

NIFL Internet Forums: Dissemination or Dialogue?

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In 1995 the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) initiated and archived discussion groups (Forums) on ESL, Family and Workplace literacy on the Internet. In 1996 Forums on Health and Homeless literacy were added and in 1997 the NLA, Learning Disabilities, Numeracy, Technology, EFF and Library Forums were added to the archives. In 1999 Women and Focus On Basics were added as NIFL archived Forums.

Examination of the last two years reveals "winners," those whose postings increased from 1998 to 1999 and "losers," those whose number of messages posted went down from 1998 to 1999. The "losers" were: ESL, from 1207 in 1998 to 1054 in 1999, Equipped for the Future, 436 to 273, Technology, 375 to 273, Numeracy, 610 to 588, and Homeless, 105 to 91.

Winners were Learning Disabilities, 504 in 1998 to 1161 in 1999, Libraries, 302 to 759, Family, 440 to 785, Workplace, 517 to 675, NLA, 1122 to 1196, and Health, 700 to 757.

Regarding the NLA Forum, of the 1196 messages posted in 1999, a "quick and dirty and hence don't hold me to exact numbers" scrolling examination of the archive by the "author" thread revealed a total of 212 authors. Of these, 15 authors posted over 50% of the messages. The top ten authors (less than 5% of 212) posted over 40% of the messages. The top six authors posted 32% of the messages. Removing the list moderator from the top six leaves the top five authors who posted over 17%, or more than one sixth of the messages. The Forum moderator posted some 171 messages, about 14% of the total posted.

Across all the 13 Forums that the NIFL archived in 1999, some 8,271 messages were posted. I have not tried to determine how many different authors posted these messages, but if they are all about like the NLA list, then it is likely that a relatively small percentage of those who subscribe to these lists are actively posting messages, and an even smaller percentage are contributing the majority of the messages posted. This suggests that the Forums are serving more as means of dissemination than of dialogue.

Finally, I do not know what the cost of the operation, maintenance, and archiving of the NIFL Forums are, so I cannot determine the per message cost. This would be useful information for determining the cost/benefit/effectiveness of the internet Forums in comparison to other staff development, dissemination activities.