

# Bringing Inservice and Preservice Teachers Together In an Online Learning Community

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**Abstract:** One of the implications of the information age is the massive information load. To keep up with the skills and knowledge of the information age, teachers can support each other and learn collaboratively in an online learning community. In this paper, we introduce such a community in which every teacher can learn from other teachers. We introduce the ICQ active list, the Internet tool we used for creating the online learning community.

## Introduction

Teachers of the information age are required to have more diverse skills and knowledge. Besides, these skills and knowledge are increasing day by day. Layman & Varian (2000) estimated that roughly 250 megabytes of unique information is produced in the world per year for every person. Teachers might be supported with various resources, services, tools, and specialized staff to close the gap in their skills and knowledge. However, a lot of inservice and preservice teachers lack this support on a timely and consistent basis. In order to address these needs, teachers can collaborate in an online learning community.

An Online Learning Community (OLC) is a community in which all of the members share control and everybody learns (Wilson & Ryder, 1996). The characteristics of the OLC are distributed control, commitment to the generation and sharing of new knowledge, flexible learning activities, autonomous community membership, and high levels of collaboration. Wilson & Ryder (1996) presented three scenarios in which learning communities could be formed. One of these scenarios used Internet discussion groups to form an OLC.

Many other Internet tools can be utilized to form an OLC. Examples are a web site, e-mail, e-mail list, threaded discussion group, chat, instant messaging, audio conferencing, and video conferencing (Harrison, 1997; Madjidi et. al., 1999; Pattison, 1999). Harrison (1997) found the problems with tools that support OLCs as finding appropriate software for members, access control to keep outsiders from disrupting communication, training members in the use of various software packages, and cost of acquisition of appropriate tools. This paper describes ICQ Active List (ICQ AL), an Internet tool which can support an OLC for inservice and preservice teachers while eliminating almost all of the problems mentioned above.

## ICQ and ICQ Active List

New forms of Web tools are becoming available everyday. ICQ (I Seek You) is one of them, which is an integrated set of Internet tools. Although it first came out as an instant messaging tool with limited capabilities, users of ICQ can also chat, and send files and URL's to others. All these functions are within one easy to use client software. Version 99b of ICQ client comes with a new feature, the ICQ Active List (ICQ AL). Users can create or join ICQ communities based on a common interest and easily access them from their ICQ client software. Once users join an AL, they can broadcast messages to all of the members of the list, receive events from other list members, chat in a virtual room, post and view messages in a threaded discussion group, and e-mail each other. Users can also become an AL owner, which gives them total control over the AL. In

order to run an AL, Active List server software needs to be run. As long as the AL server software is running, the AL will be accessible by all ICQ clients.

### **Our Use of ICQ Active List to Bring Teachers Together in an Online Learning Community**

In our learning community, we adapted the learning model identified by Wilson & Ryder (1996). This linear model has seven components which are articulating the learning need, seeking help, engaging in the help consultation, assessing the learning, sharing the solution with the OLC, archiving the solution to the problem, and the repetition of the process.

When a member of the OLC needs help, he/she may seek help in a variety of ways. The member might broadcast an instant message to other members of the OLC, who are online at that time. Or, the member can open the threaded discussion forum, and create a new thread by posting the problem. For example, one of the preservice teachers in our OLC asked for sample lesson plans for science education by sending an instant message to the group and by posting a message in the threaded discussion group.

After the problem is stated, OLC members may help to the member who has a problem. Helping might be implemented in a variety of ways, like giving instruction in the chat room, sending an instant message to the member, sending a Web address (URL) that will explain a solution to the problem, posting a solution to the threaded discussion group, or sending a document. In our example, one of the OLC members sent a lesson plan in the word processing format to the member in need of help. Another member posted a message in the threaded discussion group, which contained web addresses for sample lesson plans.

At the assessment stage, the member who asked for help evaluates the solutions offered through different channels. If these solutions are not enough or complete, he/she can seek for help again. In our case, the preservice teacher was satisfied with the lesson plan sent to him by another member; however he indicated that the Web addresses posted in the threaded discussion group didn't contain lesson plans for science education.

When a solution to a problem is found, this solution might be shared with other OLC members. Threaded discussion group is a convenient place for sharing the solution with the OLC, since every posted message stays there as long as it is not deleted by the administrator of the AL. In our example, the preservice teacher posted a message in the threaded discussion group, explaining how he found solution to his problem.

Interactions in the OLC should be archived for future reference. Current or future members of the OLC might seek help for a problem that was already solved in the past. In such cases, the archive of the OLC might serve as an EPSS (Electronic Performance Support System) or as an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions). In our OLC, we created a thread in the threaded discussion group called 'Solutions to past problems'. There are also sub-threads under this general thread for such domains as 'Science', 'Computers', 'Mathematics', and etc. Such a categorization allows members to browse the solutions easily in a timely manner.

### **Conclusions**

With the help of ICQ active list, an Internet tool, we have created an online learning community for teachers, in which every member can learn from each other. We have observed that such a learning community can be utilized by teachers successfully to close the gaps in their skills and knowledge. Since this is an ongoing research, our future research agenda includes nurturing the learning community, fostering communication in the learning community, and examining interactions in the learning community.

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