

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

EXCERPTS from responses to "Could Newsgroups Help?"
by Patti Johnson, 4/1/98

EDITOR'S NOTE: We are pleased that responses to Patti Johnson fill five pages, but, to conserve our printing budget (and a few trees) and expedite your reading, we are printing excerpts. The full text of all responses is available upon request.

My citation of WCU newsgroups as examples of how NOT to build a faculty-student community was the fifth point in my original list. Before taking a shot at newsgroups, I emptied both barrels at "formal, structured, scheduled activities, especially those created and run by faculty." I then called for faculty and students to work together on projects, some of which should not be directed by faculty. I also maintained that we must begin to treat students as ADULTS who are perfectly able to read and discuss what they choose, whether faculty like student choices or not.

Rather than "selling" and promoting newsgroups, which she says have not worked well, Johnson might look into providing free, off-campus Internet access to all WCU students, as Southwestern Community College is doing. She might also look into providing that to faculty. We would all appreciate saving the \$15-20 per month we now must spend for Internet access. It might encourage more extensive communication among students and faculty.

John Moore, Communications and Theatre Arts

I think [newsgroups] are very powerful and I attempted to start one of my own to help teachers share their problems and look for solutions.

I think there are several problems with regard to using newsgroups. First people have to be knowledgeable about the group or be willing to search for it. Second, they need to be willing to communicate through the group. They obviously need to have access to a wired computer and mostly they need to have time. People would most likely prefer to have a face-to-face encounter to discuss whatever the topic of the newsgroup because they can do two things: communicate and have a social encounter. Newsgroup use doesn't allow for the second, so most people, given the choice, would probably rather meet in person. But this doesn't reduce the power or potential of newsgroups. Like Patti, I think they have much to offer and I hope to use them more in my own work.

David Westling, Human Services

A newsgroup is as interesting as the people who participate in it, and if nobody knows it's there, it's likely to be pretty dull. If a message is posted in a forest and nobody reads it, does it exist?

The local newsgroups Patti described are languishing because nobody knows about them. They're a POTENTIAL but underutilized resource. You can provide just the information everybody needs on a "campus events" group, but if nobody's reading it, nobody knows. You can post a fascinating and provocative question for discussion, and if nobody reads it or answers it, the discussion doesn't happen.

But these newsgroups could be exactly the kind of thing we're talking about in our "how do we use technology to enhance education?" discussions: a technological tool to keep students, faculty, and staff in touch, discussing intellectual (technical, cultural, social, recreational, other) topics with each other, with local experts, and with the outside world. They have an obvious and natural place as a communications tool in learning communities, particularly the cross-discipline types of learning communities some of us are talking about. If we didn't already have them, we'd need to invent them!

Allen Moore, Biology

**Responses to "Could Newsgroups Help?"
by Patti Johnson, 4/1/98, continued**

John Moore's comments on newsgroups and Patti Johnson's reply to him leave me wondering what sort of community can be built within newsgroups. I have used newsgroups for 8 years and found very little community there. It may be the community of the city center, rather than that of the town square, but listserves are much more conducive to any sort of community feeling.

I view newsgroups as similar to bookstores: you can choose whether to enter, and when to visit, and decide which sections you want to browse. Listservs are more like mail: sometimes full of junk mail, sometimes more useful and more similar to professional journals. I recommend "dejaneews" (www.dejaneews.com) to anyone interested in exploring the real value of newsgroups. I would be happy to help anyone who is interested in exploring this resource further.

Bob Strauss, Hunter Library and Dept. Of Math & CS

Patti Johnson's reply to John Moore on newsgroups was a refreshingly informative and compelling piece. I have three points of reaction.

First, Patti points out that faculty who are concerned can read in a newsgroup students' reasons for wanting to transfer to other schools. A meaningful discussion and exchange on this issue would be both challenging to faculty and well worthwhile. I've felt long and strongly that students ought to better recognize the reasons for staying at WCU—our campus' unique values—but I'm torn between thinking, "It IS their decision, and you're rather biased, aren't you?" and having little I could offer in the way of concrete reasons besides the obvious: WCU offers more student-faculty contact opportunities, strong student support, and a more beautiful environment (students who don't value increased contact with faculty, don't particularly want to be "supported," and for whom an urban mall is the height of beauty are not likely to be swayed by these reasons!)

Second, Patti points out that a small but steady involvement by faculty might have a solid effect on increasing student-faculty communications, and hence might increase retention. Her suggestion that each of us spend 30 to 60 minutes a week reading and responding in a student newsgroup seems highly feasible. Many of us are already trying to get students to use electronic media to exchange ideas or carry out tasks within OUR agendas (class work, learning-enhancement discussions, etc.); how better to put our commitment to students on the line than to spend some time in a newsgroup focusing on THEIR needs and views. (True, I personally don't find myself as interested in much of what seems to thrill students as I am in W. B. Yeats or literature in general: but I WOULD like to know more about student values and perceptions on life. Perhaps my involvement a newsgroup would give me this added insight and help me save a student for WCU at the same time.)

Third, Patti points out that the Faculty Center is providing workshops including the use of newsgroups. This, I think, offers all of us an opportunity to see what CAN be done to enhance our courses and campus life in general (and to avoid some of the most obvious pitfalls, which I assume motivated John Moore's statements about waste of time and effort in the first place).

Patti rightly points out that newsgroups are merely tools, and can be unused, misused, or used effectively—just as a hammer might. Let's see if a number of us can learn to use newsgroups to enhance communication with our students both about education and values of WCU life on the one hand, and about student concerns and worries on the other. We may be able to build something really worthwhile with such tools.

Steve Eberly, English