

Development through Dialogue

A showcase of Dgroups from three perspectives; institutional, project and capacity development level

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Introduction

In 2002, seven development organisations were looking for an online communication tool that would suit their needs for their target groups in the developing world as well as other development practitioners worldwide. As none of the existing knowledge sharing platforms were considered suitable, they decided to join forces and build their own platform called Dgroups.

Over the last five years the Dgroups platform has grown ‘exponentially’. Today, around 80,000 users exchange approximately 12,000 e-mail messages each month. This surge in popularity has resulted in extensive discussions about the future of Dgroups among the 21 development organisations that are now partners in the Dgroups joint venture. The Dgroups Partnership stands at the crossroads, debating how the technical platform should be further developed, it is perhaps a fitting moment to take stock of what Dgroups has achieved so far. This paper therefore showcases some of the benefits, both expected and unexpected, that Dgroups has brought to three very different stakeholders:

- one of the co-founding institutions;
- the project manager of an international project that uses dgroups intensively;
- a dgroup facilitator and trainer.

For the purposes of clarity, Dgroups, with a capital letter, will be used when referring to the Partnership and the technical platform, and dgroups when referring to the online groups themselves.

The article begins by outlining the experiences with dgroups of the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD). The article then goes on to examine Dgroups from a project perspective, drawing on the experiences of the Programme Manager of the Global Teenager Project (GTP) who uses dgroups intensively, twice a year, to facilitate online debates between 6,650 secondary school students and teachers from 30 countries. The GTP is a particularly interesting example because it is a project in which dgroups play a central role: not only does the platform drive the project’s

activities, it is also used for communication purposes by the GTP coordination team which is globally dispersed. Finally, the third section examines Dgroups from a capacity development perspective: that is, developing the capacity of all those involved in Dgroups - users, moderators, facilitators, administrators and trainers – particularly as this relates to training others to use dgroups proactively as a tool for discussion.

Dgroups from an institutional perspective

Although Dgroups is often considered within the context of its effects on the end users, many benefits and challenges can be identified at the institutional level, especially in light of the fact that Dgroups is being supported by a group of organisations whose core tasks do not include facilitating online tools. This section will cover how and why Dgroups was created, its usage by IICD partners, and the benefits and challenges encountered over the years with the use of dgroups.

The Dgroups Partnership

In 2002, seven development organizations were looking for a simple, reliable, and accessible communication and information-sharing tool. Together they decided to create a platform which met their needs, and in 2003 they launched Dgroups. All seven organisations felt a joint venture would benefit their respective stakeholders and networks, avoiding duplication and stimulating linkages. The need to create something new at the time stemmed from the lack of a comparable service which was simple, non-commercial, respectful of privacy, and targeted at low bandwidth users in the South.

Founder members of the Dgroups Partnership

Bellanet
Department for International
Development (DFID)
Institute for Connectivity in the
Americas (ICA)
IICD
OneWorld
Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS
(UNAIDS)
UN Economic Commission for Africa
(UNECA)

Each dgroup includes mailing-list based discussions supported by an accessible, simple website with discussion archives, and where members can share personal profiles, events, links, and documents of interest to the group. The combination of mailing-list based communication, with extra functionalities in a simple and accessible website, allows those users with low bandwidth to fully participate in discussions.

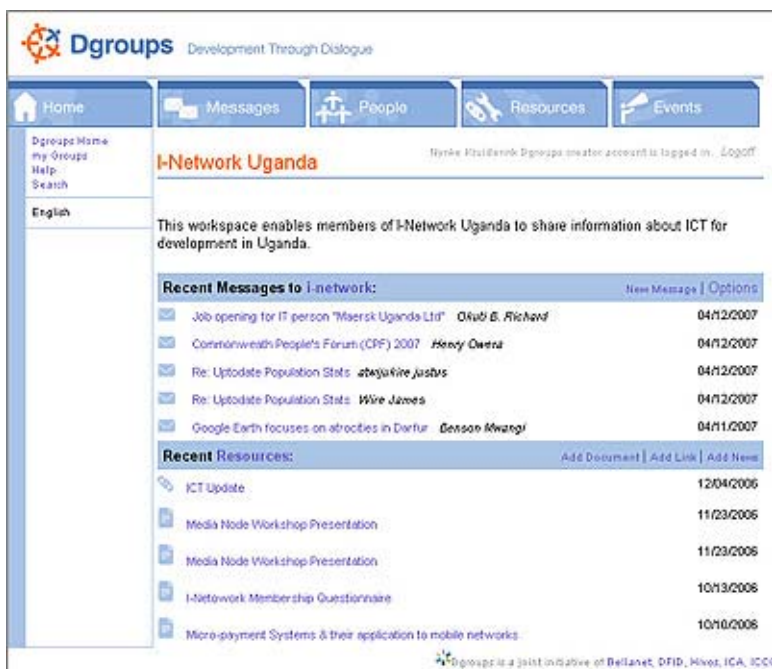


Figure 1: Screenshot of a generic Dgroups website

Source: <http://www.dgroups.org/groups/i-network>

Dgroups mission/vision

The Dgroups Partnership exists to mobilize and share the resources, experiences, and knowledge of the partners, members and participants, to achieve more effective (open and inclusive) development work. It facilitates online dialogues and collaboration through an accessible, easy-to-use platform tailored to the needs of the development community, and by promoting effective electronic networking, collaboration and knowledge sharing. Through dgroups, people are actively engaged in peer-to-peer networks and are connecting across various sectors and disciplines in the development community to share their knowledge and experiences.

The platform is hosted and managed by Bellanet on behalf of the partnership which currently consists of 21 organisations. Member organisations within the partnership pay membership fees and have ‘creator rights’, meaning they can create groups when the need arises.

Current Dgroups-wide statistics

Dgroups currently has 76,000 users [26,000 new ones during Jan-Dec 2006]. It supports some 2,034 groups [450 new Jan-Dec 2006]. Users include farmers, community development workers, school pupils and teachers, researchers, students, academics, development practitioners, politicians, policy makers, and staff of donor organizations and governments from approximately 200 countries.

Some 1,000 files or links to files are shared each month (33,000 since Dgroups began) and 12,000 e-mail messages pass through Dgroups each month. In 2005 the Dgroups Platform received 9.5 million hits; 180,000 unique visitors and 670,000 visitor sessions. It has cost approx \$CAN 500,000 over 5 years, equivalent to €327,000.

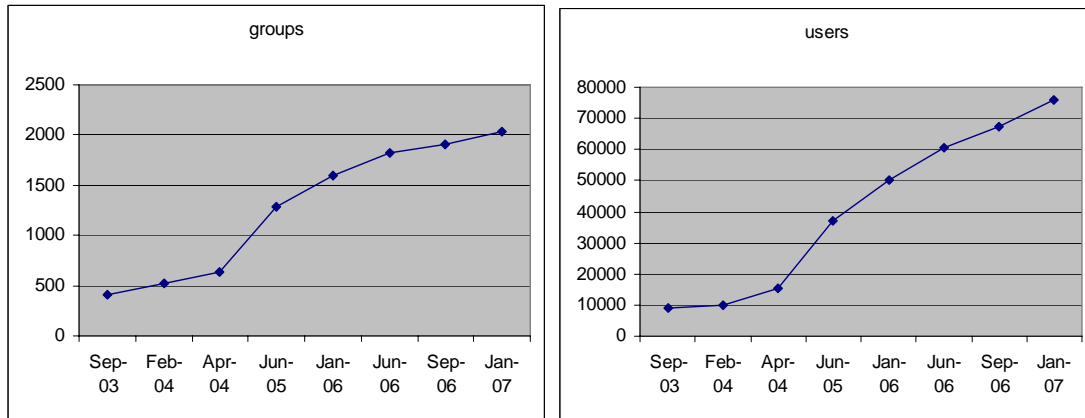


Figure 2: Growth of the total number of dgroups and users

Use of Dgroups by IICD

IICD's mission is to assist developing countries realise locally owned sustainable development by harnessing the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). IICD works in nine focus countries (Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ghana, Jamaica, Mali, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia) where it sets up programmes which create and enhance development opportunities. Technology itself is not the prime objective; it is merely an essential link to the benefits that can be gained via information and communication. As most developing countries have limited or low connectivity, IICD looks for cost-effective, sustainable ways to connect people and create new opportunities.

IICD uses dgroups to facilitate its national and international programmes. In each of the nine countries, IICD has supported the creation of a National ICT4D Network whose members are distributed throughout the country. Each network is supplied with a dgroup by IICD, as well as related sub-groups and/or committees. I-Network Uganda [<http://www.dgroups.org/groups/i-network>], one of the National ICT4D Network's main dgroups is regularly the most active of all dgroups.

IICD has also created dgroups to facilitate international communities, as well as for some project management initiatives between IICD and its public and private partners. Dgroups have also been created for internal project management within IICD and the process of project management has benefited from having a central area (the dgroup) which facilitates the communication and information sharing on project relevant issues and topics. Finally, IICD has also created dgroups for other development organisations interested in trying out dgroups. The total number of dgroups created by IICD comprise 26 publicly available dgroups; and private are 142 ones.

Benefits for Partnership organizations

Access to tried and tested platform

- Partnership members have access to a tried-and-tested platform for supporting online networks in development.

Improved communication and collaboration with fellow partner organisations

- The Partnership entails that the partner organisations communicate regularly on Dgroups issues but also on online communications issues in general.
- Existing networks and/or bilateral partnerships are strengthened by working together on the Dgroups platform.
- Lines of communications between the partner organisations are expanded and strengthened by this cooperation.
- When new organisations join the Dgroups partnership, other forms of partnering can be forged and opportunities for cooperation can be explored. Membership can pave the way to other, more complex forms of cooperation and collaboration.
- Challenges faced within Dgroups, are shared challenges, and solutions are often sought after in a joint effort.
- Partner organisations learn from each other and share experiences.

Joint platform in line with needs of the target group

- By managing and hosting a platform for development practitioners and professionals, the platform can be upgraded according to the needs of that target group. Development professionals and practitioners generally have specific technological and interface needs due to connectivity, hardware and computer experience issues.

Identity and Branding

- Dgroups' partners are able to have 'organisational skins' (a specific design for that organisation) applied the homepage of their groups, thereby increasing the visibility of their online work.



Figure 3: Example of a Dgroups skin; a World Bank example

Challenges

Dgroups was barely out of the first phase of development when it experienced an explosive growth as the graphs above indicate. This explosive growth was not foreseen and therefore the resources available to further develop the platform were consumed by the activity of simply managing and hosting the platform. The result has been that the platform has seen little development since its launch, apart from those necessary to keep it running as a reliable and secure platform.

Another side-effect of this explosive growth was that Bellanet could no longer sustain the original chain of support which was originally directly between each administrator to Bellanet. A solution was implemented at the end of 2004, namely the creation of the dgroups for administrators. These are peer-to-peer support groups (in three languages: English, French and Spanish) where all administrators can post challenges, questions, issues they are facing while administering and facilitating their groups, and their fellow administrators and facilitators can reply with suggestions and help. These groups have evolved as incubators for online facilitators and administrators. First-time administrators can find support amongst a network of their peers who are also working in development and often face the same challenges due to the context of their work. They also receive support from administrators who have a thorough understanding of the specific challenges which may be faced due to the context of their work.

Currently, research is being undertaken to expand the platform to include more web 2.0-like functionalities. Options are being explored to expand functionalities for these users mirrored on other social networking platforms such as MySpace [www.myspace.org]. The consequences of such a change could be enormous, allowing for greater interaction and knowledge sharing amongst the group of 80,000 users in the Dgroups platform.

Benefits for IICD on the ground

As mentioned earlier, IICD provides each of the national ICT4D knowledge sharing networks set up under its nine Country Programmes with a Dgroup platform. From a practical point of view, IICD has found the Dgroups platform to be a cost-effective, user-friendly tool that can be used to facilitate discussions between and among its local partners, particularly when long distances prohibit regular f2f (face-to-face) meetings.

It has also discovered, through trial and error, that creating a dgroup is only the first step; the key to getting a dgroup off the ground lies in training dgroup facilitators to stimulate and maintain a certain level of momentum among the dgroup's users. Therefore, in keeping with IICD's principle of 'learning by doing', e-facilitation workshops are now being held in IICD's focal countries. Only recently, an e-facilitation workshop was held for representatives of Mali's national ICT4D knowledge sharing network [www.mali-ntic.com] and representatives of Burkina Faso's national ICT4D knowledge sharing network [www.burkina-ntic.com]. Aside from teaching network members how to facilitate, moderate and administer dgroups, the workshop presented an ideal opportunity to introduce participants to Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and wikis as well.

Another interesting aspect of Dgroups which benefits IICD and other development organisations using the platform is its transparency. The transparent interface enables IICD and others to see what is happening within a developing country based on the exchanges between the (many) dgroups it administers, as well as which dgroups are popular and which ones have become inactive. For example, as a direct result of the e-facilitation workshop mentioned above, IICD noted that one 'Gender and ICTs' Dgroup in Mali had received a new lease of life and a new Dgroup had been created for the 'Gender and ICTs' network in Burkina Faso. Thanks to the transparency of Dgroups, IICD was able to observe a great deal of activity and witnessed over 40 postings on the Burkinabe dgroup in just 30 days.

A number of development organisations have commended specific Dgroups created by IICD's local partners in personal communications to IICD. In this way, the presence of IICD's local partners on the dgroups platform not only helps to increase the visibility of the national ICT4D networks but also increases the visibility of IICD in the international development sector. For example, the Dgroup of the national ICT4D network in Ghana (the Ghana Information Networking and Knowledge Sharing Network or 'GINKS' for short) has generated outside interest and has been praised in several personal communications to IICD.

From Words to Action: The Global Teenager Project

The Global Teenager Project (GTP, www.globalteenager.org) is an inter-classroom exchange of information and ideas which has since 1999 included over 10,000 teachers and students from 300 classes in about thirty countries. Originally established in 1999 by IICD, its aims are two-fold:

- to promote inter-cultural awareness by providing regular classroom debates in a safe, structured environment; and
- to improve the quality of secondary school education (both formal and informal) by introducing schools to the exciting new applications of ICTs.

The GTP is characterized by two major initiatives; its Learning Circles (LC) in English, French and Spanish, and Understanding Diversity which provide secondary school students with the opportunity to engage in project-based learning adapted to meet and fit with local curricula needs while collaborating with students from other cultures at home and abroad via the internet.

The 30 countries currently taking part in the GTP virtual learning network have the following curriculum goals in common :

- Contextual learning;
 - Tolerance and intercultural understanding;
 - Affirmation of national constitutional values; and
 - Socialization of the learner;
- Working critically with information in a global society;
- Solving problems collaboratively, in communities and wider networks; and
- Using ICTs.

Although technology plays an essential role in the LCs, it is not the main focus of the project is one of the added values of participation. The Dgroups platform has from inception been utilized by the project for both its activities as well as team coordination.

The GTP's use of dgroups

LCs are highly structured and facilitated by the class teachers with the support of a Circle coordinator. Interaction between classes takes place in a safe learning environment and is moderated via the dgroups.

The GTP learning circles activity has two phases each year, the March Learning Circle and the September Learning Circle. In each circle, clusters of 8-12 classes from different schools across the world deliberate on a theme of their choice for about 12 weeks with their findings, discussions and outcomes being posted in real-time on the project's [Virtual Campus](#). These Learning Circles are based on themes such as 'our school', 'the world

around us’, ‘traveling’, ‘sports’ and ‘life values which are pre-determined by consultation of learners with their teachers.

The broad curriculum overview of countries currently part of the GTP virtual learning network have many common goals relating to the specific goals of the two GTP programs, such as:

- Contextual learning¹
 - Tolerance and intercultural understanding
 - Affirmation of national constitutional values
 - Socialization of the learner
- Working critically with information in a global society
- Solving problems collaboratively, in communities and wider networks
- Using Information and Communications Technology.

Focus on Learning Circles

Learning Circles occur in English, French and Spanish with distinctions based on level of experience on collaborative learning and capacity for research into basic and advanced learning circles. Below is a graph which shows four different categories in which the learning circle is integrated within existing school curricula and activities.

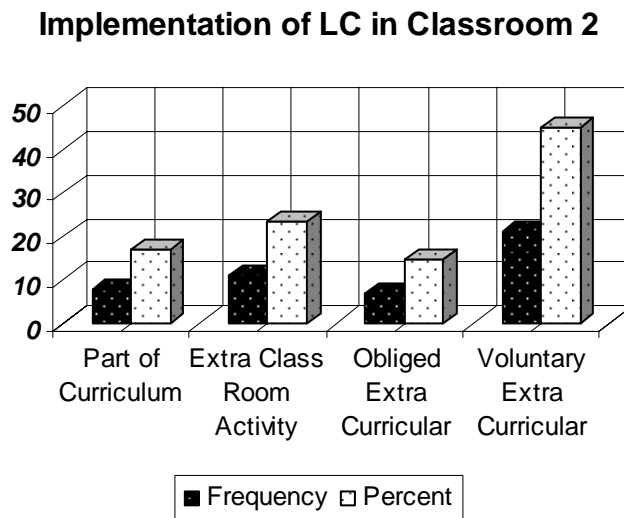


Figure 4. Implementation of learning circle (LC) in Classroom 2 (GTP LC evaluation 2005/2006).

Each learning circle is created based on the thematic discussion topics chosen by groups of learners: this is where the Dgroups platform comes into play. Each group is created on

¹ Bob Hofman’s *Surfing the 7 C’s: Seven Conditions of Global Learning* includes contextual learning, which is described in a similar way to these sub-points.

Dgroups based on the following parameters: that they are openly accessible when searched online but contributions are restricted to registered and approved members only catering both for the need to have knowledge and content generated accessible to all but at the same time preserving the room for such content to be generated without risking participants vulnerabilities (learners that participate range from 9–19 years of age).

Each learning circle has a facilitator assigned alongside the teacher with each class of learners. The facilitators role is not only to ensure that the schedule of the discussion is adhered to but that the quality of discussions and therefore content generated is at a level where each group of learners' learning and participation objectives are met.

Facilitating the LCs is a challenge, particularly given the different time zones, the workload involved, and the teething problems often experienced by first—time users. To provide some insights into the nature of this position and the day-to-day challenges involved, a vivid and personal account from one of the facilitators of a Basic GTP LCs is provided below.

My experience as facilitator of the Basic Learning Circle

I have been involved in the Learning Circle facilitation process since September 1999. As facilitator, I enjoyed my work very well. The job is so challenging, especially during the maiden weeks of the beginning of the Learning Circle, where you have to be glued to your computer to resolve the problem of inactive e-mail addresses and other technical problems.

One of the interesting and time-consuming exercises is the weekly updates, where you have to scan through the virtual campus to ensure that all the Teacher and Class letters and Sponsored Questions are captured and updated. At times, as soon you prepare your update, other partners of the Learning Circle suddenly send in their work, hence you are tempted to omit some of these works in your updates.

I always have to check my mails at least three times daily with 3-hour intervals. When it comes to posting Learning Circle News and updates, I always keep to time. I work on Saturday and Sundays as well. For example, I prepare the updates on Saturday and send the updates on Sunday.

When it comes to chat sessions, as a facilitator, I have to be online to ensure everything is working well in various chat sessions. To me, facilitating the Learning Circle process has really improved my interaction with different people from different countries. My interpersonal relationships with people have been enhanced. My computer skills have been enhanced as well. I also have the opportunity to coach and mentor teachers and students virtually. I have gained insight into different cultural diversities. In a nutshell, I enjoyed the facilitation of the Learning Circle.

E. Malcolm, Ghana

Data analysis of dgroups usage in the Learning Circle context

The following analysis is based on the evaluation process on the September 2005 (LC1) and March 2006 (LC 2) learning circles in French, English and Spanish (language of communication) involving teacher and learner respondents from 21 countries globally. These speak to the number of hours spent specifically with the computers online using the dgroups specifically.

- 32% of the teachers used 5-10 computers for the LCs. 26% had more than 10. Only 11% had to manage with only one computer. (31% had between 1-4 computers)
- 95% of the students themselves used the computer for the LC. In the majority of cases, there were 2-3 students working on one computer. In 33% of the cases, the students could work by themselves.

- 84% of the teachers indicate that the computers are in a separate room in the school. Very few (1-3 teachers) have computers in every classroom, in 8% of the cases, the students had to go out of the school (internet café, etc.) to work on the computer. In some cases, the home computer of the teacher or that of students was used.
- The virtual campus was mostly used for sending and receiving LC messages (67%). To a lesser extent also for reading the news items (47%), getting background information (45%) and for the chat sessions (38%).
- There is some difference between the two LCs when it comes to the Internet connection. In the first LC, 70% claims that all computers are connected to the Internet, in LC2 that is only 46%. For LC2, 28% of the teachers have to go out of the school to get to the Internet. This is striking as this does not have seemed to influence satisfaction on the LCs.

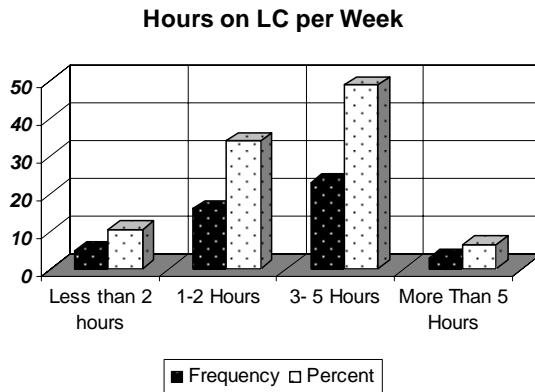


Figure 5. Number of hours spent by students on learning circle (LC) per week (2005).

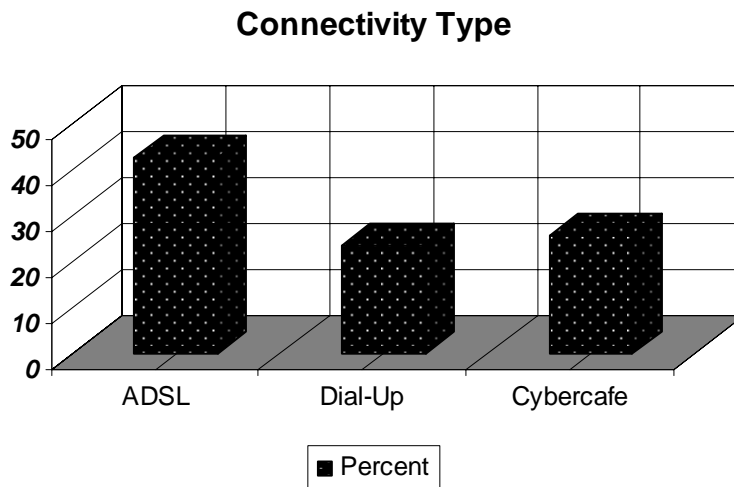


Figure 6. Type of connectivity used by secondary schools participating in the Global Teenager Project.

DGroups as a learning platform, plays an essential role in facilitating the exchanges (including resource sharing, training, and e-mail based discussion) on the Learning Circle, but it is not the focus of the activity. Students and teachers alike further learn about technology particularly the use of the Internet as a knowledge tool and the computer as a facilitative medium of allowing focused learning in knowledge areas from Technology to Art.

The GTP, as a concept, continues to fulfill a niche of the need to use existing and emerging technology to support the attainment of the most common global curriculum goals. Through its learning process and themes it provides a common sense that learners can communicate, present and share their ideas with counterparts from other countries using technologies such as the Dgroups platform as the neutral virtual meeting ground.

Dgroups from a capacity-building perspective

Approaching the Dgroups platform as a user, facilitator/moderator/administrator and a trainer allows different levels of interaction, control and understanding. In each, different capacities are built – of the individual user, of the trainer, of those being trained and in advancing the goals of the group using the tool to develop an online community. In this section, we reflect on all noted entry aspects but specifically on training others to use dgroups as a tool for e-discussion group facilitation.

As a user...

Coming to dgroups as a user often looks like many different things depending on where you are coming from. Variations in experience will depend on cultural and socio-economic factors - such as language, geography, sex, education, access to internet - but it will depend more on experience with e-mail groups.

Using e-mail networking develops the individual's capacity as an agent of change – able to influence, enter into dialogue and help shape and change popular discussion around issues. Creative use of e-mail networking allows the user to become a powerful advocate, one able to affect change in his/her own sphere and the virtual spheres in which s/he operates. As a user, the immediate benefits of dgroups are the benefits of any well-moderated or managed e-mail group. The success depends on the focus, the purpose, the other participants and then the moderator. The added benefit of dgroups, however, is that there are several tools that can enhance this experience of virtual networking or community-building. Using the e-mail and web tools can provide powerful tools in sharing resources, protecting privacy, and connecting with other groups.

As a moderator-facilitator-administrator...

Navigating dgroups as a moderator, namely going between the web and e-mail interfaces and then between the different platforms that support each part sometimes appears daunting when first approaching Dgroups, but this quickly dissipates when the potential of using Lyris (listserv platform) along with the Dgroups workspace is noted and experienced. According to one of the authors of this article – having used several freely available listserv platforms for facilitating groups on social change, Dgroups scores highest: for the different technical aspects it brings together, that is part of a community of dialogues around social change, that it builds knowledge around experience, that users and administrators can give input on its design, and that it is free to partners.

The capacity development of the facilitator-moderator-administrator in being part of a community of practice with other facilitators cannot be underscored, and that the platform affords as much control to the administrator is a powerful asset. Although in the end, good facilitation skills of the moderator/facilitator will determine the success of his/her group management – the ease of using this platform and the control it can extend can strengthen or highlight these skills and allow facilitators to be more creative in managing groups.

As a trainer ...

Training others to use Dgroups as a platform for facilitating dialogue for social change requires several layers of skills development – understanding the uses of the platform from a user perspective, the technical aspects of using Dgroups as an administrator, moderating the list using the Lyris platform, contemplating on the power of e-mail and online networking for social change, and online facilitation skills.

For the purposes of this section, a case study will be used to describe and reflect upon training on the use of dgroups for online facilitation.

Case-study : Training Programme for GINKS members and other IICD partners in Accra, Ghana – June 2006

The Ghana Information and Knowledge Sharing Network (GINKS) has been supported by IICD as a multi-stakeholder network since 2002. Among tools used to bring together interested stakeholders to discuss the possible ICT applications, two dgroups have been used: the GINKS forum and the GINKS tech forum. Interested in improving on the organisation and quality of the mailing lists, and to train a wider group of facilitators, GINKS management and IICD planned a workshop on online facilitation of dgroups, to be conducted by a local consultant. The training course was organized in three phases:

1. Online: Preparation for training and introduction to the forum;
2. Face-to-face: Training and planning;
3. Online: Practice sand mentoring.

A dgroup was developed for the training course
[<http://www.dgroups.org/groups/ginks-dgroups-training/>].

The training objectives were to build the participants' capacity: (1) to understand the roles and purposes of online group facilitation; (2) to administer and manage a Dgroup; (3) to facilitate/moderate online Dgroup discussions; and (4) to consider innovative systems to manage contextual issues and to encourage dialogue. There were group evaluations each day of the workshop and two conducted by IICD: at the F2F and 6 months after the training. The consultant also did two rapid assessments of two dgroups that facilitators' skills were being built around. The training was conducted in June 2006 in Accra with nine participants, 33% were female, and there was a good mix of technical and information management backgrounds.

Reflections, lessons learned and recommendations

Below are some reflections on the user of the dgroup for the training exercise.

Dgroups is a powerful platform which affords different level of interaction. Trainees can easily learn the required technical skills if the most important and basic are taught first. Practice and exploration can then help trainees build on those learned skills and become more specialised in their technical expertise.

During training, it is important to show how the different tools (resources, calendar, closed/open groups, member profiles etc.) can be used and to give concrete examples

from other groups on when/how to use them. In this instance, using Dgroups as the object of and the platform for the training worked well.

When training people to manage Dgroups – or, for that matter other e-mail discussion groups – it is important to offer several models and concrete examples of management and moderation to consider. For example: rostering role division, bi-weekly team meetings, ways to engage more users, linking eforum material to efforts on the ground, uploading offline discussion onto online dialogues, and the importance of surveying members. After this training one of the participants surveyed his Dgroups and got indication, after 2 years of the group-life, of how facilitation was being received, needs of members, and gaps in the content.

Dgroups has several innovative tools yet unless used often by the moderator, members are not aware of those functions or that they are able to utilise them as well. As a group facilitator, one can role-model, remind and re-create those tools – use of those tools and regular updates and reminders of them may help enhance user participation so that the tools that Dgroups offer can be more effectively used to develop the community.

Conclusions

The benefits of online discussion platforms are often analysed from the perspective of the end users. This article clearly demonstrates that being involved in an online discussion platform can be a rewarding experience and valuable learning process at a number of other levels too. At the institutional level it was observed that IICD and the other co-founders of Dgroups have benefited in a variety of ways from their involvement in the Dgroups platform at different stages of its development. These benefits include greater visibility in the international development community; the opportunity to forge stronger links with a large number of like-minded institutions resulting in a number of other initiatives and joint ventures; and access to a practical, user-friendly communication tool which has been welcomed by many of their partners in the developing world.

From a project perspective, the Global Teenager Program (GTP) illustrated that, with a modest investment and minimum level of training, an online discussion platform can be used successfully as a solid basis for an interactive project operating on a global level. Aside from helping the secondary school pupils and their teachers to become computer-literate and improve their communication and information gathering skills, the online Learning Circles facilitated by Dgroups brings them one step closer to a greater understanding of and respect for other cultures and helps them improve their interpersonal skills. The different functionalities provided by Dgroups, such as e-mail, the ability to spontaneously create open and closed dgroups as and when needed and then terminate them when they become redundant, a separate section for resources where files can be stored, message lists, and an overview of participants per dgroup allows the students to share resources, participate in regular e-mail-based discussions and engage in

training exercises. In this way, it accommodates many different aspects of the GTP project and gives it a great deal of flexibility. Last but not least, in addition to providing a transparent, easy-to-use environment for GTP's many different activities, the platform is also used regularly by the GTP team to facilitate communication between its own team members, many of whom operate in different countries and travel frequently.

From the capacity development perspective, the dgroups experience provided an interesting learning trajectory. Firstly, the added benefit of dgroups over other online discussion platforms is the extra tools it offers; tools that enable the participants to share resources, protect their privacy and connect with other groups. Secondly, the platform not only affords facilitators, moderators and administrators a great deal of control, it also brings them together in their own community of practice. Sharing knowledge and experiences in this way has helped to dispel feelings of isolation and has empowered the facilitators and administrators to manage their own dgroups more creatively. Indeed, providing a safe, inclusive learning environment with peer-to-peer support for the facilitators, moderators and administrators has been one of the defining features of dgroups from the outset. Sharing experiences and best practices in this way has generated a number of different training models and a wealth of information on what works, and what does not, from a training perspective. Some key lessons learned include: develop a clear set of criteria for workshop participants and manage their expectations; a mix of face-to-face and online training sessions is more effective; training sessions should be reinforced with follow-up sessions for the dgroups facilitators; offline and online monitoring and evaluation activities allow the trainers to assess the usefulness of the training courses and identify what the trainees need to help them apply their new skills; enabling trainees to practice online and providing them with a mentoring phase was also found to be helpful.

To sum up, the popularity and success of the Dgroups platform has proved that it is possible for organisations with no former experience of stewarding an online discussion platform to join forces and successfully create their own unique platform from scratch without having to resort to ready-made solutions that already exist in the public domain. Moreover, the democratic and inclusive nature of the Dgroups platform has helped to nurture a user-friendly, supportive environment for all those involved in this knowledge sharing community – the users, facilitators, moderators, administrators, and partners – an environment that is conducive to learning, knowledge sharing and continuous improvement. This paper underscores the fact that participating in Dgroups has been a rewarding experience for all concerned. It has also demonstrated the added value of a simple, user-friendly interface that lowers the threshold for first-time users of an online discussion platform. The fact that Dgroups is now a 'victim of its own success' and having to find ways to expand and develop its services further to keep up with demand bodes well for its future.

Abstract

This paper takes an alternative approach and analyses the benefits of using Dgroups, an online discussion platform for development practitioners, from three very different

perspectives, beginning with the perspective of the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), one of the co-founders of Dgroups. The paper then highlights the experiences of the Global Teenager Project (GTP), an international project that uses dgroups to facilitate online discussions between over 10,000 school pupils from 30 countries. Finally, experiences from a training perspective are described including the skills needed for this role such as: understanding the platform from a user perspective, the technical aspects of using dgroups as an administrator, moderating the list using the Lyris platform, and understanding the power of e-mail and online networking for social change. Reflections, lessons learned and recommendations are provided, together with a list of both recommendations and limitations when training others to use Dgroups.

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