

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)

How Many People Do Public Online Discussion Groups Reach?

The membership size of online discussion groups is limited only by the license for the server software maintaining the distribution list and web pages and any limitations set by those who manage the group. The distribution list for administrative messages to online discussion group owners/moderators at Topica.com has over 840,000 subscribers; at groups.yahoo.com the membership of a similar group is over 900,000. The largest electronic mail distribution list at the http://www.lsoft.com (home of LISTSERV software) hosting service, 9@totallyfreemailoffers.com, has over 5.2 *million* subscribers. At L-soft.com there are six more email distribution lists with over a million subscribers, and a further 348 delivering mail to more than 10,000 email addresses.

Lists of this size are usually for information distribution only and not for discussion because there are just too many subscribers. The Pennsylvania State University listserver hosts about 2790 public and private electronic discussion lists and processes an average of 573,500 messages a day, ranking

in the top 20 by number of lists hosted, the number of subscribers served, and the email traffic generated.

What Are Public Electronic Discussion Groups Used For?

Public electronic distribution groups have several functions. Those with many thousands of subscribers typically are used for the one-way distribution of information, sometimes in the form of electronic newsletters or e-zines (electronic magazines). Smaller discussion groups are frequently used for the exchange of email among the subscribers with interest in a specific topic focus. The terms "discussion list" and "discussion group" are frequently used interchangeably; however to emphasize the focus of this study on the moderators, members, and the interpersonal interactions among them and not the groups so they will be referred to as “online discussion groups”. Two classes of discussion lists forming somewhat distinct groups within the wider span of online discussion groups have been identified:

1) The Scholarly Discussion Group, populated by academics and professionals with discussion revolving around topics of academic and professional interest (Berge, 1992; Berge & Collins, 1994, 1995; Collins & Berge, 1996, 1997b; Collins, Richardson, & Clark, 1997).
2) Support Groups, which, like their offline counterparts, are used for mutual support, assistance and counseling (Collins & Berge, 1997b; Galegher, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1998; Goldsmith & Alexander, 1998; Meier, 1999;

Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; S. L. Williams, 1996). As a point of interest, the earliest research studies examined online support groups for recovering addicts (King, 1994, 1995).

A recent evolution of online discussion groups, discovered in the course of this study, is their deliberate creation as a marketing tool, accessed through commercial web sites. These discussion groups are designed to develop brand recognition and customer loyalty through the creation of content-specific "communities". Businesses hope that members, drawn by a common interest, will become engaged in social relationships with one another, and will return to their websites frequently. These groups of communities have professional managers who often have a team of moderators working for them on a full- or part-time basis.

Another way of categorizing groups is as public or private. Private online discussion groups have a membership that is limited to a specific group of people segregated by discipline or profession, gender, gender preference, political or religious beliefs, etc. Membership requires meeting the group's criteria and approval by the moderator. Public discussion groups, on the other hand, have an unrestricted membership, although abiding by the group's guidelines is usually required for those who wish to stay.

One of the largest and best known of the private, corporate providers is America Online (http://www.aol.com), now the owner of the oldest online community, CompuServe (http://www.compuserve.com). AOL membership is

limited to those who are willing to pay the monthly fee for access. These full-service, propriety entities do provide access to the Internet but have been designed to be what would be known in Las Vegas, NV, as "a destination resort". Once a member is logged in a full range of services are provided, including both real time chat rooms and asynchronous discussion conferences, news and other resources, references, and communities so that users will have, the providers hope, no incentive to stray beyond their boundaries.

Who Uses Public Online Discussion Groups?

Subscribers to public online discussion groups are generally adults, who are interested in the discussion topic, pursuing their own personal learning projects (Collins & Berge, 1996; Dewar, 1996; Heuer, 1997) or informal professional development activities (Anderson, 1996; Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Chisum, 1997; Gray, 1998; Medley, 1999; Reilly, 1999). Subscribers come from all demographic groups and geographic regions with a single attribute in common: they all have access to the Internet. Early group members were computer professionals who were building the Internet network infrastructure in the 1970s (Grier & Campbell, 2000). Public discussion groups grew rapidly in number as access to low-cost computers increased, then exploded as access to the Internet through the World Wide Web became common. The Internet has been identified as being "meant for the sharing and building of ideas, information, and skills among the participants to strengthen knowledge building, integration

and application of conceptual information" (Harasim et al., 1995, p. 24). Particularly for members of online discussion groups, the Internet may serve as a primary vehicle for this process.

The leadership of online public discussion groups is critical for their success: "The success of a virtual gathering place can depend as much upon the energy, creativity, and approach of its host or hosts as it does upon the proposed subject matter or theme" (Williams, 1997). Understanding online discussion groups necessitates an understanding of those "hosts": the moderators who are the subjects of this study.

Public Online Discussion Group Leadership

If one were to observe public online discussion group leaders performing their functions, what would there be to watch? One would see a person, usually sitting in a chair in front of a computer, reading the screen and sometimes typing, or clicking the mouse, activities that might continue uninterrupted for several hours. This person may be in any one of several environments, but most likely in an office at work, or at home. During their time at the computer they may be engaged in fulfilling any one of a number of roles, described later in this study, but all from that same spot in front of their computer screen.

What cannot be easily observed, unless one is reading over their shoulder, is the content of the messages appearing on their screen. What cannot be intuitively grasped is the ongoing construction of a conversational

reality from what is transpiring on the screen–the conversations and discussions they are engaged in, the technical and administrative matters they are attending to, and the general sense of connection and friendship they feel with the invisible others who make up their personal communication networks.

There are three broad classes of discussion groups based on who has control over what is posted to the discussion group:

Moderated online discussion groups have a person (or persons) charged with screening all messages for suitability *prior* to distribution to the group members. This "suitability" filter is often encoded in the form of a set of formal guidelines explaining the social compact for communication among group members (See Appendix C for examples).

Unmoderated online discussion groups have all postings immediately forwarded to all group members. This can lead to a lot of "noise" as administrative action requests, advertisements of all kinds, virus-laden messages, personal messages, and other forms of electronic “junk mail” are all sent immediately to subscribers' mailboxes, sometimes burying messages that pertain to the group discussion.

Monitored groups may also have a formal set of communication guidelines. The "monitor" is a discussion group leader who follows and often participates in the discussion as a peer, and may admonish those who break the communication rules, after the fact. In other cases the

entire group assumes the responsibility of monitoring the discussion and sanctioning offenders.

And the Public Online Discussion Leader is Called . . . ?

For those pubic online discussion groups based in listserver software, the terms embedded in the software for the leadership functions are generally "owner" and "editor" and denote levels of administrative privilege, i.e., who can access and change the configuration of the distribution software. The term "editor" generally denotes someone who may or may not monitor or review messages, but who does deal with matters like bounced mail, or adding and deleting subscribers. Free online services like Yahoo! Groups and Topica.com use the inclusive term "owner" for the person responsible for the administration and leadership of their discussion groups.

In 1992, Collins and Berge conducted their first study to determine the appropriate roles and responsibilities of public discussion group "moderators". Their initial assumption was that the defining attribute of a person identifying with the title of "moderator" was their reviewing of all posts before distribution. Unusable surveys indicated that the respondents, while identifying themselves with the term "moderator," functioned in a number of roles that might, or might not have included reviewing all messages, or having any contact with the group membership. On the basis of that study (described in Chapter Two), the nomenclature was amended to “administrator”, “owner”, and “moderator” (Collins

& Berge, 1997a). The descriptive titles further evolved to "owner", "monitor", and "moderator" for their subsequent 1997 study (Berge & Collins, 2000) based on responsibility for what appears in the discussion forum and the amount of contact with the individual discussion group members. Those who took the leadership role in public online discussion groups most often self-identified with the term "moderator" (Berge & Collins, 2000) as evidenced by the variety of persons who responded to the 1992 and 1997 studies, regardless of the extent of their involvement with the group membership.

Moderator was used as an inclusive term in this study to indicate the respondents' self-identification. This term has three identified sub-sets of activities: "administrator/owner," "monitor," and "reviewer" (Berge & Collins, 2000):

- An *administrator* generally has little or no contact with group members on a daily basis, but does attend to technical and management functions, often ensuring that the server is functioning, is virus-free and the connection to the Internet is maintained.
- A *monito*r may perform an administrator's functions and may also be a peer participant or a leader/facilitator, but does not review posts prior to their distribution to the group
- A *reviewer* may, or may not, perform either an administrator's and a monitor's functions, but they do review all posts prior to their being forwarded to the group.

Research Questions

Despite online discussion group moderators' influence on the recreational, or otherwise voluntary, informal learning experiences of countless adults, only two prior studies of groups of moderators have been conducted to describe the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of those who serve as online public discussion group moderators (Berge, 1992, 1995; Berge & Collins, 2000; Collins & Berge, 1997a, 1998). These exploratory studies were conducted in 1992 and 1997. In the five years since the 1997 study, the landscape of the Internet has changed significantly. The Internet has privatized, the World Wide Web has gained in popularity and has spread far beyond academic institutions. Much of the growth in the World Wide Web can be traced to the successful efforts of advertisers to entice people to log on and explore this intriguing new cyber-place.

The research reported here was conducted in three intersecting phases. The first questionnaire extended the Berge and Collins' longitudinal study of online discussion group moderators along research lines their findings had suggested, but also moved research into the realm of non-academic online discussion groups. Next, the study investigated the similarities between the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of online moderators and those of adult education discussion facilitators, as described in the literature. The study concluded with a examination of responses to a question in the first questionnaire and a follow-up questionnaire investigating moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators.

The three main research questions guiding this study follow:

1) What are online discussion group moderators' perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities?
2) In what ways do moderators' roles, tasks, and responsibilities compare and contrast with the skills and activities suggested for discussion facilitators/moderators in formal adult education settings, as presented in the literature?
3) What, if any, are moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators?

Significance of this Study to the Field of Adult Education

Online discussion group leaders function very much as discussion leaders or facilitators do in informal face-to-face adult learning settings, even if the physical manifestations are not the same. In so doing, they join the ranks of practitioners meeting the broad definitions of "adult educator" (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, pp. 15-16). Moderators' activities involve helping other adults to become more competent and achieve their goals (Knowles, 1980, p. 26), specifically by providing a venue for online discussion and frequently by filling the role of discussion facilitators. Longworth and Norman (1996) include in their list of adult educators

> the vast number of people who would not describe themselves as teachers but who nevertheless pass on information, knowledge, understanding and, sometimes, wisdom . . . parents, friends,

> neighbors, doctors, lawyers, councilors, scout and guide leaders, political and religious leaders, journalists, television presenters, comedians and actors. (p. 141)

Like many other adult education practitioners so defined, moderators may not be "conscious that they are performing the increasingly precisely defined role of *adult educator*" (Knowles, 1980, p. 26), yet, in many ways, they fill these roles as members and leaders of an online community. Moderators are seldom involved in any part of the academic profession of adult education, nor do they appear to believe the study of adult education is relevant to what they do on a daily basis. Yet, hundreds of thousands of adults participate in public online discussion groups on a daily basis and use them as a venue for informal and incidental learning and professional development (Collins & Berge, 1996, 1997b; Collins et al., 1997; Heuer, 1997). This study adds to the knowledge base regarding the facilitation of informal and incidental adult learning in online environments.

The variety and diversity of adult learning modes, formats, and methods and a concern for the individual as an adult learner have been part of the study of adult education since its very beginnings (Hilton, 1981, p. v). Public online discussion groups have existed on the Internet since 1975 and are adult, lifelong-learning environments (Graebner, 1999; Heuer, 1997) that instantly span local, national and international boundaries and time zones. Through the Internet, adults, most of whom are no longer involved in formal education, can have unparalleled access to learning resources and to others who share similar interests. Online discussion groups encompass many of the same elements that

have always characterized informal, face-to-face adult learning groups and networks.

Online discussion group participants refer to the exchange of email messages among group members as *discussion*. Discussion, and the exchange of stories and experiences, have been identified as two of the most effective means by which adults learn (Brookfield, 1990; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Brown & Duguid, 2000). Although the focus of this study is an informal learning environment, it is important to note that the online discussion group format is also being used for the delivery of academic courses and programs, for online professional development seminars (Medley, 1999) and for the management of discussion in courses delivered primarily through other media. As suggested by Rojo (1995) in the conclusion to her dissertation, a description of the tasks, roles and experiences of practicing public online discussion group moderators could lead to the development of better training for those wishing to function effectively as discussion facilitators and moderators, while teaching on-line.

Online discussion groups with topics of a professional nature are heavily populated by practicing professionals and are perceived as presenting opportunities for informal professional development activities (Anderson, 1996; Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Chisum, 1997; Heuer, 1997; Medley, 1999). This study contributes to what we know about the leadership and facilitation of online discussion and of leadership in informal, online, professional development venues among adults in non-academic settings. It also makes an original

contribution to the adult learning literature concerning the identity and activities of a largely unknown, yet highly influential, population of "adult educators".

Limitations of this Study

This non-funded study was limited to a volunteer group of self-identified moderators of online discussion groups that were managed by mail distribution programs (such as LISTSERV, groups.yahoo.com, Topica.com, etc.) with optional display on web pages. These public and private categories of online discussion groups exclude the forums conducted on the commercial Internet service providers (CompuServe, America Online, etc.) and those used for the distribution or one-way transmission of information. Usenet newsgroups were excluded because their constituencies were difficult to identify, and Usenet moderators do not function in the same way as discussion group moderators.

Also specifically excluded were formal academic online discussion groups associated with courses because their duration is limited, not open-ended, and participation may be required, rather than voluntary. The formal nature, short time span, often required participation, and the potential power differential between formal adult educators and their students on academic online discussion groups took them beyond the scope and focus of this study.

Technology and its place in society is evolving so rapidly that this study can only be a "time-framed window in a rapidly changing landscape" (Heuer, 1997, p. 74). However, when added to the previous Berge and Collins studies, it

is now part of a time-series, and can be useful for comparison and benchmarking of later studies.

The study was further limited by using moderators' reports on their own perceptions of their tasks, roles, and responsibilities. The assumption was made that moderators were accurately interpreting the questions and reporting their experiences truthfully to the researcher. Further research will be needed to investigate the intersection of moderators' perceptions of their performance and the perceptions of their group members.

Summary

In this introductory chapter the professionalization of the academic field of adult education has been indicated as a reason why there are now many persons who are engaged, on a daily basis, in the informal education of adults but whose voices are not heard within the academic discipline of adult education, nor is the discipline of any relevance to them. These informal adult educators would only rarely claim for themselves the title of "adult educator" as they equate this term with instructors in formal educational institutions and settings. One group of such "invisible" adult educators is the moderators of public online discussion groups. This study examined moderators from an adult education perspective.

As mentioned above, moderators of online public discussion group have been the subject of two previous studies (Berge & Collins, 2000), neither of which viewed moderators in their capacity as educators of adults. This study used a

revised version of the Berge & Collins questionnaire, and extended the research along dimensions they suggested (See Appendix D for the full text of their 1997 study).

To set the context in which public online discussion group moderators, and for those unfamiliar with the phenomenon, the functions of online discussion groups were described and their history reviewed. The nature and extent of their audience was described as adults engaged in topical discussion in venues that have been identified as ones in which adults learn. Their leadership was likened to that of face-to-face discussion groups leaders as described by Brookfield and others (Brookfield, 1986; 1990; Harasim, 1986).

The research questions that guided this study centered around the roles, tasks and responsibilities of online discussion group moderators, extending the work of Berge and Collins (2000). The perspective taken in this study is that moderators are informal educators of adults, invisible to and ignorant of the academic adult education community.

This study is significant to the study of informal adult education practitioners because moderators of online discussion groups influence the learning experiences of countless thousands of adults on a daily basis, while failing to feel any affinity with, or connection to the academic study of adult education. Their voices are unheard among adult education scholars and yet there may be much to be learned from the activities in their roles as leaders and facilitators of online discussion. Discussion has been identified as a valuable

way in which adults learn (Brookfield, 1986; Brookfield, 1990; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999) and discussion is the currency of transactions in online discussion groups.

Limitations to this study include it being a "snap shot" of an expanding field that could not address all online discussion groups. Those affiliated with academic courses were specifically excluded based on the power differential between teacher and students and the requirement that often exists for participation. The study depended upon the self-report of online discussion group moderators' perceptions, their interpretation of the questions asked and their ability to correctly interpret and explain their perceptions.

Overview of the Study

The literature review in Chapter 2 situates public online discussion groups as a contemporary example within the historical tradition of voluntary, informal, learning groups used by adults for discussion, fellowship and learning. Leadership in face-to-face informal adult learning is examined, predominantly in a historical setting (since in the 1930s), as the field of adult education began to seek professional recognition as an academic discipline. After that time, close attention to the roles, characteristics, appropriate behaviors, and training of leaders of voluntary, informal, learning groups refocused on leadership in formal adult education settings. Finally, the existing body of literature describing the

roles, tasks, and responsibilities of public moderators is reviewed, as are the two prior research studies on which this current study is based.

Chapter 3 reviews the quantitative and qualitative data collection methods used in this study. Triangulation was achieved by using data sources in a mix suitable for this study. The sample was one of criterion and purpose, with deliberate sampling designed to obtain a broad and representative span of respondents.

Chapter 4 describes, discusses, and summarizes the data from the first questionnaire regarding the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of public online discussion group moderators.

Chapter 5 compares the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of public online discussion group moderators to those of discussion moderators or facilitators in informal adult education settings. A question on the earlier Berge & Collins survey concerning moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators is also explored in Chapter 5, and the findings from a follow-up questionnaire are discussed.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of this study, states the conclusions drawn from this research and suggests areas of future research.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

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 are anecdotal reports from individual moderators (e.g., MacLennan, 1995), little is 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, 2000b; Collins & Berge, 1996c, 1997b). 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 study extended the Berge and Collins time-series of studies beyond academic settings and examined moderators in the light of their functions as adult education practitioners. Three research questions guided this descriptive study:

1) What are online discussion group moderators' perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities?
2) In what ways do moderators' roles, tasks, and responsibilities compare and contrast with the skills and activities suggested for discussion facilitators/moderators in formal adult education settings, as presented in the literature?
3) What, if any, are moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators?

Overview

This literature review situates online discussion groups 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 email exchanges, they can also be likened to historical correspondence networks. Just as the online discussion group is a contemporary, informal learning group, so the moderator or monitor of the online discussion group also serves a similar function as a facilitator of informal adult learning, fulfilling many of the same roles, tasks and responsibilities of an adult educator. This should place the moderators of online discussion groups within the realm of interest of adult education and educators. To provide a background for this research study the literature concerning voluntary informal and incidental learning, adult learning networks, public online

discussion groups and their administrators/monitors/reviewers was reviewed, as were the two prior research studies in which this one was grounded.

Voluntary, Informal and Incidental Learning

Adults learn in many situations besides the classroom, being constantly engaged in their own self-initiated, informal learning activities beyond formal education and training programs (Brookfield, 1984; Candy, 1991; Heimlich, Diem, & Farrell, 1996). Informal and incidental learning are distinguished from learning in formal and non-formal, but structured, settings in that informal and incidental learning occurs most often in the learners' natural settings and is initiated and carried through primarily by the learners themselves (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Historically, adults sought out others in their close proximity with whom they could associate at home and at family gatherings, at work, at church, and in political and civic organizations. They congregated wherever they could find others with similar interests, and have built their own personal, informal learning networks (Candy, 1991; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Sharp, 1997). Many people also developed widespread correspondence networks of like-minded friends and colleagues (Cremin, 1977), writing and receiving a constant stream of letters.

Carlson remarks that, while some adult education is carried out in formal settings, "still more is carried out, often spontaneously, by individuals responding

to questions or to their private muse." He alliterates: "Most of adult education is unorganized, conducted by peers, poets, propagandists, priests, peddlers, politicians, performers, publishers, pamphleteers, playwrights, and practitioners of the plastic arts" (Carlson, 1980, p. 178).

Adults may not identify the primary goal of these associations and activities as "learning" (Candy, 1991, p. 18) or "learning projects" (Tough, 1979) even when they are actively engaged in informal or self-directed learning activities at work or at home (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). However, public online discussion groups have come to be identified by educators as informal venues in which learning by adults does take place (Berge & Collins, 1993; Coglan & Stevens, 2000; Collins & Berge, 1996a; Dewar, 1996; Haavind, 1999; Harasim, 1986).

Peterson (1979) claims that "one can conceive of environments, particularly interpersonal environments, that are more stimulating than others and thus make for more frequent unintended learning" (p. 18). Adult learning networks, both face-to-face, and online (Cranton, 1996), may be one of those more stimulating environments that "extend well beyond the traditional formal education system into the thousands of interest groups which influence the thoughts and actions of people in modern society" (Longworth & Davis, 1996, p. 12).

The following section situates face-to-face informal adult learning in voluntary associations into a historical perspective. An examination of the

literature suggests that online discussion groups are a contemporary example of the voluntary associations that have been a feature of the American informal learning landscape since the earliest days of settlement (Cranton, 1996).

The Historical Context of Informal Adult Learning

Stubblefield and Keane (1991, pp. 19-20) remind us that "much of adult education in the early colonial period owed less to formal institutions, educational or otherwise, than to everyday living." They go on to detail the existence of wide-ranging informal correspondence networks relating not only to commerce, scientific information exchange, and politics, but also to the everyday affairs among relatives and friends. Workingmen's self-help groups, various pre-union workers' associations, lyceums, learning exchanges, free universities, and cooperatives were all voluntary associations in which significant adult learning took place, both individually and as part of collective action.

Henry Barnard, (cited in Knowles, 1977) describes lyceums as free learning exchanges that were open to all and characterized by equality among members. Teaching and learning roles were rotated among different participants (Cremin, 1977; Richmond, 1943). This situation sounds remarkably close to the descriptions of informal adult learning environments found in contemporary literature (Brookfield, 1986; Sarason, 1977; Sarason & Lorentz, 1979), and the learning environment provided by online discussion groups.

Welter (1962) describes lyceums as the lineal ancestors of the later Chautauquas, and as more significant in terms of the several aspects of adult education as they brought together widely scattered adults–very much in the pattern of contemporary online discussion groups. Welter noted the following characteristics of lyceums:

- Participation was primarily, but not exclusively, by working men.
- Participation was voluntary.
- They had a democratic form of educational governance and participation at a time when both private forms and more hierarchical forms were especially suspect among workers.
- They were appropriately adapted for a geographically dispersed society.
- They made offerings of and participation in public issues discussion available to entire families.

Participation in public online discussion groups is open to all persons who have a networked computer, and participation is voluntary. Group members can post or only read messages, as they choose. The membership of many online discussion groups is now dispersed internationally and participation continues regardless of time zones and distances. If current television advertising is to be believed, participation in online discussion groups and the exchange of email and chat messages is, indeed, available to and taken advantage of by entire families.

Cremin (1977) also points out that, from the earliest colonial period, much education took place, not in formal settings, but within the family, church, work

apprenticeships, and voluntary associations. 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. He states:

> the definition projects us beyond the schools and colleges to the multiplicity of individuals and institutions that educate–parents, peers, siblings, and friends, as well as families, churches, synagogues, libraries, museums, summer camps, benevolent societies, agricultural fairs, settlement houses, factories, publishers, radio stations, and television networks. (p. 136)

Cremin's definition of education is used in this study because online discussion groups, occurring, as they do, in a cyber-location, fit logically within it.

Historical Correspondence Networks

Electronic mail is also analogous to earlier forms of paper-based communication, and email plays a role similar to that which letters and other documents historically played in informal adult education. Before the American Revolution, the spread of the printing press in England, Europe, and the colonies encouraged literacy. Cremin (1977) points out that the circulation of letters, pamphlets, and other printed matter by Committees of Correspondence prepared the hearts and minds of the people for the notion of revolution and independence: "Printed matter exerted an independent and potentially liberating influence, as well, for individuals could come to printed matter on their own, or in

concert with other individuals outside the confines of formal educative institutions” (p. 14).

Cremin points to the period between 1783 and 1876 as a time when printed material was an instrument of "deliberate self-instruction, teaching all the skills needed for participation in the welter of competing voluntary associations that became vehicles for everything from mutual consciousness-raising to systematic political lobbying" (pp. 51-52). Even as universities and colleges proliferated during this period, "the basic configuration of American education . . . remained one of household, church, Sunday and evening school, college, and publisher; to which was added the workplace, government custodial bureaus" (p. 55), "botanical gardens" (p. 61), "circulating libraries, and Christian associations like the YMCA " (p. 63). This list grew to include "institutions . . . such as museums, lyceums . . . mechanics' institutes, and societies for the diffusion of useful knowledge" (Richmond, 1943, pp. 16-17). Self-improvement and self-instruction became a vehicle for general social mobility; participation in church-connected, voluntary associations served the same purpose for slaves after emancipation (Cremin, 1977).

The century between 1876 and 1976 was one of urbanization (Cremin, 1977), and easy access to formal education, at least for children, became the norm, with family and church declining in importance. Libraries, lyceums, chautauquas (Richmond, 1943), fairs, expositions, and conventions were agencies for sharing, diffusing, and displaying knowledge, art, and entertainment,

as were the agricultural extension and home-demonstration agencies. The most "revolutionary development . . . was the rise of the mass media of communication, the press, cinema, radio and television" (p. 105). While these media claimed to leave education to the schools, "they educated relentlessly, precisely as they informed, entertained, hawked products, and sold services" (p. 106).

The average work week declined from 60 to 40 hours and allowed adults more time to pursue self- and mutual education in informal settings: "Listening to the radio, reading newspapers, magazines, and books; participating in clubs and other voluntary associations; visiting museums, concert halls, and theaters; enrolling in adult education courses, and traveling by automobile to national parks" (p. 112). To this list Houle (1972, p. 105) adds lecture series, training classes in industry or unions, educational tours, lifesaving and first aid courses sponsored by the Red Cross, speeches delivered to meetings of voluntary and professional associations, and religious instruction carried out by churches.

Brown & Duguid (2000) draw our attention to the role of documents in "structuring society, enabling social groups to form, develop and maintain a sense of shared identity" (p. 189). They thus situate online discussion groups–with their sharing of electronic documents–firmly into this long tradition of learning communities extending back to ancient philosophical and religious communities bound together by texts and a common understanding of the meanings within those texts.

Sociologist Anselm Strauss (1978) has developed the notion of "social worlds" based on the constant circulation of communication in the form of documents such as letters, journals, books, and papers. Although his colleagues were widely scattered nationally and internationally, he noticed that these individuals developed a sense of their colleagues, their field, and their position in it from their participation in the circulation of discipline-specific documents. Very few of these sociologists knew each other directly, but their sharing of texts gave "texture to the notion of their membership in a discipline, a profession, or an interest group" (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 190). A similar phenomenon occurs among members of online discussion groups.

The circulation of electronic mail, like its paper predecessor, is a medium of education and community. From this historical context, we will now turn to contemporary examples of adult learning networks and voluntary associations in face-to-face settings that closely resemble the online discussion group experience.

Adult Learning Networks

The activities of Internet online discussion groups populated by adults bear a strong resemblance to those in other informal, adult learning networks (Collins & Berge, 1996b; Digenti, 2000; Fordham, Poulton, & Randle, 1979; Graebner, 1999; Harasim, 1986). In Thompson's study of the Westchester Resource Network in New York State (1984), for example, participants identified

several major educational functions of the resource sharing network, including: exchange of information; the development of problem-solving techniques in concert with others; attitudinal changes among members; the fostering of peer-group support; the development of interpersonal communication skills; and the use of connectional thinking in which adults became adept at making quick connections between diverse resources, bodies of knowledge, or problem solving techniques (as discussed in Brookfield, 1986, p. 151-152).

As Brookfield suggests, "learning networks are important mechanisms through which adults acquire skills and change attitudes, become more insightful concerning their own behaviors, and explore alternative ways of living, thinking and feeling" (1986, p. 152). Candy (1991) notes that even independent and solitary learning activities are generally carried out as a result of "the learner's membership in some group or society . . . its intention and justification is social" (p. 22).

Describing informal learning networks in the contemporary workplace, Digenti (2000) identifies informal learning as a mechanism by which much valuable learning takes place:

> Informal learning is based in conversations, social interactions, and team projects, in which learning is part of the interactions between people. It has been acknowledged as one of the key reasons for forming communities of practice, networks, and other forums that allow people to network and socialize. Informal learning isn't limited to a predefined body of knowledge, but rather emerges from the interaction of people. At the heart of it is the transfer of tacit knowledge—knowledge that's not articulated but is acquired by individuals through experience.

The *discussion* in online discussion groups takes place in the form of shared text messages transmitted via the Internet to a widely dispersed audience. Having set the context for informal adult learning networks, we will now look at the roles of adult educators in face-to-face informal learning environments, in both historical and contemporary contexts to determine their likenesses, if any, to the roles of online discussion group moderators.

Adult Educators in Informal Adult Learning Environments

Having identified the basic similarities between the structures and functions of face-to-face and online informal learning environments, the literature review now moves on to a discussion of the characteristics of adult educators in both environments.

The Discussion Facilitator in Formal Adult Learning

One of the research questions guiding this study focused on the ways in which public online discussion group moderator's roles, tasks, and responsibilities compared and contrast with the skills and activities suggested for discussion facilitators in more traditional adult education settings as presented in the literature. In teacher-led adult learning settings, the role and authority of "teacher" sets the leader apart and creates a separation between the teacher and the students (Brookfield, 1986; Steutel & Spiecker, 2000). In this context,

teachers have mastered and must demonstrate their knowledge and the students are there to learn under the teacher's direction and according to the teacher's chosen method of instruction (Houle, 1972). The extent of teacher control over in-class discussion can extend from guided discussion through teacher-centered "guided didactic conversation" (Holmburg, 1983, p. 117) to an "open, collaborative quest for meaning" (Brookfield, 1986, p. 138). Where learners perceive their teachers as fellow learners–rather than "authority figures there to control or manipulate them . . . a climate of mutual trust and mutual responsibility can develop" (Knowles, 1980, p. 223), and learners can begin to confidently make decisions that affect their own learning.

> Effective facilitators need to know about and react to the nature of voluntary learning, create a climate of mutual respect, operate within a collaborative mode, foster a spirit of critical reflection that helps learners question cultural constructs, and, through praxis, nurture adults toward self-directedness and empowerment (Heimlich & Norland, 1994, p. 26).

In such a trusting relationship between learners and teachers, the risk of exploring new ideas is minimized and students can be encouraged to experiment in ways they might otherwise not try. Learners can engage with different perspectives, different ways of viewing a problem or a phenomenon. This can be best accomplished when teachers considers their task "not to instruct, but rather to understand her student's thought and perhaps raise questions about it" (Daloz, 1986, p. 226).

If an accepting and open climate for discussion and reflection is not fostered then "individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for

representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 26) and their voices are silenced. "The learning group makes it possible for each of those who belong to it to experience 'a turning to, a dynamic facing of the other' members, and this relationship lies at the heart of the group's existence" (Houle, 1972, p. 105). Most moderators of online discussion groups foster an open climate for discussion and reflection, where all voices can be heard, with the caveat that civility and respect be observed (White, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c; 2001d). However, as Brookfield (1989) notes, regarding academic facilitators of adult learning

> facilitators will never meet all the needs of their learners to their full satisfaction. They will never connect directly, simultaneously, and dramatically with all their group members. While it is essential to have some clear purpose and rationale directing their efforts, facilitators should avoid the mistake of crucifying themselves on the cross of perfection. (p. 207)

Leadership of Informal Adult Learning Groups

Leadership of face-to-face adult learning groups can take many forms (see, for example, Houle, 1972). Groups can even function without a designated leader, guided only by the push and pull of the personalities in its membership, with the leadership power shifting among those who can exert more influence. In this case the leadership role is not consciously accepted, nor is it awarded to specific individuals by the group, but the group "leaders" can nonetheless be identified. In some cases where a leader has been appointed, that person may,

or may not, be the “real” leader of the group. Sometimes a group is composed of various competing factions or cliques, each with its own leader. In other cases, leadership may rotate among the group members. A leader may be recruited as the discussion facilitator from outside of the group, or the group may accept an appointed leader as it is formed.

The leader of an informal adult learning group may be trained in the job, may make up the role as they go along, or may try to adopt some pre-determined formal group process. This type of leader is the first among equals; although the role may have aspects of formal educator, the adult learning group generally retains the power of decision about the form and process of group discussions (Houle, 1972).

Hilton's research on adult education in the 1930s determined that the adult educators of that time were unlike today's adult education professionals (Hilton, 1981). They were

> best known for their accomplishments outside adult education, however central the mission of adult education became to their lives. These men were nationally known as novelists, philosophers, historians, and social scientists. Their zeal for adult education and adult learners anticipated and perhaps surpassed our own. (p. 7)

He further notes that

> it is no exaggeration that almost anybody could be an adult educator in the 1930's, and those most successful represented widely disparate training: some were adherents of Bonaro Overstreet's notion that education of the heart is as important as education of the mind; at least two—Hunsaker and Sheats—were law school drop-outs, Knowles had prepared for foreign service (p. 279).

The early Adult Education Handbooks published by the American Association of Adult Education, the Adult Education Association and the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education were compilations of descriptions of the various components of the field, through a listing of institutional program and institutional examples, many of which were informal in nature. However, as adult educators sought to legitimize adult education as a serious field of academic study, these handbooks quickly became a catalogue of scientific studies of adult education practice, research reported with the goal of improving academic practice (Cranton, 1996). Wilson and Hayes (2000, p. 12) write, "The handbooks represent just how systematic and pervasive this drive and its intellectual underpinnings have been . . . the handbooks demonstrate very clearly how scientific knowledge has been used to define the field and thus control the development of professionalization." Attention in the field has moved from the early adult education professionals who were "gifted amateurs out to change the world" to today's "respectable and polite professionals" who "vivisected the nightingale to prove the secret of its note" (Welton, 1995, p. 49).

This continuing drift is still in evidence in the latest *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Wilson & Hayes (2000) note that "previous editions have implicitly or explicitly depended upon the notion of a handbook as a ready source of information about the field and practice of adult education" (p. xv). They also envision their audience as almost exclusively academic and explain their organizational structure as one that "represents an

insightful categorization that orders for newcomers, long-time practitioners, and academics a complex and diverse field of study and practice" (p. xvii). The editors have made a deliberate effort to establish "critical reflective practice" as the philosophical lens through which the profession of adult education should be examined. This emphasis on critical reflective practice directs the attention of the reader to the unstated assumptions that under-gird such practice, the false dichotomy of theory and practice and the importance of drawing attention to those whose voices are, or have been, largely unheard by society in general and the field in particular.

This research study has been designed to fill a gap in knowledge about one group of non-academics who are functioning as adult educators in non-academic settings. This was done by examining a contemporary, informal, adult education setting and the leadership of activities occurring there. The next section of this literature review describes online discussion groups, their history, extent, and leadership. This will set the context in which online discussion group moderators function.

Public Online Discussion Groups

Online discussion groups have much in common with the face-to-face voluntary associations and learning groups described above, as they are characterized in the earlier adult education literature (Harnack & Fest, 1964; Knowles, 1977). Houle, (1972, pp. 101-105) when making the following

observations about learning groups in face-to-face settings outside of formal education, could have been describing public online discussion groups:

> All groups are learning groups in the sense that their members are constantly influenced by interaction with one another.
>
> Most are probably autonomous, arising from some spontaneously discovered sense of interest or need and continuing as long as they find their experience rewarding.
>
> Learning groups are so numerous and so variable in form that they can be neither counted nor catalogued. Some are brought into being by the common desire of several people to study a specific body of content. Others are literary clubs, scientific societies, or other associations designed to provide a generalized opportunity for learning; many clubs of this sort outlive their founders, occasionally by several generations. Others focus on the group process itself as a way to provide increased sensitivity to individual personality and human interaction. Others are designed to be vehicles of advanced study; most professions and scholarly disciplines have self–selected groups of leaders (known collectively as "Invisible Colleges" (Crane, 1972)) who inform one another of outstanding new developments and research contributions (p. 101).

Berge and Collins have described just such scholarly discussion groups (Berge & Collins, 1994, 1995; Collins & Berge, 1996b, 1997b; Collins, Richardson, & Clark, 1997) as one of the earliest uses of public online discussion groups. These groups originated in academic institutions and their users were not students, but rather faculty and administrators engaged in informal professional development as they discussed the content and process of their disciplines. This extension into “cyberspace” (Gibson, 1994) of Crane's "invisible colleges" (1972; Pfaffenberger, 1986) has been discussed by Baptista (1999) and Gresham & Zuccalla (2001). Gilbert (1995) notes that scholarly discussion groups "allow scholars an opportunity not only to share their ideas with a wide

group of peers, but to develop those ideas through the resulting online conversation" (p. 29). Harrison and Stephen (1996) point out that

> academic electronic conferences vary widely in content, structure, and the extent to which substantial academic work is accomplished. Some conferences are free flowing and general forums, in which any topic may be introduced and pursued if there is sufficient interest. Other conferences feature 'focused and directed' scholarly discourse. (p. 16-17)

However, not all online discussion groups are focused around scholarly discourse or learning, although vicarious learning does often occur.

Online Learning

Adults, in and out of school, join public online discussion groups to take advantage of opportunities for "enlightenment", although they may not make such a decision consciously nor describe their reasons for joining by using that particular term. Brilhart (1974) describes enlightenment as "a fuller understanding, a wider grasp of information pertinent to a topic, or consideration of a problem from as many points of view as possible" (p. 117).

There is a growing body of literature that shows that learning occurs for both active (posting) and passive (reading) participators in public online discussion groups (Beckett, 1998; Draper, 1997a, 1997b; Fulford & Zhang, 1993; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Reilly, 1999; Schober & Clark, 1989). Some online discussion group members actively participate by posting, carrying on conversations, arguing and debating, and exchanging information with other

members (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996). The rest of the group members function as "audience", or are, in Internet parlance, *lurkers*–non-posters–learning vicariously as they *listen* to the others who share their thoughts with the group.

Vicarious learning theory is the basis for Lave and Wenger's theory of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as they discuss the way in which much situated learning is a result of observation of others in particular situations. The basis for the three year Vicar (Vicarious Learning) joint project between Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland was an investigation and validation of the theory of vicarious learning in online discussion groups (Hartman, 1999; Lee, Dineen, McKendree, & Mayes, 1999; Lee, McKendree, Dineen, & Cox, 1998; McKendree, Dineen, Mayes, & Lee, 1998a, 1998b; McKendree, Stenning, Mayes, Lee, & Cox, 1998):

> The Vicarious Learner project is investigating the role of dialogue in learning, both in face-to-face teaching interactions and in distance learning. We propose that dialogue is central to a learner's 'enculturation' into the patterns of language characteristic of particular disciplines, as well as encouraging deep reflection about a domain. We propose, further, that such learning can occur not only through direct participation in dialogue, but also by participating in dialogue vicariously, through observing others. (McKendree et al., 1998a)

When the term "learning" is used in this study, it refers to vicarious learning from reading and reflecting on the shared, written experiences and opinions of others. This is the same kind of learning that occurs when one reads a book, or any other kind of material encoded as text to be read.

One example of vicarious learning was shared by a member of an online discussion group that was devoted to a particular breed of cat and frequented by breeders, fanciers and owners:

> Because cats are territorial, introducing new cats into a setting where one or more other cats live can cause big trouble. I often read "horror" stories from other group members, usually followed by suggestions about how the problem could be fixed or avoided altogether. For a long time I was owned by one cat, so didn't pay too much attention. Then, suddenly, as part of a rescue effort, I needed to house two more cats. I remembered what I had read on the list, followed the best of the advice, and managed the transition without any fur–or my skin– flying! (McBride, 2002, personal communication).

The Historical Setting for Online Discussion Groups

Shared electronic mail comments among individuals using the same mainframe computer were the first example of computers being used as communication devices among people. As early as 1964, "despite the wide variety of projects and computer systems, tight bonds were beginning to form among members of the computer community" (Hafner & Lyon, 1998 p. 13). Researchers saw each other at technical conferences and talked by phone, and used a form of electronic mail to exchange comments and maintain their interpersonal relationships:

> When ARPANET, the Internet's precursor, came online in 1969, it did not have a foundational moment like the telephone's, where Alexander Graham Bell's ordered his associate Thomas Watson: "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." That sentence signaled an era of person-to-person communication over distance. In contrast, ARPANET connected a community. In its earliest days, it was a

> community of computer researchers at major U.S. universities working on similar problems. Since then, the Internet's capability of allowing many-to-many communications has fostered communities of various sizes and sorts. (Horrigan, 2001, p. 8)

The development of mailing-list or email-distribution list software for managing lists of email addresses took email communication between individuals to one-to-many or many-to-many levels, allowing single messages to be sent to everyone on the list of addresses. MsgGroup, the very first online discussion group, was announced on June 7, 1975 and funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, familiarly known as ARPA. This discussion list brought together researchers who belonged to different electronic message services and was set up so that the network community could share its knowledge and "develop a sense of what is mandatory, what is nice, and what is not desirable in message services" (Hafner & Lyon, 1998, p. 200).

Mailing lists were successful "because users found that they frequently wanted to send mail not just to specific individuals on the network, but to fixed groups of people, such as everyone involved in a certain implementation or participating in a particular team" (Harasim et al., 1995 p. 5). This useful feature became public with the establishment, in the mid-1970s, of the first public email-based distribution group for those interested in discussing science fiction, SF-Lovers (Hafner & Lyon, 1998).

Email distribution lists are referred to as electronic discussion lists (or just lists) or, as in this study, *online discussion groups*. Membership in these lists or groups is by subscription—persons must join a group and have their email

address added to the distribution file for their group. These distribution files are stored on a listserver—a networked computer running a program that receives and distributes email messages to every email address on a subscription list. These messages may subsequently be stored on a web site so members can read them there.

Online discussion groups are also used in formal educational settings, with much of the research in the use of online discussion groups coming from many disciplines in the academic community . There are several critical differences between the public online discussion groups of this study and course-related discussion lists. Course-related discussion lists are, by definition, limited in duration and the entire membership is likely to change from term to term. Participation in course-related online discussion is often both mandated and graded and an instructor has powerful sanctions–failing grades being one of them–with which to maintain order. The severest sanction that the moderator of an informal list has is to unsubscribe troublesome members and prevent their return, effectively silencing their voices. This does not stop the troublemaker from changing their online identity and rejoining, nor from joining other groups!

Some public online discussion groups have persisted for more than ten years and, while there is always in- and outflow of members, there are often many core members who can count their membership in years, rather than months (Grier & Campbell, 2000; Rojo, 1995). Members enter the group from the periphery and gain status as knowledgeable members through participation,

and freely sharing their expertise in the discourse activity of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sharp, 1997). This extended interaction time allows for the development of group communication norms (Newby, 1993) and a sense of community among the participants (Rheingold, 1993a, 1993b).

Public online discussion groups, in this study are defined as voluntary associations of learners, discussions are focused around a limited range of topics, and they are of indefinite duration. Such online discussion groups have been described as communities of practice (Sharp, 1997) and discourse communities (Newby, 1993; Sharp, 1997). Active participation (posting) is not required, and contributions are not graded.

> Successful online discussion groups take on many of the characteristics of "real" interaction — people discuss, argue, fight, reconcile, amuse, and offend just as much and perhaps more in a virtual community. In mailing lists one sees examples of attempts to control behavior by correction, by suggestion, by appealing to the rules of the group, by attempt to keep posters on topic, and so on. (Sharp, 1997, n.p.)

The *discussion* that occurs in online discussion groups is carried on by members via the exchange of email messages distributed via the listserver to be read by all group subscribers. Messages are distributed via Internet electronic mail or made available on World Wide Web pages. This provides adults with opportunity for discussion with many thousands of other adults—anywhere on the Internet—who have similar interests and who participate by at least reading messages on a regular or intermittent basis.

Online Adult Learning Networks

The term "network" has several connotations and in this study refers to both computer networks and the adult learning networks that "ride" on them. The activities of informal Internet online discussion groups bear a strong resemblance to informal, networked, adult learning environments described above (Collins & Berge, 1996b; Cranton, 1996; Fordham et al., 1979; Graebner, 1999; Harasim, 1986).

Computer networks make online discussion groups possible. The popularity of online discussion has risen as computer networks have spread from a small beginning to span the globe. During the early 1960s computer researchers at MIT discovered how to create a simple "mailbox" so that researchers using the same mainframe computer could leave messages for each other. Mainframe computers were being installed at locations across the United States, but they were isolated from each other, and much work with these expensive resources was, of necessity, duplicated from site to site.

The impetus behind the creation of the first computer network was to make access to a range of valuable computer resources possible for researchers and scientists, with funding coming from the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) of the US Government.

> By virtue of its geographic reach, the ARPA network turned electronic mail from an interesting toy into a useful tool. The tendencies of the ARPANET community ran strongly democratic, with something of an anarchic streak. The ARPANET's earliest users were constantly generating a steady stream of new ideas, tinkering with old ones, pushing, pulling, or prodding their network

> to do this or that, spawning an atmosphere of created chaos. The art of computer programming gave them room for endless riffs, and variations on any theme. One of the main themes became electronic mail. (Hafner & Lyon, 1998, p. 190)

The email messages that constitute the communication among discussion group members are carried on these local, national, and international computer networks. This allows online discussion groups to attract a local, national, and international membership. Membership also crosses social, geographic, professional, hierarchical, and institutional boundaries (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996).

Descriptions of face-to-face adult learning networks can apply equally well to the structure and function of online discussion groups, whose members are interconnected by the computer network that delivers their messages. Brookfield (1986) describes such face-to-face networks as:

> not usually affiliated with a formal educational institution, nor do they offer courses leading to some form of qualification. Rather they are groups of adults united by some common concern, some shared status, or some agreed-upon purpose that exchange information, ideas, skills, and knowledge among members and perform a number of functions having to do with problem solving and creation of new modes of practice or new forms of knowledge (pp. 150-151).

Schön (1987) provides a description of an adult learning network with multiple, inter-connected nodes with no central switching point that accurately reflects the distributed network design that was Baran's choice when building the ARPAnet (Hafner & Lyon, 1998, p. 58):

> A network is a set of elements related to one another through multiple interconnections. The metaphor of the net suggests a special kind of interconnectedness. There is a suggestion of each

> element being connected to each other, and of elements connecting through one another rather than to each other through a center. (Schön (1987) p.190-191)

Sarason adds further to the definition of learning networks "as the total number of interrelationships . . . defined by function, support, common interests, diffusion of innovation or cultural norms that is nonhierarchical, flexible and characterized by lateral communication and information input into diverse points (1977, p. 13).

Online discussion groups resemble informal adult learning networks (Cranton, 1996, p. 152) in several key characteristics:

- Participation is both sought out and is voluntary.
- Membership is grouped around a common interest, topic, or theme.
- All members of the network can chose to join in the conversation, although many may choose to remain *lurkers*, listening/reading but not contributing.
- Members may share their thoughts, ideas, and tacit knowledge of the groups' designated topic area.
- Members may be widely dispersed over distance and time zones.
- Communication revolves around reading and responding to shared documents. In face-to-face settings these documents may be paper-based, in online discussion groups the document is the ubiquitous email message, that appears as text on a computer screen.

One extraordinary result brought about by online discussion groups is a change in the notion of "proximity". Face-to-face groups are generally limited by the participants' ability to assemble in a single space at the same time. Just as

such limitations did not hinder networks based on postal mail correspondence, such limitations do not limit online discussion groups. For example, one public online discussion group focused around the topic of distance education brings into communication proximity over 3000 people resident in 76 different countries (DEOS-L@psu.edu; July 2003).

Discussion group hosting has evolved over the years. The Berge 1992 study was conducted in an environment where text-based email discussion groups predominated, before the advent of web browsers and the World Wide Web. This meant that discussion group hosting was limited to networked listservers linking academic and scientific institutions. Private bulletin board systems like San Francisco's The Well (Rheingold, 1993a) and proprietary systems like Compuserve and America Online used direct dial-up (i.e., access to the system required a direct telephone connection to one of the system servers). What is now known as the Internet was developed with US Government funding to enable the sharing of (then) scarce computing resources, and for the support of open research and educational activities (Hauben & Hauben, 1997). The ARPA “Acceptable Use Policies” strictly forbade the use of this computer network for commercial or advertising purposes.

In the early 1990s the policy towards advertising on the Internet changed as the Internet was privatized, coincidental with the rising popularity of the World Wide Web. Rather than just using a text-based interface for email delivery, it now became possible to make a public online discussion group appear to be a

"place," (i.e., a web page that gave access to the group's postings). This style of group is hosted by commercial entities like groups.yahoo.com, and funded by the advertising appearing on their pages and appended to the messages that are delivered to group members. The other style of online discussion group more properly still called a “mailing list”, is managed by a host computer running listserver software and messages are delivered to list subscribers by email, with the facility to make a web-based archive available where messages can be searched and retrieved.

Size and Extent of Discussion Groups

The LISTSERV® mail server at The Pennsylvania State University is one the busiest in the world, ranking 7th in the number of lists serviced and 18th in the average number of mail messages distributed daily. This listserver hosts almost 4000 public and private discussion lists and averages over 218390 messages delivered daily to over 364300 list subscribers. These statistics are tracked and can be accessed at http://www.lsoft.com/ltop/LTOP-TODAY.HTML.

Public online discussion groups are open to anyone who wishes to subscribe and who agrees to abide by the communication rules of the group. Online discussion groups provide an online forum in which adults can seek, share, and exchange information, argue and debate, articulate their ideas more clearly, try out new ideas, reflect on the inconsistencies in their own logic and in the observations of others, and discover multiple or varying perspectives on

issues of interest to their group (Berge, 1994; Hahn & Stout, 1994). They can engage in discussion that can lead to creation, experimentation, or discovery–a process that may lead to personal growth and change. They may establish a “collective dialogic wisdom” (Berge 1994, p. 103) and develop a sense of imagined or virtual community based on the reading of common texts (Anderson, 1991; Rheingold, 1993a). The interaction among online discussion group participants is reflected in the contents and meanings of the text of electronic mail messages. On a moderated list, email messages detour through the group moderator’s mailbox for review before they are generally distributed.

The online discussion group experience is internally constructed from electronic mail messages received and displayed on a computer screen. Online discussion group members read these email messages and construct dialogs, discussion, arguments and reconciliations, and imagined communities based on reading shared texts (Anderson, 1991; Nolan & Weiss, 1999).

Some persons, a large number of them women (Horrigan, 2001), believe they are being supported in physical, mental or emotional affliction; they develop a sense of "groupness" as they would in face-to-face support groups (Galegher, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1998; Goldsmith & Alexander, 1998; King, 1994, 1995; Korenman & Wyatt, 1996; Meier, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Williams, 1996). Research shows that the social and psychological effects serve to widen access, obliterate social distinctions, reduce or eliminate social barriers, and foster a strong sense of group identity (Pfaffenberger, 1986).

There is a sense of immediacy in the rapid exchange of messages that can build a feeling of belonging to a group and a wider community of peers. Group members have reported a sense of participating in political activity (Sakkas, 1993) or sitting by helpless, reading contributions to the Humanist list, describing–in real time–the SCUD missile attacks on Jerusalem in 1991 (Werman, 1991).

Participants exchange that which can be conveyed in words by text on a screen: thoughts, ideas, information, opinion, argument, feelings, values, and beliefs. Emotions can be conveyed in expressive language and by using emoticons; those ubiquitous little faces created using keyboard characters. The smiley face ☺ is created using a colon, a hyphen and left parenthesis; the “frowny” face ☹ by using a colon, a hyphen and a right parenthesis. This online communication convention has become so ubiquitous that it is now encoded into recent versions of the Microsoft Word processing program: typing : -) (without the spaces) immediately creates ☺. As in many imagined communities, members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6) and they will smile ☺, laugh (:-D) and weep (:’-(with one another in their imagined spaces.

Online Discussion Group Communication Norms

When groups of people are in frequent association with each other they develop patterns of behavior which become the accepted behaviors for the group. Online discussion group moderators encode, abide by and help hold group members accountable to the community guidelines, rules, or norms (White, 2001).

> A norm is a rule, standard, or pattern for action . . . Social norms are rules for conduct. The norms are the standards by reference to which behavior is judged and approved or disapproved. A norm in this sense is not a statistical average of actual behavior by rather a cultural (shared) definition of desirable behavior. (Williams & Gibbs, 1968, p. 204)

The Internet parlance for informal statements of generally accepted communication norms is 'netiquette'—a series of statements that may include indications of the appropriate tone, content, and length of messages. The behavioral norms for off-line discussion groups are generally well understood and usually governed by the setting in which the discussion takes place, so they rarely need to be clearly articulated. Peer pressure exerted through kinesthetic signals (frowns and head shakes for instance) is often sufficient to bring an offender back into line. Such social context cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) are invisible online and the "rules of engagement" must, at some point, be clearly stated.

A formal statement of these norms for an online discussion group can be encoded in list charters and/or formal editorial policies (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996) and can greatly ease the moderation of lists, especially those with controversial

subject matter (Berge & Collins, 2000b). Such policies can be disseminated frequently to the list and may be sent to all new members in response to their subscription request (Robinson, 1996). Editorial policy statements often describe the parameters of the topic of the group discussion, by whom it was set up and for what purpose. Editorial policies also serve to create cues concerning the context in which discussion will occur and as Feenberg (1987) suggests, "these contextual cues establish a shared communication model from which flows norms, roles and expectations" (p. 178). Participants bring to the online environment their understandings of group communication norms from their prior associations (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996). These notions may need to be modified to match the style of communication behaviors that are acceptable in a new group. In the case of breaches of the accepted online communication norms, editorial policies can be posted as a general, non-personalized reminder to the entire community to re-focus the discussion.

Entry into an ongoing online discussion group where group communication norms have had time to arise can be difficult, especially when the norms are not articulated and newcomers are expected to absorb them by osmosis (Kealey, 1994). While flexible and subject to change, norms are usually stringently enforced by members of social groups (Newby, 1993) as a way of defining the group's bondaries. Some norms are fairly constant across online discussion groups, e.g., that messages should be kept short and on-topic and contribute substantively to the group discussion. Almost universal also is the

prohibition against "flaming" (Collins, 1992; Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997)–intense and vociferous personal attacks–sometimes provoked by a misunderstanding of a post's contents or tone. As with most social norms, this prohibition is often not made explicit until they are transgressed. When this happens, even inadvertently, list members may sanction the offender.

Moderators have indicated that having an editorial policy that states group communication norms does, in fact, assist them to define and regulate discussion, by setting out clear guidelines for discussion and sanctions that are known to all participants (Berge & Collins, 2000b). Where lists have more than one moderator, it helps to put list co-moderators on the same page (Berge & Collins, 2000b).

Leadership in Online Discussion Groups

This section of the literature review will look at the importance of online discussion group leadership and moderation; moderator's roles, tasks, and responsibilities; and moderators as adult educators.

McMann (1994) describes the work of several authors who characterize traditional, face-to-face discussion facilitation. He concludes that many of the roles, functions, and tasks involving the management of the content, course process, communication, and decisions are similar in both online computer conferences and face-to-face learning situations. While the management of physical space is not an issue online–as the medium is the space–moderators

must help participants to become comfortable with the software used so that it becomes transparent. The management of conceptual and communication space is as important online as it is in face-to-face settings as group members must feel comfortable and accepted or they are unlikely to venture their opinions.

The role of an online discussion group moderator is sometimes filled by a single person and sometimes by a group of moderators serving on a rotating basis, if the subscription list is large or traffic is heavy (Molinaro, 1998). These persons decide, using various formal and informal criteria, if the messages should be distributed to the group, i.e., whose voices will and will not be heard, what content will, and will not, be seen. This screening or filtering process can maximize the transmission of content-rich messages and minimize electronic junk mail, but can also reflect the moderator's own biases.

The moderators' job requires constancy and dedication:

> The discussion and the management duties are always there for one to think about, to wonder, and worry about. Since e-mail is being sent at any time of the week, day or night, messages are steadily — at times relentlessly — arriving in your mailbox. It is also a voluntary job that must be woven into and around one's occupation and personal life. (Milbury, 1996)

The primary functions of the moderator have changed very little over the past 25 years. Einar Stefferud was the first discussion group moderator, who, in 1975,

> began in the job by keeping the list of MsgGroup participants, signing up newcomers, cajoling them into posting introductory biographies of themselves, and sorting out bounced mail. Stefferud would become the MsgGroup's moderator and the man behind the curtain. Serving as the go-between, he received messages for posting and manually remailed them to everyone on the list. It was

> an arduous process that became automated later on. (Sharp, 1997 p. 201)

Bittner (1997) describes the function in this way:

> Every group needs a strong leader — one who is sensitive to the varying needs and interests of members, is able to provoke discussion and debate, to give encouragement where necessary, to keep the group on track. The leader, or moderator, should be an expert on the topic under discussion and should set a schedule of subjects that meets the group's needs. (p. 6)

The Importance of Moderation in Public Online Discussion Groups

Unmoderated online discussion groups are set up so that any and all messages sent to the list are immediately distributed, unscreened, to all members. Administrative requests, advertising, attachments containing computer viruses, and other messages unrelated to the discussion topic can flow, like electronic junk mail, directly into the list subscribers' email boxes. In a moderated online discussion group the electronic messages that represent the "discussion" are reviewed before they are distributed by the list moderator. Bitner and de Ville de Goyet (1997) stress the importance of this type of moderation:

> Just as successful meetings focus on specific topics and discussions are guided by background documents and knowledgeable moderators, online discussion groups must be run in the same way (p. 6).

Birdie McClennan, the founder of SERALST, a library-serials'-related discussion group, pondered over the decision to moderate a formerly unmoderated group:

> As I found myself giving increasingly more amounts of time to list management and administrative issues, I began to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of an unmoderated as opposed to moderated discussion list. The unmoderated forum offered communication and interaction that was spontaneous and, aside from the quirks and idiosyncrasies of occasional network delays, fairly immediate.
>
> On the other hand, it seemed that moderating the list could reduce some volume of mail (and the error returns it generated) while simultaneously making it easier to handle list administrative queries and misdirected replies, which could be intercepted and dealt with, rather than distributed to subscribers.
>
> By ensuring that posted messages were within scope, discussion would be more focused, thus raising the quality and usability of the list and the archives that were automatically generated with each posted message.
>
> Moderating was beginning to look more and more appealing as a way to make optimal efficiency of computer resources that were, indeed, beginning to show signs of stress (MacLennan, 1995, n.p.).

Andrew Feenberg, writing in 1987, made the following observations about the importance of the moderation of online discussion groups, which he refers to as "conferences":

> More often than not, when conferences fail, it is because the person in charge is unable to overcome the initial difficulty of transposing leadership skills acquired in face-to-face settings to the online setting. . . . since so few people have participated in computer conferences, it is often difficult to find an experienced leader who knows the online equivalents of the codes operative in face-to-face groups. Furthermore, the codes of online activity are still very much in formation and to some extent every moderator contributes to inventing them (p. 177).

The techniques for moderating an online conference are significantly different from those appropriate for face-to-face meetings (Brochet, 1989; Kerr, 1986, p. 12):

> A discussion group moderator's life is generally consumed with tasks which are not normally noticed or observable by the members. Although the participant might think of the discussion group mainly in terms of the message content or the quality and the number of messages that arrive in their mailbox, the moderator of the group is involved in a wide variety of roles and tasks that assure the smooth operation and success of the discussion. (Milbury, 1996, p. 5)

As Milbury suggests, most of what a moderator does is invisible to the group members and they only become aware of the moderator's presence when problems or issues arrive.

Moderation versus Censorship

It is important to note at this point that online discussion group moderation does not equate to censorship of content, nor is it intended to stifle discussion. Because there is rarely appeal against a moderator's actions, it may appear that moderation is a type of dictatorship. It is, but it is generally a "benevolent dictatorship" (Molinaro, 1998), designed to facilitate the distribution of civil, content-rich messages and to minimize off-topic and/or uncivil posts. As one moderator stated,

> For those of you not familiar with moderated discussion groups, I should point out that moderation does ***not*** entail rejecting messages I am not personally interested in, nor does it mean rejecting submissions that put forth a point of view with which I disagree. Rather, moderation means that I will be reading the messages that come through for content and some general style considerations (see below). If a message is abusive or off-topic, then I may work with the submitter to fix the problems, forward it if it is a reply to a specific message already distributed to the list, or excise those portions of the message that are unacceptable, if

> doing so will cause the message to conform to the list charter. If there are style issues (method of quotation, size of .signature, etc.) then I will either fix these and/or work with the submitter to clear up any issues related to style. Trivial "me too", "I don't know", or one-liner posts ***WILL NOT*** be distributed in most cases. I emphatically ***DO NOT*** see my job as one of list censor, but rather as a facilitator and mediator at the service of the group. Moderated Classical Music List (Lampson, 1998).

There are, of course, two views on this point, as illustrated by the following quotation from the list-moderators@yahoogroups.com discussion group:

At 08:19 AM 5/23/02 +0000,list-moderators@yahoogroups.com wrote:
>I now stick to my own group due to these people who want to control
>other peoples views.
>My view of chat groups now is they are simply dictatorships and so
>the censored messages are simply propoganda (sic).

Well, they are dictatorships in a sense. Free speech doesn't apply in lists as it's considered private space and is up to the list owner what is allowed and what is not allowed (Katherine, 2002).

Moderators: Owners, Monitors and Reviewers

In an online discussion group there is always a person or persons variously identified as list owner, list monitor or list moderator (Berge & Collins, 2000b), depending on their chosen functions, roles, and level of involvement. Regarding the person holding this role, White says

> The online host or facilitator can be the convener, online community owner, or someone designated by the community owner. The role may evolve within a group. Small communities may have just one, while large online spaces with many spaces and topics may use teams. In the past, many hosts have been unpaid volunteers in the social communities, where facilitators in online work groups often

> draw from the team. Facilitators may be a team leader or outside contractor. (2001, n.p.)

Typically, the face-to-face and online discussion moderator guides and monitors the discussion, stimulates participation and often offers intellectual leadership. Thus, the role of the moderator of online discussion combines aspects of a teacher, discussion facilitator, and community organizer (Green, 1998b; Harasim et al., 1995). Still, experience suggests that the type of online discussion list, or the purpose of a particular discussion group, would determine to a significant degree the moderating style necessary for success. As Green (1998a) states, "There are important differences between moderating in an online classroom and moderating an online meeting, not the least of which is the difference in motivation of the participants" (p.1). In course-related discussion groups the role of the teacher as dispenser of grades is rarely forgotten by the learners.

The way that online discussion moderators approach their tasks depends on the nature of the group, so there are several levels of involvement that can be clustered into three broad groups: "List Owner/administrator", "Monitor", and "Reviewer" (Berge & Collins, 2000b).

Owner/Administrator: These terms are used in this study inter-changeably in two ways: as technical terms to refer to the individual who is responsible for the administrative and technical maintenance of the list or as an indication of the level of involvement in the day-to-day affairs of the group. The list owner may be the person who had the original idea for the list, saw to its creation and accepted

responsibility for maintaining it (Molinaro, 1998; Robinson, 1996). As a referent to indicate a level of involvement in list discussions, "list owners" generally take a "hands off" approach and are content to let discussion run its course and do not participate in the day-to-day activities of the group.

The administrative functions of a list owner may include taking care of bounced mail messages, setting subscribers to "no mail" or restarting their mail delivery, changing addresses, adding and removing subscribers, etc. The list owner may be responsible to the host organization for the conduct of the list and the use of bandwidth resources. The list owner may also be a systems administrator who, as part of the regular employment, ensures that the listserver hardware and software are functioning correctly and that a connection to the Internet is maintained.

Monitor: Monitors may also perform the technical and administrative duties of a list owner. They also participate, as a peer, in the day-to-day discussion, perhaps by interjecting comments that may serve to stimulate, regulate and/or redirect the course of the list discussion, and to remind participants of agreed-upon communication conventions. Monitors may admonish offenders publicly or privately, but do so after the fact.

Reviewer: The reviewer may also perform the technical and list maintenance functions of an owner and also function as a 'monitor,' i.e., they take an active, peer role in the group's discussions. The distinguishing characteristic of reviewers, for the purposes of this study, is that they receive and approve some

or all messages, before distribution to the group. This review can have several levels, depending on the individual reviewer's preferences (Robinson, 1996). Some groups are set to immediately distribute posts that come from subscribers, but those that come from non-members are sent to the moderator for review. Sometimes new members may be set to "review" for a period of time so their initial postings are screened to ensure compliance with group norms. Sometimes when group members transgress the group's communication norms, they are set to “review” for a period of "cooling-off" time.

On fully reviewed groups all posts go to the list reviewers(s) prior to posting. The reviewer then uses a formal or informal set of criteria to determine the post's suitability for distribution. These criteria may be formally stated in a list charter or guidelines, often giving a number of alternatives, and how the criteria are applied is often a function of personal style and time constraints. Messages may be sent to the group as they were received, they may be edited for content or length, or may be discarded–with or without notification to the original poster–or they may be returned to the original sender for revision. A discussion group reviewer may also choose not to post individual messages but to collect and compile posts into a digest or newsletter format (Gilbert, 1995).

As Crabb (1996) notes, "The Internet is the fastest growing uncensored and unstructured information network of all time. But the ability to disseminate any information to a mass audience quickly on the Internet has far outstripped our methods to provide quality information" (p. 25). It is one of a reviewer's

primary responsibilities to filter or screen messages in order to keep high the information value of messages distributed to the group and keep low the nuisance of off-topic messages and advertising. All respondents to this study self-identified as "moderators" of online discussion groups, this being the Internet generic term that encompasses the roles of owner, monitor and reviewer explained above.

Moderators as Adult Educators

Online discussion group moderators have a significant impact on the communications exchanged and the learning that occurs in online discussion groups. The point of most stark contrast in practice between online discussion group moderators and face-to-face discussion leaders is that, because of privileges incorporated into the software that manages online discussion groups, online moderators can silence, totally, any voice they choose. Most moderators choose not to exercise that privilege, except in extreme circumstances of continual abuse.

Moderators meet Knowles' definition of "adult educator" in that their activities involve "helping other adults to become more competent" (1980, p. 26). Longworth and Norman (1996) include in their list of informal adult educators

> the vast number of people who would not describe themselves as teachers but who nevertheless pass on information, knowledge, understanding and, sometimes, wisdom . . . parents, friends, neighbors, doctors, lawyers, councilors, scout and guide leaders, political and

> religious leaders, journalists, television presenters, comedians and actors. (p. 141)

Online discussion group moderators may not be "conscious that they are performing the increasingly precisely defined role of adult educator" (Knowles, 1980, p. 26), but they fit within Knowles' broad definition of adult educator as someone having some responsibility for an adult learning situation or event. In online discussion groups moderators may choose to make their presence as obvious as an adult educator who can be seen chairing, leading, moderating, or facilitating a place-based discussion group or they may choose to remain invisible to the discussion group members. Even when their presence in an online discussion group is acknowledged, their contributions may be unknown or ignored by group members. Heuer (1997) reports that respondents to her dissertation study of a moderated discussion group remarked on the supportive, helpful, and collegial atmosphere and high information content of the discussion group she studied. Although she did interview the moderators, she did not acknowledge to the moderators' contributions to the group's positive ambiance.

Online discussion group moderators, while they may never have read the following description of an adult educator, would recognize this as a description of their roles and tasks:

> Effective facilitators of adult learning, at their best, need to know about and react to the nature of voluntary learning, create a climate of mutual respect, operate within a collaborative mode, foster a spirit of critical reflection that helps learners question cultural constructs, and, through praxis, nurture adults toward self-directedness and empowerment. (Brookfield, 1986, pp. 9-11)

Prior Research Studies

Described below are the Berge and Collins surveys of public electronic group moderators conducted in 1992 and 1997 (Collins & Berge, 1997a, 1998) (Berge & Collins, 2000b). Their interest in this topic stemmed from their own practice as long-term moderators of online discussion groups, coupled with their involvement in teaching and learning online. Their studies were used as a starting point for this research, and many of the categories used in the present study have been derived from their work.

The 1992 Study

Berge and Collins' first study (1992) was instigated by an accusation of censorship, rather than moderation, by a group member in a group they moderated. This informal study was designed to determine what other moderators considered the appropriate roles of an online discussion group moderator should be. The term "list" was used in this study as the postings to all discussion groups represented were distributed as email from a listserver. Berge & Collins conducted a brief survey comprising of nine questions (eight open-ended and one closed-ended) that was posted to two online discussion groups used by online discussion group owners and moderators (LSTOWN-L and ARACHNET) and to a similar list for USENET newsgroup moderators. These were online discussion lists where the technical issues surrounding the

administration of discussion lists were aired. The following questions were asked in this survey:

1) What should the role(s) of a discussion group moderator be?

2) Why should (or should not) discussion groups be moderated?

3) Have you developed a formal, written editorial policy for list(s) you may moderate? If so, what does it say?

4) If not, what informal criteria do you use to determine the appropriateness of posts to your list?

5) How many and what kinds of discussion groups do you moderate?

6) How long have you been moderating discussion groups?

7) How did you get started moderating a discussion group?

8) How does moderating a discussion group fit in with the rest of your life? e.g., Is this part of your work, your recreation etc?

9) Status (check or list all that apply): __student __ staff __ faculty __ administration__ academia __ business __ industry __ government __ military

When data analysis began it quickly became obvious that "moderate" and "moderator" in this first survey was not clearly defined. Collins and Berge reported in 1997 that they had made the implicit assumption in their questions in their 1992 survey that “moderators” received and reviewed all messages prior to sending them on to the list, and that “moderators” had either formal or informal guidelines governing that review (Collins and Berge, 1997a). This proved not to be so. One of the important findings from the 1992 research came from analysis of the unusable survey responses. These came from many persons who self-

identified as “list moderators” but who apparently did not review messages posted to the lists for which they were responsible. A qualitative approach was taken in this early study as there was little or no literature on public online discussion group moderators on which to base categorical questions. Responses to all questions were analyzed using the method of constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to determine comprehensive, but mutually exclusive categories. The moderator roles derived from the 1992 study are listed below with examples of their indicators:

Role	**Indicator**
Facilitator	keeps list "on track"; group leader
Manager	administrator, archiving, deleting/adding subscribers
Filter	deciding upon on-topic posts; increasing signal/noise ratio; deletes libelous posts; may delete jokes
Expert	answering Frequently Asked Questions; expert in the list's field, for example a manufacturer's representative
Editor	text editor, digest posts, format posts
Promoter	asks questions of the list subscribers to promote discussion
Marketer	promotes/explains list to potential subscribers
Helper	helps people with needs — more general than expert
Fireman	takes "flames" or ad hominem attacks offline

The range of time that respondents had been moderating was less than six months to more than five years with most having less than three years of

experience. Gender was not sought but from the respondents' names it appeared that less than two percent of the respondents were female. Almost half of the respondents had formal editorial policy statements; the rest claimed informal criteria against which the suitability of posts was judged. Editorial policies often greatly ease the moderation of lists, especially those with controversial subject matter (Berge & Collins, 1997a; 1997b).

Moderating discussion lists, especially those with controversial content can be harrowing and time-consuming–so why do it? Moderators appeared to value their own time and place a high value on keeping the information content value high, eliminating electronic junk mail (spam) and keeping the discourse civil. Many respondents felt that online discussion groups should not be moderated. There was a strong cyber-cultural sense that an online discussion group belongs to the participants in the discussion and their right to freedom of speech should be vigorously maintained. Monitoring discussion and reviewing posts also took time, could tie a moderator to their list as if it were an inescapable daily chore, and could delay postings to the list.

Many moderators stated that they learned by observation and from their experience as discussion list participants, watching others moderate lists and then "stepping into their shoes". Sometimes moderators volunteered for the task when, after having been a list member for some time, and they felt the need to increase the content value; sometimes they were asked to step in when an existing moderator stepped down. Still others started their own lists, wanting the

content matter to be very specific, the discussion to be conducted in a particular fashion, or to take a direct hand in shaping the list. The latter group was usually dissatisfied with the conduct of discussion on existing online discussion groups, or had not been able to find a list that matched their specific interests. For many moderators their work was a "labor of love" and they devoted many hours to reading and responding to posts, but for one third of the respondents this was part of their job as systems administrators.

Moderating for some was a way of “keeping a finger on the pulse” of their discipline or profession. Online discussion groups were used by others as if the list members were consultants or subject matter experts available any hour, day or night to respond to queries with facts, techniques, or experiences. Other respondents likened their time spent moderating to "hanging around the water cooler" or "in the lunch room" at work where they were able to connect with others with similar interests while physically remaining in situations where they may be without a contiguous peer.

The 1997 Study

Berge and Collins conducted a second survey of online discussion group moderators in 1997 (Berge & Collins, 2000a). The report of that study is included, with permission of the publisher, as Appendix D. The 1997 study invited the participation of a randomly drawn sample of 1500 moderators from a list of 15,000 online discussion groups. The questionnaire was distributed in individual

emails. The survey, which was rather lengthy to complete, received 162 usable responses, about a one percent return rate.

The issues explored again revolved around discussion group moderators' conceptions of their roles, their rationale for moderating or not moderating their groups, where they learned their craft, and where moderating groups fit into the context of their lives. The descriptions of the tasks and roles of practicing moderators resulting from the survey, Berge and Collins believed, could be used to develop better training for those persons wishing to function effectively as on-line discussion facilitators and moderators in formal education settings.

Berge and Collins' 1997 survey included new questions concerning moderators' attitudes towards their group members and their beliefs about the sense of community among them. Early in the data analysis a major design flaw was revealed. Most of the questions were written with the assumption that each respondent was responsible for only one discussion group. This, in many cases, proved to be incorrect and caused the respondents some confusion–as indicated by their comments on the returned surveys–about which list they should consider when responding.

The length of time that the respondents had been moderating lists had risen since the 1992 survey with 52 percent reporting more than three years of experience, a not-unexpected finding. More than 50 percent of the discussion groups had been in existence for more than three years. One third of the groups represented in this study had a membership of more than 500 persons. This fact

is important because discussion groups need a critical mass of members who post in order to sustain activity, as the majority of any public online group are *listeners* or *lurkers* given that posting is voluntary.

A valuable tool to set the context and ground rules for discussion is the discussion group charter or editorial policy, and this strategy was used by half of the respondents. They cited the need to keep advertising off their lists and to define what was and what was not appropriate communication behaviors. For those who had an editorial policy, it served to define and regulate discussion, set out clear guidelines and set sanctions that were known to all participants. New discussion group members received a copy of this document with their welcome message in 60 percent of the cases, and in many cases it was re-posted to the group at regular intervals, or made available on a web page or in the group's message archives.

Findings from the 1997 study confirmed Berge and Collins' previous research that moderator roles included filter, firefighter, facilitator, editor, manager, discussion leader, content expert, helper, and marketer with manager, facilitator and fire-fighter being the most common. The moderators responding to this survey cited several reasons a mailing list should be moderated: keeping the message value high; keeping the discussion focused within the topic of the list's mission; keeping down "flames" (i.e. keeping the discussion civil) and digesting/editing posts into newsletters or e-zines.

There were three broad levels of involvement in the every day business of discussion groups, representing different amounts of moderator energy expended. Systems administrators considered the lists in their charge as *unmoderated,* saying that their responsibility ended when they ensured that the messages were delivered and any bounced addresses deleted from the subscription list. A monitored group had posted messages immediately delivered to all members, but there was someone who kept an eye on traffic to make sure that people are not subscribing and then flooding the discussion group with advertisements, or other kinds of offensive messages. Monitors were often peer members of the group, but could remove troublesome subscribers, or review their messages before they were posted to the group. Reviewers examined all messages prior to their being posted to the group. Reviewing is time-consuming and requires at least daily attention, assuming the dimensions of a chore, rather than a labor of love.

Of the 162 respondents 21.0 percent reported their lists as being reviewed, 45.0 percent monitored and 31.3 percent as un-reviewed. These relative proportions were subsequently born out when 14.6 percent of the respondents agreed that posts to discussion groups should be reviewed, 66.9 percent that it depended on a number of factors, and 17.8 percent said that it should not. It appeared that, for many moderators, what they were doing coincided with their beliefs about who "owned" the discussion in the group, but many moderators were still in ambiguous areas in between.

Another belief that influenced some moderators' actions was the extent to which they believed that their discussion group was a community. The literature reflects lack of agreement in this area, with some authors promoting the notion of online discussion groups constituting a virtual community for its members (Rheingold, 1993a, 1993b; Wick, 1997) and others who are skeptical (Killain, 1994). Group members reported deriving a sense of community from their reading and participation (Collins & Berge, 1996b, 1997b). It is often the influence of the moderator that sets the tone for list transactions. Over 70 percent of the respondents reported they believed their group was a community and 70 percent that they believed their members felt they were community members. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents reported that they took deliberate actions that they felt contributed to a sense of community among group members.

Being a moderator had generally been a volunteer activity, although there were indications in 1997 that this situation was slowly changing. There was very little formal training available for those who wished to moderate online discussion. Most reported learning to moderate by observation, or just "jumping in" after watching others, rather like apprentices. Some volunteered to be a group moderator, others were invited to be, or started their own groups. Others reported being involved in online discussion group moderation because the discussion group was work related, or was part of their leisure activity, or was part of both.

On the basis of the 1997study, Berge and Collins (2000b, p. 97) suggested the following areas for further focused research:

1) A closer examination of online discussion group moderator's perceptions of their tasks, roles, and responsibilities
2) The role played by the moderator in the creation of a group's communication guidelines and to what extent they reflect the moderator's personal beliefs
3) The personal skills and attributes that online discussion group moderators believe most necessary
4) Where and how moderators learned their craft
5) The rewards and difficulties that moderators experience
6) What, if anything, they do to foster to community in their groups
7) Moderators' suggestions for appropriate training activities
8) What part, if any, group moderation plays in their work life and if they are earning any or all income from group moderation

The questionnaire for the present study included questions that addressed each of the above areas, and the results are reported in Chapter 4.

Summary

This literature review situated online discussion groups as contemporary examples within the historical tradition of voluntary, informal, learning groups used by adults for topical discussion, fellowship, and learning. Because much of

the discussion among online discussion group members takes the form of email exchanges, they were also likened to historical correspondence networks. Next, the adult educator in informal adult learning environments was described, with note being taken that attention in the field of adult education has turned away from the study of informal adult educators to adult educators in formal academic settings. The roles of the discussion facilitator in informal adult education were set forth, followed by a discussion of leadership in informal adult learning groups.

The moderators who were the subject of this study work in the context of public online discussion groups. To establish the context for their work, the history of these groups was described, as was the extent of their use and the norms for acceptable behavior among group members. Much of what an online discussion group moderator does is governed by these norms, often set forth in the group's editorial policy or "terms of use", which may be encoded by that moderator (see Appendix C).

The literature review next looked at the importance of electronic discussion group leadership and moderation, and discussed the distinctions among group administration, monitoring and reviewing. Online discussion groups were 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 fulfils 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 literature review provides the foundations for understanding the complex, dynamic, and multi-textural environment in which online discussion group moderators function.

Commencement

This study was built on the foundation of two previous studies of online public electronic group moderators, one conducted in 1992 and a subsequent one in 1997 (Berge, 1992; Berge & Collins, 2000b; Collins & Berge, 1997a, 1998). Now, five years later, the Internet is continuing its rapid expansion, and the number of persons using it is increasing exponentially. The World Wide Web has assumed priority as an access portal and one search engine, Google (http://www.google.com), was, at 5:00 pm on March 15, 2003, searching 3,083,324,652 web pages–and that is only the "shallow web," i.e., pages that are publicly accessible. Despite the Web's ubiquity, most online discussion group members still elect to receive their group mail the *old-fashioned* way by direct mail into their own email boxes. Online discussion groups now number in the hundreds of thousands and each one has at least an owner, often a monitor, and sometimes a reviewer, most of whom would identify themselves as "moderators".

It is at this point that the current study begins. Geertz (1973), in his seminal article "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" makes the following remarks that situate this study in relation to what has gone before:

> Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things. Every serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning and ends where it manages to get before exhausting its intellectual impulse.
>
> Previously discovered facts are mobilized, previously concepts used, previously formulated hypotheses tried out; but the movement is not from the already proven theorems to newly proven ones, it is from an awkward fumbling for the most elementary understanding to a supported claim that one has achieved that and surpassed. A study is an advance if it is more incisive — whatever that may mean — than those that preceded it; but it less stands on their shoulders than, challenged and challenging, runs by their side. (p. 55)

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CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

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 are anecdotal reports from individual moderators (MacLennan, 1995), little is 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). 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 on face-to-face, informal, adult education settings. To extend the Berge and Collins time-series of studies beyond formal academic settings and to examine moderators in the light of their functions as adult education practitioners, three research questions guided this descriptive study:

1) What are online discussion group moderators' perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities?
2) In what ways do moderators' roles, tasks, and responsibilities compare and contrast with the skills and activities suggested for discussion facilitators/moderators in adult education settings, as presented in the literature?
3) What, if any, are moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators?

Data for this study were gathered using a combination of methods following the precedent of several recent ethnographic studies of cyberspace (Baym, 1995; Hammon, 1999; Hammon, 1997; Heuer, 1997). Baym (1995) suggests that

> the emergence of pattern in a computer-mediated group is a complex and dynamic process. Rather than focusing on building predictive models of computer mediated communication, more naturalistic, ethnographic, and micro-analytic research should be done to refine our understanding of both influences and outcomes. (p. 161)

Interests and Qualifications of the Researcher

Strauss and Corbin (1994) suggest that

> researchers carry into their research the sensitizing possibilities of their training, reading, and research experience, as well as explicit theories that might be useful if played against systematically gathered data, in conjunction with theories emerging from analysis of these data. (p. 277)

I am an experienced public online discussion group moderator, having been an online discussion group member since the late 1980s and a moderator for the past 10 years. My own stories were especially useful in the research and development of the core categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 67) of moderator roles and functions. Trained as a sociologist at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, (BA 1987, MA 1992) with an emphasis in social research methods and analytical techniques, my training and experience directed the choice of data collection and analytical techniques.

Design of the Study

There have been many anecdotal reports from individual online discussion group moderators reporting on their own experiences with single discussion lists, and some dissertations with the same narrow focus (Berge & Collins, 1993; Bittner & de Ville de Goyet, 1997; Krempels, 2002; Lampson, 1998; MacLennan, 1995; Milbury, 1996; Molinaro, 1998; Tilaro, 1992; Wick, 1997). Only two prior studies, those conducted by Berge and Collins in 1992 and 1997, have investigated online discussion group moderators as a group rather than as individuals. The initial impetus was to make some generalizations about the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of moderators of scholarly discussion groups (Berge, 1992), i.e., those peopled by scholars and academics, where discussion revolved around discipline discussion topics. From the beginning, the Berge & Collins research method followed a qualitative-quantitative cycle where data

collected using open-ended questions was analyzed, and the categories derived were subsequently used in categorical, quantitative questions in their further research.

The first of the two questionnaires used in this study contained quantitative questions, derived, in part, from the Berge and Collins 1997 study that used categories derived from their 1992 research. New, open-ended questions were used in this study to probe the perceptions of online discussion group moderators as they described and reflected upon their experiences in areas not addressed in prior research. The second questionnaire, to probe more specifically moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult education practitioners, contained only open-ended questions.

Quantitative Research Methods

Quantitative research methods permit the collection and summary of large quantities of data in order to make general statements about specific populations, or to extrapolate from samples to whole populations. Research studies conducted by Berge and Collins in 1992 and 1997, following Darkenwald (1980), were more concerned with developing generalizable descriptions of the moderator's roles than with developing detailed descriptions and interpretations of individual moderators' beliefs and experiences. Their aim was to develop generalized principles that could guide the training of those preparing to moderate and facilitate online discussion in academic settings. Idiosyncratic

experiences may provide examples, stories, and color, but are rarely translatable into specific guidelines for generalizable practice.

Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research puts "an emphasis upon description rather than explanation . . . the representation of reality through the eyes of participants, the importance of viewing the meaning of experience and behavior in context and in its full complexity" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1993, p. 16). In a sense a jigsaw puzzle is being constructed as the pieces are discovered, but the picture does not emerge until it is finished (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Sociologist John Lofland (1971) has suggested that there are four distinct requirements for those who wish to collect qualitative data:

- They must get close enough to the people and situation being studied to personally understand in depth the details of what goes on.
- They must aim at capturing what actually takes place and what people actually say: the perceived facts.
- The collected data must contain a great deal of pure description of people, activities, interactions, and settings.
- The data must include direct quotations from people, both what they say and what they write down.

Lofland (1971) notes that

> a major methodological consequence of these commitments is that the qualitative study of people *in situ* is a *process of discovery*. It is of necessity a process of learning what is happening. Since a major part of what is happening is provided by people in their own terms, one must find out about those terms rather than impose upon them a preconceived or outsider's scheme of what they are about. It is the observer's task to find out what is fundamental or central to the people or world under observation. (p. 4)

The researcher for the current study was an experienced online discussion group moderator and known as a peer to the members of the discussion groups observed in this study. The participant observation was carried out on existing online discussion groups where moderators spoke freely of their concerns, asked questions and provided answers, help and information for each other. The proceedings of the moderators' discussion groups are discourse-in-text, written by the "speakers" themselves, and accessible from public archives, one of which contained records as far back as 1986. This removes the researcher from the role of "inscriber of social discourse" and yet allows the collection of extensive amounts of recorded discourse so it can be "reconsulted" (Geertz, 1988, p. 50).

The open-ended questions in both questionnaires used in this study sought the perceptions and meanings of moderators of public online discussion groups as interpreted by the writers themselves. This part of the research design was framed by the methodology for the discovery of grounded theory based on Glaser and Strauss (1967) and extended by Strauss and Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 105-115) was used to build explanatory categories,

with the indicators expressed in the moderators' own voices. Because this portion of the study is descriptive, no attempt has been made to move from "a collection of ethnographic miniatures–an assortment of remarks and anecdotes–to wall-sized culturescapes" (p. 54); rather, the picture was kept deliberately "microscopic": "What generality it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinction, not the sweep of its abstractions" (Geertz, 1988, p. 55).

The intention of the second questionnaire did not lend itself to experimental hypothesis-testing but to the collection and analysis of "thick, rich description", a notion most often associated with Geertz (1988, p. 39) in qualitative adult education research. Geertz, an ethnographer interested in the building of cultural theory, borrowed the term from Ryle's discussion of "rich description" (Ryle, 1971). The current study focused on describing, in their own words, the individual perceptions of moderators of online discussion groups of their functions, roles, and responsibilities. This is a process that tends to create the "sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which an ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way" (Geertz, 1988, p. 40), To strengthen this study a multi-method design was developed, collecting data from different sources using both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Data Triangulation

The purpose of data triangulation is to illuminate and crosscheck different aspects of a study (Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this study triangulation was achieved by using multiple data sources. Sources of data included

- Prior research data gathered over time (1992-1997) and with different groups of moderators.
- A previously developed and tested online questionnaire (Berge & Collins, 2000) adapted for use in this study (Appendix A). This questionnaire included both open- and closed-ended questions.
- A short, follow-up emailed questionnaire (Appendix B) probing the moderators' self-identification as adult education practitioners and their awareness of the profession of adult education.
- Narrative data previously collected (Berge & Collins, 2000), used as a basis for refinement in some of the categorical questions.
- Participant observation over six months on seven online discussion groups for moderators. This allowed access to the conversations of several hundred moderators on an ongoing basis and provided a window on the transmission of moderators' "culture", i.e., their particular rhetoric and semantics and their vocabulary of interests and concerns.

- Examination of online discussion group guidelines to determine the *super-set* of areas addressed (See Appendix C) as background for the analysis of responses to related questions in this study.
- Published accounts written by individual online discussion group moderators describing and reflecting on their experiences was used to refine the open-ended questions.
- The adult education literature describing the roles, tasks and responsibilities of face-to-face discussion facilitators, was consulted to determine areas of similarity to those of online discussion facilitators.

Population and Sample

The persons invited to participate in this study were online discussion group administrators, monitors, and moderators who self-identified as online discussion group moderators and who were members of seven discussion groups devoted to their special interests. The online discussion groups hosted at http://www.groups.yahoo.com were: *emoderators, egroups-discuss-manager*, *emaillist-managers*, *list-moderators, moderators-n-listowners* and *onlinefacilitation*. One other discussion group observed was LSTOWN-L@peach.ease.lsoft.com. This group has been in existence since 1986 and deals with the administration of groups using the LISTSERV software, developed in 1986 (Thomas, 1996).

These groups were deliberately chosen to provide a range of background and cultural information. The discussion groups were designed for persons working in different venues, with some more specifically for those facilitating online discussion associated with academic enterprises and others for those facilitating discussion in business and industry. Most groups had a mixed membership with significant crossover (i.e., a person may belong simultaneously to several different discussion groups).

These public online discussion groups were used as an ethnographer would use field sites: to enter a group unobtrusively to observe, in this case, their culture and communicative practices (Baym, 1995), and the topics of their interactions and concerns. The postings to each list were read and the archives consulted for a period of six months, a time span long enough for a representative selection of topics to be raised and discussed. This practice was analogous to entering a public meeting of a group of which one is a member and listening to the ongoing conversation to determine the topics of interest and concern. The main difference between face-to-face observations and observing a public online discussion group is that it is possible for the online observer to be totally invisible and in no way to influence the proceedings of the group.

The Sample

This study was designed to examine and report on the perceptions of online discussion group moderators. This is a largely hidden population as group

conversation occurs in "cyberspace" (Gibson, 1994), the conceptual space that exists between computers. To find respondents for this study it was necessary to go to where they congregated, i.e., to seven online discussion groups intended especially for moderators. One list was hosted by The Pennsylvania University listserver, one list was hosted by http://topica.com and the other five were hosted by http://groups.yahoo.com.

The sample for this study was generated using both purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 1990, pp. 169-183). When conducting experimental studies or generalizing from a small sample to a larger population, it is critical that the sample be truly representative of that population. There are complicated mathematical processes to ensure this level of representation, however, that level of generalizability was not sought in this study and other sampling methods, more suited to the aims of this study, were used.

Purposive Sampling

In most public online discussion groups there is always a small group of persons who are active in the conversation, with the largest proportion of the membership serving as an “audience”. A deliberate effort was made to seek "information-rich cases" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) by soliciting the cooperation of persons who had posted either a question, a comment, or a response to one of the public discussion groups for moderators over the six-month period that the groups were being monitoring, using the criterion of "activity" for selection.

The purposive sample was generated in the following way:

- All members of the above lists who had posted to the discussion group between October 1, 2001 and March 31, 2002 were emailed an individual invitation to participate. This was done to ensure a minimum level of activity and a current email address.
- An invitation to participate was emailed to each of the online discussion groups for general posting to the membership.
- A list of discussion groups hosted by the listservers located at The Pennsylvania State University and St. John's University was generated from the http://www.lsoft.com catalog of lists running on LISTSERV software. The Pennsylvania State University listserver was chosen as it is one of the ten busiest listservers. The listserver at St. John's University was chosen because many of the discussion groups hosted there are "support groups", to ensure representation of that genre in the sample. A description of each list and the name(s) of the group owner(s) and editor(s) was determined from public information held at the Lsoft.com web site. Invitations were sent to all owners and editors of public discussion groups with more than 50 members, but not to owners of groups that were strictly for one-way information distribution. When sending invitations to owners/editors of discussion groups at the Penn State and St. John's listservers, each group was checked to ensure that discussion had occurred during the preceding month.

- Each invitation contained a request that the recipient pass it along to any other online discussion group moderators of their acquaintance, and, in several cases this was done, this adding a "snowball" element to the sample.

A general invitation was sent to each of the monitored discussion groups to ensure that all members received it, whether they opened the message to read it or not. While the number of members of individual online discussion groups is usually available, there is no way to determine how many members actually read any one post to a group, nor to ensure that it is read.

There were 367 individual invitations sent out and the greatest number of responses arrived during the 2 days following their distribution. This result led to the conclusion that, when conducting online research, the most productive solicitation is to individuals, especially when the researcher's name is known to them. This approach does, however, risk annoying people, who always wonder how their address was obtained, and who tend to pass their ire along to your Internet Service Provider with the suggestion that your Internet privileges be revoked for sending out "spam". This research effort over the course of 30 days generated 136 usable survey responses. By that time it appeared that a close approximation to the range of moderators' experiences was represented. The proportions of gender, age ranges, and the length and extent of their involvement with online discussion groups approximated closely that of the Berge & Collins 1997 study (Berge & Collins, 2000, pp. 88-89).

Validation of Sampling Method

The 1997 survey's random sample was generated by acquiring a list of 15,700 public online discussion groups hosted by LISTSERV® software. A list of their owners was ranked alphabetically, and a random number for each was generated. From that starting point an individual invitation was sent to the "owner" of every fifth list. This probablistic methodology yielded approximately 1,500 list addresses resulting, after two reminders, in 162 usable questionnaires. (Berge & Collins, 2000). The similarities between the demographics of respondents to the two questionnaires indicateed that the purposive sampling methods that were used for this study had generated a sample of approximately the same composition as was drawn from a far larger population using a methodologically stringent, random sampling method.

Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaire 1

The categorical questions used for data collection in this study (see Appendix A) were adapted from those developed in two prior research studies (Collins & Berge, 1997a, 1997b, 1998). During those research studies, an iterative process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 105-115) emerged as open-ended questions were used to capture information from which

categories were developed. Those categories were subsequently used and further tested in a third research study (Berge & Collins, 2000). Other questions were developed from the literature review and from observation of moderators' group discussions.

The web-based questionnaire (see Appendix A) questioned the following:

- The length of time and degree of involvement in online discussion groups
- The management, moderation and facilitation of online discussion groups as a recognized professional skill set in government, business, and industry
- How moderators self-identify and how they define their level of involvement with their list members.
- The role of list policies and guidelines, and the part played by the respondent in their creation, and the extent to which the guidelines reflected moderators' personal beliefs; for those who had formal guidelines, how they helped or hindered the moderator's work; for those using informal guidelines, their criteria for determining appropriate interventions
- The respondents' relationship to the list members, the moderators' personal styles, and thoughts about discussion groups as communities
- Five open-ended, reflective questions:

1) What do you most enjoy or find most rewarding about moderating online discussion?
2) What do you find most difficult or challenging?
3) What do you believe are the personal qualities/skills most useful to online discussion moderators/facilitators
4) What training would you recommend for someone who wants to become an online discussion moderator/facilitator?
5) In their role as an online discussion moderator, to what extent do you consider yourself an "educator of adults"?

- How the respondent got started and how they learned to moderate discussion
- The extent of the moderators' tasks as described in messages processed and time spent
- Gender and age
- Membership in, and value derived from their membership in discussion groups for moderators

At the end of the questionnaire respondents were asked to provide their names and email addresses if they were willing to respond to follow-up questions or if they wished to be informed when the results of the study were posted to the http://emoderators.com web site.

The survey instrument (see Appendix A) was made available on the http://emoderators.com web site for 30 days. It was created as a web form and

CGI (Common Gateway Interface) scripts were tailored to collect the data in plain text files, with the data from the categorical questions stored at the beginning of the file and text of the responses to the open-ended questions at the end. The data were then downloaded into Excel spreadsheets; from there the numerical data were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Graduate Student Version 10) for analysis. Identifying information was removed from the data and stored separately to unlink identifying information from respondents' comments but to allow the researcher to notify responds who had requested notification that the final report has been posted could be informed.

Pilot-Test Procedures

After the web-based questionnaire was constructed, and installed on the web-site, three experienced moderators were asked to complete the questionnaire and to provide constructive commentary. As a result, the wording of several questions was revised for clarity and duplicates among the list of roles, tasks and responsibilities were eliminated.

Questionnaire 2

The brief follow-up questionnaire (Appendix B) was based on Merriam & Brockett's expressed concern for the invisibility of some groups of adult

educators to the mainstream study of adult education. These "invisible" educators of adults do not read adult education journals, attend conferences, enroll in adult education graduate programs, nor join any adult education associations. In other words, they do not identify with the profession in any way, and yet they are fully engaged in the education of adults (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 640). For this reason the second questionnaire also probed moderators' identification with the profession of adult education, and their knowledge of the profession and its practitioners.

The second questionnaire was emailed individually to 116 of the 136 initial respondents to the first questionnaire two months after the conclusion of data collection using the first questionnaire. These moderators had identified themselves as willing to participate in further research. The identity of the respondents was known as they had left their email addresses when they completed the first questionnaire. The respondents were informed at the time that their addresses would be held confidential, consistent with The Pennsylvania State University Human Subjects Review Board guidelines. Four addresses bounced (the messages were returned).

The follow-up, emailed questionnaire (see Appendix B) asked moderators about:

- Their beliefs that one reason group members participate in their groups (by posting or just reading) is so they can learn.

- Their belief that they play an educational role for the members of their groups.
- The extent to which they identify themselves as adult educators.
- Their knowledge of adult education as an academic field of study.
- Any formal, academic courses in adult education they had taken, any books or journals in the field they had read, or any adult education conferences they had attended.
- Their relationships/connections with adult educators, if any and the identity and roles of any adult educators they knew.

Participant Observation

As mentioned above, further questions and considerations for this study were developed through participant observation of the discussion occurring in seven online discussion groups for those who own, monitor, and moderate online discussion groups. Participant observation, in its ethnographic sense, means going out into the field and participating in, or closely observing, the activities of the group(s) being studied. In this way the actors and the activities can be observed in context and more thoroughly understood on their own terms and in their own language. One drawback of participation observation in face-to-face situations is that the presence of the researcher can change the behavior of the persons being observed. This is not true of participant-observation of online discussion groups. “Participant observation” in this study meant reading

documents–the electronic mail by which group members communicate–that were delivered to the researcher's private email box. One's name may appear on a group's membership list, but unless one posts a message to an online discussion group, one remains invisible. The ongoing discussion and the group archives were open to all who subscribed to the discussion groups that were observed for this research. There were no gatekeepers who would serve to forbid entrance, nor limit access. There were, however, several moderated lists under observation, where the only persons to post to the list were the reviewers.

This phase of the research lasted more than six months so the range of topics discussed could be evaluated, a broad spectrum of moderators' stories could emerge and the general tone of the interactions among group members could be determined. It involved reading the postings to each list, usually in the form of a daily digest of messages. In this way the messages served as a running record of the *public* activities of the group. In any public online discussion group there is always a lot of "back-channel" communication as group members email each other privately, and those interactions are generally hidden to an observer not participating in those private conversations.

Document Analysis

The second question that framed this study was "In what ways do moderators' roles, tasks, and responsibilities compare and contrast with the skills

and activities suggested for discussion facilitators/moderators in formal adult education settings, as presented in the literature?"

To respond to this question, it was necessary to first conduct a search of the adult education literature to determine what skills and activities were suggested as appropriate for face-to-face discussion facilitators or moderators. This was conducted using the researcher's personal and local university libraries; several online library databases: ERIC, Infotrack and Dissertation Abstracts, and the Internet search engine, Google, to find articles in online journals and conference proceedings.

Hiemstra (1991) edited an issue of New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education entitled *Creating Environments for Effective Adult Learning* that examined the various physical, psychological-emotional and socio-cultural meanings of adult learning environments in formal, classroom settings. Hiemstra's interest was initially in the design of optimal physical environments for adult learners and this evolved into consideration of the effective climate for adult learning, engendered by the social interface between teacher and learner, again in the classroom. Moderators do provide a "space" in which the group members meet, but it is a neutral, "cyber-place" composed "physically" of electronic bits and bytes and takes on the appearance of whatever the imagination of the participants choose to make of it. This renders moot for online moderators any recommendations made to adult education facilitators with reference to the design and arrangement of physical space.

The results of my search of the adult education literature consistently pointed to the work of Stephen Brookfield, particularly his books *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (1986) and, more recently, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (1999). These books addressed the facilitation, by discussion, of adult learning in academic settings. They were determined to be the best available sources of information for this study as the currency of exchange in online discussion groups is just that–discussion, and the moderator's principal role is that of a discussion facilitator. Brookfield's "six principles of effective practice" for the facilitators of discussion in adult learning was used as the criteria to judge the similarities and differences between the preferred skills and activities of face-to-face and online discussion moderators.

Data analysis procedures

The numerical data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences to generate descriptive statistics. The data for this study was collected at a nominal level, which was sufficient for this study, as the intent was to provide description, and not to collapse sample data to generalize to a larger population.

The narrative data from the completed surveys were imported into the NUD*IST "N4 Classic" program for the analysis of unstructured, narrative data so categories could be inductively built and grouped. This allowed clear indicators to emerge and to expose interrelationships in the data not otherwise obvious.

Analysis of the narrative comments allowed the emerging list of categories to generate the conceptual structure which, in turn, created an awareness and consideration of additional factors (Kerr & Hiltz, 1982). The development of categories relied heavily on constant comparative analysis (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg , & Coleman, 2000). Each new instance was compared with the contents of established categories to determine if there was a match or if a new category needed to be created. As Patton (1990) notes, "The challenge is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (pp. 371-372).

For the second, emailed questionnaire, the data were tabulated by hand, and the responses stored in a Word table, so that comments would be easily available for reference and citation.

Conclusion

This study builds on two earlier studies conducted at five-year intervals. In those intervals significant social and technological changes have resulted in what appears to be an exponentially expanding use of the Internet as more and more people come online (Horrigan, 2001). The basic business of the Internet is not, as sometimes appears, commerce, but humans communicating with one another. This study collected the same demographic information as Berge & Collins did in their 1997 study to determine if respondents came from similar

populations. This was done so that findings could be reasonably compared and form the basis for further research. However, the current study did include a wider span of open-ended questions to allow public online discussion group moderators to more clearly and fully describe their perceptions of their roles and experiences.

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Chapter 4

QUESTIONNAIRE 1 - FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will report on and discuss the findings that speak to the first of the three questions that guided this research. That question asked:

> What are online discussion group moderators' perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities?

This chapter reports the data collected using a web-based questionnaire (see Appendix A) and compares some of the variables with those investigated in the 1997 Berge and Collins study (Berge & Collins, 2000; see also Appendix D). Berge and Collins studied moderators of public online discussion groups in 1992 and 1997, and the present study, conducted in 2002, extends this longitudinal study and moves it into a different population. The comparisons will serve to highlight the stability of some factors and the changes in others as use of the Internet has grown.

Data for the first phase of this study were derived from a web-based questionnaire completed by a volunteer group of 136 self-identified moderators of online discussion groups. The analysis software used for the categorical questions was the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Student Version

10, with the data being imported from the tables created by custom CGI scripts that collected the data from the web form. The statistical procedures used were Frequencies, Cross-tabs and Multiple-Response. Data for the second phase of this study, reported in Chapter 5, were derived from a short survey emailed to those respondents to the first questionnaire who had indicated they would be willing to answer further questions. This follow-up questionnaire used open-ended questions focused specifically on the respondents' sense of themselves as educators of adults, and was influenced heavily by Imel, Brockett and James' (2000) concerns that "many who practice adult education do not identify with adult education as a field because they do not see its relevance to their work and to the learners that they serve" (p. 632). See Appendix B for the second, emailed questionnaire.

The data from each questionnaire have been presented and discussed separately in Chapters 4 and 5 to allow for a more coherent sense of the findings to emerge. The categorical questions in the first questionnaire were interspersed with open-ended questions. In several cases, one question built on the other to allow for expansion and clarification of responses. Data were collected on the survey form (see Appendix A, questions 1-105) that were not reported in this study, but will be used to further refine the indicators of moderator role categories in future research. Where percentages are reported they are "valid percentages" (i.e., the missing values are omitted from the calculation) to give a more accurate representation of the information). The spelling errors in the comments from

moderators quoted in this chapter have not been corrected. To preserve respondents' anonymity, no quotations have been attributed to individual moderators.

From the respondents' email addresses, it is obvious that the online discussion group phenomenon transcends national and international boundaries. The preponderance of respondents who left their addresses are recognizably from the United States (e.g. pacbell.net, webtv.net), but it is more difficult to determine where the .com addresses or the obviously personal domain addresses are located. Free email services like Yahoo! and Hotmail are international, as are proprietary services like AOL. However, country codes did appear for Canada (.ca), Australia (.au), Germany (.dk), and Israel (il), and .edu codes indicating participation from universities, community colleges, and K-12 schools.

In this study, as in Berge and Collins' prior research (1996; 1997) the term "moderator" was used as a generic term to refer to all those who functioned in some capacity with online discussion groups, based on their self-identification. Within that generic term is a continuum of 1) responsibility for the content of the group discussion and 2) the amount of contact that the moderator has with the group members. Table 4-1 shows the definitions and their indicators to demonstrate the range of activities.

Table 4–1: Definitions of Owner, Monitor and Reviewer Based on Responsibility for Content of Discussion

Minimum responsibility		**Maximum Responsibility**
Group Owner or Administrator	Monitor/Facilitator/Host	Reviewer
Only performs technical and management functions	May perform technical and management functions	May perform technical and management functions
Does not participate in discussion	May be peer participant in discussion, or the discussion leader/facilitator	May be discussion leader/facilitator, or consider themselves a peer participant
Does not review posts	Does not review posts May sanction 'offenders' against group communication norms, but does so after the fact.	Reviews and screens some or all messages prior to distribution

Respondent's Self-Definition

Respondents were asked to identify themselves as Group Owner/Administrator, Monitor/Facilitator/Host or Reviewer, based on the definitions in Table 4-1. One person did not respond; for the remainder the results of this self-identification is shown in Table 4-2.

Table 4–2: Proportion of Owners, Monitors, and Reviewers

	N	%
Group Owner or Administrator	14	10.4
Monitor, Facilitator, or Host	92	68.7
Reviewer	28	20.9

The focus and unit of analysis of this research was the discussion group moderator, not the groups they moderated. The Berge and Collins 1997 study determined that most moderators take responsibility for more than one discussion group. To ask specific discussion group-related questions caused confusion among the 1997 study respondents about which group moderators should be considering in their answers. This study focused on the moderators and their perceptions of their own roles, tasks and responsibilities. However, the moderators were asked for the topics of their lists and these were sorted into categories drawn from the Pew Internet and American Life project report *Online Communities: Networks that nurture long-distance relationships and local ties* (Horrigan, 2001), and shown in Table 4-3.

Table 4–3: Categories of Lists

Category [1]		Percentage
Getting ahead	Professional development, work-related discussion	46.82
Getting by	Managing day-to-day responsibilities, including parenting and medical issues	17.05
Hobby and Entertainment		15.00
Lifestylers	Seeking people with common beliefs, lifestyles	6.68
Civic Engagement	Regards locality/country of residence	5.02
Political		4.01
Belief Groups	Religious or spiritual beliefs	3.01
Sports		1.33
Ethnic and Racial		1.00

[1] Categories adopted from Pew Internet and American Life *Project report Online communities: Networks that nurture long-distance relationships and local ties.* (Horrigan, 2001).

Age and Gender

The gender ratio of Internet users has changed somewhat over the past 10 years. In 1992, the World Wide Web was experiencing its early beginnings as HTML code was first announced in 1991 (Gribble, 1998). Before that time access to the Internet was available to those who held positions in computing or information processing, were located in science or academic institutions, and/or were in mostly male-dominated professions. As late as 1998 that male

predominance still held true (Gladdis, 1998; Murphy, 2000). This situation is slowly changing, according to the Pew Internet and American Life project: "Women have pulled slightly ahead of men in the overall Internet population; 50.6% of American adults with Internet access are women and 49.4% are men" (Rainie & Packel, 2001).

The gender distribution of respondents to this questionnaire indicates that 60.6 percent were males, and 39.4 percent were female (with 9 persons not reporting gender). This result compares with the 66 percent male and 31.2 percent female response to the 1997 survey. It appears that, among the moderators responding to these studies, the gender ratio has shifted slightly in favor of females, consistent with the Pew Study mentioned above.

Those who first built the Internet were largely young graduate students working under the direction of young to middle-aged engineers (Hafner & Lyon, 1998), but the Internet, in its infancy, was the solid province of middle-aged computer and data processing professionals. This situation has been slowly changing. Table 4-4 shows that the age of the respondents in this study is marginally lower than in the 1997 study.

Table 4–4: Age Comparison between 1997 and 2002 Studies

Age	This Study %	1997 Study %	Change %
20-29	25.4	14.2	+11.2
30-39	27.7	24.7	+3.0
40-49	28.5	29.6	-1.1
50-59	15.4	21.0	-5.6
60 and over	3.1	4.9	-1.8
Respondents	130/135	153/162	125/136

Slightly more females responded to this study than to the last (by 8 percent) and overall the respondents were slightly younger, but the group still closely resembled those of the Berge and Collins 1997 study. This, and other similar comparisons throughout this study, indicates that the criterion-based, purposeful sample used in this study closely resembles the 1997 study's systematically-generated, random sample, and validates, to a certain extent, the sampling method used in this study.

Length of Time as Moderators

The first set of questions in this study examined the length of time that moderators had been moderating their own groups. Berge and Collins (2000)

noted that they had underestimated moderator longevity, with too many categories at "less than 2 years" and not enough at five years plus, so the current study collapsed the lower categories and added a ">10 years" category. The percentages shown in Table 4-5 indicate that the longevity of respondents in this study closely resembles that of the 1997 study participants.

Table 4–5: Length of Time as Moderators

	Frequency	This study %	1997 Study %	Change %
No response	9	1.5	.6	+.9
Less than 6 Months	7	5.3	4.2	+1.1
6-12 months	8	6.0	9.9	-3.3
13 months-3 years	45	33.8	43.8	-10.0
3-6 years	46	34.6	28.4	+4.2
7-10 years	13	9.8	13.0	-3.2
More than 10 years	14	10.5		+10.5

Table 4-5 also indicates that the half of the respondents were experienced moderators, with 54.9 percent serving over three years and 10.5 percent of that group serving over 10 years. Most of these moderators were volunteers and this longevity suggests that this activity could be considered as intrinsically

rewarding. Later in the survey moderators were asked about the nature of those intrinsic rewards.

Extent of Time Investment

The next two questions addressed how often moderators checked their discussion groups for activity and how long they spent each session doing so. "Hosting is heart work. It is not virtual. Like anything having to do with the heart, it's earthbound. It is messy. It is mixed. And it is incredibly rewarding" (Williams, 1997, n.p.). It also represents a significant time investment (Milbury, 1996). Depending on one's primary role, each respondent might not be expected to claim duties involving a large number of discussion groups, which would impact their time investment. This assumption proved to be accurate as 90.9 percent (n=120 of 135 respondents) moderated 12 or fewer groups.

A computer systems administrator, self-identifying as a moderator, may "moderate" many hundreds of discussion groups, but only in the administrative sense that the host computer was kept online, the software updated, and the server linked to the Internet. An administrator may also serve various trouble-shooting functions on an "as needed" basis.

Table 4-6 shows how often the moderators attended to their lists, and Table 4-7 the amount of time spent, per session, reading and/or reviewing posts to their lists. Tables 4-6 and 4-7 indicate that 48.1 percent of the respondents checked their discussion groups several times a day and 45.9 percent spent

more than 2 hours per session. While that did represent a significant investment of time and energy, it was also an activity that could be interspersed with other activities when the moderator works online all day.

Table 4–6: Frequency of Attending to Discussion Group

	Frequency	This study %	1997 Study %
Weekly	14	10.4	5.6
Several times a week	7	5.2	9.9
Daily	26	19.3	28.4
Several times a day	65	48.1	25.9
Depends on the traffic	23	17.0	17.9

A cross-tabulation of time spent, as noted in Table 4-7, with where the moderator's place themselves on the spectrum of activities (Table 4-1) indicates that 57.1 percent of those who review all posts to their lists spend over two hours a day, as do 50 percent of those who consider themselves owner/administrators, and 41.3 percent of those who consider themselves peer participants. This indicates that moderating discussion groups at any level tends to represent a labor/time intensive task.

During their time spent on the groups, these moderators deal with a wide range in the number of posts, reported in this study to be from 1 to 49,000, giving a mean of 642.4, a median of 75 and a mode of 100. Moderators reporting the

highest number of posts worked full-time at online community building, and were actually supervising other moderators who actually did the work.

Table 4-7: Time Spent Each Session

Time	Frequency	This study %	1997 Study %
Less than 30 minutes	29	21.5	40.7
31-60 minutes	20	14.8	13.6
1-2 hours	24	17.8	3.7
More than 2 hours	62	45.9	2.5

The number of messages these moderators report represent the total postings that are processed through their site, including the singular value of 49,000 per week that significantly distorts the mean. In this case, the median of 75 and the mode of 100 posts per week are a more accurate representation of group traffic.

The person who reported "moderating" the highest number of groups–3000–was a systems administrator who served as the Post Master for a busy listserver host computer, a role also filled by three of the eight persons reporting involvement with 20 or more lists. The person who reported 49,000 posts a week to his groups was the manager of online community development for a national television network.

Moderators as Discussion Group Participants

The extent of moderators' involvement as members of discussion groups could vary widely, from receiving and reading all posts arriving in their personal mailboxes, and responding actively to many or all of the discussion topics, to rarely going to discussion group web sites to skim over the "Subject:" lines to see if there is anything of interest. This study did not inquire into the extent of respondents' involvement with discussion groups besides their own, asking only the number of groups that respondents belonged to, as a clue to the extent of their investment in their personal continuing education.

The range extended from 1 to 360, with a rounded mean of 21 groups. Thirty-four percent of the respondents were involved as members of 3 to 6 groups and 63.7 percent of all respondents reported membership in 10 or fewer groups. This result indicates that moderators continued to pursue their own interests and learning, beyond their own discussion groups, in a familiar online setting. Respondents were recruited from among the membership of moderators' groups, where content analysis of the posts indicated members discussed the business, joys, trials, and tribulations of moderation, thus furthering their own professional development. When moderators reported the topics of their own lists above, several moderators indicated that the topic focus of the lists to which they belonged as members did not necessarily match the ones they moderated.

The Professionalization of Discussion Group Leadership

During observation of several of the moderators' discussion groups it became apparent that at least one significant change had occurred over the past five years, with the increasing commercialization of the Internet. The use of online discussion groups for internal organizational communication in business and industry had grown with, for example, professional organizations using online discussion to determine ways of winning support for radical changes by a new board of directors (Executives, 1997); holding online board meetings (Fox, 1997); businesses implementing computer-supported co-operative work groups (Cole, 1995; Lloyd, 1994); and online corporate training events (Berge, 2000).

Because online groups are different from face-to-face groups in several important respects (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), the management, moderation, and facilitation of online discussion groups goes beyond face-to-face facilitation skill training and is slowly becoming a recognized professional skill set, attractive to government, business, and industry (Berge, 2000). This situation was indicated by frequent requests–job advertisements–that appeared on the discussion groups observed for this study, for persons to moderate both short and long-term online events. This change may not be welcomed by all moderators, who take pride in their volunteerism, as evidenced by the following remarks made in response to the announcement of my dissertation study:

> I'm guessing that you are on your way toward 'professionalizing' the role of moderator. Someone will become 'keeper of the keys' regarding the definition and maintenance of a 'moderator skill set' and, of course, there will be an entity (college/university??) who will

> be offering training or a degree specialty for a fee. At the same time, a certification movement will develop and the 'keepers of the keys' will begin to create a two-tiered moderator world: those who are trained and certified, and those who are not. It is my greatest hope that you will do NOTHING to interfere with the quirky and spontaneous way that moderators become moderators and with the unique nature of their contributions to their groups and their groups' unique, sometimes oddball, personalities.
>
> Online discussion groups are like old-fashioned New England town squares. People jump up on a soapbox and begin to speak their minds, other people exert pressure on them or interact as they see fit. And it's all done spontaneously, without a lot of structure or planning. I'd like to see you share your data, but I'm afraid that the 'between the lines' message from you who will become 'experts' as owners of this date is that there is a certain way moderators must do or be. Frankly, I'm in favor of anyone, lunatics and fascists included, hosting and moderating a discussion group. Since anyone can join (and quit), anyone can participate (or simply watch), then anyone, no matter how clumsy, arrogant, or weird should feel free... even be welcomed... to moderate. Let me know when you set up your Masters degree program in Moderating Online Discussion Groups. I want to say, I told you so! (Project manager, consultant and author)

This independent sentiment appears common among long-time online discussion group members and moderators, who pride themselves on their volunteerism.

Moderation as a Source of Income

The next series of questions asked for the respondents' job title: whether moderation or facilitation was an income source; whether moderation was a part of their regular job, as opposed to being a volunteer activity; and what proportion, of their income, if any, over the past six months was derived from the facilitation of online discussion. The question "Do you do it as part of a regular hourly or

salaried, part-time or full-time job?" was followed on the questionnaire by "If not, please explain" and a textbox. The written responses shed unexpected light on moderators' views of the place and value of moderating in their lives, and the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards they receive.

Online discussion moderation is part of a full-time occupation for 25.4 percent (n=34) of the respondents. When asked if moderation or facilitation was an income source, only 18 respondents (13.3 percent) indicated that it was. However, many moderators made comments on the moderation-for-pay topic that shed light on their value systems. In the analysis of the responses to this open-ended question, four clusters describing their motivations emerged: 1) personal satisfaction and relaxation; 2) volunteerism and service; 3) professional development; and 4) paid employment.

Personal Satisfaction and Relaxation

As noted above, 46 percent of these moderators spent more than 2 hours a day, and 55 percent had more than three years of service, indicating that moderating is an activity that provides them with considerable personal satisfaction. Sixteen moderators mentioned that moderating was a hobby or something they did for relaxation. Moderators found that their acquaintance with list members evolved into very successful, enduring friendships; they helped further charitable causes that they loved; they found "private satisfaction" and felt they contributed to "the good of the species." Even when handicapped and only

able to work at moderation for short periods, one moderator derived a sense of personal worth and connection to others and "a lifeline to the outside world". Another respondent found a therapeutic treatment that had been of great personal help so he reported that his work was a "Labor of love! All volunteer work, hoping to help in the propagation of Insulin Pumping as a viable alternative therapy for insulin requiring diabetics".

Volunteerism and Service

The spirit of volunteerism and the desire to serve appears strong among this group of respondents. Seventy-two responses (52.9 percent) to this question related in some way to moderation being a volunteer activity, one that provided a service to the moderators' professional community.

Concerning discussion groups for caregivers of children with disabilities one respondent remarked,

> I do not believe in them being a source of income nor that they should be, the entire focus is on ensuring people have a place to go, even if it is only long enough to learn of more focused sources for support and information regarding care.

Another expressed this volunteerism in terms of their personal values:

> a service to the Netizens and to maintain the Internet's public appeal of free speech, free expression power, and extra-ordinary ability for promoting information and knowledge sharing.

Professional Development

Fifteen respondents indicated that they consider their work with online discussion groups to be part of their professional development. Access to the Internet has significantly reduced the isolation of professionals who may be working as the only specialist in their field in their vicinity. They moderated lists as a means of building networks of professional colleagues, and to continue to develop themselves professionally. These respondents gained access to the combined wisdom and knowledge of other group members and stayed informed about common industry and professional problems.

A Part of Paid Employment

Online discussion groups bring together persons who are interested in a particular topic and who "self-select" as members of a potential market. Three moderators used their groups for conducting market research. Advertising in most groups is discouraged, but, as one respondent noted, there are ways of getting around that restriction:

> It is not legal to advertise directly at Yahoo! groups. However, it is permissible to answer topical questions on where to find goods and services and indeed I generate income from that, based on my knowledge and reputation made evident on the lists by my answers to queries. I do have consultancy clients who came to me off-list because they liked what I said on-list. Operating discussion lists overtly for income is not within the Terms of Service for Yahoo.

Five moderators attended to their discussion groups as part of their paid employment with non-profit groups, providing online services to various segments of their constituency.

Proportion of Income Directly Derived from Administration, Facilitation or Moderation Activities

Fifteen years ago those who could report that they derived their entire income from their work with online discussion groups would have been employed as systems administrators, often only peripherally involved in the actual management of online discussion. However, since the advent of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, this situation has slowly changed and employment opportunities are opening up in new areas for those who can build online communities and/or facilitate and lead online discussion groups. Moderating and/or facilitating online discussion was a source of income for only 13.3 percent of the respondents, while only 25.6 percent claim moderating as part of their regular work.

This new trend towards professionalization is indicated by the type of employment reported by the 6 persons with100 percent of their income derived from their work with public discussion lists. This group included an editor-in-chief of a large site devoted to publishing “e-zines”, and part of whose job description involves overseeing the work of 30 sub-moderators, and developing new magazine topics; a consultant in the building of online communities; a forum

operations manager of an online support service, who, in addition to moderating duties assisted in the development of the next generation of software used to support the discussion groups; an editor of an online cruise community; and a community builder for a corporation developing online communities around their various product brands as a business tactic designed to increase brand recognition and customer loyalty. The last respondent in this group was a community manager for an extensive series of K-12 discussion groups and newsletters.

Moderators' Composite Roles

The names and indicators of moderators' composite roles have been refined by research over the past 10 years (Berge, 1992; Berge & Collins, 2000). The changes in moderators' composite roles made for this study were based on observations of the changing landscape of online discussion groups determined by reading postings to moderators' discussion groups over time. At the time of Berge's 1992 study, a high proportion of discussion groups were of the "scholarly" variety (Berge & Collins, 1995; Collins & Berge, 1997) and served the research and academic community. As the Web became popular so has the use of online discussion groups for the building of "community" in online business settings (Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; White, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d; Williams, 1997). The use of such online communities, focused around products and services to establish brand recognition and consumer loyalty and for internal

corporate uses, has given rise to a need for professional online discussion moderators and facilitators.

Changes in the purpose of online discussion groups have also brought about changes in moderators' role clusters. Based on the observation of public discussion groups serving the moderator community over a year, this study adds the roles of Host/Hostess and Publicist; redefines the Manager's name into Administrator and makes a finer distinction between Discussion Facilitator and Discussion Leader. The changes are shown below in Table 4-8.

Table 4–8: Evolution in Role Cluster Names and Indicators 1992-2002

Role	1992	1997	2002
Manager	administrator, archiving, deleting/ adding subscribers	administrator, archivist, deleting/adding subscribers, dealing with bounced messages	
Administrator			Responsible for the technical administration of the list; may delete/add subscribers; may deal with bounced messages and administrative requests; may liaison with host organization, may be archivist
Facilitator	keeps list "on track"; group leader	peer discussion participant, mediator	
Discussion facilitator			Peer discussion participant; mediator; may interject questions and/or comments to stimulate/re-direct/encourage group discussion
Discussion leader		poses questions or otherwise promotes discussion, keeps discussion "on track"	May structure discussion; specify discussion topics; pose questions/issues or otherwise promote discussion; keep discussion "on track"; may summarize and conclude discussion topics; may invite guest experts
Editor	text editor, digest posts, format posts	text editor, digest posts, formats posts, may correct spelling, grammar, newsletter editor	May edit messages for length, style, or content, may re-format posts; may compile posts into digests or a newsletter format; may correct spelling, grammar
Expert	Answering Frequently Asked Questions; expert in the group's field, for example a manufacturer's representative	compiling or answering Frequently Asked Questions; expert in the list's topic	Expert in the list's topic; may compile or answer Frequently Asked Questions; may suggest off-list resources; may serve as a reference source for discussion participants
Filter	deciding upon on-topic posts; increasing signal/noise ratio; deletes libelous posts; may delete jokes	deciding upon on-topic posts; increasing signal/noise ratio; rejects libelous posts; may reject jokes	Determines if message content is appropriate for posting to the discussion, e.g. on topic, appropriate language and tone; may filter out "spam" mail, and unwanted advertising; may review posts from new group members
Firefighter	takes "flames" or ad hominem attacks offline	douses or rejects "flames" or protests ad hominem attacks	Douses or rejects "flames", monitors appropriate list behavior, may sanction offenders publicly or privately
Helper	helps people with needs - - more general than expert	helps people with needs in the list's focus area–more general than expert	Helps people with needs within the list's focus area - more general than expert; responds, as peer, to questions, shares information, resources
Host/ Hostess			Welcomes new members; may orient them, explicitly or by example, to group procedures, processes, culture; may make discussion contributions oriented towards maintaining a congenial and/or welcoming tone to the discussion
Marketer	promotes/ explains list to potential subscribers	promotes/explains list to potential subscribers or promotes sponsor of list	Promote/explain list to potential subscribers, recruit members; may create and/or maintain informational web-pages for the group
Promoter	asks questions of the list subscribers to promote discussion		
Publicist			Writes or has written, about the list and/or list activities for publication; may create or maintain Group web-site

In the current study respondents were given the list of role clusters and their indicators as shown in Table 4-8 and asked to check all those that applied. The results are shown in Table 4-9, with the roles ranked in order of frequency of choice.

Table 4–9: Differences between the 1997 and 2002 Role Clusters by Rank

Label	Count	% of Responses	% of Cases	2002 Rank	1997 Rank
Administrator	124	14.3	93.2	1	1
Discussion Facilitator	93	10.7	69.9	2	2
Host, Hostess	92	10.6	69.2	3	–
Helper	89	10.3	66.9	4	4
Firefighter	86	9.9	64.7	5	3
Expert	77	8.9	57.9	6	8
Marketer	76	8.8	57.1	7	5
Filter	65	7.5	48.9	8	6
Discussion Leader	65	7.5	48.9	9	7
Publicist	64	7.4	48.1	10	–
Editor	35	4.0	26.3	11	9

In this question, moderators were asked to "check all that apply". The "percentage of responses" represents the percentage–out of 100 percent of

responses–that were allotted to that role. The “percentage of cases” represents the percentage–out of 100 percent of respondents–who chose that role.

Table 4-9 also indicates that the relative ranking of the roles has not changed substantially since the 1997 survey. The addition and definition of a role cluster representing Host or Hostess was validated by its high ranking (3rd of 11 clusters). The indicators for that new role cluster are specified as

> welcomes new members; may orient them, explicitly or by example, to group procedures, processes, culture; may make discussion contributions oriented towards maintaining a congenial and/or welcoming tone to the discussion

The relative lower ranking of Firefighter (3rd in the Berge & Collins 1997 study, 5th in this one) may indicate that the notion that “freedom of speech” as freedom to make *ad hominem* attacks at will is fading. As two respondents noted, "Posting to a discussion group is a privilege. If they want to say anything they want, they have the freedom to create their own groups" and "Freedom of speech is OK as long as it doesn’t make other listers feel they cannot post how they feel, too."

The definition of Editor remained substantially the same between the 1997 and 2002 surveys and its low ranking (last) in both studies indicates that editing functions common to print media, e.g., editing for style, length, or content, do not constitute a large proportion of these respondents' tasks.

Moderators and their Discussion Group Guidelines

Discussion in most face-to-face situations is usually framed by the situation in which it occurs. Conversational style, tone, and vocabulary vary by location and the mix of participants, but the "rules of communicative engagement" rarely need to be explicitly stated, as most people have pre-existing "scripts" for appropriate interaction behavior that they can follow, even in new situations. Participants can usually assume from the face-to-face context what the conversational rules are, and, if there is any uncertainty, silent and rapid observation of other participants is usually possible.

While computer-mediated communication has been in use since the mid-1960s, and appeared in higher education in the mid-1980s, it is still a relatively young communication medium. Participants in online discussion are often separated by geography, language, time, and culture and the initial tendency is to bring into the online environment practices used in face-to-face settings. However, for the most part, online discussion is conducted in a text-based environment, stripped of most of the social context cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) that under gird face-to-face communication decisions. This can sometimes cause misunderstandings to rise rapidly, feelings to be hurt, and the feeling that the online discussion group is a "safe place" to communicate can rapidly dissipate. One respondent said

> The [discussion group] guidelines were formed by another member and myself. They are actually very informal. We believe in free speech - but if a member gets 'down & dirty,' they will have to 'mud wrestle' the moderator.

In online settings, explicit statements of communication norms, in the form of discussion guidelines, are often necessary as the assumption cannot be made that everyone just “knows” intuitively how to communicate appropriately online . See Appendix C for a representative selection of categories of information found in online discussion group guidelines, with quotations to illustrate specific guidelines.

Guidelines as Self-imposed Limitations on Moderation

The quality of the relationship between the moderator and group members is critical to the group's success. This interface has many dimensions and is frequently based on the moderator's notion of "list ownership”. Moderators who believe that the group discussion space belongs to the members and that their own responsibility ends with making the group space available will be behave very differently from those who believe that moderators have a responsibility to review and approve every message that is posted to the group.

The open-ended question in this category asked:

> Some online discussion group moderators believe that the discussion belongs to the group members and they should be allowed to say anything they please and to sort out their own differences. To what extent do you subscribe to those beliefs?

Three categories of responses emerged from the analysis: the unqualified “completely” and the unqualified "not at all" and larger group that qualified their "completely."

The strongest level of agreement, as expressed by one respondent, was "100%! I want to make the group safe for ideas, not for feelings. I can't control feelings in any case, and the desire to do so has too many unintended consequences". The other end of the response spectrum was represented by the statement: "Not at all. Posting to a discussion group is a privilege. If they want to say anything they want, they have the freedom to create their own groups." The following comment from one respondent notes the sanctions that might be taken: "I agree, subject to prohibiting behavior and language which would offend other members. I would warn first, then unsub [unsubscribe] a member who repeatedly violated good taste. This have (sic) not been necessary in the two years the group has existed".

Many responses, while expressing agreement, were qualified: "Strongly agree. Discussion members are open to discuss and speak their minds as long as their (sic) is value in their message and they do not use inappropriate language. The site is not censored, but if inappropriate discussions occur, they will be edited or deleted". The following reflects a commonly expressed sentiment:

> the list does belong to the members, and as long as there is no flaming, or abusive tones ... no libelous statements made and no copyright or other legal infringements, the discussion remains open and unmoderated. Members do work out their differences within the group unless or until things get 'ugly' or out of hand".

Respondents noted that there were so many variables in play that "It depends" was an appropriate conditional response: "It depends largely on the group and topic. In some groups, it's OK to let it all hang out and sort out the

differences. In others, it's more appropriate and definitely more constructive to stick to the topic and stay objective and professional". Another respondent expressed a similar viewpoint:

> This depends very much on the original intent of the list's creator(s). If it was created by a single person or entity for a specific purpose then they should have the right to steer the discussion in whatever direction they choose. If the list is created by a group for a common goal then it it (sic) the whole group's resposibility (sic) to steer the discussion. Whether the individual subscribers like or agree with either situation is immaterial; the subscribers can always ignore offending posts, leave the list, or move to a different one.

Online Discussion Group Guidelines

While moderators have wide latitude in the way they manage their discussion groups, it is common for public online discussion groups to have some kind of charter, communication guidelines or "Terms of Service" that govern the activities of the group. These guidelines can greatly ease the moderation of online group discussion, especially for groups with controversial subject matter. However, guidelines should be written with care, for each "rule" must apply to everyone equally and will have to be enforced fairly.

Table 4–10: Proportion of Moderators Having a Formal Discussion Group Policy

	Current Study Percentage	1997 Study Percentage	Percentage Change
Yes	68.1	51.9	+16.2
No	22.2	46.3	-24.1
No response	9.6	1.9	+7.7

Table 4-10 indicates that there has been a 16.2 percent increase in the percentage of respondents having formal guidelines for their discussion groups and a significant decrease in the percentage of those who do not. Ten years ago there was great concern about "flaming" in all online venues (Collins, 1992; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, 1991). This seems to have diminished as access and the use of the Internet has moved into the mainstream and communication norms have developed that encourage civil discourse (Newby, 1993). Moderators also appeared to be more willing to formalize the rules by which interaction was governed and to police them to ensure that flaming did not occur. Any rules, will, no doubt, at some time, be argued over by group members: "Many things are not black and white, and the guidelines simply don't cover every possibility. Further, people hate rules. Especially online."

Respondents appeared to believe that hosts/hostesses could do a lot to keep the tone in their gathering places positive by making general ground rules that encouraged courteous argumentation, and with reminders, when necessary,

to "attack the idea, not the person" and to "take personal disputes to email, please" (Williams, 1997).

The Creation of Group Discussion Guidelines

Moderators reported that group guidelines had been created in various ways, largely depending on the history and purpose of the group. In many cases the moderator was the author of the guidelines: one respondent stated simply [I] "defined, wrote, reviewed, and enforce" and another respondent said that they "helped formulate, update, store, and occasionally remind subscribers of them."

Sometimes the group guidelines had come from outside the group entirely and the moderator had to adapt them to local use. One respondent, a member of a team of moderators, said, "Usually these guidelines come from a corporate level with an acceptable electronic use policy. We try to refine these among our group to fit the discussion at hand. So I would say I am a reciever (sic) and facilitator of guideline creation." Sometimes guidelines had been passed down from previous moderators and updated slightly to reflect current conditions, or were the result of a collaborative process among moderators or between a moderator and list members. One moderator, part of a team, said they filled their role in guideline creation by "discussing them with fellow moderators off-line and online, formating (sic) the message that goes out, ensuring that every members can have acess (sic) to them and follows them particularly."

"Guidelines are more likely to be followed when group members have had a hand in creating them," one respondent noted, "I wrote them, the group discussed them, and the group voted to approve the modified FAQ" and another respondent said they had been the "primary writer of the group policies. Policies were gone over with core group members".

Disseminating the Groups' Guidelines

In the groups that had formal guidelines, respondents noted that they were of no use if the discussion group members did not know about them, so moderators indicated that there were several different ways that the group guidelines could be distributed. Software used by most listserver-based groups can send out a welcome message, that can include group discussion guidelines, when a request to join a group is confirmed. Sometimes, rather than the listserver sending such a welcome message out automatically, the moderator sent the guidelines out personally. Still others posted the guidelines to the group discussion forum on a regular basis, for example, once a month or once a quarter. Many discussion groups had web sites from which a copy of the guidelines could be downloaded. For other group members, who belonged to complementary face-to-face groups, the guidelines might be found in organizational bulletins or other forms of documentation.

Those group members who were familiar with the Internet probably joined discussion groups already knowing about "netiquette", an informal set of

guidelines generally accepted on the Internet, concerning respectful treatment of fellow group members and including suggestions for the length, tone, and format of postings to group discussions (see http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml for examples).

A more difficult and time-consuming way for new members to learn what group and communication norms were–ordinarily encoded in the guidelines–was to become a group member and observe the discussion for an extended period of time prior to posting for the first time. When there were no formally stated guidelines to refer to, a new member might inadvertently, or deliberately, transgress the group communication norms to test their boundaries. Respondents noted that, in such cases, the other group members were likely to inform the transgressor of their error, in no uncertain terms.

Owners and monitors sometimes put new members "on review" (i.e., a specified number of their postings would be reviewed prior to posting to ensure conformity with the group's topics and purpose). This avoids the issue of people joining a group just to flood members' mailboxes with advertising, or other noxious "spam" (electronic junk mail).

Moderators Views of Appropriate Online Discussion Group Behaviors

Moderators were asked to what extent their list guidelines reflected their personal views about appropriate online discussion behaviors. Of the 68.1 percent of respondents who said that their groups had formal guidelines, 95

percent claimed that those guidelines reflected their personal beliefs about appropriate online discussion group behaviors. One respondent said: "My FAQ has everything I have ever thought about online communities. It is my defining philosophical document." Others drew on their own past experiences and on the knowledge of moderators they respected, basing guidelines on core personal values and censorship was differentiated from acting in good faith and with mutual respect to one another. Another typical response was:

> I thought about what I wanted and didn't want from a graphic design discussion list. Not wasting time reading vacuous posts was high on the list. The most useful part of the guidelines was no flaming and when/how it was appropriate to respond to individual messages.

At the other end of the spectrum were those discussion groups that have no formal guidelines, but that choice was also a reflection of the moderator's beliefs about formal guidelines. A typical response was: "They're almost non-existent. They set a general framework for behavior–no lengthy list of rules–and then we sort stuff out collectively as it happens".

Moderators' Views on the Advantages of Guidelines

As noted above, some moderators had written their own guidelines, some inherited them along with the discussion group from a prior moderator and some had to accept the guidelines of the organization that owned their groups. Guidelines appeared to functioned as a "neutral rule book" that could be used to remind members that they had received and agreed to abide by when they joined

the group. When the guidelines were received when they joined the group, subscribers knew what was expected of them, what was allowed, and what was forbidden

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Table 4-11: Guidelines: Help or a Hindrance

This study N=92	Frequency	Current Study Percentage	1997 Study Percentage	Percentage change
Helped	77	83.7	91.3	- 8.0
Hindered	03	03.3	0.1	+3.2
No Effect	12	13.0	7.6	+3.4

As Table 4-11 indicates, moderators who responded to this question overwhelmingly agreed that having guidelines had helped in ways that the comments below make clear. The value of a set of established guidelines began with their being made available to group members when they joined the group, thus setting the tone and the expectations for appropriate discussion group behavior.

The relationship between moderator and group members and among group members is the glue that holds the group together. When difficulties with group members arose, moderators reported their first line of defense was to point to the guidelines, in a neutral fashion, as the agreed-upon communications compact that applied equally to all, rather than arbitrarily to some members and not others. One moderator noted

> when members have questions about policies, they were directed to our guidelines in FAQ's and summary policies so there could be no surprises. Having established guidelines made it much easier to turn away off-topic material, although members do occasionally threaten to sue a moderator for being inconsistent.

Moderators reported that members felt a sense of ownership and investment in the social contract. A discussion group with well-established and accepted guidelines meant that, on some lists, as one respondent stated, "there has never been rudeness, spam, viruses, not a day when members could not post, no porn, or personal information stealers, etc. There was no need to advertise the list, yet it grews (sic) steadily, and was well liked and respected as a community".

One moderator stated it this way:

> they helped because even when I vehemently disagreed with one individual I have been able to stand back from the discussion as the list owner and tell people (as a group) that their handling of a discussion has become overly heated they need to step back and give the topic up for a few days. Because of the list rules I haven't been forced to take sides and say anyone is wrong, I can comment on the level of maturity in the posts without singling out any one person and making them feel they are being victimised (sic).

Another example:

> they have given me a clear directive on how to handle disruptive members where I was unsure of how to proceed. Members tend to think first then post. Flame wars down, number of posts that I get asking for me to help sort out problems between members are down by about 150 per month to less than a dozen.

Even when there were formal guidelines, they were subject to revision and negotiation to meet new situations:

> there are formal guidelines but they are not set in cement. For anything new that crops up, I test against the list objective. Since

> everyone knows the list objective, a new rule that meets it is no big deal to existing members. This works on any list. One that I belong to allows discussion on anything, but invites cat lovers to join so we have something in common. However the list has excluded a porn joke on grounds it is not within the Yahoo TOS (Terms of Service) The TOS covers a lot for list managers without management experience.

In some circumstances where there were a large number of discussion groups, or one very large one, there might be several moderators working together. Formal guidelines were reported to ameliorate differences of opinion among the co-moderators, allowing them to enforce the rules in a detached manner. When the moderators could say, "those are the rules and you know it!" to members, the possibility of argument was lessened significantly. However, as one moderator of a very large group with a moderating team noted "you can't please everyone. Some people cannot handle what they see as hypocrisy if a post that contravenes rules gets through, even tho (sic) they are aware that with 12 moderators there may be some differences at times."

Moderators' Views of the Disadvantages of Guidelines

The list of disadvantages that emerged from the questions about having a written policy was very short. As Table 4-10 indicates there were only 3 out of 92 respondents who indicated that having guidelines had hindered them in their role as a discussion facilitator. "Retroactive troubleshooting wasn't always the best way to resolve conflicts," said one respondent, "But I'd rather that conflicts arise than there be no room for conflict." Sometimes having written guidelines limited

a moderator's flexibility in novel situations because many choices were not black and white, nor all inclusive, and the guidelines simply could not cover every possibility and had to be fine-tuned on the spot. Further, there was some belief expressed that people hate rules, especially online. As a result, if the policy was too specific, "bozos find 'loopholes' to justify their actions. We've had to adjust our moderation policy to avoid such abuse."

Moderators' Views on the Advantages of Informal Guidelines

In some cases moderators preferred not to commit the discussion group guidelines to written form; rather they operated using a set of informal guidelines, often expressed as "common sense" or "the golden rule" or they relied on their instincts and professional experience. "Failure of respect and/or politeness" was usually a signal that intervention was necessary. Some monitors indicated that specific behaviors triggered their intervention: "Whinging, Whining & Advertising", the exchange of personal insults and

> actual irrational expression, or threats to other members specifically or as a group. The inability to participate in rational discussion is cause for removal from the group. I don't explain what I am doing either. I just delete the person, and block their email. This is a very rare occurrence. Twice in five years. By irrationqal (sic) I mean people who seem to have no continuity of thought, and generally are threatening or extremely abrasive. In both cases I had group members indepenently (sic) and privately contact me.

While still wishing to protect their members, this sub-group of respondents tended to take a hands-off approach, "treating adults as adults until they stop

acting like adults". A moderator reported choosing to wait until "my non-intervention would create a problem for a substantial portion of our membership" or until participants acted in a manner inappropriate for a work environment.

Sometimes it was not necessary for a moderator to step in because "other group members would intervene. Moderators sometimes depend on members to exercise control, and in many cases, peer comments and pressure were reported to be successful in keeping the peace.

As one moderator commented:

> for the most part, we've been lucky. There haven't been more than a few cases in which I would seriously have contemplated intervention. I'm helped, also, by having several other experienced, well-clued active participants who may step in to direct things towards resolution if a problem looks to be brewing.

Sanctions

When the behavior of discussion group members becomes intolerable to the moderator or to the group as a whole, both the moderator and the group can take action. The group as a whole could, and often did, become vociferous both publicly in the group, and privately to the offender. Moderators who believed that the discussion in the group space belonged to the group, as indicated above, allowed the group to sort out such difficulties amongst themselves.

When the limits of their patience or a high level of concern for potential damage to the entire group was reached, moderators exercised the power invested in them by the software that manages most group discussion areas.

Moderators reported that they would most likely start the process with a personal message to offenders asking them to desist. This approach was often sufficient, as was a message posted to the group as a whole, explaining that the particular discussion that had sparked the difficulties was over, the whole list was temporarily on “review” and no more messages to that discussion topic would be posted.

To control an individual's offensive postings to a group, group management software could be set so that messages from the offender came to the moderator for review before they were distributed to the group. The moderator could then choose to post those messages or not. Offenders who persisted could be removed from the group's distribution list, and, further, their addresses could be blocked from re-joining the group.

This process reflected the greatest extent of the public electronic group moderators' power—to totally silence a voice. That power was absolute with no appeal, but it was rarely exercised. One respondent reported: "We have had surprisingly low off-topic messages. I have removed a few members without warning or discussion for inappropriate posts. There are over 600 members at the moment from all over the World". Moderators generally sought to legitimize their actions with reference to the group's guidelines: "I have my 'advance warning' FAQs to fall back on when I must take action against a list member".

Moderators' Authority Relationship with their Group Members

Moderators' perceptions of their authority relationship to the members of their group seemed likely to influence how they treated their members and also their attitudes towards their own tasks.

Table 4-12: Moderators' Perceptions of their Relationship to their Group Members

	Frequency	Percentage
Leader	44	34.4
Peer	72	53.3
Subordinate	00	00
Not thought about it	10	7.8
No contact with group members	02	1.8

Notice in Table 4-12 that no moderator claimed to be a "subordinate", notwithstanding moderators' prior remarks about volunteerism and the value of providing a service. Those respondents with no contact with group members were discussion group owners who were also systems administrators; however, they still self-identified as "moderators". Although 53.3 percent of the respondents appeared to consider themselves as peers to list members, rather than as leaders, the software that maintains the discussion group space gave specific authority to the "owner"/moderator. They were empowered to change

the group environment and members' options, and could limit or completely remove a person's subscription.

Community in Public Online Discussion Groups

It was left to the respondents to judge the applicability of the term "community" to their own discussion groups. Rheingold's seminal book *Virtual Communities* (1993a), familiar to most moderators and other, similar publications have promoted the potential of online discussion groups to become a virtual community for their members (Banks, 1997; Braddlee, 1993; Nolan & Weiss, 1999; Rheingold, 1993b; White, 2001b; Wick, 1997), although there are some who remain are skeptical (Killain, 1994). Table 4-13 indicates the importance of a sense of community has increased in the five years since the Berge & Collins study was conducted. The percentage of moderators who checked "Not at all" diminished by 12.3 percent. In the "Important" and "Extremely important" categories, the percentage of persons agreeing increased by 14.5 percent. There could be many reasons for that increase, including the movement by many commercial entities to establish web-sites with sections labeled "Community," where visitors could find discussion groups focused around products or topics that would be of interest to consumers of products.

Table 4–13: Importance of a Sense of Community among Group Members

	Current Study N=130		Berge Collins 1997 Study	Percent change
	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage	
Not at all	4	3.1	15.4	-12.3
Somewhat	13	9.6	6.2	+3.4
3	17	12.6	13.0	-.4
4	39	30.0	27.2	+2.8
Extremely Important	57	43.8	32.1	+11.7

Among respondents to this study, this commercial promotion of the notion of community appeared several times. One respondent with the job title of "Executive Development Producer, Communities" said,

> I work for the internet division of a large TV company in the UK. We have websites for all our programme brands and we also manage communities for third party sites. These probably all fall into the categories of sport, entertainment, lifestyles, and corporate/government communication.

Another online community manager said, "the communities are built around online game play, either traditional classic games or massively multi-player games."

One respondent was so committed to the notion of community that when the host organization changed the discussion group format, in the process of a business merger, he protested:

> I posted this about the Yahoo Clubs to Yahoo Groups (formerly eGroups) merger that is currently ongoing: Stated simply, our problem with eGroups is: eGroups are not communities, they are mailing lists. The major problem with this change isn't the tools or technology, it is the change in focus from online virtual communities to communal mailing lists".

Building and Sustaining a Sense of Community

One respondent made a generalized comment about the importance of community in public online discussion groups, stating clearly that: "It depends" and specifying some of the conditions:

> Community is an issue that varies from list to list. On some lists, community is extremely important and keeps a list alive and activity thriving. These lists are usually smaller, 'niche' lists focused on narrow subjects. Other lists are less reliant on the need for community and in fact their growth potential can be limited by *too much* community. These lists are usually larger and more business-oriented forums and require a less personal 'feel'. Overall, I feel community as a list philosophy is important (# 3 according to your scale), but not necessarily very important or extremely important.

Another respondent provided a more mystical viewpoint:

> You just have to be a spiritual force that never goes away. And it's challenging because members will always find your sins. Such as pride. And they say, stop looking at yourself. Look at us. And they put you on the right track, all the time. All you have to do is listen to them. I bend to them, and then I might lead one week. I let them mold me, as I mold them. Never boring.

When asked what, if anything, they had done to foster a sense of community among their group members, responses from the one hundred and six who wrote comments to this question clustered into several areas: the basic provision of "place" and making that space safe and protected; performing

host/hostess duties; encouraging joint governance, and “little or nothing at all”. Forty-eight of those moderators reported they were affiliated with discussion groups that were online extensions of off-line groups that already showed a sense of community, or that had already spawned a face-to-face meeting group.

Provision of Group Space

The basic level of “building a sense of community” was to provide a place for the community to come together and communicate. A typical response of those who had done nothing besides offering a community meeting place was:

> what individuals want to feel is something only they can decide. Those who feel it is a comunity (sic) behave accordingly. Those who don't behave accordingly. It matters to me that members each choose what approach to take. . . . I have individuals who are members. I respect and enjoy them as individuals.

Some of these meeting places could be quite elaborate, but some moderators believed that it is for the prospective member to involve themselves in what is going on:

> We have many many features on our website that fosters community. We have an artists Gallery for people to post their artwork. We have poetry topic, as well as a Grieving topic. We have a LiveChat room where people can meet to talk in real time. We have a vision statement, and a Banner on our home page with icons of many world religions. We allow members to register for membership and Add their faith to a growong (sic) list of faith groups. We have many ways for people to involve themselves in the community.

Another aspect of moderators' providing community space and then stepping back was tied into their belief that the group space belonged to the participants, as discussed above, and below.

Providing a Safe and Protected Group Space

In one discussion group the sense of privacy and safety was important, although the moderator acknowledged that: "it was impossible to guarantee. The group archives were not available to members, and the moderator encouraged pseudonyms, to foster “a sense that members could ask questions without endangering their disability claims". The moderator felt that this situation did not represent a community, since the sharing of personal information was discouraged, even though every effort was made to create a safe space for sharing. Another respondent believed that a safe space was the beginning of a community: "Creation of a safe place where feelings and opinions are freely expressed in a civil, caring ambiance makes the growth of community possible." Other aspects of creating a safe meeting space were "to require adherence to guidelines so that people treat each other well, and to encourage respect for diverse viewpoints," or to ensure that the communication stayed focused on list topics, in particular discouraging the flaming of new people who asked simple questions.

Performing Host/Hostess Duties

The Host/Hostess category was an addition to the moderators' role sets in this study, and ranked third of the eleven roles (see Tables 4-8 and 4-9). This role set had its genesis in participant observation and analysis of the discussion occurring on the moderators' discussion groups. The activities of an online Host/Hostess were conceived to be very similar to those in face-to-face groups and much of what a public online discussion group leader does falls into this category. Three respondents actively solicited new members for their discussion groups then encouraged them to participate freely. Greeting a new member happened in various ways including welcoming new people and letting them know from the moderator's own experiences they were not alone, with other members of the group following the moderator's lead. That moderator hoped that "Whenever someone can say, 'Oh, I have that same problem!' people know they belong here." Some moderators encouraged new members to post short biographies to introduce themselves to the community and acknowledged members who had arrived at membership milestones like 6 months or a year, or more.

Because it is disconcerting to post messages to a group and receive no replies, one moderator made a point of acknowledging member contributions both publicly and privately, and shared occasional personal details while pointing out common resources and inviting participation. Another moderator felt it was important to lead by example, so all new members were welcomed, and special

events and birthdays were acknowledged by sending appropriate e-greeting cards from both the moderator and other members. Another respondent said, "I offer congratulations, condolences (sic) etc. when they are appropriate and other communications to let them know they have the support of the group."

Changing the way the group software behaved could sometimes encourage a feeling of community, for example, by setting the list behavior to send replies directly to the list rather than to the original poster increasing the amount of information sharing among members. Another way was to maintain a list of current members so everyone could see who the group members were, with members encouraged to get to know each other on a personal basis.

For some groups, setting up different discussion topics or areas contributed to a sense of community. One moderator said:

> I usually have (or recommend) a topic area that is not restricted to a given thread/topic. Somewhat of a 'cafe' style area where anything goes. This usually facilitates community as people begin to find other common ground and shared interests that normally wouldnt (sic) be apparent during a normal on-topic discussion.

Moderators shared various other strategies for encouraging community: they implemented a peer reward system for discussion replies to posted questions, they posted job vacancies, organized and advertised local interest groups; identified commonalities beyond the main group identity; and co-ordinated, on a quilters' list, a short term, inexpensive gift-giving exchange.

Group Responsibility and Joint Governance

Some moderators believed strongly that the group space belonged to the members. The role of moderators in community building, then, was to

> let them be. Conflict is necessary to build community - a community is a group that has created a social contract for communication and the handling of inevtible (sic) conflict. A community that depends on the constant services of a referee can never become a mature community. People come to groups for freedom of expression - it is joyous and liberating. They often settle for less than that, but they are not happy when they do. Arguments do not hurt people - stifling hurts people.

Other ways included using “the imagery of the Round Table [to] encourage everyone to make their opinions known for the good of the group" and by involving the members in decisions about the community: "Although the ultimate decision is ours, the members know their views are respected and valued–illustrated by response when we ask for views and also the fact that some suggestions are acted upon". When moderators included some active participants in decision making and planning and offered connections among diverse participants the result was a communal sense of responsibility and empowerment.

Extension or Origin of Face-to-Face Meetings

Forty-eight of the respondents moderated groups that either had their genesis in face-to-face groups, or that had subsequent, face-to-face meetings for group members. One moderator said, "We're constantly looking for new

activities which will involve more people" and mentioned monthly dinner meetings, an annual ski day, a theme park visit, and golf meetings. Another responded: "We've had several face-to-face get-togethers in this part of the country and encourage others to do the same".

Two discussion groups with an international membership had moderators who traveled widely, while keeping in touch with the whole group online. One moderator said: "Some of us have met in Prague, other meetings planned, network of behind-the-scenes relationships, have met individuals for meals, have them stay if they were in my country."

Another well-traveled moderator reported:

> Face-to-face gatherings in 165 cities in 36 countries. Shared local leadership in planning or design teams. Almost-annual global gatherings of leaders and members. I travel to meet with groups and spread the word and ideas like Johnny Appleseed.

A respondent summarized the role of the host/hostess in community building in an online discussion group in these words:

> hosting Online chats in conferences, off-line meetings and outings where ever possible, developing a brotherlyhood amongst the people connected across the globe is slow and painstaking task but there many ways like helping individual users . . . which generates a feeling that help would be available in the group and this generates a faith/trust kind of thing that is more important for the people to remain connected and communicated as a part of a real-time community.

What Moderators' Enjoy about their Work

It is evident from this study that online discussion group moderators are still a largely unpaid, volunteer group, who provide, on their own time, a service that can be a time-consuming task (see Table 4-7) over extended periods of time. The perceived rewards must be at least sufficient to motivate over half of the respondents in this study, and to the Berge & Collins (1997) study, to continue as moderators for more than three years.

Analysis of the responses to the question "What do you enjoy most about what you do?" generated five themes. These themes expressed moderators' enjoyment with personal growth (their own and that of their group members) and providing a valued service; interpersonal connections for themselves and among group members; professional development and sharing knowledge; creating community; and receiving personal and professional recognition.

Personal Growth and Service

Personal growth came, one group of moderators said, from helping others who were dealing with issues they themselves had overcome, and knowing they could be in the same position again at any time. These respondents enjoyed a sense of self-discovery and group learning, coupled with watching new people develop into knowledgeable contributors to the discussion. One respondent especially enjoyed "the challenge of developing myself to come to an

understanding of different view points." Another appreciated the "opportunity to offer expertise, the opportunity to help people, the opportunity to discuss issues that matter to me, the opportunity to LEARN (sic), the feeling of comradeship/ cameraderie (sic) - as if we are all friends". Three moderators reported that their subscribers frequently expressed gratitude for the moderators' investment of time and effort, thus indicating that they were providing a useful service and had successfully helped their members while the efforts of another made the first discussion group for Aikido practitioners available.

Interpersonal Connections

Online discussion groups bring together people who might otherwise never have the opportunity to meet face-to-face and to make interpersonal connections that transcend national and international boundaries. Moderators reported enjoying participation in "an interactive manner with other real people working to solve issues or problems." The sense of connection was reflected in the friendships that formed between moderators and their group members, and among group members. One moderator reported finding it "particularly rewarding to have been able to attract such a helpful and compassionate group who, at the same time advocates a strong sense of self help and initiative". Another felt rewarded by having a chance to help build a global family in a professional way, learning from others while encouraging mutual support developing friendships, partnerships, and relationship that developed.

Moderators derived great satisfaction from creating safe online communities that helped people improve their lives by being involved in thought-provoking discussions or by sharing information they might otherwise have been unable to find.

Sharing Knowledge and Professional Development

The question-and-answer mode of much public online discussion leads to a great deal of knowledge sharing. One respondent, a content expert, "loved to talk about the topic" and to share her knowledge, and "loved to hear other people's opinions". Other moderators found the fast-paced discussions and the knowledge sharing that empowered others to be stimulating and satisfying.

For professionals, online discussion groups can function as informal professional development activities (Heuer, 1997; Medley, 1999; Reilly, 1999). Among people from all over the world, professionals kept up with news in their field, "getting scoops of what's important in my field". One moderator particularly enjoyed

> the stimulating free exchange of ideas among professionals, in a way that cost nothing and was the equivalent of an ongoing, asynchronous professional conference where knowledge was freely shared. Watching the flow of great ideas and interesting conversation. Seeing how a group of like-minded people can discuss and solve problems together, sometimes in surprisingly inventive ways.

Creating Community

The section above on community in public online discussion groups indicated the different ways that moderators believed they had contributed to the sense of community among their group members, so was not surprising that some moderators reported watching the birth/growth of a community to be a source of satisfaction. According to one respondent,

> Founding a group in 1995 that is flourishing in 2002 is rewarding. I am proud I had the idea, I named the list, and people are enthusiastic and consider it an important communication tool. I think the international film scene benefits tremendously; many people have been able to show their work around the world thanks to the list. I sometimes meet list members at film festivals which is rewarding, but would be even if I weren't the listowner.

Another found satisfaction in

> creating a sense of community and providing a friendly forum for discussion by members of the community. This is NOT an ego thing, it's to help grow a Greater Beloit. In the case of Moderator help, Antispam, Gene Wolfe, etc. groups -- they exist simply to inform people -- members AND non-members. (Or inform people on spam email issues).

Personal and Professional Recognition

One moderator said that, as a graduate student, she had sought the role of moderator of a large, international, online discussion group in their future professional field so that when she graduated from University and entered the job market, her name and record of service would be familiar to other members of their profession (and it worked!) In similar fashion, another moderator said: "I like

to promote the list and awareness of myself and my scholarly work through the list". "In the 'reward' category" another moderator welcomed "providing information, guidance, or explaining how to use a tool. Some list-owners, including me, sometimes get recognized for our work in providing these channels of communications".

Then there is always one in any group who says "It's not especially rewarding but someone needs to do it and it's not a whole lot of work for me".

Challenges and Difficulties Experienced by Online Moderators

It is difficult at best to communicate one-on-one in a text-based environment that lacks many of the social context cues and body language that are usually depended upon to add significantly to understanding (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Communication becomes a significant challenge when many personalities interact in online conversations on controversial topics. Dealing with difficult people was the number one, most challenging aspects of discussion group moderation. Others, according to these respondents, included keeping the group active, technical issues, and the time and effort that must be invested.

Dealing with Difficult People

"Childish 'intellectual food fights' between thin-skinned academicians with huge egos" was one moderator's picturesque characterization of a familiar

difficulty encountered with discussion group members. Others included “people who think they know everything therefore have the right to be rude to others”; "butting heads with the anti-censorship crowd"; dealing with those more interested in argument or promoting their views to the exclusion and condemnation of all others; dealing with flamers and people who have hidden agendas for being on the list (usually some kind of self-promotion or profit motive); and the occasional individual who wanted to use the list for personal, political purposes.

Moderators found it difficult to deal with "arrogant subscribers that continually pushed the boundaries of acceptable etiquitte (sic) for some personal benefit usually, self-ordained experts that sound-off just to hear the sound of their own voice." Moderators had to spend time and energy controlling tempers and flames, weeding out unstable characters who used discussion groups as their only social contact and who could become “too intense and passionate about discussions"; or watching for and controlling the unstable characters; and dealing with private squabbles among group members.

One particular nuisance moderators faced was the necessity of screening new users' first several posts to limit spam problems (people subscribing and immediately posting one or more commercial or pornographic messages). "So now new members are moderated, then set to an 'unmoderated mode' once they have proven that what they have to contribute is not spam, but a new voice."

Being civil to demanding or otherwise difficult group members was another reported challenge.

Keeping the Group Active

A discussion group requires continuing discussion to provide value to members, so one concern of moderators was to encourage those who read the group discussion but did not contribute (known as “lurkers” in Internet parlance) to become active participants. Discussion groups have fluctuations in conversation due to outside occurrences so maintaining the balance and flow of discussions when volume goes down during certain times of the month and year can be difficult. As one moderator remarked concerning these fluctuations,

> I don't know the reasons for the decline in participation. When I have checked I have found those reasons have varied from 'not interested in this question' to 'don't have anything to say on this subject' to 'got busy with stuff outside the group and haven't even been reading the messages'.

Difficulties are encountered, not only in keeping the conversation going, but in also in assuring the quality of the postings. One moderator reported finding it difficult to maintain the quality of the discussion, "getting and keeping threads running at a good enough depth to be useful, rather than dissipating into trivialities".

Technical Issues

Some respondents were systems administrators who faced the difficulties of maintaining software, keeping the servers linked to the Internet, and dealing with virus infestations and bouncing mail. Others complained of not having control over the technical environment of the group, of difficulties in educating members "who don't have a clue about what can make the list management software behave badly (vacation messages, excessive quoting, incorrect command formats, etc)", and of the volume of bounced messages and the time it takes to handle them. One respondent said, "anyone can request to subscribe/unsubscribe on a daily basis and you have to be up to the task every day. So, at times, it can get tiring if you're not having a good day".

Personal Investment of Time and Effort

As reported above, 45 percent of public discussion group moderators spend two or more hours a day working with their discussion groups, which represents a considerable time investment. This can mean that moderators “rarely just get to enjoy web surfing or reading articles that aren't about the groups” they moderate. The requirement to check frequently and to keep up with time-consuming administrative tasks, including just keeping up with reading the discussion postings “can become wearing," especially for reviewers. One moderator of a large group, remarked on the sense of loss of community from

lack of time to keep up: "We have so many members now that it is difficult to keep track of who is whom and who has what kids, etc.".

Two moderators were disabled and said their difficulties centered around "the physical aspects - sitting, using my hands, exacerbating the pain in my arms" and "my health is compromised and I can answer less and less queries. It is most difficult and challenging to have to decide whom to answer and whom to ignore and why. Or whether to remember there is life other than email in my own house. My code of ethics helps but not enough :-/". These moderators did find their interactions with group members were sufficiently rewarding, however, that they continued their efforts.

Desirable Personal Qualities for a Moderator

Patience was mentioned twenty-nine times as a desirable quality in an online discussion group moderator and it appeared to be greatly needed when dealing with difficult people and balking technology, as described above. The span of other qualities mentioned is wide, as the following responses indicate:

> Ability to differentiate topics from those writing them. Understanding the importance of stated list objectives and environment. Knowing how to implement the environment definition with compassion and firmness. Knowing how to detect and keep out undesirable activities by joiners who have no list objective in mind. Taking responsibility for managing the list so it operates smoothly from a technical perspective. Being available to members to handle queries - with a backup person. Making list members feel welcome. Encouraging the list activities towards meeting the list objective.

> The ability to weed through information (posts) and pull out the best examples -- and also the most diverse examples -- on a particular subject. Ability to lead a group impersonally yet personably. Ability to edit copy, manage subscribers and maintain professionalism. Ability to stick to deadlines. A book could be written on this subject, so I'll just stop now (respondent)

The other qualities identified cluster into five theme areas: vision and goals, interpersonal communication skills, care for people, content knowledge, and technical skills.

Vision and Goals

Discussion groups must have a clear focus, usually stated in the group guidelines, (as described above), because members join discussion groups that have topics that reflect their own interests and will leave if the discussion persistently drifts off into other areas. One respondent said that desirable qualities were to "be a well read Saint with clear vision and goals of the Mission and Vision of the List". Other desirable qualities included being accomplished in "the art of listening through the words written by members and having a clear focus on the goals of the list. Firm, fair list control provides an ambiance that is considered to be safe and conducive to civil discourse".

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Dealing with discussion group members in a text-based environment that lacks social context cues can tax a moderator's skills; so the ability to

communicate clearly online was mentioned by six moderators as being the most desirable. It was not just the "ability to speak/write clearly, but to understand someone's meaning and tone when it may not necessarily be clear due to writing styles" coupled with the "ability to smoothly translate spoken words to written" and to be a good conversationalist. Other qualities mentioned were “a gentle sense of humor that translates into the written medium, a reluctance to infer more than the written text says, a personal level of comfort with the medium, and a low need for personal reward in the group”.

One moderator who reviews all posts offered the following:

> excellent comunication (sic) skills - written articulateness, patience to read heaps - i think you have to read everthing (sic) at your board every day. an open mind, and tolerance to encourage those whose views you disagree with, to expand on, or clarify their views - to try to find meeting points for people and elucidate these for the rest of the audience. an organised sort of mind, capable of bringing structure to apparently disorganised (sic) comments/posts/discussion tangents kindness to people - a visible generosity of spirit.

The functional skills of typing and computing were also mentioned; someone who types slowly and reviews all posts is disadvantaged dealing with a busy–that is, talkative–group

Judging accurately when to intervene in an ongoing discussion was mentioned as a desirable skill, as was knowing how to do so in a way that fostered individual and group growth. This judgment sometimes depended on a moderator being able to understand both what people said and why others are critical about it and to be able to make them understand as well; to be able to always keep an eye on the process, and not jump naively engaged into the

discussion. The interventions, suggested one moderator, must display "the ability to stay objective and at the same time be supportive and show personal interest: sort of 'group godmother' with no personal stake". From another respondent's perspective: "it is important to know about the dynamics of group work, depending on what kind of group you are trying to build. Or, conversely, to let things go if you want a free flow of ideas... leting (sic) go is an art."

Other important interpersonal skills reported included generosity; benevolence; idealism; enthusiasm; energy; organization; a sense of fairness and objectivity; having a creative spark and kindness; having a passion for what one is doing and a desire to express that passion in a way no one else can duplicate; tolerance for ambiguity; having a deep love of people and all their messiness (not looking for uniformity or perfection); being a global learner; being self aware; and, finally, patience and humor; assertiveness; and tenacity.

Caring for Group Members

Caring for and appreciating group members was mentioned in different ways by six moderators. Such caring was expressed as love, the ability to tell the truth at a deep level, and willingness to take risks, for example, by sharing personal experiences, ideas, and lessons. Keeping one's temper and being fair were other ways in which moderators cared for their group members. Especially important is "an ability to fully understand that there are real people on the other

end of the keyboard" and to be non-judgmental, inclusive and open to different perspectives." One moderator summed it up:

> I am not sure, really. Whatever it is, I think I have them. A sense of people. An empathy for how others will perceive the list -- when enough is enough, when things are getting tedious -- basically the same skills needed to host a party -- how do people feel? -- is it boring? -- is it time to try something new? is it time to do introductions? (respondent)

Content Knowledge and Technical Skills

Members come to discussion groups to learn and to share information, as discussed above. Seven moderators believed that commitment to the general subject or purpose of the discussion group and familiarity with resource areas or persons in the group's subject area were valuable qualities. One moderator likened the desirable skills to:

> the same required of a good consultant/facilitator of any brainstorming session. (Get things going, get out of the way!) A passion for the professional field or topic and an absolute determination to see that all views get fully expressed in a free and open fashion.

Technical skills were also mentioned as important. For one respondent that meant "knowledge of managing a LISTSERV discussion group." and for other "technical knowledge of how list runs AND ability to engage others in conversation".

Recommended Training for New Moderators

Table 4-14 shows moderators' responses to the question "How did you learn to moderate online discussion?" for both this study and the Berge & Collins 1997 study. Moderators (81.9 percent) were most likely to jump in and learn as they went, but 70.9 percent had been group members and observed others as they moderated discussion. The least likely way of learning (checked by 5.5 percent of the respondents) was to have taken formal training as an online facilitator. This question asked respondents to "check all that apply". The percentages shown in Table 4-14 indicate the percentage of respondents who checked each item.

Table 4–14: How Moderators Learned Their Trade

	2002 Study % of cases	1997 Study % of cases
Just jumped into it	81.9	73.9
Observing others	70.9	31.9
Read or studied about it	29.9	50.0
Other moderator taught/mentored me	18.1	20.3
Formal training as a facilitator	5.5	2.9

Moderators were next asked what training they would recommend for someone who wants to become an online discussion moderator or facilitator.

There was considerable overlap between responses to the preceding question, as moderator training should develop those qualities most desirable in a discussion group moderator. While most of them reported having just "jumped in;" analysis of their responses to this question indicated they recommended some form of apprenticeship; joining and participating in online discussion groups, watching the moderator(s) and asking them a lot of questions, or joining a moderators' discussion group. Other avenues suggested were starting a list and jumping in, formal training in off-line group facilitation or online facilitation and getting a good grasp of both technical and content knowledge. Some respondents had no suggestions and others said training was not needed.

Formal or Informal Apprenticeship

Six moderators recommended some form of formal or informal apprenticeship as the best way to learn the roles, tasks and responsibilities. Subscription to quality discussion lists on varying topics was also recommended so that an apprentice could observe the moderators and the way the list runs. As one respondent suggested, "Ask the moderators questions about their jobs–you'll find they are happy to share. Post to the lists. You can't run one until you understand what it means to participate". Another recommended approach was to become part of a learning group in which participants role play as moderators and group members, giving each other practice in dealing with difficult situations.

Working closely with an active moderator was another suggestion, as was serving as a co-facilitator; doing the off-line work and discussing the dynamics of the list with the main facilitator; learning all of the off-line work while building up a strong understanding of ethics of the group and learning how to deal with disruptive members. One moderator felt that to become a moderator meant making a personal change and extending that into all spheres of life:

> Join a list of list moderators and read the archives, ask! ask! and ask again. Develop a personal standard of ethics to apply to everything. PRACTISE applying it to everything. Study how other list managers work, and why it works, doesn't work. Never take it personally - understand the difference between a topic and the person presenting it. On international lists know where the translation sites are, and intercede when language difficulties create misunderstanding - or allocate a bilingual list member to help you see the translation error (off list of course). Best approach there and in most things is not to assume but to ask the person what they meant. Management by artful persuation (sic) towards an objective is good to practise. You can practise by watching others manage and thinking how to do it by artful persuation (sic) towards an objetive (sic).

Just Jumping In

Four moderators specifically suggested that the best way to learn to be a moderator would be to start a group and "jumping in" and then to "do it for 5 years, 4 - 7 hours a day"; consistent practice; “telling list members you are new to the job, and asking for help with problems, is perfectly acceptable" and paying close attention to what bothers you were strategies recommended by respondents.

Formal Training in Management or Group Facilitation

Seven moderators noted the value of formal training in discussion group facilitation or management. Because such online training is not generally available, moderators suggested several alternatives, including general group facilitating experience, a grounding in basic group facilitation skills and theories, training in how to be a face-to-face discussion moderator/facilitator, taking assertiveness training and developing mediation skills. One moderator, who likened online discussion group moderating to supervising people in face-to-face settings, believed that those skills were somewhat similar, for some settings. Another moderator had formal training in another setting that had proved useful:

> I have (Australian) level 2 training in teaching which comes in handy but isn't essential. It taught me how to deal with a group of people discussing a topic & what to do when it gets out of hand without hurting the feelings of any one person.

Know the Content

One moderator stated this requirement very strongly: "READ, READ, READ -- KNOW YOUR SUBJECT - be an expert or know how to find and talk to experts". Moderators frequent start groups in content areas where they are experts. Such groups quickly gather other experts, which in turn attracts those who want to learn from the experts, but may not have access to them in their own physical locations.

Technical Training

Most moderators have to deal with administrative matters at one time or another and need to be "at least one page ahead of the rest of the group on the technical aspects". Eight moderators passed along their opinions on this topic. For discussion groups that were maintained using listserver software, moderators suggested training in the "email basics and the list management software are essential . . . email server software, advanced Internet priciples, (sic) and SMTP [Small Mail Transfer Protocol] other e-mail systems, mail delivery problems, list configuration options and where to go for help." Many public online discussion groups are maintained on web-based software (like Yahoo! Groups) group owners have access to around-the-clock technical support and tutorials.

No Training is Needed

Four moderators responded by saying "no training required!" Another said that since the "Internet hasn't been around forever, we've all learned on the job. I do think it's important that lists arise from necessity. If I hadn't started my list, someone else would have". Another respondent suggested that all that is necessary is computer literacy, motivation, interpersonal skills, and general knowledge. Another moderator was even more emphatic:

> NONE!! They should simply participate in the group at first, begin to care about it, and bring their own unique skills and perspectives. We have over professionalized (sic) the universe by developing

pedagogical skill sets that lock people out of roles any smart adult can perform".

No Idea

Three moderators said that they had no idea what kind of training would be appropriate. Although they had had none, but one reported having received compliments on his approach and expressive ability with list subjects; and another respondent offered, "that is a question I have been asking for the past three years. I do not know."

Membership in Moderators' Online Discussion Group

As Table 4-15 shows, 68.8 percent of the respondents to this study belong to at least one online discussion group for moderators. This allows them to "meet" with their peers and enjoy the benefits of discussion, collaborative problem

Table 4–15: Membership in Moderators' Online Group

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	86	68.8
No	39	31.2
		100

solving, and access to the latest news of potential virus problems. They also had access to the group's store of accumulated wisdom concerning the intricacies of the software platform that is supporting their discussion group(s). One of these public online discussion groups, LSTOWN-L, was created in 1986 for the use of those using LISTSERV software, a platform that was subsequently adopted by many educational institutions. This group has many members who have been part of the group since 1987 and have seen several significate updates and platform migrations in that time.

Analysis of 92 responses to the follow-up question regarding membership in a discussion group for moderators: "If Yes, what benefits do you derive from your participation in that group?" indicated that 24 percent felt they received little or no benefit from their membership. However, some of the reasons cited included being too new to the group, the inactivity of a particular group, or, in one case, the belief that the respondent helped others more than being helped by other group members. The remaining responses grouped into two categories: knowledge-sharing, including technical information, and social support. One moderator's comment sums it up these responses:

> Many others are much more technically advanced and I've learned tremendous amounts from them. Also, others have developed good ways of dealing with problems and issues before I have even encountered them. Sharing resources and experiences has been enormously helpful Also, it's interesting to see how many different ways and views of moderating there are.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to describe online discussion group moderators' perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities based on an analysis of their responses to the first of two questionnaires used in this study. Further it was noted how those perceptions influenced their day-to-day activities. This analysis was in support of the first of the research questions posed in this study. In Chapter 5 I will discuss how the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of online discussion group moderators compare and contrast with those of adult learning facilitators in formal educational settings, as presented in the adult education literature. This will be followed by an examination of moderator's perceptions of themselves as adult education practitioners.

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CHAPTER 5

MODERATORS AS ADULT EDUCATORS: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research was conducted in three intersecting phases. The first questionnaire extended Berge and Collins' longitudinal study of online discussion group moderators along the research lines they suggested (Berge & Collins, 2000, p. 97), i.e., into the realm of non-academic online discussion groups. This aspect of the overall study was reported and discussed in Chapter 4.

The second research question of this study investigated the similarities and differences between the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of public online discussion group moderators and those of adult education discussion facilitators, as described in the Adult Education literature, to establish if moderators were, indeed, adult education practitioners. The study concluded with a third question, answered by incorporating an examination of responses to one question in the first questionnaire and responses to the follow-up questionnaire to elaborate on moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult education practioners.

This chapter will examine responses to the second and third research questions:

- In what ways do moderators' roles, tasks, and responsibilities compare and contrast with the skills and activities suggested for discussion facilitators/moderators in formal adult education settings, as presented in the literature?
- What, if any, are moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators?

The first of the research questions above sought to compare and contrast online discussion group moderator's roles, tasks, and responsibilities with those who lead or facilitate discussion in formal adult education settings. This comparison was accomplished in two parts. First, the definitions of adult education practitioners were examined to determine if online discussion group moderators met the criteria, based on their roles, tasks and responsibilities.

As noted in Chapter 4 and presented in Table 5.1, online discussion group moderators and those formally recognized as adult educators share a number of roles. The primary role they share is one identified in the adult education literature as perhaps the defining role for adult educators in informal contexts: that of discussion facilitator or leader. For this reason the focus of this comparative analysis is on the prescribed characteristics and behaviors of discussion leaders. Discussion is the primary mode of knowledge construction in public online discussion groups, so the guidelines offered by Brookfield as a recognized authority on teaching and learning by discussion among adults in formal educational settings (Brookfield, 1986; Brookfield, 1990; Brookfield, 2000;

Brookfield & Preskill, 1999) were used as a basis for comparing what formal adult educators are expected to do and what online moderators actually do, as determined by the research reported in Chapter 4.

After the first question above has been addressed, the responses to the question in the first questionnaire concerning moderators' perceptions of themselves as *educators of adults* will be presented and discussed as those responses were a precursor and an impetus to the elaboration questions in the second questionnaire (see Appendix B). This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the data derived from the follow-up questionnaire.

Literature Definitions of "Adult Educator"

Knowles (1980, p. 26) broadly defines an adult educator as "one who has some responsibility for helping adults to learn" and goes on to list persons who, while not "conscious that they are performing the increasingly precisely defined role of an 'adult educator'" nevertheless fit within his broad definition. These persons include

> discussion leaders in such voluntary associations as women's clubs, men's clubs, service organizations, labor unions, trade associations, farmers' organizations, and the like . . . to the extent that all of these assignments involve helping other adults to become more competent, they have a common element–what we might call an adult education component. And to this extent all the people carrying these kinds of assignments are partly adult educators. (p. 26)

Some moderators in this survey denied being adult educators, and yet they, at the very least, provided the venue where online learning could take place, and at the most, provided resources and led discussion. As indicated in Chapter 4, sharing knowledge was a motivator that added to moderator's enjoyment of their task, as was creating a safe place for discussion and sharing. Longworth (1996) extends the definition of an adult educator further:

> There is a vast number of people who would not describe themselves as teachers but who nevertheless pass on information, knowledge, understanding and, sometimes, wisdom. They include parents, friends, neighbors, doctors, lawyers, councilors, scout and guide leaders, political and religious leaders, journalists, television presenters, comedians and actors. When we cast our minds back to the people who have influenced who and what we are we can usually find more examples from these groups of people than from the formal teaching we received. Museums, libraries and churches are not a part of the formal system but they affect the values and attitudes of many people. They are all part of our own personal community of learning. They stimulate or kill our desire to learn (p. 141).

It is evident from moderators' own words, reported in Chapter 4, that they did indeed pass along information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. The online discussion group moderators in this study came from all walks of life and less than 10 respondents were actually involved in formal higher education.

Adult Educators as Discussion Facilitators in Formal, Academic Settings

Any group of adults formally or informally associating for the purpose of learning usually has one or several persons who could be identified as the group's leader(s), organizer(s), or (sometimes) rotating chair(s) (Cranton, 1996,

p. 15). In formal, academic settings that person may also bear the label of *teacher*.

Brookfield (1986) stresses that the image of the traditional teacher is coupled with the notion of authoritarian classrooms derived from primary and secondary school, an image often carried over into higher education experiences. One study participant remarked "*educator* for me has a dark side, based on the way people who give themselves that label adopt a style of self-importance and grandiloquence". Adult educators, in reaction to this kind of pervasive image, stress their investment in the "emotional and congenial aspects of their practices" (Brookfield, 1986, p. 123) and often prefer to be called *facilitators* or *resource persons* to emphasize the democratic and student-centered nature of their practice.

The weakness that Brookfield perceives as inherent in this viewpoint is that adult learners are assumed to be, by definition, self-knowledgeable and critically aware of their own learning needs, and can fulfill them without external prompting. This viewpoint also assumes that adults, in their personal quest for self-actualization, would be willing to voluntarily undertake a rigorous analysis of their unchallenged and internalized assumptions, beliefs and values. This process is, under the best of circumstances, likely to be an uncomfortable-to-painful activity.

As a result, Brookfield believes that the teacher of adults' task "is to help them to realize that the bodies of knowledge, accepted truths, commonly held

values, and customary behaviours (sic) comprising their worlds are contextual and culturally constructed" (1986, p. 125). Adult educators are also charged, Brookfield notes, "with the imperative of assisting adults to contemplate alternatives, to come to see the world as malleable, to be critically reflective, and to perceive themselves as proactive beings" (1986, p. 125). Public online discussion group moderators have not claimed–and in some cases, as noted below–vehemently denied feeling such an imperative, although these tasks may be fulfilled in the discussion by other group members.

Brookfield's 1986 description of the adult educators' tasks noted above is consistent with his later statements in the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). In reference to Horton and Freire's "blending of elements of pragmatist and constructivistic thought into an outline of praxis grounded in the collaborative but critical analysis of experience" (Horton & Freire, 1990), Brookfield notes that these adult educators "are flexible and experimental in their methods, honoring the constructivist belief that knowledge and understanding are waiting to be created rather than existing in some *a priori* dimensions beyond human intervention" (Brookfield, 2000, p. 38). Brookfield continues:

> The adult educator's task is that of helping people articulate their experience in dialogic circles and then encouraging them to review this through the multiple lenses provided by colleagues in the circle. On the basis of these collaborative critical reflections on experience reenter the world to take critically informed actions that are then brought back to the circle for further critical analysis (p. 38-39).

While couched in the terms of academic adult education settings, these same principles describe the form and function of online discussion and apply equally well to the roles that moderators' assume when they directly and indirectly guide the dialogue that occurs in their groups.

Merriam and Brockett (1997), in their definition of terms, note that the preferred term for *teacher* or *instructor* in adult education is *facilitator,* to denote "a more collaborative, student-centered focus" (p. 16). These *facilitators* are those who function in formal adult education settings that are distinguished from informal settings, like online discussion groups, by "the planned activities" and "systematic, organized events intended to bring about learning" (p. 6). Some online discussion group moderators do arrange for “guest speakers” who join the list for variable lengths of time and respond to members’ questions.

Merriam and Brockett (1997) define an adult education *practitioner* as "anyone involved at whatever level in the planning and implementation of learning activities for adults; the term is generally interchangeable with *adult educator*" (p. 16). Quoting Usher and Bryant (1989, p. 2), Merriam and Brockett point out that practitioners' "consciousness of having an educational role in working with adults" resides along a wide continuum ranging from "the full-time 'professional' educator of adults (to) the individual whose vocational and non-vocational activities have repercussions for adult learning." This moves the definition of *adult educator* squarely into the public online discussion group moderators' realm of practice. Merriam and Brockett continue: "whether or not

one identifies oneself as an adult educator–or is even aware of the role–varies with the setting and level of professional preparation" (pp. 16-17). It is in terms of *adult education practitioner* that moderators of public online discussion groups roles, tasks and responsibilities could best be described.

Six Principles of Effective Practice of Discussion Facilitators

Brookfield (1986, pp. 11-16) sets forth six principles of effective practice for those who facilitate adult learning, with his qualification that these "apply chiefly to the teaching-learning transactions or to curriculum development and instructional design activities that support teaching-learning encounters" (p. 9) in academic settings. When I first read these principles in 1995, I was immediately struck, because of my acquaintance with online learning environments, by their applicability to the transactions between moderators (monitors and reviewers) and online discussion group members. This connection would not have been so obvious in 1989 when Brookfield wrote his principles as the use of public online environments for adult learning was in its infancy. These principles are discussed below and the data gathered from the moderators responding to this study will be compared and contrasted with the principles.

Participation in learning is voluntary; adults engage in their learning as a result of their own volition.

Both professional adult educators and moderators are dealing with voluntary populations. Members join public discussion lists out of their own interests and

stay for as long as that interest is sustained. Moderators sometimes actually publicize or promote their groups to encourage more persons to join. As has been shown above, one of the challenges for moderators is to keep discussion flowing and active in their discussion groups, as it is participation in ongoing discussion that keeps members coming back and actively engaged in the discussion group (Rojo, 1995). As one moderator said, "Funny - my other volunteer work is with an adult education organization! As a moderator, I am definitely engaged in adult education."

Effective practice is characterized by a respect among participants for each other's self worth.

Adult educators are enjoined to avoid, and discourage in their group members any behaviors, practices or statements that belittle others or involve emotional or physical abuse, and that attention to increasing adults' sense of self worth should underlie all facilitation efforts (Brookfield, 1986, p. 10). Respectful communication is generally a characteristic of online group discussion that moderators exemplify, encourage and, in some cases, enforce. Moderators, even those who took a "hands-of" approach, and claimed that the discussion space belonged to the participants, stepped in if members started to "flame" one another. Appropriate communication behaviors and norms were encoded into discussion group guidelines (See Appendix C) and moderators referred to those guidelines when they were breached, as a first step to encourage respectful behavior among participants. As one study participant commented: "I consider

myself a facilitator of the education of adults. I see knowledge being shared and I learn a lot from this. Seeing people 'talk' through differences and reach a compromise shows progression to me." Another moderator had a slightly different perspective: "Generally the adults take care of themselves, and only when someone lacks the matiruty (sic) to fit into that, do I take on the role of educator of adults".

Facilitation is co-operative . . .at different times and for different purposes, leadership roles will be assumed by different group members.

Fifty-six percent of the respondents considered themselves "peers" of their group members, and maintained the role of "one among equals," and encouraged the group members to contribute their expertise. An online discussion group has no "front of the room" and there are no situational clues to status and leadership positions. Leadership authority in such groups is definitely by consent of those led. In some online discussion groups there are those with expert status who lead discussion in areas of their own expertise. One study participant commented, "I think that the role of a moderator is best suited to one who has expert power rather than legitimate power".

Praxis . . . is to be involved in a continual process of activity, new activity, further reflection and collaborative analysis etc.

Brookfield (1986, p. 10) notes that this also applies to cognitive activity. Exploring new ways of interpreting work, personal relationships or political allegiances are indicators of activity in the sense in which he is using the term

“praxis”. Members of online discussion groups can ask questions about activities in their own situations, answer the questions of others, exchange thoughts, ideas and opinions, learn about the list topic, get help solving problems and find peers interested in the same topic. Other group members will offer and debate suggestions and solutions (Berge & Collins, 2000, p. 95). Logs of online group discussion often show a question posed, several solutions offered, and a subsequent report back of a result or consequence, which then engenders further conversation. The moderator may facilitate discussion and ensure civility when emotionally-charged topics are discussed. One study participant acknowledged the reciprocal nature of knowledge sharing: "Definitely, I consider myself an educator, sharing my knowledge of the topic and directing the group to other appropriate on-line and off-line resources. I'm also a learner, receiving information and guidance from my membership, many of whom are more knowledgable (sic) on various aspects of the topic than I". Another respondent noted the process of education and advocacy:

> I think I educate a lot of people as do various members on our list. Many people show up knowing very little about Asperger's Syndrome, high functioning autism, medications, behavior therapies and the rules of special education law. They are overwhelmed and confused. We are able to help them sort it out and learn more information so that they can go out and advocate better for their kids. I think the majority of what I do anymore is this - educating adults.

Facilitation aims to foster in adults a spirit of critical reflection.

Moderators, by creating a safe conversational space, provide an opportunity for group members to critically reflect in the conversation and sometimes vigorous

debate among discussion group members. Observation of discussion occurring in online discussion groups for moderators showed that assumptions were constantly challenged and group members often came “to question many aspects of their professional, personal and political lives" (Brookfield, 1986, p. 11).

The aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults. As indicated in Chapter 4, moderators reported caring about their group members and derived satisfaction from watching and assisting their personal growth. Moderators who function as discussion monitors and who consider themselves as peer learners deliberately avoid taking an overt leadership role, but encourage group members to educate each other in response to the expressed needs of group members. As one respondent said, "professional development of other dance teachers is one of my major areas of concern (currently doing a masters degree in education, with a view to putting such a course online for dance teachers, and will use a BB in that)". Another respondent remarked, "I find myself slipping into a mentoring role quite frequently and many times the people I am helping are older than I am. So in a sense, I am an educator of adults more often than not".

Sometimes the consequences of these principles for effective practice are the same in both face-to-face and online contexts. It is not always because of the actions of the discussion “leader” but occurs through the actions of the group members themselves.

The Issues of Power and Authority

A critical difference between adult educators in formal settings and public online discussion group moderators is in the exercise of power and authority. Students are always aware of the differential in power between themselves and the *learning facilitator* despite any effort by the adult educator to refuse to dominate the group. "It is disingenuous to pretend that as educators we are the same as students" Brookfield states (2000, p. 40). His advice shows a radical departure from what an online discussion group moderator would express concerning power in their practice:

> Better to acknowledge publicly of position of power, to engage learners in deconstructing that power, and to attempt to model a critical analysis of our own source of authority in front of them. This involves us in becoming alert to, and publicly admitting, oppressive dimensions to our practice so that learners, colleagues, and literature have helped us to see (p. 40).

An online discussion group moderator exercises no such power, so deconstruction in that manner is moot. Thirty-four percent of the moderators responding to this study identified themselves as leaders in their groups, and 53 percent identified themselves as peers to group members. However, these "peers" were endowed, by the software that runs their groups, with the power to sanction (put on review) and remove persons from the group, when they believed it to be necessary, thus silencing their voices. This "silencing" can also occur in face-to-face groups if a facilitator refuses to acknowledge attempts to participate, sanctions those who offer minority or dissenting opinions, or they can eject a member from the group.

As indicated in Chapter 4, moderators sometimes write and always police the guidelines that govern the group communication processes and can be as democratic, autocratic and/or despotic as they choose, with little recourse open to the group members. However, discussion group members can "vote with their feet" and voluntarily leave the group. It is difficult to be a leader if there is no one to lead, or to hold a conversation in an empty space.

Like other "invisible" aspects of the online world, conscious recognition of the moderator's "power" by group members is usually submerged in the background, unless an incident arises that brings it back to the group's attention. This may well be because online moderators cannot be seen (unlike a face-to-face discussion group leader or facilitator), so their presence can be ignored, or taken for granted.

Summary: Research Question 2

Table 5.1 shows the moderators' roles that are consistent with those explicated as best practices in the adult education literature. There are, however, a number of roles that are applicable to online discussion group moderators

Table 5.1: Moderators' Adult Education Practitioner Functions

Role	Indicators
Discussion facilitator	Peer discussion participant; mediator; may interject questions and/or comments to stimulate/re-direct/encourage group discussion
Discussion leader	May structure discussion; specify discussion topics; pose questions/issues or otherwise promote discussion; keep discussion "on track"; may summarize and conclude discussion topics; may invite guest experts
Expert	Expert in the list's topic; may compile or answer Frequently Asked Questions; may suggest off-list resources; may serve as a reference source for discussion participants
Firefighter	Douses or rejects "flames", monitors appropriate list behavior, may sanction offenders publicly or privately
Helper	Helps people with needs within the list's focus area - more general than expert; responds, as peer, to questions, shares information, resources
Host/ Hostess	Welcomes new members; may orient them, explicitly or by example, to group procedures, processes, culture; may make discussion contributions oriented towards maintaining a congenial and/or welcoming tone to the discussion

But do moderators perceive themselves as adult educators? The next section presents the responses to the question in the first survey concerning moderators' perceptions of themselves as "educators of adults," followed by the results of the subsequent, emailed survey to probe the dimensions of those perceptions.

Moderators' Perception of Themselves as Adult Educators

In the first questionnaire respondents were asked "In your role as an online discussion moderator, to what extent do you consider yourself an

"educator of adults?" Seventy-seven respondents (57 percent) in this study stated that they considered themselves as an "educator of adults" either unequivocally, or responded in "Yes, but . . . " mode. Even among the 22 percent who did not consider themselves adult educators, there were many responses of the "No, but . . ." variety.

The sharing of new information and knowledge is considered to be one of the moderator's primary roles, with one respondent believing that "most listserve (sic) to which I subscribe exist primarily as a way for members to share information". Examples of specific information shared among group members are indicated in the following comments:

- I feel I do offer lots of education to new parents or those newly dealing with issues (breastfeeding, depression...). I thoroughly enjoy researching and sharing my own personal experiences.
- I try to educate everyone who joins my groups to encourage everyone they know to be a responsible pet owner and have their pets spayed or neutered.
- I was the list owner for the 12 Internet Writing Workshop lists. In that capacity, I considered myself a classroom teacher and the 'school principal.' As a matter of fact, one of the lists I own still is the list owners' list for the workshop, which we refer to as 'The Teachers' Lounge.'

For some moderators, their online activities are an extension of their face-to-face work. One respondent, working in a religious, non-profit setting, filled a

discussion moderator's role in several different contexts: "The online setting was just a change of setting, with (of course) the different dynamics that go with that setting".

In describing some of their activities as adult educators, moderators indicated that they were fulfilling the role clusters described in Chapter 4. Because new members joined groups on a continuous basis, they needed to be informed about the group's conversational rules and to have their questions answered, so moderators assumed the role of *helpe*r. When a topic appeared that required some research they assumed an *expert* role and that of a *marketer* when "marketing a restricted list that requires looking for the best places to 'get the word out'". Taking the role as a *filter* one respondent noted that

> (It) is amazing (believe me!!) how nonsensical some posts can appear when considered in the light of the full discussion. Is obvious in those circumstances that the user has focused only on a particular point, instead of looking at the 'broader picture'".

Another respondent admitted to being more a facilitator than an educator: "For me I do it because so many people gave me so much good information for a long time".

Six respondents to this question apparently had not considered themselves as adult educators until the question was asked; then they realized it was an accurate description. One respondent’s answer exemplifies this group:

> Good question. It is true, but I don't realize it till someone says that to me. I'm not there for the 'education' except of myself. If I am able to pass something along to others, that is just a side benefit, not my objective, so I don't tend to think of myself as an 'educator'".

Twenty-two percent of the respondents to this question indicated that they did not believe themselves to be adult educators, believing that the mere provision and maintenance of meeting space did not qualify them for that title, These respondents believed themselves in all other ways to be a peer to group members and a member of a community of scholars. One said, "We all are educated through participation in the list community. I simply provide the list and maintain a safe place for civil discussion of list topics". Another respondent remarked "In no way at all am I an educator, unless I post something intelligent like any list member should". One respondent who arranged for “guest speakers” in their group said "Some of our celebrity chats are with medical experts, MPs, etc and I suppose these are for educational purposes" and another respondent from a medically-oriented group said "Hmmmm... not very much. Well, an educator about the disorder in which we're all gathered together, but otherwise, no, not an educator". In one case it appeared as if being an adult educator was equated with being paid to do it: "I do not educate. I educate in my consulting practice and get paid for it. The group does not pay me."

A specific distinction was made by three respondents between fulfilling the role of a moderator and that of an "educator." For these respondents, moderation was the content-neutral facilitation of discussion, i.e., performing the management functions of the group, like helping others navigate around, and keeping the conversation flowing and cordial. Educators, on the other hand, were considered to be a subject matter experts, sharing their knowledge in a way

from which other group members can learn. An example of this type of response follows:

> I don't exactly understand the question. Basically, for the lists I run I am *not* the expert. I am the experienced moderator, I am the expert on my duties. But there will usually be a handful of expert posters who will be the most knowledgeable about their subjects. These are the 'educators' in my opinion. That said, a moderator has no choice but to become very learned in the topics their list covers -- you have no choice by reading thousands and thousands of posts.

Also of interest was the disdain in the tone of two of the negative responses, as if these respondents held a negative attitude towards the notion of *educator of adults*: "NOT AT ALL! Yech, the term sounds just horrible" and "To no extent. Too pompous a claim".

Summary: How Respondents Feel About Being "Educator of Adults"

While fifty-seven percent of all the respondents did consider themselves to some extent to be adult educators, a minority of the respondents had difficulties with the term "adult educator." Many of the respondents who claimed not to consider themselves "educators of adults" still met the criteria of "having some part in facilitating adult learning". Their function as adult education practitioners may be at the basic level of providing a venue in which that learning can occur rather than facilitating the sharing of complex content knowledge. The role of an "educator of adults" is clearly not part of their own self-concept, even in the most informal sense.

The Follow-up Questionnaire

A short, follow-up survey was emailed to the 116 respondents who had provided their email addresses, thereby assenting to follow-up questions (see Appendix B). Four messages were returned as undeliverable. The following discussion reports on 44 responses, four of them from education professionals. All responses were received within four days of the email distribution. Response patterns to this research study indicate a prompt return on inquiries sent to individual email addresses with a salutation, by name, to the addressee, but not to messages broadcast to various discussion groups.

The questions in the follow-up questionnaire were based, in part, on Merriam & Brockett's concerns about the invisibility of practitioners who may be fully engaged in the practice of adult education, but who neither identify with the profession nor are involved with the academic adult education establishment (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). The questionnaire was prefaced with the words: "As an online discussion owner/monitor/moderator:" to direct respondents' thinking into that particular context.

Online discussion group as a place where learning occurs

To establish moderators' beliefs about online discussion groups as a venue for adult learning, they were asked, "Do you believe that one reason group members participate (posting or just reading) in your group is so they can learn?"

All 44 respondents believed, that it was, and in the words of one respondent, "this may not surface as the primary explicit motivator, but I do believe a learning agenda is a key intrinsic motivator". This response is consistent with the findings of a number of other researchers (Coglan & Stevens, 2000; Collins & Berge, 1996a, 1996b; Dewar, 1996; Haavind, 1999; Harasim, 1986; Heuer, 1997). The moderators' responses indicated that their group members visited or joined their groups to get useful information or answers to specific questions. Some members joined to find information, others appeared to derive considerable satisfaction from being the expert informant in the group, while still others sought reassurance in their own practice. One respondent described a particular group as "designed to be a place where folks can ask their peers for help, suggestions, advice, criticism, etc.". Members variously sought community and social connections or networking; in-person association and friendship-building; and interaction with persons of similar interests.

One respondent reported that online support groups provided a supportive haven for those with medical conditions who have difficulty with conventional heath care and finding sufficient current treatment information:

> Yes, I think that is one of the initial reasons for people coming to our group. We are health related, and fall in the cracks where conventional medicine, either can't or won't go. We advocate a complementary approach to health care, combining conventional and alternative methods. Our success is based in our effectiveness in giving relief for people who are suffering severe symptoms. After that, they stay on the list to assist in others who need help and share their experiences with the various health care methods they use.

Moderators Playing an Educational Role

When asked "Do you believe you play an educational role for the members of your group(s)?", 52.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they definitely did, 34 percent said they did, to some degree, and 13.7 percent said that they definitely did not. There appeared to be a strong sense among these latter moderators that learning in an online discussion group was a collaborative effort with the group members looking to each other, rather than to the moderator for "THE ANSWER(S)," for example:

> as a group we have certain fundamental things that we know work in a vast majority of people, when they are suffering and can get no help from their doctors. To that extent, all list veterans are educators, but we prefer to view it as a sharing process, rather than an educational process. There are no rock hard truths in this... Only experiences and results that can be shared to indicate a potential solution for our newer people. On the cutting edge aspect of the group, it's our members who are seeing specialists who bring back information and help the people who have had some success and not quite completely healed from their infections/infestations (moderator of a health oriented group).

When analyzing the answers to this question it became evident that the moderators were using some indicators to determine, for themselves, if they played an educational role. Examples of such indicators included sharing information, experience, and their expert opinion; being a peer learner, teacher and "connector"; creating and maintaining a virtual learning space and facilitating the discussion that happened there; and creating the conditions under which members could network with each other.

Self-identification as an Adult Educator.

The responses to the next question–"To what extent do you identify yourself as an adult educator?"–indicated that only 41 percent believed that "adult educator" was part of their personal identity. Fifty percent said it was not part of their self-identity and 7 percent made distinctions such as the following

> Yes and no–I do not preside magisterially over the ebb and flow of discussion. Sometimes I provide answers to inquiries. In the sense that I make the common-room atmosphere (for discussion) possible, and act as a facilitator, yes.

One respondent made an apparent distinction between "playing an educational role" which might be interpreted as a "ordinary person" activity, and "adult educator," which had a connotation more closely aligned with formal educational institutions.

> Only to the extent that I sometimes try and bring my specific knowledge into the discussion. In that way yes, I hope they benefit from what I have to say. In a general way, by having created the discussion group, yes I hope they benefit from that, but there was never an educational intent in doing it, only a communication network for the general greater good of all.

Another respondent, “the moderator and/or list owner on close to 50 email lists,” explained the perception that this role was largely management and technical support:

> Most of the time, I am facilitating the functionality of the online community, but not responsible for the content that is shared on the list. When relevant information does cross my path, I will certainly send it to the appropriate lists and in that sense I then act as an educator.

One respondent described a role not as that of an educator but "primarily one of policing, promoting and perusing" and another offered that the moderator role was "not intentionally (as) an adult educator, other than in normal conversational exchanges of interests". A third respondent made a distinction between the technical and managerial support role and the roles of those he considered to be the "educators" in the group:

> Generally, no - Taking the kosher group again as an example, I'm "Mr IT", making sure it all runs smoothly, however there are 2 non-technical moderators who initiate postings and moderate member input. They would more probably earn the title 'educators'.

Adult Education as a Field of Study

When asked if they knew about adult education as a field of academic study, only four persons–all of whom had degrees in education–gave an unqualified "Yes". One, a minister by profession, noted the expansion of the field in the past 30 years:

> Adult Education had much less formal literature 30 years ago, when I was first preparing for my professional work. I did take several classes that looked at education in general and the education of adults as a piece of that course. Since entering a phd program in 1998 I have taken a deeper and more formal look at the literature of the field, both religious and secular elements.

Another of the professionals responded "Have been involved in the practice of adult ed for 14 yrs and have done formal studies in the field and have presented at conferences on the topic of adult ed."

Thirty-six percent of the moderators responded that they knew something, or very little about the field, and 32 percent said they knew "nothing" about adult education as a field of study. Two persons responded to this question with brief definitions of adult education. Seven respondents (16 percent), based on their answers to this question, seemed to be adult education practitioners, and yet they knew little about the academic field of adult education. One respondent said, "I have taken "some" adult education, but I'm not one for formal education, more of a self-taught individual". Another claimed not to know a great deal about adult education, saying, "I kind of fell into my work and became a trainer of adults as a result of the way my work developed. I have explored theories of adult learning and do take a particular approach in my training, i.e., experiential learning", Yet another practitioner claimed to know "surprisingly little given that, in the past, I have taught both university students and adult ESL students, and have written a grant proposal for a university-level distance education project. Another respondent expressed some confusion: "Don't know what you mean. I've read some articles, listened to some talks, and observed projects that featured 'adult learning theory.' They weren't labeled 'adult education' so I'm not sure if it's the same thing".

Relevance of the Academic Discipline of Adult Education

When asked, "What, if any, relevance does the academic discipline of adult education have for you?", thirty-six persons–81 percent of the

respondents–replied that it had no relevance.. One respondent asked what "the academic discipline of adult education" was, and another responded with the notion of adding credibility to the field in general:

> Such a discipline would lead to dean and vice-president positions in the Management of continuing education. Academic credentials in this area might provide assurances to academic and business institutions of the integrity of their non-credit instruction and that it is being managed wisely.

One respondent related this question to personal educational preparation:

> I have three years of college courses preparing for an on campus education, after I finished high school. I had advanced in my job to the point that I didn't want to leave such a good start, so I never finished. That was considered an adult education curriculum, but they were all standard on campus courses, shortened for an abbreviated curriculum load for working people. As far as learning to teach adults, I have not taken any courses in that area.

Four persons appeared to be aware of the discipline; they were interested, but not motivated to learn more. Another respondent was sure that it might be relevant, but they didn't know enough to judge. Another respondent was critical of the discipline "None. Academic discipline has degraded into specialized job training and nothing else. True adult education would have to be something along the lines of Plato's Academy, which is the type of environment we have at my e-group".

The respondents to this study included four professional educators working in higher education and one who was completing a doctorate. For those respondents the academic field of adult education had great relevance. One said that it was a critical discipline to his professional life as he worked with adults and adult education was part of his doctoral program. Another respondent worked for

a corporation that developed educational materials for the K-12 market, focusing on professional development materials for teachers. The respondent whose profession was adult and continuing education found the academic discipline of adult education to be of "continual important relevance" and another practitioner claimed "I have found the academic discipline and adult ed theory have underpinned my practice as an adult educator. I have been able to use the knowledge and experience of other academics in improving and broadening my practice".

Formal Academic Coursework in Adult Education

Among the 44 respondents only seven persons (16 percent) had taken formal academic courses in adult education. Two persons had degrees in adult education; a third person had taken courses in the process of attaining a degree in educational technology and a fourth in psychology. Two persons had taken "adult education" courses–one respondent specified Welding I and II, the other "non-accredited courses in Training Skills and Methods". One person had not been able to complete her degree studies: "I have level 1 and level 2 training as an adult education teacher, but didn't graduate level 2 because of distance factors living in the Australian bush (I couldn't teach a class for final assessment in the time required)".

Reading Journals or Books about Adult Education

Thirty respondents (70 percent) had not read any books or journals on the subject of adult education. Those who had chosen to read about teaching techniques to improve their teaching skills; how to use discussion in teaching adults; and the psychology of knowledge sharing. One of the professional practitioners said, "The books are too numerous to mention. I have read both current and past issues of *Adult Education Quarterly*. Many other journals, especially those that deal with distance education, have a decidedly adult orientation". Another respondent was more selective:

> Occasionally, as time permits. Usually I have to skim and cherry-pick articles which are short and written in direct language. I have always had little love for third-person, academic style and seldom read articles written in that style unless there's a huge payoff for doing so. For that reason, I tend to read popular adult and continuing education magazines rather than research-oriented publications.

Only the four adult education professionals already involved in higher education indicated that they regularly read or consulted the adult education literature.

Attendance at Adult Education Conferences

Of the conferences mentioned by these respondents, none were sponsored by adult education professional organizations. The conferences mentioned by name were the Distance Education Conference held in Madison, WI each August, the Texas A&M distance education conference and the National Educational Computing Conference, none of which are sponsored by adult

education associations. Four persons had attended conferences with other adults, and where adults were educated, but the presentations had not focused on adult education. One practitioner commented, "No. I'm not sure I would join one. Seems the field of interest to me has moved away from formal curriculum led instruction to group or community practice".

Acquaintance with "Adult Educators"

When asked if they knew any "adult educators"–and the phrase was deliberately enclosed in quotes–25 persons (58 percent) responded that they did, 12 (28 percent) that they did not and 6 persons (14 percent) said "probably." Three of the respondents who said they knew adult educators indicated that these were persons who taught courses to adults. Another said, "No, but I've given courses in the history of experimental film; adults have participated in my classes and round-table discussions". There appears to be some confusion as to what exactly an adult educator is: "I know people who give courses. But I am not sure of that is what you mean regarding academic 'adult educators'".

Examples of Adult Educators and their Functions

The next question asked those who had said they knew adult educators to describe who these "adult educators" were and what they did. After analyzing the responses, three categories of examples of adult educators emerged:

"formal", "informal", and "remedial". The "formal" category represented instructors in elementary, secondary and higher education and training settings; the "informal" category represented volunteer or work-related examples; and "remedial" where mention was made of GED preparation or adult literacy training. The examples of adult educators in formal settings came from universities and community colleges and noted professors, graduate assistants and laboratory instructors. One respondent offered a comprehensive list of adult education practitioners that indicated awareness of the various locations and functions of informal adult educators:

> University professors and teaching assistants; ESL teachers; Crisis Centre workers (run on-going workshops to train new volunteers; do community outreach and media interviews to promote awareness of violence against women); research psychologist (presents papers and workshops to her peers); software engineer (gives courses to professional computer programmers on how to use his company's specialized products); seemstress (sic) (taught general interest sewing courses at night school); museum docent (conducted tours, explained exhibits); factory shop steward (gave safety seminars to his co-workers and management representatives); entrepreneur (ran her own company providing courses in practical writing techniques for business executives); karate instructor; dental assistant & office administrator (presented talks to peers at association meetings; trained other staff in-house); security guard (trained new staff); members of the Editors' Association of Canada (conduct professional development workshops and skills training).

Also given were three examples of religious teachers, four examples from work training settings and three moderators. It was apparent that 58 percent of this group of respondents could recognize adult education practitioners by their functions, whether or not they identified themselves as adult education practitioners.

Summary

The following response from a practitioner is indicative of the general confusion surrounding respondents' perceptions of professional–and voluntary–adult educators and how that perception is tied to the setting where it occurs:

> I have taught psychology part-time at our local community college, and considered myself an "adult educator." I have taught classes to new human service paraprofessionals as part of their orientation. I also conduct various types of workshops, discussion groups, community service classes, along with other people doing similar things. For example, I regularly "teach" a class on Orientation to Red Cross for new volunteers. Is that "adult education?" How about my volunteer work as a literacy instructor? But, as far as standing in a classroom, teaching from textbooks for people who are working toward their GED's–no, haven't done that, and don't know anyone who does.

This chapter has shown that online adult education practitioners do meet the criteria for 'adult educators' that appear in the adult education literature and that their roles, tasks and responsibilities, given the difference in settings, do appear to be very similar. Online discussion group moderators also espouse Brookfield's "Six Principles of Effective Practice" (1996) without, however making the explicit attribution to adult education principles.

Analysis of the questions relating to moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult education practitioners indicates a considerable amount of confusion in their minds as to just what an adult education practitioner is or does. For this reason, "adult education practitioner" does not figure prominently in their self-image.

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CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite online discussion group moderators' influence on the recreational, or otherwise voluntary, informal learning experiences of countless adults, only two prior studies of groups of moderators have been conducted to describe the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of those who serve as online public discussion group moderators (Berge, 1992, 1995; Berge & Collins, 2000; Collins & Berge, 1997, 1998). In the past six years the landscape of the Internet has changed significantly: the Internet has privatized, the World Wide Web has gained in popularity and the Internet has spread far beyond academic institutions. Much of the growth in the World Wide Web can be traced to the successful efforts of advertisers to entice people to log on and explore their corner of this intriguing new cyber-place.

The research reported here was conducted in three intersecting phases. The first questionnaire extended the Berge and Collins longitudinal study of online discussion group moderators along the research lines they suggested, but also took it into the realm of non-academic online discussion groups. The second phase of the study investigated the likeness and differences among the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of online moderators and those of adult education discussion facilitators, as described in the adult education literature.

The study concluded with a follow-up questionnaire to probe, in depth, moderators' perceptions of themselves as adult educators.

Data were gathered using one web-based and one emailed questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS, NUD*IST, and a process of constant comparison. The results of the questionnaires (see Appendices A and B) were described at length in Chapters 4 and 5 and will be summarized and commented upon below. Comparison was made on key demographic and quantitative measures between the Berge and Collins 1997 survey (for a report, see Appendix D), and data from the current study and indicated that the two samples, while drawn using very different sampling methods, were very similar in most demographic respects. Review of data collected in these earlier studies and participant observation as a member of public online discussion groups for list owners, monitors and moderators spurred the revision of a number of categories and questions in the data collection instrument. This chapter includes sections on discussion of findings, conclusions drawn and recommendations for further research.

Moderators: Extending Prior Research

The age of respondents to this third research study of online public discussion group moderators has dropped slightly with the 20-39 year old age group growing by 14 percent over the past 5 years. Sixty percent of the respondents were males, down 6 percent from the Berge and Collins 1997 study and the number of women rose by 8 percent, reflecting a similar change in the

male/female ratio on the Internet as a whole. When the respondents were asked about the topics of discussion in their online groups, the top three general categories were:

1) Getting ahead: professional development and work-related discussions
2) Getting by: managing day-to-day responsibilities, including parenting and medical issues
3) Hobbies and Entertainment

Moderator longevity has increased with 68.4 percent of the respondents falling into the 13 months to 6 years category, and 10.5 percent of the respondents had served for more than 10 years. These moderators invested considerable time in their groups with 63.7 percent of the respondents spending, in several session per day, a total of more than an hour with their groups. During those sessions moderators dealt with a mode of 75 messages per week, with 63 percent of the moderators managing 4 or fewer groups and 90 percent managing less than 12 groups. Moderators belonged to discussion groups besides their own, usually including at least one group for moderators. They appeared to continue to pursue their own interests and their professional development, using public online discussion groups, with one third of the respondents belonging to 3 to 6 groups and a total of two-thirds of the respondents belonging to less than ten. This indicates the value that moderators place on access to, and the use of, public online discussion groups, rather like restaurant employees who

demonstrate their high regard for their restaurant's cooking by eating there on their day off.

As a source of income, only 6 respondents claimed that moderating online discussion groups constituted 100 percent of their income, but 25.6 percent claimed that it was part of their regular job. From the analysis of the moderators' comments to this question, four themes emerged that illuminated the intrinsic motivation behind their persistence. Moderators' work with online discussion groups provided them with a source of personal satisfaction and relaxation; an opportunity for volunteerism and service; a source of professional development; and/or paid employment.

The definitions and indicators of moderators' composite roles have changed somewhat over the past 10 years, and a new category of "Host/Hostess" was added for this study. The rankings of the composite roles remained relatively steady between this and the 1997 study (Berge & Collins, 2000) with the new Host/Hostess category justifying its creation by assuming the position of third in a list of eleven categories.

Discussion group guidelines (see Appendix C) spell out the purpose and scope of the group and the appropriate communication behaviors. These guidelines have frequently been written by the moderators, and were reported to reflect moderators' personal beliefs about what communication behaviors should and should not occur. These guidelines were disseminated in several ways, most often by being sent to new members as soon as they join the group. Even

when moderators believed that the discussion group belonged to the members and that they should be allowed to sort out their own differences, moderators still drew the line at "flaming." "Flaming" is an Internet term that refers to ranting, raving and being deliberately offensive, rude, or unkind to other group members.

In this study 68.1 percent of the moderators said they had formal discussion guidelines, an increase of 16.2 percent from the Berge and Collins' 1997 study. While 22.1 percent of the moderators still said that they only had informal discussion guidelines, this is 24.1 percent less than in the 1997 study. This indicates that written and published discussion guidelines have proved useful and are becoming an established part of the structure of online discussion groups. These guidelines proved helpful to 83.7 percent of the moderators, especially when it came time to sanction a group member who had transgressed the group's communicative norms. Moderators who did not have formal guidelines frequently had some kind of informal guidelines that they consistently used. When guidelines were transgressed a moderator generally started with private email to the person suggesting a change of topic or tone, then placed the group member on "review" i.e., all their posts were reviewed before they went the group. In the meantime, group members often took it upon themselves to exert peer-pressure on the recalcitrant member, or on the moderators to take action. The most severe sanction that a moderator can apply is for the member to be

banned from the group and not allowed to rejoin, thus effectively–and sometimes deservedly–silencing their voices.

When asked about their sense of their relationship to their discussion group members, 34.4 percent of the respondents considered themselves leaders, 53.3 percent considered themselves peers, and 7.8 percent claimed to have not thought about it. While half of the respondents considered themselves peers, they still had the authority granted to them by the software that maintained the discussion group space and could encourage or silence members' voices.

In the Berge and Collins 1997 study, 15.4 percent of the moderators who responded believed that a sense of community among their group members was not important at all. In the current study that number was down to 3.1 percent. At the other end of the scale there was an increase of 11.7 percent (from 32.1 percent to 43.8 percent) in those who believed that a sense of community was extremely important. This may be attributed to the increasing visibility of the notion of online communities of practice in the business world, and to the increased interest in building learning communities in academia.

Moderators described a number of strategies they used for building that sense of community. These including performing a variety of Host/Hostess duties, providing a safe and protected group discussion space, allowing group members to take responsibility for sorting out their own problems; encouraging joint governance; and recognition of the group as either the origin or the extension of a face-to-face group.

Many moderators had been active discussion facilitators for more than three years, some for more than 10. This would indicate that there were some powerful motivations and rewards for this continuity. Analysis of the moderators' responses to the question asking what they most liked or enjoyed about their work clustered into five themes: personal growth; facilitating interpersonal connections; professional development and sharing knowledge; creating community; and personal and professional recognition.

In the personal growth category, moderators enjoyed the challenges that discussion group moderating presented. The question and answer nature of much of the online discussion leads to knowledge sharing, and many persons have used discussion groups for informal professional development (Heuer, 1997; Medley, 1999). Moderators found assisting in the birth and development of new, safe and caring communities especially rewarding. Moderators said they facilitated interpersonal growth in others by bringing people together who may otherwise have never met and that they received personal and professional recognition for their efforts. In the commercial arena those efforts are increasingly rewarded financially.

When moderators were asked what they found to be most difficult or challenging, they put dealing with difficult people at the head of their list of issues, followed by keeping their groups active, dealing with technical issues and making the personal investment of time, effort and energy. Text is a difficult medium in which to convey the nuances of communication and it is easy for

misunderstandings to arise and feelings to be hurt. "Difficult people" sometimes have thin skins and believe everything said to be directed at them–and sometimes, unfortunately–it is, by those who seem to have lost sight of the person on the other side of the screen. Keeping the group active when participation is not required, as it often can be in course-related discussion groups, can also pose a challenge. Moderators sometimes solicited input from group members, or posted something of interest or controversy to elicit discussion. Some moderators with busy lists said they were happy to take a break or enjoyed a breather when discussion traffic slowed down. Technical issues were always a trial as some of the software used to maintain discussion groups was complex, as was the hardware and software that sustained the Internet itself. While their work with a discussion group may be rewarding, there were those who were physically handicapped who continued to moderate at the cost of considerable personal discomfort, and still others, not handicapped, who felt that it could become an unending chore.

Moderators believed that the most desirable quality for a moderator was, first and foremost, patience: patience with the group members and patience with the technology. Other desirable qualities were: having a vision and goals for the group, having interpersonal and social skills, caring for people, having content knowledge, technical skills and strong communication skills

Moderators recommended training for new moderators that would help them to attain some of the "desirable qualities" included above. Some kind of

formal or informal apprenticeship where a neophyte could watch and learn from a seasoned moderator was believed to be valuable. Also recommended were "just jumping in", formal training in management or group facilitation, knowing the discussion group topic, and sound technical training. There are those who believed that no training was needed, and others who had no idea what would constitute good training for new moderators.

In response to the second research question for this study, moderators' online behavior very closely resembled "best practices" for the facilitation of discussion designed for adult learning in formal academic settings, as it appears in the adult education literature. Moderators preside in a venue where adults learn through discussion. They function variously as discussion facilitators and leaders, subject matter experts, helpers, host/hostesses and 'firefighters' (by setting and monitoring the tone and content of the discussion). There are particular functions of a moderator's role that may not be replicated off-line, including the technical aspects of managing software, and that of "administrator", "editor", "filter" and "manager" as described in Chapter 4. The roles of "editor" and "filter" might be appropriate for a setting where conversation occurs in text. This is especially true on moderated lists where it is deemed part of a reviewer's responsibility to keep the level of content high and the level of "noise" (in the form of unwanted advertising, poorly formatted posts, flames, off-topic posts, etc.) low. Those functions are antithetical in face-to-face situations where best practices

indicate that discussion should facilitate the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults.

Conclusions

Moderators as Invisible Adult Educators

It appears accurate to say that a shroud of invisibility hangs between "amateurs" fully engaged in the education of adults, and professionals engaged in the same activity (albeit in different settings). The informal learning setting in which moderators function is one not even mentioned in the 2000 *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. A discussion about "discourse communities" that appears in a chapter on urban contexts for adult education practice seems to describe public online discussion groups exactly; however, it is in fact referring to face-to-face urban situations only. Online discussion was mentioned in a chapter on distance education, but only in reference to formal, academic settings.

The prevailing lay opinion, held also by online discussion group moderators, that learning does not count unless it takes place in a classroom works to the benefit of those controlling the credentialing of education. It devalues the efforts of hundreds of thousands of those who have not received professional training in the education of adults, thus maintaining the existing institutional and social power structures (Imel, et al. 2000).

Moderators meet the criteria for "educators of adults" that were derived from adult education literature. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents to this study indicated that they believed that they were indeed functioning as adult educators, 21 percent said that they were not, and 19 percent did not respond to this question. It is apparent that, to many of the respondents in this research study, a teaching or learning activity could not be considered "real education" unless it took place in a school classroom. Moderators also made the distinction between being a moderator–as a content-neutral facilitator of discussion–and a content matter expert whose expertise and knowledge-sharing was a primary impetus to group membership, and who could be considered as fulfilling the role of “teacher”.

Moderators believe that members come to their groups with learning as one of their primary motivations and that knowledge-sharing is a large part of what sustains membership in their groups. Over 80 percent of the respondents believed that they played a role in the learning that occurred in their groups, although their emphasis was on collaborative rather than facilitator-centered learning.

Moderators as Silent Voices in the Knowledge Base of Adult Education

Imel, Brockett and James (2000) have expressed a number of concerns around the issue of the professionalization of adult education and adult educators that

were pertinent to this study, and this provoked the questions in the follow-up survey concerning moderator's perceptions of themselves as adult educators.

One concern voiced is that adult education's current knowledge base is founded upon the results of scientific study, deemed a necessary support for the field's professionalization process, as it is conducted by adult education professionals in academic settings. This focus has led to the exclusion of more intuitive or experientially gained knowledge, and thus the under-representation or exclusion of many adult voices from the adult education literature. This result was evident during the literature review process for this study: no publications in the adult education literature were found that dealt with the moderators and facilitators of public online discussion groups, only those that dealt with instructors of online discussion groups in academic settings. The literature concerning the appropriate behaviors for academic online discussion group facilitators is narrowly focused on contexts in which the duration of the group is limited to an academic term and the facilitator always has the "power of the grade".

Another concern expressed by Imel et al. (2000) is that "Many who practice adult education do not identify with adult education as a field because they do not see its relevance to their work and to the learners that they serve . . . and [they] have neither a credential nor formal preparation in adult education" (p. 632). Only four respondents (3 percent) in this study indicated unqualified assent to a question about having knowledge of adult education as a field of

academic study, and these respondents had, or were pursuing, advanced degrees in education. Among the 44 persons responding to the follow-up survey: 80 percent indicated that the field of academic adult education held no relevance for them; only 16 percent had taken formal courses in adult education; 30 percent had read any literature in the field (with only 4 persons consulting it regularly); and none of the respondents had attended conferences sponsored by adult education associations. This sustains Imel et al.'s concerns. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were able to recognize educators of adults by their function i.e., they teach adults in formal, informal or remedial settings.

Moderators as a Professional "Public"

From my observation of moderators as members of online discussion groups specifically for moderators, it is apparent that they function as an invisible, professional "public" (Dewey, 1988): they meet the definition of "adult education practitioners", but function independently of, and often in ignorance of and are ignored by, academic adult education institutions. Moderators serve as "officials" as they mediate between the organization that may host the online discussion groups and the members themselves, while most insist they are peers to their membership rather than leaders.

Online public discussion group moderators associated together in membership groups in their own milieu, and defined themselves by the online tasks they performed. They have developed a fairly consistent set of common

standards for communication behaviors in their groups, and were willing to police those behaviors to ensure that members have the freedom to express themselves and their opinions, but only to the point where that does not harm other group members. They offer training and advice to new moderators, and assist each other in solving problems with networks, software, hosting organizations, and group members. All these activities are conducted on an informal basis as there is no association or formal organization to impose standards nor to police compliance.

Online Public Discussion Group Moderation as an Emerging Profession

When the first study of public online discussion group moderators was conducted in 1992 by Berge and Collins, access to the Internet was restricted to academic and scientific establishments and there was still considerable discussion occurring to determine the right of free access of undergraduate students to the Internet. While there were independent dial-up access entities–like Compuserve and San Francisco's *The Well*–the Internet was not an object in the conscious awareness of most persons. Online public discussion groups were populated largely by academics and scholars and email was just beginning to be introduced into businesses (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991).

By the time of Berge and Collins' second study in 1997 the Internet had become privatized and the development of the "World Wide Web" and its associated browser software (Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator, for

example) had made access to the Internet easy and wide spread. When the current study was conducted in 2002 the URL designation "http://www . . ." appeared on everything from television and print commercials to chewing gum wrappers and match-book covers. Access to the Internet had become so ubiquitous that formerly black London taxi-cabs now appeared sporting bright yellow paint work with a vivid, purple "Do you Yahoo!?" splashed across their sides (picture available from the author).

From reading the postings to discussion groups for online facilitators over a period of six months as part of the data-gathering for this study, it quickly became apparent that businesses had adopted the use of online discussion groups for internal meetings and communication and that moderators and facilitators of online discussion were now in demand. As with any emerging profession there was considerable discussion among moderators concerning marketing themselves and fee structures, ethical conduct, and much anecdotal knowledge-sharing concerning technical and management issues. A further investigation of World Wide Web sources determined that there were many short courses offered by various organizations to prepare those who wish to acquire or sharpen the skills needed to facilitate online discourse in business and community settings.

Four respondents to this study were employed full time as either online discussion facilitators themselves or organizers or managers of online communities. The notion of "online communities" was being exploited by entities

with a need to develop brand recognition and consumer loyalty, as respondents noted when explaining their occupation. Members join public online discussion groups to find others with similar interests for both knowledge-sharing and socializing, so commercial entities were making such group spaces available, and often with the added incentive of bringing noted personalities (television, movie and recording stars, for instance) to chat directly with group members.

It is highly unlikely, in the author's opinion, that the professionalization of online discussion moderation will flow along the same lines as has the professionalization of the field of adult education, with its retreat into the ivory tower. The very nature of both the activity and the "cyber-place" in which the activity occurs mitigate against it. Moderation and facilitation of online discussion, even in academic settings, is not a separate discipline, although one enterprising graduate student of the author's acquaintance was proposing that thesis for her dissertation study.

Recommendations for Further Research

A number of respondents to this study have indicated they would be willing to participate in further research. A next natural step would be to chose a range of individual moderators of public online discussion groups and create in-depth, information-rich case studies, starting with the more general information

contained in this study, to further illuminate roles, tasks, and activities of a group of generally invisible, informal adult educators.

The use of the Internet continues to increase at an exponential rate and there is a steady flood of new persons coming online and seeking connections with each other and those already there. If growth continues at its present rate, it will increase significantly the demand for interest-based discussion groups that must all have at least an *owner*. It would be instructive to continue the time-series with another study, similar in scope to this one, to be conducted in 2007 to track the changing dimensions of the use of online discussion groups.

A study of moderators' culture from a participant observer's point of view could be conducted of some or all of the discussion groups observed for this study. A profitable, theoretical approach may come from Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation to track the replication and renewal of moderators' discussion groups and to observe how moderator "wisdom" is passed along to new “apprentices”.

A closer investigation could be conducted to track trends in the use of online discussion groups for commercial purposes, demonstrated in several cases in this study where "Community Builders" were specifically charged with the responsibility of developing discussion groups to build brand recognition and loyalty, and to build a self-qualified group of customers. Such activities may lead to more accountability on the part of moderators, if moderation becomes their full-time occupation, and they are held to employers’ standards.

A closer investigation of the motivation and rewards of online discussion group moderators could potentially assist online teachers in academic settings. Findings could be used as the basis for teacher preparation or faculty development activities. The same holds true for moderator's recommendations for appropriate qualities, skills, and training.

To Make the Invisible Visible

> The fact that many individuals who practice adult education either remain invisible to professional adult educators or find the profession irrelevant should serve as a wake-up call. By creating a profession that is more inclusive of the many voices in the field of adult education, adult educators have the power to help bring about changes in existing social and institutional power structures. (Imel et al., 2000, p. 640)

Moderators and facilitators of public online discussion groups influence the informal, self-directed learning efforts of hundreds of thousands of adults on a daily basis and yet they are unseen and unheard by most professional adult educators. While the education of adults is proceeding at a geometrically increasing pace in online discussion groups, professionalized adult education, for the most part, plays little or no part in it. This situation is unfortunate because formal adult education does have a sound body of useful knowledge about how adults learn and engenders a sensitivity to issues of exclusion, power, and to the value of reflective practice.

The author anticipates that the initial audience for this dissertation will not be formal adult educators, but rather moderators of online discussion groups,

both in formal and informal educational settings. However, as the potential of online learning in all its forms is recognized by mainstream adult education professionals, this study may also provide a starting point for adult educators interested in expanding the study of the field beyond formal contexts and personnel. This study has described moderators as informal educators of adults and reported their perceptions of their roles, tasks, and responsibilities in an effort to make the knowledge base of formal adult education more inclusive. While it is apparent from this study that many moderators find the field of formal adult education to be irrelevant, there is much that most moderators could learn concerning the facilitation of adult learning and the leadership of adult learning groups. And while it is equally apparent that professional adult educators have, to date, overlooked informal online learning contexts as a focus of study and practice, there is much that the field can learn from the experience of online moderators about effective discussion facilitation in this new environment. It is the author's hope that this dissertation may offer a basis for first understanding, and then, perhaps, dialogue between online moderators and the field of formal adult education.

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Glossary and Definition of Terms

Academic discussion groups: These are online discussion groups that are associated with academic courses and are usually instructor led and of limited (one course/semester/quarter) duration. Participation is often required and/or graded.

Computer conference (noun): The term refers to asynchronous message storage and related retrieval software located on a central server. Messages are posted and stored there and made accessible by browser or client program. The software may allow for branching and threading of messages and the sorting of messages by category (date, author, subject etc.), and may also include a facility for synchronous communication (CHAT).

Computer conferencing (verb): A generic term used to refer to the use of a computer as a communications device in interaction with other persons; the activity of online discussion, in all of its forms.

Computer mediated communication (CMC): Following Santoro (1998, pp. 33-34) there are three categories of computer mediated communication. The first, computer conferencing, "involves direct human to human communication with the computer being used as a communications router." The second is informatics where "the computer serves as a repository of information that originates with human contributors and is utilized by human retrievers." The third category is computer-assisted instruction where the computer "structures and

manages both the presentation of information and the possible choices available to the human user."

Cyberspace:

> "Cyberspace is a metaphor that allows us to grasp this place where since about the time of the second world war we've increasingly done so many of the things that we think of as civilization. Cyberspace is where we do our banking, it's actually where the bank keeps your money these days because it's all direct electronic transfer. It's where the stock market actually takes place, it doesn't occur so much any more on the floor of the exchange but in the electronic communication between the worlds' stock-exchanges. So I think that since so much of what we do is happening digitally and electronically, it's useful to have an expression that allows that all to be part of the territory. I think it makes it easier for us to visualize what we're doing with this stuff." (Gibson, 1994, n.p.)

Flaming: Flames are harsh, angry, profane, or aggressive responses to posts, often vociferously attacking the person of the sender. This behavior is generally prohibited, formally or informally, in all discussion forums. (King, 1995; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986)

List moderator: This person may also perform the functions of a list owner (see below) and may also function as a “list monitor”. The distinguishing characteristic, however is that they receive and approve all messages, prior to distribution to the list. A "list moderator" may also collect posts to the group and compile them into a digest/newsletter format.

List monitor: This person may also perform the duties of a list owner (see below); also participates in the day-to-day activities of the list, interjecting comments that may serve to regulate and/or redirect the course of the list discussion, and remind participants of agreed-upon communication conventions.

List owner: This term is used as a technical term in this study to refer to the individual who is responsible for the technical management of and electronic discussion list. The functions of a 'list owner' include taking care of bounced mail messages, setting subscribers to ‘no mail’, or restarting their mail delivery, changing addresses, adding and removing subscribers, etc.). This person may be responsible to the host organization for the conduct of the list and the use of resources. A list owner may or may not participate in the day-to-day activities of the discussion group.

LISTSERV: This term is often used as a generic term for all email distribution programs, and also as a generic adjective to describe all online discussion groups (a listserv group) or just as a generic noun 'a listserv'. **LISTSERV** is the registered trademark of www.l-soft.com and its founder, Eric Thomas (Thomas, 1996), and is the name of a specific e-mail list handling software program. Similar programs include Majordomo, listproc, MailMan, etc.

Lurker, Lurking: Lurker is an Internet pejorative term for an online discussion group member who "lurks" i.e., receives and reads postings to a list, but rarely or never contributes to the discussion (Grint, 1992; Marvin, 1995). Another perspective is to consider the non-contributing members of an online discussion group as an “audience,” engaged in behavior similar to listening to a face-to-face panel discussion.

Monitored list: This is one in which posts are distributed to the list as they are received by the distribution software, without being approved first. One or

more persons are responsible for monitoring the discussion for breaches of list etiquette or policy, after the fact.

Netiquette: An Internet descriptive term for a generally accepted set of informal rules for appropriate discussion group behavior (Harasim, 1986; Killain, 1994). This may include keeping posts short, and on topic, maintaining a polite and reasonable tone, and not "flaming" (see above).

Participation: In online public discussion groups participation includes both passive and active participation. Most discussion group members are passive participators (audience, lurkers) (Killain, 1994; King, 1994; Marvin, 1995; Nolan & Weiss, 1999; Tilaro, 1992; Williams, 1997), in that they read but do not contribute messages themselves. Active participation can span the range between a single contribution, comment or question during the period of a person's membership and the posting of many messages per day.

Private online discussion groups: These online discussion groups are not associated with academic courses. While participation is voluntary, membership is restricted to a particular group of people, and membership must be approved. This may be a division by interest, profession, gender, gender preference, disability, language, religion, location etc.

Public online discussion groups: These are online discussion groups, not associated with academic courses. Membership and participation is voluntary and open to all and discussion is usually related to a particular topic, or group of topics.

Scholarly discussion groups: That subset of online discussion groups that have a scholarly focus and a high proportion of their participants are involved in primary, secondary, or tertiary education. These discuss scholarly topics, but are not part of academic courses.

Spam: Spam is unsolicited, electronic junk mail.

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Appendix A

STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Perceptions of Public Electronic Discussion Group Moderators of their Roles, Tasks and Responsibilities

Marie (mauri) Collins

Thank you for agreeing to complete the following online interview and so contribute to my dissertation research.

Before you begin, if you have not done so already, please print out a copy of the Informed Consent form for your records

For the purpose of this study, discussion groups or lists associated with academic courses are excluded. If you moderate both course-related and public discussion groups, please consider your work with the public groups as you complete this questionnaire.

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY
There is little agreement about a common term to refer to the span of roles, tasks and responsibilities covered by those who own and/or manage online discussion groups.
In this questionnaire '**moderator**' will be used as a generic term to refer to a person - or persons - who have some responsibility for the operation of online discussion groups or lists - from the technical administrator to the reviewer of messages.

The verb '**moderate**' in this questionnaire refers to the performance of any of the tasks, roles, and responsibilities involved in the above.

By contrast, a '**list member**' or '**discussion participant**' receives, reads, and responds to posts to the list, a '**lurker**' receives and reads posts but rarely, if ever, responds to the list discussion. Lists commonly come in two varieties: moderated and unmoderated. What sets a 'moderated' list apart is that all posts are screened before they are posted.

CONTEXT SETTING:

How long have you moderated/facilitated online discussion?

How many discussion groups are you currently involved with?

as an owner/monitor/moderator?

as a member or discussion participant?

What are the primary discussion topic areas of your own discussion groups?

The management, moderation and facilitation of online discussion groups is slowly becoming a recognized professional skill set in government, business, and industry. The next five questions explore that notion a little further:

Your job title, as it might appear on a business card:

Is the moderation or facilitation of online discussion an income source for you?

Yes No

Do you do it as a part of a regular hourly or salaried, part-time or full-time job?
(as opposed to being a volunteer or self-employed contractor or consultant)

Yes No

If not, please explain:

Over the past six months, what proportion of your income would you estimate was directly derived from your administration, facilitation. or moderation of online discussion groups?

IDENTITY

When you explain to someone else what you do with online discussion groups, you would generally refer to yourself, using the term(s):

Respondents in prior research studies self-identified with the term "moderator." Closer examination of the data revealed a continuum of roles, tasks and responsibilities. In the following

table, the defining characteristic that has been used to anchor this continuum is the level of responsibility for, or control over, what is posted to the discussion group.

Minimum responsibility		**Maximum Responsibility**
LIST OR GROUP OWNER	**Monitor/Facilitator/Host**	**MODERATOR or REVIEWER**
Only performs technical and management functions	MAY perform technical and management functions	MAY perform technical and management functions
Does not participate in discussion	May be peer participant in discussion, or a discussion leader/facilitator	May be discussion leader/facilitator, peer participant
Does not screen posts	Does not screen posts MAY sanction 'offenders' after the fact.	**Screens all messages prior to distribution**

Considering the table of cluster definitions above. Would you classify yourself primarily as a(n):

○Owner/administrator ○Monitor/facilitator/host ○Moderator/ reviewer

TASKS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This section asks you about your tasks and responsibilities and typically takes 4-5 minutes to complete
Reminder: In this questionnaire '**moderator**' is being used as a generic term to refer to a person - or persons - who have some responsibility for the operation of online discussion groups or lists - from the technical administrator to the reviewer of messages.

In the past year, as a discussion group moderator, have you performed any of the following activities?

1. Mediate or referee disputes among group members	○NA ○Yes ○No
2. Add subscribers to the group	○NA ○Yes ○No
3. Write about the group for publication	○NA ○Yes ○No
4. Advocate for individual group members	○NA ○Yes ○No
5. Enforce the group rules or guidelines in an even-handed manner	○NA ○Yes ○No
6. Interface with the host institution/organization	○NA ○Yes ○No
7. Be the group 'conscience'	○NA ○Yes ○No
8. Answer members' questions about the group	○NA ○Yes ○No
9. Answer non-members' questions about the group	○NA ○Yes ○No
10. Arrange face-to-face meetings among group members	○NA ○Yes ○No
11. Arrange for guest experts to take part in group discussion	○NA ○Yes ○No
12. When the group discussion is slow, ask others to start new topics	○NA ○Yes ○No
13. Build a group web-site	○NA ○Yes ○No

14. Close or end discussion topics	NA Yes No
15. Communicate with group members in an intentionally friendly manner	NA Yes No
16. Gather information/news to post	NA Yes No
17. Communicate with other moderators	NA Yes No
18. Compile a group history	NA Yes No
19. Conduct polls or surveys of members	NA Yes No
20. Conform your personal 'moderating' style to group policy	NA Yes No
21. Consider your group members as a community	NA Yes No
22. Co-ordinate co-moderators	NA Yes No
23. Correct spelling and/or grammar in posts	NA Yes No
24. Decide when 'spin-off' group should be started	NA Yes No
25. Delete bouncing addresses	NA Yes No
26. Delete members who disrupt discussion	NA Yes No
27. Develop the statement of group policies or discussion guidelines	NA Yes No
28. Digest messages before they are posted	NA Yes No
29. Discipline recalcitrant members	NA Yes No
30. Douse flames	NA Yes No
31. Delete offensive language before messages are posted	NA Yes No
32. Email flamers privately	NA Yes No
33. Encourage lurkers to post	NA Yes No
34. Encourage members to express their concerns	NA Yes No
35. Encourage group members to express their feelings	NA Yes No
36. Encourage the sharing of contrary opinions	NA Yes No
37. Encourage the expression of diverse ideas	NA Yes No
38. End discussion topics	NA Yes No
39. Enforce group rules	NA Yes No
40. Promote the group sponsor	NA Yes No
41. Enforce group guidelines in a detached manner	NA Yes No
42. Post news and announcements	NA Yes No
43. Arrange for 'group - sitters'/back-up moderators	NA Yes No
44. Forward mail to 'experts'	NA Yes No
45. Communicate with group members in a professional manner	NA Yes No
46. Get information out in timely fashion	NA Yes No
47. Get to know group members	NA Yes No
48. Learned how to facilitate discussion	NA Yes No
49. Return posts for revision before sending to group	NA Yes No
50. Help members solve their technical problems	NA Yes No
51. Introduce members to others with similar interests	NA Yes No
52. Keep discussion on topic	NA Yes No
53. Keep dissenting opinions out of group discussions	NA Yes No
54. Discourage humor or jokes	NA Yes No
55. Keep libel out of group discussions	NA Yes No

56. Intentionally keep the tone of group discussion informal	NA Yes No
57. Intentionally ignore the group	NA Yes No
58. Unintentionally post personal, private messages to the group	NA Yes No
59. Keep the discussion civil	NA Yes No
60. Keep trade secrets or proprietary information out of group discussion	NA Yes No
61. Take a 'hands-off' approach to discussion content	NA Yes No
62. Consider input from group members privately	NA Yes No
63. Maintain address/phone list of group members	NA Yes No
64. Maintain the technical set-up of the discussion group	NA Yes No
65. Maintain the FAQ for the discussion group	NA Yes No
66. Maintain the group's web site	NA Yes No
67. Make group a safe place to share	NA Yes No
68. Market the group to solicit new subscribers	NA Yes No
69. Intentionally model appropriate communication behavior	NA Yes No
70. Post all on-topic messages from all members	NA Yes No
71. Post conference announcements	NA Yes No
72. Post job announcements	NA Yes No
73. Post messages to the group as soon as they are received	NA Yes No
74. Enforce group guidelines in an even-handed manner	NA Yes No
75. Post product advertisements	NA Yes No
76. Prevent individuals from dominating discussion	NA Yes No
77. Probe for opinions	NA Yes No
78. Intentionally promote a sense of community among members	NA Yes No
79. Intentionally promote feelings of self-worth in members	NA Yes No
80. Intentionally promote free and open expression of feelings	NA Yes No
81. Add editorial commentary to posts	NA Yes No
82. Put group members in touch with each other	NA Yes No
83. Post group rules/guidelines to the group	NA Yes No
84. Remind members of group policies	NA Yes No
85. Screen potential/new members	NA Yes No
86. Search the group archives for members	NA Yes No
87. Set senders of 'vacation messages' to nomail	NA Yes No
88. Set the group rules/guidelines	NA Yes No
89. Share your knowledge of the group topic	NA Yes No
90. Share your personal experiences with list members	NA Yes No
91. Ask for members' input into group policies	NA Yes No
92. Solicit personal introductions from new members	NA Yes No
93. Start new discussion topics	NA Yes No
94. Stay in the background	NA Yes No
95. Post member input on group management to the group	NA Yes No
96. Summarize discussion topics	NA Yes No
97. Teach group members about group topic	NA Yes No

98. Teach members how to use the group software	○NA ○Yes ○No
99. Track down and delete bouncing addresses	○NA ○Yes ○No
100. Train new moderator(s)	○NA ○Yes ○No
101. Welcome new members	○NA ○Yes ○No
102. Write the group's Frequently Asked Questions	○NA ○Yes ○No
103. Interject humor into the discussion	○NA ○Yes ○No
104. Keep advertising off the group	○NA ○Yes ○No
105. When traveling, arrange access to moderator's account	○NA ○Yes ○No

COMPOSITE ROLES

The following is a list of online discussion moderators' roles, derived from the literature and previous research.

Which of the following describes the roles you fill? (Please check all that apply)
Role with examples of tasks (examples are not all inclusive):

☐ **FILTER**: determines if message content is appropriate for posting to the discussion, e.g. on topic, appropriate language and tone; may filter out 'spam' mail, and unwanted advertising; may review posts from new group members

☐ **FIREFIGHTER**: douses or rejects "flames," monitors appropriate list behavior; may sanction offenders publicly or privately

☐ **EDITOR**: may edit messages for length, style, or content; may re-format posts; may compile posts into digests or a newsletter format; may correct spelling, grammar

☐ **DISCUSSION LEADER**: may structure discussion; specify discussion topics; pose questions/issues or otherwise promote discussion; keep discussion "on track"; may summarize and conclude discussion topics; may invite guest experts

☐ **DISCUSSION FACILITATOR**: peer discussion participant; mediator; may interject questions and/or comments to stimulate/re-direct/encourage list discussion

☐ **HOST/HOSTESS:** welcomes new members; may orient them, explicitly or by example, to list procedures, processes, culture; may make discussion contributions oriented towards maintaining a congenial and/or welcoming tone to the discussion

☐ **ADMINISTRATOR**: responsible for the technical administration of the list; may delete/add subscribers; may deal with bounced messages and administrative requests; may liaison with host organization, may be archivist

☐ **EXPERT**: expert in the list's topic; may compile or answer Frequently Asked Questions; may suggest off-list resources; may serve as a reference source for discussion participants

☐ **HELPER**: helps people with needs within the list's focus area -- more general than expert; responds, as peer, to questions, shares information, resources

☐ **MARKETER**: promote/explain list to potential subscribers, recruit members; may create and/or maintain informational web-pages for the list

☐ **PUBLICIST**: writes, or has written, about the list and/or list activities for publication, may create or maintain List web-site

Are there other roles that you fill that are not included in the above list? Please explain:

LIST POLICIES

Some online discussion group moderators believe that the discussion belongs to the group members and they should be allowed to say anything they please and to sort out their own differences.

To what extent do you subscribe to these beliefs?

Not everyone knows intuitively how to behave in online discussion. Many online discussion groups have some sort of formal guidelines or policies that specify what is, and is not, appropriate communicative behavior. These guidelines may be available as a reference to discussion group members, sometimes being sent with a "Welcome" message. They may or may not have been approved by the group's members, may or may not be specified by representatives of the hosting agency, or as "Terms of Service'.

Do you have formal guidelines describing required and/or appropriate communication behaviors for your online discussion group(s)?

Yes No **If NO, click here**

What was your role (if any) in the creation of these guidelines?

Do these guidelines reflect your personal beliefs about appropriate online discussion behaviors?

Yes No Don't know

In what ways?

Have these formal guidelines helped or hindered you as a online discussion moderator?

Helped Hindered No effect Does not apply

If you are helped, in what ways?

If you are hindered. in what ways?

If there are no formal guidelines, what informal criteria do you use to determine appropriate intervention(s)?

How would you characterize your relationship with the members of the groups you are responsible for?

Leader	Peer	Subordinate	Not thought about it	No contact with group members
○	○	○	○	○

Please describe your personal style as an online discussion moderator.

COMMUNITY

How important is it to you that your group members feel themselves part of a community?

Not at all 1	Somewhat 2	3	4	Extremely important 5
○	○	○	○	○

What, if anything, have you done, or do you do, to foster such a sense of community among your group members?

REMINDER: In the following questions '**moderator**' will be used as a generic term to refer to a person - or persons - who have some responsibility for the operation of online discussion groups - from the technical administrator to the reviewer of posts.
The verb '**moderate**' in the following refers to the performance of any of the tasks, roles, and responsibilities involving discussion occurring in online discussion groups.

What do you most enjoy or find most rewarding about moderating online discussion?

What do you find most difficult or challenging?

What do you believe are the personal qualities/skills most useful to online discussion moderators/facilitators?

What training would you recommend for someone who wants to become an online discussion moderator/facilitator?

In your role as an online discussion moderator, to what extent do you consider yourself an "educator of adults"?

If you have shared your experiences as an online discussion moderator with others, perhaps in the form of articles, presentations, or other forms of publication, would you please provide a URL or reference, or send a copy to the researcher?

How did you get started with online discussion groups?

How did you learn to moderate online discussion (please check all that apply)?

- ☐ Observing others
- ☐ Another moderator taught/mentored me
- ☐ Just jumped into it
- ☐ Read about it
- ☐ Formal training as an online discussion leader/facilitator

Other, please describe

What is the average number of posts per week to your group(s)?

approximately per week

How often do you attend to, read, and/or review postings to your group(s)?

Approximately how long do you spend on discussion group related tasks per week?

The male/female ratio of Internet users appears to be changing, with more women coming on-line, so we are asking:

Are you ○ Female? ○ Male? ○ Prefer not to respond

The Internet has been perceived as a place for young people, but research indicates the highest proportion of users are between 30 and 50 so we are asking:

Your Age (in years):

Do you belong to an online discussion group for discussion monitors/moderators/facilitators/hosts?

○ Yes ○ No

If Yes, what benefits do you derive from your participation in that group?

Would you be willing to respond to follow-up questions to clarify or elaborate on your answers here?
Yes No

IF YES : your email address:

Optional: Your Name:

Would you like to be notified when the results of this research are posted to The Moderators Homepage? (http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml)
Yes No

If you gave your email address above, you do not need to type it in a second time.

If you only want notification: your email address:

Any Final Comments:

Completion of the survey implies your informed consent to the use of this data for the described research project.

Thank you for your participation

Submit Reset

Appendix B

FOLLOW-UP EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

To: mauri@emoderators.com

From: mauri collins <msmauri@rochester.rr.com>

Subject: Follow-up to Moderators Dissertation Research

Bcc: Dissertation Respondents

Thank you for your participation and for leaving your email address indicating that you are willing to respond to follow-up questions. This will be the only request.

Some preliminary information:

Online discussion groups have been described as voluntary, informal places where adults go to learn: group members exchange information, ask and answer questions, argue and agree, seek and provide support. Some even consider their participation as a form of professional development. Discussion, and the observation of discussion among others, has also been identified as one of the most effective means by which adults learn.

Owners, monitors and moderators set up or maintain and monitor the (cyber)space in which those activities take place. Even those who believe that group members "own" the discussion space, still care that participants treat each

other with courtesy and civility - and many will enforce that by sanctioning those who break the rules set forth in group policies. Some consider themselves as leaders, and some as peers to group members; some consider themselves experts, some peer learners. In one way or another they are involved in the learning activities of other adults.

On my questionnaire I asked: "In your role as a moderator, to what extent do you consider yourself an educator of adults?"

The responses spanned the spectrum from "Most definitely" to "NOT AT ALL! Yech, the term sounds just horrible" with a few "Well, I never thought of it that way, but . . ." in the middle.

With your help, I would like to elaborate on those responses. There is significant concern among the academic adult education community that, in the process of professionalization, the field of adult education turned inward to academia and objective research to validate itself, losing touch with its informal, non-professional, volunteer roots.

As an online discussion owner/monitor/moderator:

Do you believe that one reason group members participate (posting or just reading) in your group is so they can learn?

Do you believe that you play an educational role for the members of your group(s)?

To what extent do you identify yourself as an adult educator?

What do you know about adult education as an academic field of study?

What, if any, relevance does the academic discipline of adult education have for you?

Have you taken any formal, academic courses in adult education?

Do you read or have you read any journals or books about adult education?

Do you attend/have attended adult education conferences?

Do you know any "adult educators"?

If so, who are they and what do they do?

Please would you respond as soon as possible? I am completing my last revision prior to my dissertation defense on July 9, 2002.

Thank you again for your assistance.

mauri collins

APPENDIX C

PUBLIC ONLINE DISCUSSION GROUP GUIDELINES

Guideline Examples

To provide a context for the presentation of moderators' opinions about public discussion group guidelines, public online discussion group guideline documents were examined to determine a representative list of their contents. What follows are the general headings, followed by samples from several different groups that appear representative of each class of information.

- An Introduction
- Scope and Purpose
- Intended Audience
- Technical Information
- Appropriate Communicative Behavior Towards Others
- Copyright
- Sanctions for Breaches of Appropriate Behavior
- What Constitutes an Appropriate Post

An Introduction

Following are some thoughts on editorial policy for IPCT-L. As many subscribers to this and other lists know, different lists serve different purposes and each has a style and character that may be different from any other group. The listowners

have attempted to make more explicit the parameters of IPCT-L, especially regarding how the list will be moderated. Still, no policy statements can capture the flavor of social interaction. This was described in the introduction to another list:

> If you are new to electronic lists . . . , you should keep in mind that joining a list is like walking into a room where conversations are underway. Ordinary behavior in such a situation is to listen to the conversations in order to determine the subject matter and context, join the conversations that interest you, introduce a new topic if you find the conversations boring, or leave the room if you find the group dull or offensive." (WORDS-L)

The Scope and Purpose of the Group

- SERIALST (Serials in Libraries Discussion Forum) was established in October 1990, with technical support from the Office of Academic Computing at the University of Vermont (UVM), in order to serve as an informal electronic forum for most aspects of serials processing in libraries. Appropriate topics include (but are not limited to): cataloging, acquisitions, collection management, serials budgets and pricing concerns, binding, preservation, microfilm and other non print serials media, union list activities, announcements, news, and job postings that are of interest to the serials community. ** SERIALST is NOT A FORUM FOR THE TRADE OR EXCHANGE OF DUPLICATE, UNWANTED, OR WANTED SERIALS. ** (http://www.uvm.edu/~bmaclenn/serialst.html)
- The Biblical Greek Mailing List (B-Greek) is a mailing list for discussing the Greek text and language of the Bible. Anyone interested in New

Testament Studies is invited to subscribe, but the list assumes a working knowledge of Biblical Greek (http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/).

- This group was set up to be a place where classical music enthusiasts can discuss music, musicians, composers, composition, instruments, performance, music history, recordings and all topics even remotely related to classical music from all periods. There is certainly room for levity and fun in the group, however, it is highly desirable to maintain wit and intelligence in even the most jocular posts. In addition, group informality and conviviality is healthy and highly desirable, but it should not take the place of the stated purpose of the group. The moderator is the final arbiter of what topics and messages are appropriate for the list. Moderated Classical Music List (Lampson, 1998)
- The Interpersonal Computing and Technology List (IPCT-L) was created in February 1992 by Zane Berge at the Center for Teaching and Technology (CTT) at the Academic Computer Center, Georgetown University. A special effort was made to promote an international forum for pedagogical issues important to higher education involving teaching with technology, and especially with connectivity and networking. A goal was to create a forum for the discussion of computing and other technology that could be used to promote learning. Topics may involve teaching and training; collaboration; the development of partnerships among learners, faculty or teachers, and other interested persons in the

educational community; research that reflect these interests, and the fostering of collegial relationships within the context of the other goals of this list. The decade of the 1990s was characterized by the personal computer, and development of individual productivity. The focus of the IPCT-L, as we move toward the 21st century, is that interpersonal computing and technology will tie persons together throughout the world -- to share ideas and solve problems

The Intended Audience

- ETHERBUN is an electronic mailing list devoted to care, health and behavior of domestic companion rabbits. The list is free of charge, and is a wealth of information, especially for the new rabbit "parent". Almost all our participants are owned by companion rabbits, and a great number are seasoned rabbit rescuers who have a great deal of experience in dealing with the unique challenges our beloved rabbits pose. Also, EtherBun is a good resource for those interested in learning more about rabbit medical care and general health. Presently, our subscribers include veterinarians, vet students, microbiologists, nutritionists, chemists, biologists, and others whose areas of expertise are very helpful in getting to the root of a rabbit health problem. (Krempels, 2002).
- . . . a forum where the Greek text and language of the Bible are discussed in detail by an eclectic group of beginning students and veteran teachers, laymen and clergy, conservatives and liberals, earnest inquirers and

academic scholars - all equally committed to probing the Biblical text in the original Koine, and jointly exploring the mysteries and probabilities of Biblical Greek morphology and syntax (Robie, 2001).

Technical Information

How to join and leave the list, modify a subscription, and how to post messages to the list, including addresses how to access the discussion group archives, and the discussion group management.

Appropriate Communicative Behavior Toward Others

- While scholarly debate, including disagreement, is encouraged as a goal of this conference, attacks upon the character, intelligence, or faith of those participating are not acceptable. Criticism must focus upon the arguments of others; it may not be directed to the individual (Biblical Greek Mailing List).
- EtherBun@yahoogroups.com is an unmoderated listserve. However, because we want EtherBun to be a happy place, the list owner and the EtherBun Advisory Committee insist that there will be NO FLAMING, EVER. A flame is defined as a personally insulting or derogatory post. Strong opinions, healthy disagreement, and civil discussion are welcome on EtherBun, but flaming will not be tolerated. If you write a post voicing a strong opinion about a controversial issue, please DO NOT name other EtherBun subscribers personally. To do so invites hostility and fans the flames of war, which will not be tolerated on EtherBun. Offenders will be

warned by the Advisory Committee, and repeat offenses will result in the offender's being deleted from the list (EtherBun@groups.yahoo.com).

- The cryptic, often-uninflected style of email writing can result in messages being interpreted in much harsher terms than the writer intended. All too often, this leads to "flame wars" resulting in waste of computer resources, hurt feelings, and a general disaffection. Biting criticism and personal attacks are unfunny and unwanted. Remember, there is a real person on the other end. You are responsible for what you write. Finally, be aware that it is a trivial job for "someone" to monitor electronic mail or any discussion list. It is also extremely easy to save any message and to forward it electronically or repost to another list tomorrow or in 10 years (CARR-L@listserv.louisville.edu)
- This is a moderated list. The moderators reserve the right to make all decisions regarding the posting of messages. Those that are judged to fall outside the mission statement of this list will be returned to the sender, with an explanation for the rejection; or with a suggestion to 'revise and resubmit' or a request for clarification. All messages not returned will be posted. No messages will be posted anonymously. Postings submitted should be in English. Messages not in English will be returned to the author. The tone of this list is that of congenial, scholarly discussion, and courtesy is assumed. Contributors may argue facts or opinions, within the focus of the goals of the list. However, personal attacks on other

> contributors or institutions will not be intentionally posted. "Flames" are not welcome on IPCT-L. We intend to moderate the list, not referee. If you believe you must attack a person rather than that person's stated opinions, do so privately. We remind our list members that the group numbers approximately 1050 addresses in over 40 countries and represents a wide span of both cultures and levels of expertise. Message content and language should reflect an appreciation that what is being said, as it were, is spoken from a podium in front of a very large, very diverse group of people. For instance, humor is often interpreted differently depending upon a person's cultural background or beliefs and therefore jokes will not be posted. (IPCT-L)

Copyright

Copyright of individual postings to, and archived files of, IPCT-L is retained by the original author unless specifically transferred. Copying, modification, publication or distribution of postings, or archives, of Interpersonal Computing and Technology Discussion List (IPCT-L) are not permitted except by the written permission of the original author(s) or the party to whom he/she has transferred copyright unless the author grants such permission within the original posting. In keeping with the spirit of free distribution of information over the net, individual authors are encouraged to grant such permission at the time of posting. This might be done as follows:

> Copyright [NAME] 1992. Permission is hereby granted for the redistribution of this material over electronic networks so long as

> this item is redistributed in full and with appropriate credit given to the author. All other rights reserved.

Since it is common that IPCT-L is exploded onto local distribution lists and netnews servers, authors posting to IPCT-L automatically grant redistribution permission for such purposes.

Sanctions for Breaches in Appropriate Behavior

- Those who violate this policy will be contacted politely by the B-Greek staff and requested to conform to these guidelines. Those who continue to violate the policy will no longer be welcome in the conference.
- If you send an off-topic post to EtherBun, you will be sent a warning/reminder from a member of the EtherBun Advisory Committee, asking you to please abide by the guidelines. Please do not take this note as a personal attack: one is sent to *every* subscriber who violates Etherbun guidelines. (You are not being singled out, but we *do* want you to know what is and is not appropriate for EB.) A second transgression within two weeks will result in the offending subscriber's receiving a second advisory note and being placed on moderated status for two weeks. If within two weeks after reinstatement following a "moderated status" period, the subscriber continues to post off topic notices to EtherBun, the Advisory Committee will place the subscriber on permanent moderated status. If a moderated subscriber continues to attempt to post off-topic posts, creating a large workload for the list moderators, s/he will be given a warning. If this warning is not heeded, the subscriber will be deleted from EtherBun and

banned from future subscription. Please note that anyone who deliberately posts off topic messages--ESPECIALLY if they are labeled "OT" in the header, or if they start off with "I know this isn't really on topic, but..." IS SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE REMOVAL FROM THE LIST WITHOUT FURTHER NOTICE. The very least EBAC will do is put the offender on "read only" status for one month, and then allow moderated status after that one month is up (Krempels, 2002).

What Constitutes Acceptable Posts

- There are no requirements beyond those that constitute a good posting to any discussion group. As such, contributions should be clear, concise, and, as a basic courtesy to your readers, as well-written as you can make them. Messages should have a point and convey information. Though the anonymity of net communications can provide a healthy environment for people to express themselves perhaps more forcefully than they might in non-net interactions - and I believe this is a good thing - by and large a posted message should be one that you would not hesitate to read aloud in a face-to-face group discussion. Please keep this in mind when composing your message. Moderated Classical Music List (Lampson, 1998).
- The following policy governs all postings to the SWISH-E (Simple Web Indexing System for Humans, Enhanced) list. Offenders will be warned once and removed from the list after a second violation of the same policy:

All messages must relate to SWISH-Enhanced or issues related to the development or implementation of it. Advertisements are not appropriate. However, a simple statement that offers a way to follow-up for more information on a service or product is tolerated if it accompanies a substantive message discussing a subject appropriate to the list. Personal attacks such as name-calling and personal insults will not be tolerated. Comments that are intended only to enrage the recipient rather than contribute to thoughtful discussion are prohibited. All postings must be free of copyright restrictions that limit distribution. For example, posting a significant amount of a copyrighted work verbatim requires the permission of the copyright holder. To verify that such permission was obtained, all postings of this nature must include a statement that this is the case. (SWISH-E)

- (IPCT-L) SUBJECT HEADERS
  - Because of the high volume of messages sometimes generated by IPCT-L, and because not all readers chose to follow all the threads in the discussions, it is particularly important that Subject: lines accurately reflect the content of the message.
- LENGTH
  - Please keep messages under 200 lines. Break long messages into shorter parts. Longer reports, transcripts or papers may be offered on

the list to other members with specific instructions on how they are to be requested privately from the individual offering them.

  - Alternatively, long files can be sent to the moderators who may then archive them on the listserver and post a note to the list announcing that they have been archived and giving instructions for retrieval.
  - It is a useful technique to set line length to about 65 characters instead of 80 when composing posts to lists. Often messages that have been posted are forwarded to colleagues or quoted when replied to, and using a shorter line avoids many problems with wordwrap.
- TECHNICAL QUESTIONS
  - This includes questions of the type "how do I make product x perform on platform y?" Considering the incredible diversity of hardware and software configurations, these questions are best addressed to your site systems administrators. However, we realize that there are times when such questions may be appropriate and we will consider posting them on an individual basis. Please state clearly the platform (UNIX, IBM, VAX etc) and the exact nature of the problem. You may also offer to post a summary of responses to the list.
- CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS; CALLS FOR PAPERS etc
  - Announcements and calls with themes closely related to IPCT-L issues will be considered for posting. Please keep them down to 2 or 3 screens and include instructions for obtaining further information.

- RESPONDING TO MESSAGES
  - When you receive a message from IPCT-L, please feel free to answer other people's questions or make comments directly to the list. By using "REPLY," your response will be submitted to the list to be read by everyone who subscribes. If you wish to reply privately to the author of a post to IPCT-L, you will find the original poster's address as the first line in the body of the message, or included by some at the end of their messages. Send your response directly to that address.
- CROSS-POSTING FROM OTHER LISTS
  - We may accept cross-postings from other lists when the content applies to on-going discussion on IPCT-L. Cross-postings from other lists are accepted and posted to IPCT-L if the original author has included permission to do so, or the content is that which could reasonably be seen as wanting the widest distribution possible (e.g., FAQ, conference or job announcements). If such permission to distribute is not included, it is the responsibility of the IPCT-L contributor of a cross-post to obtain permission from the original author to post the message to IPCT-L, and so state that permission is granted in the cross-post submission to IPCT-L. All cross-postings must meet all other criteria for posting to IPCT-L.
- CITING IPCT-L MESSAGES

- All contributors to IPCT-L are asked to supply their full name in all posts to the list to facilitate possible citation. The following form is suggested when citing from IPCT-L in professional papers (assumes original author J. Doe for a message posted 9/19/92):

Doe, J. (1996). [LIST SUBJECT HEADING here]. Electronic message to Interpersonal Computing and Technology Discussion List. IPCT-L@LISTSERV.GEORGETOWN.EDU. September 19.

MLA Format:

Citing a list-serve document:

> Author. "Title of Posting." Online posting. Date. Name of listserv. Date of access <electronic address for retrieval>.

APPENDIX D

THE RESULTS OF THE BERGE COLLINS 1997 STUDY

Berge, Z. L., & Collins, M. P. (2000). Perceptions of e-moderators about their roles and functions in moderating electronic mailing lists. Distance Education: An International Journal, 21(1): 81-100. The full text of this article is included here with the kind permission of the journal editor, Som Naidu, Ph.D., December 8, 2000.

Perceptions of E-Moderators About Their Roles And Functions In Moderation Electronic Mailing Lists.

Zane L. Berge and Mauri P. Collins

Reported here are responses gathered using a probabilistic survey (n=162). Indications of what this group of electronic mailing list moderators, or emoderators, perceive about their roles, tasks, and responsibilities as list moderators. The issues explored revolve around mailing list moderators' conceptions of their roles, their rationale for moderating or not moderating their mailing lists, where they learned their craft, and where moderating lists fits into the context of their lives. With such descriptions of the tasks and roles of practicing moderators, better training could be developed for those persons wishing to function effectively as on-line discussion facilitators and moderators, as part of their on-line teaching for instance. Findings confirmed previous research that moderators perceive among their roles those of a filter, firefighter, facilitator, editor, manager, discussion leader, content expert, helper, and marketer. The moderators responding to this survey cited as reasons a mailing list should be moderated as keeping the signal-to-noise ratio high; keeping the discussion focused within the topic of the list's mission; keeping down "flames;" and digesting/editing posts. Most learned to moderate online discussion lists by watching

> others perform those functions--rather like apprentices, and either volunteered to be a list moderator, were invited to be, or started their own lists. They report being involved in list moderation because the list is work related, or is part of their leisure activity, or is part of both.

Introduction

Over the past several years we have been interested in online teaching, both as an adjunct to in-person instruction and as a replacement for face-to-face instruction. We have also been involved in the delivery of professional development seminars using the electronic discussion group (EDG) format (Berge, 1992; 1994; Rojo, 1995,). We believe a moderator is essential in creating a stimulating and supportive online environment (Anderson and Kanuka, 1997). In the literature in these areas, there is a growing number of descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of online teachers in course-related computer conferences (Berge, 1995; Brochet, 1989; Collins, 1997; Collins and Berge, 1997; Davie, 1989; Eastmond, 1992; Feenberg, 1989; Kerr, 1986; Paulsen, 1995). A teacher's role as a moderator and facilitator of online course discussion--an emoderator--shares much in common with the roles that a moderator of any online discussion forum performs; although moderators of lists used largely by out-of-school adults may not consider themselves as teachers/instructors in any formal sense.

Many distance educators make use of electronic mailing lists, both in their teaching and in their professional roles. In fact, facilitation and moderator of

discussion is integral to much distance education today. A purpose of this paper is to help anyone using mailing lists to understand these tools better.

While there is a growing body of literature that describes and prescribes the functions and roles of online instructors, there is no similar body of literature that specifically addresses the roles, tasks and functions of online moderators in non-pedagogical conferences, i.e., online gatherings that are not part of a formal course or instructional program. McMann (1994) describes the work of several authors who characterize traditional, face-to-face discussion facilitation. He concludes that many of the same roles, functions and tasks involving the management of the content, course process, communication, and decisions are similar in both online computer conferences or face-to-face learning situations. Both face-to-face classroom discussion groups (Brookfield, 1990; Brookfield, 1986), and public electronic discussion groups (Berge and Collins, 1995) appear similar to the extent that they both involve social activity and discussion, are cooperative endeavors, are usually rational and purposeful, are sometimes systematic and often creative, require participation, and involve formal or informal leadership or moderation (Hyman, 1980, pp. 13-17). They are also used by their participants as venues for professional development, formal and informal learning, enlightenment and decision-making (Collins and Berge, 1996; Heuer, 1997).

Still, Harasim (1990) points out that the face-to-face discussion facilitator's skills need to be updated and modified somewhat, and Feenberg (1987, p. 178)

points out the critical need for a moderator to be skilled in setting the contextual cues that establish a shared communication model from which can flow the appropriate norms, roles and expectations for an instructional setting (Newby, 1993). A subset of the roles and tasks of online teachers seem to be the same or very similar to those we have played in our experience as moderators of scholarly discussion on electronic mailing lists. The role of the online moderator includes special responsibilities and authorities in both a technical and facilitating sense. Typically, the face-to-face and online discussion moderator guides and monitors the discussion, stimulates participation and often offers intellectual leadership. Thus, the role of the moderator of online discussion combines aspects of a teacher, discussion facilitator, and community organizer (Green, 1998a; Harasim, et al., 1995). Still, experience suggests that the type of online discussion list or the purpose of a particular list, would determine to a significant degree the moderating style necessary for success. As Green (1998b) states, “there are important differences between moderating in an online classroom and moderating an online meeting, not the least of which is the difference in motivation of the participants” (p.1). The role of the teacher as dispenser of grades is rarely forgotten by the participants.

The current study reached online discussion moderators who function outside of professional development or formal education settings. While ultimately, we may wish to understand the emoderators' roles in professional development and academic settings, we are interested here in exploring the

perceptions and attitudes of persons who moderate non-academic electronic mailing lists that have subscribers, as a starting point for a more extensive research agenda. Once the significant facets of the online moderator's roles and tasks are described, it should be easier to determine which factors account for success in a particular type of online moderation and to what degree each factor contributes in which different context.

A major purpose of this paper is to survey emoderators concerning their perceptions about their roles and functions regarding moderating electronic mailing lists. The perceptions of moderators using this push technology (i.e., technology that is older, but stable, with content that shows up in the subscriber's mailbox without the subscribers actively needing to go to a website, or being locked in time as with IRC for instance) is important--especially in developing countries. In some countries, one simply can not afford to sit online for such technologies that are real-time, or require the bandwidth that the audio and other high-end technologies require. It is a challenge in many places to have 24/7, basic connectivity, let alone cutting edge, high-bandwidth access. Why do technologies such as mailing list continue? Not only continue, but there re tens of thousands more mailing lists today than five years ago. They are familiar, easy to use, archival, relatively inexpensive, and easily accessed.

Defining an Electronic Mailing List

An “electronic mailing list”, variously referred to as an online forum, a discussion list, a discussion group, as just a "list", or incorrectly as a LISTSERV®, is a

subscription list stored in an email distribution program, (e.g., LISTSERV®, majordomo, listproc, MailMan), to which persons can subscribe using their email address and under conditions set in that particular mailing list's header by the list owner(s). Each time an email post is sent to the list's electronic address, it is distributed to the entire subscription list. Analogous to the subscription list of an email discussion list is the subscription list of various print publications where individuals are represented by their postal name and address.

Logistically, once subscribed to a particular electronic mail distribution list, a subscriber receives an email copy of every post distributed to the list of subscribers. From this incoming series of text messages on their computer screen, from more than one subscriber including themselves, participants can internally construct a "discussion" and sometimes, even derive a sense of belonging to a "virtual community" (Rheingold, 1993b).

For the purposes of this research, we are making a distinction among the terms "list owner", "list monitor" and "list moderator". A "list owner" is used as a technical term to refer to the individual who is responsible for the technical management of the list (taking care of bounced mail messages, setting subscribers to nomail, or restarting their mail delivery, changing addresses, adding and removing subscribers, etc.), and may be responsible to the host organization for the conduct of the list. A list owner may or may not participate in the day-to-day activities of the discussion group.

A “list monitor” may also perform the duties of a list owner, but may also participate in the day-to-day activities of the list, interjecting comments that may serve to regulate the course of the list discussion. A monitored list is one in which posts are distributed to the list as they are received by the distribution software and one or more persons are responsible for monitoring the discussion for breaches of list etiquette or policy, after the fact.

A “list moderator” ("Editor" in list terms) may also perform the duties of a listowner and be a “list monitor”, but may also receive and approve messages, prior to distribution. A "list moderator" may also collect posts to the list and compile them into a digest/newsletter format. Literature review and our prior research (Berge, 1995; Feenberg, 1989; Eastmond, 1992; Davie, 1989; Kerr, 1986) has determined a list of moderator roles which are discussed below.

We define a "moderated list" as one where one or more persons are responsible for reviewing and/or editing all posts before they are distributed and generally overseeing the discussion. An “unmoderated list” is one that has an owner but all messages sent to the list are distributed directly to the subscribers. Subscribers to an unmoderated list may or may not police their own communication behaviors in accordance with accepted communicative behaviors.. One or more of the list subscribers may informally assume the role of monitor, discussion moderator or agent provocateur.

“Signal-to-noise ratio” is a ham radio term referring to the balance between the clarity of the incoming signal and the ambient static and/or

atmospheric interference. In the context of a mailing list, it is the perceived ratio of relevant posts to irrelevant posts on the list. On most discussion lists, advertising is considered the worst kind of "noise."

(Note: Technical terms used here are those used in the LISTSERV® software, but other software such as majordomo and listproc have similar functions to "Editor" and "Owner.")

Current Study

Significance

In the literature, the roles played by emoderators appear to have been articulated largely from individual, personal experiences of those who have performed those functions in their classrooms (Berge, 1997; Davie, 1989; Feenberg, 1986; Feenberg, 1987; Hiltz, 1994; Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Harasim, 1986; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles and Turoff, 1995; Mason, 1991; Rohfeld and Hiemstra, 1995). The literature on those who moderate EDGs who do not have an academic purpose or affiliation, is small and again, consist mostly of reports of individual experiences (King, 1994; MacLennan, 1996; Sakkas, 1993). These case studies represent a data set derived from a small group of very experienced online teachers rather than from research that articulates and summarizes in generalizable form the collective experience of a large and diverse range of on-line discussion group moderators.

Research questions

In this study we wanted to expand upon our prior research (Berge, 1992; 1994) and verify our conclusions by asking a large group of online discussion group moderators to describe their experiences. We wanted to know what they perceive the roles and functions of emoderators to be.

To place this research in context, we gathered the following data from moderators

1) A description of the list for which they were responding
2) The policies that guide the topic and tone of postings and the operation of the list
3) Their perceptions about their various moderator roles
4) Their attitudes about moderated versus unmoderated lists
5) Their perceptions regarding attributes of subscribers to the list
6) Their perceptions of their lists as a community
7) Demographic information about the respondent's training and experience as a moderator
8) Reflections on their moderating experiences and
9) The respondent’s awareness of one particular resource for online moderators—(http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml)—The Moderators Homepage.

This article reports on selected findings from all content areas above, except the last two: reflections on the moderating experiences is excluded because it demands more space than permitted here, and the awareness of our

website was asked for more "personal" reasons by the researchers than to report here. Additionally, many EDGs have documents (editorial policy, FAQ, etc.) that describe the purpose of the list, prescribe the range of appropriate topics, how discussion will be conducted and what the roles of the moderator will be. Technical instructions and the various software commands for list activities (subscribe, unsubscribe, turning on and off receipt of postings from the list) are also often included. Respondents were asked to include their policies, or give a URL where they could be found. This data is awaiting analysis.

Methodology

Sample selection

Using a mailing list search program, Tile.net (http://tile.net/lists/), we found listed approximately 15,700 mailing lists with access to the public, from a total of approximately 71,050 mailing lists managed by LISTSERV® software. This number included local lists not accessible to the public at the time this survey was distributed. The email addresses of the registered "owners" of 15,700 public mailing lists were arranged in alphabetical order. Using a random number to start, every fifth mailing list was selected to receive the survey. Lists with only BITnet addresses or that had less than 20 subscribers were omitted and the next list with more than 20 members was substituted. (The BITnet network has been dismantled). This probabilistic methodology yielded approximately 1500 lists addresses.

The Questionnaire

The categorical questions in this questionnaire have emerged and have been tested during a continuing program of research that has been conducted by the authors since Fall 1992. The categories for moderator's roles had their genesis in the authors' personal experiences as emoderators and discussion about appropriate moderator roles on IPCT-L (Berge and Collins,1993) (owned and moderated by the authors since February, 1992). After a literature review and informal discussion with other list owners a initial list of possible moderator roles was developed and formed the basis of further discussion on IPCT-L and several other EDGs. These refined categories were verified in a survey late in 1992 consisting of 9 open-ended questions sent to the LSTSERV-L list (Collins and Berge, 1997), a list for those who own and moderate electronic discussion groups.

Sometime later our research interests expanded to include EDG members and two electronic surveys were conducted (Collins, 1997; Collins and Berge, 1996). The benefits members reported that came from their participation in mailing lists, (i.e., why they belong to EDGs) was one of the outcomes of this research. From the survey findings it became apparent that out-of-school adults were using electronic discussion groups for self-directed and informal learning, professional development activities. Another finding from those surveys was that out-of-school adults also use electronic discussion groups to find and participate in a "community" - and as a support group, which was later verified by reference to the literature (King, 1994; MacLennan, 1997; Sakkas, 1993). Seven open-

ended questions were included to further probe moderator's perceptions. This data has not yet been analyzed and categorized, nor have the many comments moderators made as they completed this study.

The research process

One week after the first distribution of the survey we resent the questionnaire to the entire list of randomly selected listowner addresses, to increase the return rate. The 162 useable surveys (and four that were incomplete) were returned and these represent approximately 10% of the lists surveyed. While 10% return may seem low to some readers not familiar with this population, a) moderators are an extremely hard group to reach, and b) the questionnaire is rather lengthy to complete including requiring the respondent to think and reflect a great deal. The moderators are steeped in a culture that, while recognizing the benefits of research, still causes some to flame the researchers for sending them unsolicited email--i.e., for spamming them. As with any survey, non-respondents may be systematically different than respondents. However, we have no knowledge of that being the case here.

We also received 7 narrative responses to our questions. Some lists have a team of moderators and, in one case, we received surveys back from three persons who co-moderate the same list. This did not affect the sample as the unit of analysis is the individual moderator and their perceptions and activities..

Findings and Discussion

In all of the following tables two numbers are reported: 1) the actual number of respondents to that particular variable, and 2) the percentage reported is the "valid percent" i.e. the percentage of all respondents, including "missing data." We feel this gives a more accurate representation of the data.

Describing the Lists that Respondents Moderate

To set the context for this study, the first set of questions inquired about the longevity of the list, and the length of time that the respondents had been undertaking their role, the number of subscribers, whether the list was open to subscription or closed to a select group, the original focus of the list discussion and if that focus had changed. These were followed by questions about the number of postings (per day, per week, or per month and their reaction to lulls in the conversation.

Table 1. Age of list and Moderator longevity

	Age of list		Length of time moderating	
Categories	Responses (n=162)	% of response	Responses (n=162)	% of responses
no response	1	.6	1	.6
3-6 months	4	2.5	1	.6
6-12 months	9	5.6	6	3.7
12 months-2yrs	26	16.0	16	9.9
2-3 years	36	22.2	35	21.6
3-4 years	25	15.4	36	22.2
4-6 years	30	18.5	27	16.7
6-10 years	28	17.3	21	13.0
Don't know	3	1.9	19	11.7

The average age of the list these respondents moderated was reported at about 3 years, with 17.3% (n=28 of 162) existing six years or more (see Table 1). The

average length of time these moderators had in their role was over 3 years, with a considerable number (13.0%, n=21 of 162) claiming 6-10 years in their role. During data entry it became evident that the possible age of lists and years of moderator longevity had been underestimated. On the survey form, there were more categories "less than 2 years'" than needed and fewer than necessary for the 5+ years time span. The LISTSERV software originally designed for interconnected mainframe computers, dates from 1986 and there are evidently discussion lists still in existence that had their start in the late 1980s.

The number of list members subscribed to these respondents' lists varied greatly. Eighteen out of 132 (13.6%) responses to this question said there were less than 50 subscribers to their list, while 34.8% (n=46 of 132) said there were over 500 subscribers to their list. For a list to be successful there needs to be a "critical mass" to carry along the discussion -which in large groups can be likened to a panel discussion with rotating membership and a large audience (Collins, 1997)

The range in list membership was from "less than 50" to "over 3000" with 65.2 percent (n=86 of 132) of the lists reporting a membership of less than 500. Eligibility for membership in some lists is restricted to certain populations. Membership is usually self-regulating as most lists are focused around a specific topic or interest. The list owner and or the list membership sometimes choose to place further restrictions. When asked if membership to their list was closed or open to anyone who wants to join, 72.2% (n=117 of 162) said it was open, 26.5%

(n=42 of 162) said it was closed, and 1.2% (n=2 of 162) respondents said their list was open but they screened subscribers. When asked if their list is associated with a course, only 8.1% (n=13) of the 160 respondents indicated it was. These lists are most frequently restricted to course registrants.

Discussion groups are ordinarily focused around a particular interest or topic. That topic could be almost anything--from particle physics through owning a pet bunny, (instead of a cat or a dog). When asked what the original focus of their discussion list was, 87.4 % (n=125 of 143 respondents) indicated it was discipline or topic specific. One of the top seven reasons for joining a particular list is interest in the topic (Collins, 1997) and list members tend to negatively sanction posts to the list discussion that are "off topic". Approximately 20.2% (n=32 of 158) indicated the focus of their list has changed from its original intent. Those lists have increased their scope within their topic, or spun off another list in order to segment the discussion and maintain tighter focus.

Discussion lists can serve different purposes. When asked to check all the purposes that applied from a list of categories developed in prior research (Collins, 1997; Collins and Berge, 1996) the greatest number of respondents selected information distribution (88.3%, n=143 of 162), a discussion forum (85.8%, n=139 of 162), and "for questions and answer" (75.3%, n=122 of 162).

. "Traffic" (the number and frequency of posts) is always a concern - there is just so much time in a day and room in most email boxes. The range of posts to these lists ranged from one to 600 per day. Ninety-one out of 155

respondents (58.7%) claimed there are lulls in the number and frequency of list postings. These lulls were attributed mainly to vacation times 39.0% (n=41 of 105), or the periodic ebb and flow of discussion (21.0%, n=22 of 105). The moderators (70.1%, n=76 of 108) typically did nothing special to stimulate conversation during lull times on the list, but 25.0 percent (n=27 of 108) took it upon themselves to raise potentially interesting topics or questions.

Policies That Guide Postings And The Operations Of The List

Documents variously called list charters and/or editorial policies, can greatly ease the moderation of lists, especially those with controversial subject matter. Such policies can be disseminated frequently to the list, and sent to all new members in response to their subscription request. Charters often state the parameters of the topic of the list, by whom it was set up and for what purpose. Editorial policies also serve to create cues concerning the context in which discussion will occur and as Feenberg (1987, p. 178) suggests: "These contextual cues establish a shared communication model from which flows norms, roles and expectations." Participants' understanding of the style of communication behaviors that are expected of them. In the case of breaches in the communication norms, editorial policies can be posted as a general, non-personalized reminder to the entire community to re-focus the discussion. When the respondents were asked if they had a formal, editorial policy or charter 52.8 percent (n=84 of 159) said they had, 47.2 percent (n=75 of 159) said that they had not.

Advertising and commercial messages posted to electronic discussion groups are often perceived as a source of annoyance and controversy. Still, the respondents were fairly evenly split, with 50.6 percent (n=80 of 158) saying they had a policy regulating advertising and 49.4 percent (n=78 of 158) said they did not. We also asked if a formal policy statement about appropriate list behavior was in place as this may or may not be part of the charter. To this, 55.1 percent (n=86 of 156) said they did, 44.9 percent (n=70 of 156) said they did not.

Entry into an ongoing discussion group where group communicative norms have had time to arise can be problematical. While flexible and subject to change, norms are usually stringently enforced by members of social groups (Newby, 1993, p. 30) Some norms are fairly constant across lists e.g. that messages should be kept short and on-topic, contribute substantively to the group discussion and the prohibition against "flaming"–intense and vociferous attacks, sometimes provoked by a misunderstanding of a post's contents or tone.

We asked these moderators how a new list member found out about the list's behavioral norms. Almost two-thirds, 61.9% (n=81 of 133), of the respondents said it was contained in the list's policy that is sent with the welcome message to the list. No other single method received over 10 percent of responses. Indications are, however, that list policies are made reasonably available through: reposting to the list, a web page, or list archives. As with most social norms, these are often not made explicit until they are transgressed. When this happens, even inadvertently, list members may flame the offender.

We asked the respondents who have a formal policy if it has helped or hindered their work. Only one person said that it hindered their efforts, by narrowing their latitude for judgment . The ways it helped most are that it defined and regulated discussion, setting out clear guidelines and sanctions that are known to all participants. Where lists have more than one moderator, it helps to put list co-moderators on the "same page"

We asked if breaches of appropriate behavior and/or flames occurred on in the discussion groups. In response, 66.5% (n=105 of 158) moderators said yes or sometimes, 33.5% (n=53 of 158) said no/never. However, only 4.3% (n=6 of 138) respondents stated these breaches occurred frequently. When asked the ways inappropriate list behavior is dealt with, the most common method used to deal with infractions is the use of private email (51.6%, n=66 of 128) which would progress from warnings, to the moderator screening all posts, to a persistent offender being removed from the subscription list. On moderated lists, inappropriate communicative behavior is screened out. On monitored and unmoderated lists, the members police and enforce their own norms.

The Roles of the Moderator

Public EDG moderators are often volunteers who, on a daily basis, moderate discussion in a myriad of different on-line discussion groups and who have accumulated many years of practical experience among them in this demanding task.

Using the definitions stated earlier for lists that are moderated, monitored, and unmoderated, we asked the respondents to best describe their list according to those categories. Of the 162 responses, 21.3% (n=34 of 160) selected moderated, 45.0% (n=72 of 160) selected monitored, 31.3% (n=50 of 160) selected unmoderated, and 2.5% (n=4 of 160) said their list distributed a newsletter.

Table 2. Roles of the Respondents

Role	**Frequency (% of total respondents)**	**Example of activities**
Facilitator	n=85 (52.5%)	peer discussion participant, mediator
Manager	n=141 (87.0%)	administrator, archivist, deleting/adding subscribers, dealing with bounced messages
Filter	n=55 (34.0%)	deciding upon on-topic posts; increasing signal/noise ratio; rejects libelous posts; may reject jokes
Expert	n=53 (32.7%)	compiling or answering Frequently Asked Questions; expert in the list's topic
Editor	n=23 (14.2%)	text editor, digest posts, formats posts, may correct spelling, grammar, newsletter editor
Discussion leader	n=54 (33.3%)	poses questions or otherwise promotes discussion, keeps discussion "on track"
Marketer	n=59 (36.4%)	promotes/explains list to potential subscribers or promotes sponsor of list
Helper	n=70 (43.2%)	helps people with needs in the list's focus area—more general than expert
Firefighter	n=74 (45.7%)	douses or rejects "flames" or protests ad hominem attacks

From the literature and previous pilot studies, we listed the roles of the moderator as: facilitator, manager, filter, expert, editor, discussion leader, marketer, helper, and firefighter, giving brief examples of behaviors comprise each role. We asked the respondents to indicate all the roles they believed described their activities (see Table 2). By far, the top selection was manager (87.0%, n=141 of 162), while facilitator (52.5%, n=85 of 162) and firefighter (45.7%, n=74 of 162) came in second and third places.

Attitudes About Moderated Lists

One of the more frequent challenges a moderator faces is that of being charged with censorship. Many people who frequent discussions lists believe they have the right to say anything to anyone. Moderating discussion lists, especially those with controversial content can be harrowing and time-consuming--so why do it? Moderators appear to value their own time and place a high value on keeping the "signal-to-noise" ratio in discussions high. Part of a moderator's concern stems from a desire to retain the number of subscribers to their list, while providing a valuable service to their readers. For example:

> "In the case of an announcement group especially, it should absolutely be moderated. The items I've rejected have convinced me of that. Also, if an announcement group does not stay on topic, people won't read it. Since the very idea of such a group is to reach as wide an audience as possible with pertinent information, the quality must be maintained or the audience will desert the

group. I have rejected various sales offers, chain letters, and pyramid marketing schemes, all of which are clearly inappropriate for an announcement group in a hierarchy devoted to technical topics" (Respondent)

Table 3. Why Should Lists Be Moderated or Unmoderated

Why lists should be moderated	**Why it depends whether lists should be moderated**	**Reasons given why lists should not be moderated**
• To keep the signal-to-noise ratio high • To keep out flames • To keep discussion focused • To increase discussion quality • For timely posting of information, agendas, working papers • Because of legal issues, e.g. copyright issues, trade secrets • To compile digests, edit messages	• The impact factors listed as reasons why lists should be moderated • The purpose/ mission/ nature/ size of the list/group • The group conscience of the list • How the list members behave/if they are self-policing • What the list members want/need • Volume of mail vs. proportion of offenders • If someone is prepared to do it/pay to have it done	• The list belongs to the members, and they are self-regulating • It abridges freedom of speech • It takes a lot of time and energy • The membership resent being censored • It slows message distribution down, slows conversation

When asked if they thought discussion groups, as a rule, should be moderated, 23 (14.6%, n=23 of 157) said yes, 105 of 157 (66.9%) said it depends, 28 of 157 (17.8%) said no, and 1 person (.64%) had no opinion. Of their reasons for moderating lists, the two most common are to keep the signal-to-noise ratio high, to keep out flames, to keep the discussion focused, to increase the quality of the

discussion, making sure postings are timely, and a concern for legal and copyright issues.

Many respondents felt that electronic mailing lists should not be moderated, 17.9% (n=28 of 156) or that it depends (67.3%, n=105 of 156). There is a strong cyber-cultural sense that a mailing list belongs to the participants in the discussion and that their right to freedom of speech should be vigorously maintained. Moderation also takes time, can tie a moderator to their list as if it were an inescapable daily chore and can delay postings to the list. Table 3 lists the reasons given for not wanting moderating to occur.

Perceptions Regarding Subscribers to the List

Tables 4 and 5 give the perceptions of these respondents about the age and gender of their lists' subscribers respectively. Note that these are only the perceptions of the respondents, and that no other methods were used to verify these.

Table 4. Perceived age distribution of list membership

Value Label	Count	Frequency
no response	03	01.9
wide span, late teens-70s	62	38.3
college-age, mostly twenties and thirties	22	13.6
all, mostly middle-aged, mature	20	12.3
early 20s and up	16	9.9
all old	0	0
Do not know	39	24.1

Table 5. Perceived gender distribution of list membership

Value Label	Count	Percent
no response	03	01.9
Can't tell, do not know	39	24.0
More, mostly women	26	16.0
More, mostly men	43	26.5
about even	49	30.2
Don't Know	02	01.2

Table 6. Perceived reasons why subscribers belong to these respondents' lists

Count	Frequency (percent) of all respondents) *	Brief Description
152	93.8%	to get information valuable to them
138	85.2%	to share information with others
134	82.7%	to get answers to questions
132	81.5%	to ask questions
122	75.3%	to respond to others' questions
122	75.3%	to exchange thoughts, ideas and opinions
112	69.1%	to learn about the list topic
109	67.3%	to get help solving problems
102	63.0%	to find peers, interested in the same topic
101	62.3%	for feelings of community or belonging
92	56.8%	to exchange experiences and stories with others
82	50.6%	for personal networking and making contacts
82	50.6%	to stay updated in their field
68	42.0%	for professional networking and making business contacts
65	40.1%	to express themselves and their feelings
34	21.0%	to increase their feelings of self-worth
28	17.3%	to find a mentor
27	16.7%	to find a job
21	13.0%	Because they share my views on the list topic
18	11.1%	Other
11	6.8%	to advertise or sell products

*Respondents were asked to "Check all that apply" The count is the number of times that category was checked (from an n of 162 respondents) and the percentage is the percentage of those 162 respondents who selected that category.

We asked the respondents to check the reason(s) they believed subscribers belonged to their lists. These categories were derived from two previous studies of discussion list members (Collins, 1997; Collins and Berge, 1996) with input from those used in Rojo's dissertation (1996). The most often selected reasons were based around the concept of exchanging information, thoughts, ideas, and opinions, and to ask and answer questions (see Table 6). These findings are consistent with the reasons group members themselves give for their own participation (Collins, 1997; Collins and Berge, 1996).

Perceptions About Lists as Community

There is literature promoting the notion of online discussion groups constituting a virtual community for members (Rheingold, 1993a, 1993b) and those who are skeptical (Killian, 1994). List members report finding a sense of community from their reading and participation (Collins, 1997; Collins and Berge, 1996). It is often the influence of the moderator that sets the tone for list transactions.

Knowing of this potential influence, we asked if these emoderators considered their list as a community. Over seventy percent said that they did (72.9%, n=113 of 155), 16.8 percent (n=26 of 158) said they did not, 9.0% (n=14 of 155) considered their lists as something other than a community and 4.3 percent made no response.

When asked what, if anything, they did to promote a sense of community, 31.9 percent (n=43 of 135) replied that they did nothing, the other 92 respondents fell into twenty-seven different categories. When asked if they believed their list members considered themselves as part of such a community, 70.6% (n=101 of 143) of the respondents to this question said yes, with only 9.8% (n=14 of 143) saying they did not.

Respondent Demographic Information

Presaging the work of Collins, Brown and Newman (1989) , Feenberg (1986, Feenberg 1987) said the usual way of learning the behaviors appropriate for those in dominant roles in electronic discussion is to observe others in those roles from a position as subordinates, very much like cognitive apprenticeships. When asked, these moderators said they learned their moderating skills from their experience as discussion list participants, and from watching others moderate lists and then stepping into their shoes. Sometimes moderators volunteered for their task after having been a list member for some time and they felt the need to increase the signal-to-noise ratio; sometimes they were asked to step up when an moderator stepped down. Still others started their own lists—wanting the content matter to be very specific and the discussion to be conducted in a particular fashion—to take a direct hand in shaping the list. Those starting a list were usually dissatisfied with the conduct of discussion on existing electronic discussion groups, or had not been able to find a list that matched their specific interests.

There are sources of information on the range of EDG moderators' technical tasks detailed in software manuals like L-Soft International's (1996) List Owner's Manual, which devotes an entire chapter to the social and cultural protocol involved in "Moderating and Editing Lists." Manuals such as this also detail the specific software commands and routines that must be used.

To test these notions, we asked the respondents how they learned to moderate online discussion groups. These respondents' most common answer was that they “just jumped in” (63.0%, n=102 of 162), followed by “read about it” (42.6%, n=69 of 162), “observing others” (27.2%, n=44 of 162), “another moderator taught/mentored me” (17.3%, n=28 of 162), and only 2.5% (n=4 of 162) stating they received “formal training as a discussion leader/facilitator". When asked how they got started moderating an online discussion group, their most common response here was that they “started their own online discussion group” (45.0%, n=63 of 140), followed by being “asked by someone” (21.4%, n=30 of 140), “it was part of their job when they began” (14.3%, n=20 of 140), they “volunteered when prior list moderator left” (10.0%, n=14 of 140) or they “volunteered when the list became moderated” (5.0%, n=7 of 140), with the rest not responding or stating other reasons.

Conclusions

Implications and conclusions were presented throughout the text. Rather than repeat them here, we will point out that, this research is part of an on-going research agenda. Future research will elaborate on the questions considered

here that involve a larger and diverse group of moderators. The personal skills and attributes that EDG moderators believe best under girds effective on-line context-setting and discussion facilitation will be investigated. Where moderators themselves learned their craft and their suggestions for appropriate training activities ("if I only knew then what I know now") should be studied further. Moderators' suggestions for development of explicit training in the skills of synthesizing and summarizing discussions threads--if indeed such activity should be undertaken, and the maintenance of participation among the voluntary participants of electronic discussion groups needs to be investigated further.

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