

ELECTRONIC CONFERENCING

By CHARLES RAMSEY

Professionals in all fields are looking to Internet technology to find communication methods that encourage greater collaboration and are an efficient way of dispersing helpful and relevant information in a cost-effective manner.

One method that has become increasingly popular is conferencing, whether it be on “electronic bulletin boards”, listservs, in chat rooms or using web-based meeting protocols. Conferencing allows a large group to exchange ideas by reading and posting messages which are delivered to a central point and broadcast to the conference participants by special software. This is done in a synchronous or asynchronous mode, that is when all participants gather together at the same time or not! i.e. that conference participants can read and post messages at any time.

Conferencing has its advantages and disadvantages. By far, it is cheaper than using long-distance telephone or fax and the software and hardware needed to run it, a personal computer and an Internet connection, are becoming so readily available that it makes it possible for larger numbers of people to become participants. Conferencing keeps meeting costs down because the costs associated with face-to-face meetings such as travel and accommodations, don't exist. And in most modes of Internet conferencing, subscribers can participate at a time that is convenient for them, thus helping in the old “time management” dilemma.

Some people find it difficult to commit the amount of time it takes to make conferencing successful, and others don't like it because of the lack of personal contact. Participation is linked to a person's previous experience with technology and the Internet, his likes and dislikes or her preferred learning styles. Research suggests that auditory learners may feel distanced from discussions in asynchronous conferences and may prefer telephone or face-to-face meetings where they can be heard. Visual learners usually flourish in the on-line environment because they are used to processing large amounts of information in this manner. Kinesthetic learners miss the body language and immediate feedback of personal meetings. Electronic meetings will have about the same number of non-participating members (in this environment called lurkers) as do regular meetings.

I have been using computers since the mid-1980s and love the immediacy and speed of electronic communication and the sense of virtual equality it provides. Over the years I have participated in many on-line conferences and have even been invited to moderate a few! Through the process of trial and error some ideas on how to encourage more participation in electronic conferences have emerged. These suggestions from a committed amateur!

- 1. Pre-planning:** Decide on a series of topics and find guest facilitators/moderators who will lead the discussion on a given topic. Determine how long a conference will last--a day, a week, several weeks, a month etc. Spread the dates of the conferences out over a six or eight month period with a good break between conferences (three conferences in this time period would be good). Promote the conferences in advance. This allows people to begin

thinking about the topics and the kinds of questions they would like to ask or information they would like to share.

2. **Promotion:** Begin sending messages introducing the moderator, giving information about the participants and commenting on different elements of the topic to conference subscribers two weeks before the conference to build anticipation.
3. **Introductions:** Ask the guest moderator to introduce him/herself a week or so before the actual start of the conference. During that time ask the moderator to post the conference agenda and request potential participants to: a) introduce themselves, b) suggest what they'd like to learn from the conference, and c) identify one or two of their favourite resources related to the topic. These are ways to “break the ice” that can contribute to the quality of the conference and, unobtrusively, help the participants feel more comfortable as they get to know and feel at ease with each other and this, for some of them, new manner of meeting.
5. **Time Factor:** Consider stretching the conference out over an appropriate period of time and have the moderator post her/his “conference” material every third day or so, depending on the overall length of the conference, to give participants more time to come and go on the system. Adjust this as time goes on, as participants become more comfortable with this process in general and become more active in their participation.
6. **Be Prepared:** There will be lulls in the action: at the beginning, as people are waiting to see how this will develop and at various points during the conference when interest may seem to be waning. Consider preparing a few colleagues to encourage discussion by having them ready to respond to the moderator’s postings, ask questions or post their own ideas at times when the action needs to get started or participation is slow.
7. **Evaluation:** Have a routine “post mortem” after each conference where participants, by way of an evaluation, can suggest what learnings they may gleaned and what could have been done to make the conference more helpful, specifically for them.
8. **Technical:** Electronic conferences should be held in a venue separate from the one people use for normal discussions. This way regular users are less likely to feel they are interfering with or interrupting the conference.

Electronic conferencing can be enjoyable as well as efficient and convenient. Giving some thought to how the conference will progress before it even starts will help to make it a valuable and enjoyable experience for all.

Charles Ramsey has been involved in adult education for more than 30 years and is the Executive Director of the National Adult Literacy Database, Canada’s national literacy information network found at www.nald.ca. He can be reached at 1-800-720-6253 (toll free

within Canada), (506) 457-6900 or at ramseyc@nald.ca.