

# An Online Community for Shared Professional Development

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a long running computer conference which was set up to provide continuous professional development for distance tutors at the OU in Scotland. It introduces a study, presently ongoing, of who uses the conference, how, and why.

## Keywords

Distance tutors, online conferences, professional development

## INTRODUCTION

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. There is an established literature on the effectiveness of learning achieved within communities of practice and their impact on levels of personal engagement for the individuals involved. Although used originally in the context of professional and social practice in 'real-world' settings, the concept of the community of practice is now increasingly used in relation to virtual environments. Research in this field has focused both on the use of online environments as an additional support to existing communities of practice, such as the potential of an online forum for a University Faculty Learning Community (Sherer et al., 2003), and on the emergence of communities of practice in online environments, such as the support of continuing professional development amongst teachers (Leach, 2002; Barab et al., 2003). Bowskill et al. (2000) review instances of their use as a means to support the process of networked learning and to promote collaboration amongst colleagues.

For University distance tutors, the asynchronicity of online conferences provides an ideal context to accommodate variations in working practices, time and distance, and helps to fill the long gaps between face-to-face meetings. Not only can they be used for courses with a fixed start and finish, they are also finding application in fostering the development of informal networks. In fact, our experiences on the SOLACE project (Macdonald & Hills, 2005) illustrated for us how much tutors appreciate the informal exchange of ideas and information, especially with peers from other disciplines. But can one claim to have established a community of practice in this context? This paper describes a long running computer conference which was set up to provide continuous professional development for distance tutors at the OU in Scotland. It introduces a study, presently ongoing, of who uses the conference, how, and why.

## SOS (SCOTTISH ONLINE SUPPORT) CONFERENCE

Over the last three years at the Open University in Scotland, we have been running an online conference for tutors from all Faculties to discuss approaches to supporting students using online media. The SOS conference contains a central area for discussion or queries, in addition to a variety of resources. It acts as a follow-up to face-to-face staff development workshops, with some discussion after each event, but it also serves as a notice board and information point for distance tutors.

A moderator provides a consistent human presence in the conference: we have employed the same person since the conference was first started. His personal style is closely associated with the conference, indeed when his wife gave birth to their fourth child recently, the conference was full of congratulatory messages. On a more serious note, his role is to respond to queries and maintain momentum in the conference, which ebbs and flows according to the topic under discussion and the work or other commitments of the participants. We also employ a 'harvester', whose job is to archive any messages containing material to which tutors might wish to refer later, into an archive of good practice.

In FirstClass each conference has an icon, which appears on the desktop of any participants joined to the conference. Any unread messages in the conference are indicated by a red flag against the icon, which signals to the reader that it might be worth opening the conference. However, because of the convention in the Open University conference system, conferences are generally nested in a hierarchical system, and so it is only messages in the “top level” conference which generate a red flag. Following this convention, the SOS conference was nested within a general conference for tutors in Scotland, which is rarely used. This meant that any activity normally signalled by a “red flag” on the conference icon was not readily visible to passers-by, in fact, tutors had to make a point of opening the outer conference in order to see whether there was activity in the SOS conference, or not. To compound our difficulties, we originally nested the SOS debate forum within a “read only” SOS news conference (again with few messages), which meant that potential participants had to click three times before they reached the conference they could contribute to. We realised that this had an adverse effect on conference readership, in fact in January 2004 we noted that the readership was halved for messages in each subsequent layer of the hierarchy. With each click there were fewer readers. Consequently in April 2004 we decided to bring the SOS debate conference to the top level, so that it is now “one click away”, with red flags visible on participants’ desktops. We believe this is important for a conference where participation is not central to the role of staff, but seen as desirable by the institution.

Over 300 tutors are presently joined to the conference: this figure is made up of 108 users from Maths, Science and Technology courses, and 201 from Humanities, Social Sciences, Health and Social Welfare, Education and Business Studies. We add further names to the group as we encounter them in our biennial staff development workshops or our online Tutor Moderators course. In addition, the conference is advertised as follow-up in all SOS leaflets and worksheets.

The conference was originally set up in December 2002. Since April 2003 we have kept archives of the conference, from which we have been able to undertake this study, the aim of which is to establish:

- who uses the conference
- why and how they use it
- what they use it for

The study is underway as we write, and we report here on the findings to date.

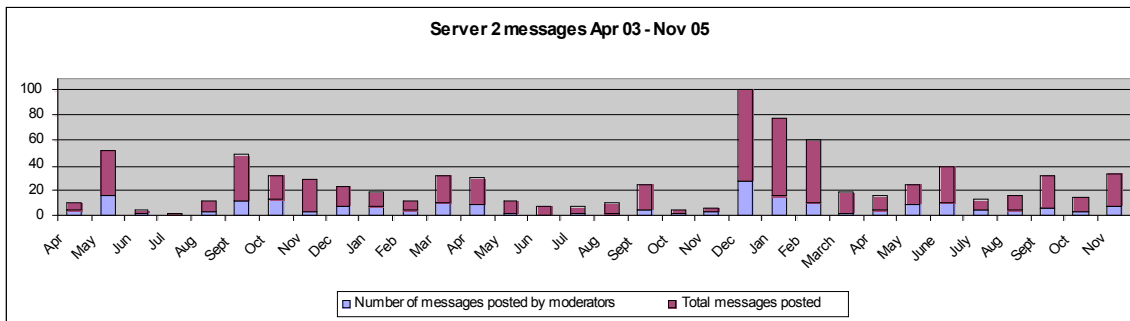
## **METHODOLOGY**

We undertook a desk study of the conference archives which have been kept since April 2003, from which we were able to count the number of postings per month. The software (FirstClass) also provides a record of who has read each posting, and when, and so we were able to check the readership of a random selection of postings.

The archives have demonstrated a variety of patterns of readership, including regulars, some who join briefly and then leave, and others who joined for an extended period, and then disappear. Do we in fact have a community of practice, or something which is rather more fluid? We intend to conduct an email enquiry from a sample of those who have contributed or read messages to the conference over the last three years, in order to enrich our understanding of why staff visited the conference and what factors influenced their visits and subsequent posting or reading of comments.

## **FINDINGS**

In order to establish how many tutors use the conference, and whether this has varied over time, we undertook a count of the number of messages posted each month over the whole period. The conference attracts an average of 20 messages a month, although clearly the discussion has waxed and waned, from 2 messages in June 03, to 73 in December 04. July and August were less busy in 2003-4, but the conference maintained momentum in summer 2005. Much to our surprise, the regular addition of extra potential participants to the conference in April and November over that period appears to have had minimal impact on the number of messages posted. We do not have a reason for this, but it could be that there is a level of conference traffic above which people feel disinclined to participate. Is such a conference self regulating in some way? Or perhaps new participants are disinclined to participate actively in an established community?



**Fig 1 SOS conference: number of messages per month, April 2003-Nov 2005**

Messages were posted by a total of 62 individuals, although around a third of those only posted once, a third posted more than 5 messages and 10 individuals posted more than 10 messages. The list has around 12 long term members who regularly post messages. Similar observations on active participation within student conferences have often been made, that a core group post messages and the majority benefit from, and possibly prefer to read what is posted by others (see for example Mason & Bacsich, 1998). It would not be surprising if a plenary conference for tutor professional development works in a similar way.

We checked the archives to establish what might have accounted for the unusually large number of messages posted in December 2004 – February 2005. As in previous years at this time, some of the conference members had recently been to a residential workshop and so had just met each other, and had plenty of related issues to talk about. Additionally, the moderator had welcomed participants and encouraged input. Although the conference had already been live for 18 months, and the moderator had welcomed participants at regular intervals during that period, this particular welcome included an overt invitation to post a contribution. Was this the magic message?

### The Magic Message?

*I am Shaun!*

*I am a member of the SOS support team and I hope to develop this conference as a way of **supporting** tutors who are working with First Class (FC) to communicate with students and other tutors.*

*This would also be a good forum for discussing some of the issues that concern tutors with regards to the current trends towards e-support, e-courses, and e-anything else you can think of!*

*In the meantime, I would be very grateful if you could acknowledge access to this conference by posting a simple acknowledgement. If you were at Tulliallan for the weekend of November 26, you might take the time to offer some thoughts on the information that was presented to us regarding the new 'learning' sites on the internet.*

This introductory message spawned a wide response, including messages initiating the following topics:

How do you use real time chat

Can you attach a sound file to email

How do you ...

Perils of working on two servers

Thanks for the contact

I enjoyed the staff dev workshop

In order to measure the readership, we sampled one message posted nearest the 10th of each of the months September-November, for all three years, and counted the names.

	2003	2004	2005
<b>September</b>	20	49	65
<b>October</b>	19	67	62
<b>November</b>	19	55	51

**Table 1: SOS conference message readership for nine sampled messages**

We feel reasonably confident in claiming that by inspection, readership has increased since 2003, even if the number of messages posted has not. We know that there are more potential readers, since names are added regularly to the conference. Perhaps new members are more inclined to read messages than to post them. It may be that the increase in readership in 2004 is also related to the changes in hierarchical structure of the conference, described above.

Further analysis will examine the half life of message readership, which can extend over many months, suggesting that while some tutors will visit the conference every few days, others do so more sporadically.

## CONCLUSIONS

Documented cases of long running online conferences for professional development such as this one are rare: in fact most papers refer to accredited courses with a fixed start and finish. For example, Bowskill et al (2000) describe courses lasting from 1 hour up to 16 weeks. There is therefore little to draw on, in terms of previous experience in this area.

The simple fact that this conference has survived over three years suggests that it provides a useful service in joining up tutors with each other and in offering the opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas on online tutoring. Professional development is often the poor relation for academics, when compared with the core business of undertaking research, or in the case of these distance tutors, of staying in touch with, and supporting students. We therefore feel that a conference which “ticks over” with 20 messages a month is probably an acceptable level for an activity which is optional and supplementary.

We must ask ourselves whether we have in fact established a community of practice. According to Wenger’s definition, members of a community of practice have the following characteristics:

- They have a shared domain of interest;
- They form a community, in which members help each other and share information, and learn together
- They are made up of practitioners, in other words people who have first hand experience of the domain. They develop shared resources, and that takes time and sustained interaction (rather than a one-off conversation, or training course)

The answer must be well probably, on the whole.

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