



Faculty Forum

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Can We Make A Computer Community?

There has been a lot of talk in the past few years about the "Community of Scholarship" in Cullowhee. But what is a community? The American Heritage Dictionary (electronic edition, version 3.0) defines "community" as both "A group of people living in the same locality . . ." and "A group of people having common interests." Let's consider both of these ideas for a few moments.

What does "locality" mean today? It used to refer to a geographic area, usually fairly small, which allowed for easy communication among its members. I would contend, however, that "locality" is, itself, no longer meaningful, as the computer and modem (or the Internet) have made geographic proximity no longer necessary for the easy communication which appears to be central to the notion of geographical "community."

So perhaps "community" might be better defined by common interests. Here we also find that the computer can provide the link to others who share our interests. I, personally, have correspondence (and sometimes just "lurk" and listen) with groups of people who are Macintosh users and who have an interest in the technical side of theatre (that being my "real" job). These people are located around the world from England to Australia and are only linked by their common interests and their access to the Internet. The questions and discussion flow freely and all are encouraged to respond, expert and novice alike . . . and they do. One of the great virtues of the Internet, I believe, is that all are equal and all can participate. The result is a kind of virtual "community" which corresponds closely to the kind of open, democratic community most of us would like to find in the University, but not all of us truly do.

The "Community of Scholarship" we have been discussing for the past few years should fit this definition, but often doesn't simply because we don't always get the opportunity to meet our colleagues from across campus as often as we might like face to face. The growing campus network and the on-line "community" it can provide can change all that. When we can all take advantage of this technology, our "community" can include greater numbers of active participants in more frequent and meaningful ways. Indeed, no one would have to be left out.

I believe that it is this sort of community which can and should characterize the University of the future. As anyone who has tried to schedule a committee meeting can tell you, the demands of teaching, service and professional development make it quite difficult to physically assemble a group of people for almost any purpose. The campus network could provide us with the means for having at least some meetings in an "on-line" format. The amount of paper used for distribution of general information can be drastically reduced when it can be "e-mailed" to everyone's "desktop" rather than placed in their mailbox, and we will know that the information was received. Discussions of interest to the entire campus (students, faculty and staff) could be held on-line through mailings lists and bulletin boards. [What do students really think about the Book Rental system? What do most of the faculty? What is a reasonable amount to require a student to spend on supplementary books and materials?] This sort of discussion could create a kind of community which included faculty, staff and students joining together to share ideas and information in free-flowing discussions which could have an impact in many areas.

This sort of community could even have an impact on what we do as educators and scholars. The "teaching" of classes might well be at least partially transformed to a "virtual" classroom which would be less dependent on physical proximity and face-to-face contact than on network access and video transmission. Such a "classroom" might well rely more on discussion than on lecture and require the instructor to be much more a facilitator of discussion than the source of information. Indeed, this is already something more than a "pipe dream" even on our campus. Marilyn Jody and others have been holding "class" discussions on WCU Micronet for some time now. Newt Smith and Linda Kinnear have been making extensive use of computers not just as word processors, but as networkable editing tools in Freshman Composition this summer. The Community Link site on campus already allows us to have discussions with and send presentations to nearly a dozen other sites in the immediate area via live, two-way television.

And there is no reason to limit this community to Cullowhee, for it extends across lines of state, nation and, even, continent. The resources of this community are as vast as its geography. Many libraries have "on line" card catalogs, there are large numbers of databases available at little or no cost and there is, literally, the expertise of the world available, as well. Imagine being able to have your students examine the holdings of the Library of Congress, or see the latest pictures from one of NASA's probes, or discuss a book with its author. These are possible today, and will only get easier as the network grows.

Computer networking seems to offer the best way to truly create the "Community of Scholarship" many of us desire. As faculty, we need to actively encourage the speedy completion of the campus network, including the dormitories, so that we can fulfill the promise of allowing everyone to participate for the benefit of all who share a common interest in scholarship. This means that we must encourage the use of such technologies in our classes and research work and, perhaps more importantly, we must demonstrate to our department heads and deans that we have an interest in supporting this network, this community, as it becomes available to us. It won't all happen at once. But it won't happen at all if we don't support its creation and use.

Richard S. Beam, Communication and Theatre Arts
(beamr@wcvax1.wcu.edu)

Comments or Questions?

If you would like to make comments about this essay or ask questions of Richard please send your questions or comments by the 8th of the month to Terry Nienhuis (FCTE; phone: 7196; WP Mail/Vax: Nienhuis). Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.