

Reaching Out by Electronic Communication



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The ASCD Executive Council has approved staff recommendations to enter the "high touch" era by establishing an Electronic Meetings and Networks system. The new system will utilize both audio and computer teleconferencing, the latter an unfamiliar medium but one with exciting potential.

Almost all educators work in isolation, even though we know collaborative problem solving may produce better solutions. Typically, exchanges about current problems come through informal peer groups at infrequent face-to-face meetings. The professional need for collaboration, therefore, remains largely unmet. Most of us recognize that new forms of communication might be helpful, but we have had little experience with them. In the past it has taken about a generation for new technologies to be accepted as functional tools. If we are to shortcut this waiting time, we must learn what these new tools can do in our real world of daily problems. This kind of learning does not often come from demonstrations and models; instead, we learn by doing and by discovering how to better meet our own needs.

Beyond our personal and professional needs, the purposes of ASCD provided an impetus. An association

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has work to do that requires the interaction of geographically separate individuals, interaction that is often limited in both frequency and extent by the burdens of travel.

Second, ASCD is an information organization. The staff, the governing committees, and the members are all

both *users* and *producers* of information. Members pay dues because they want timely information through publications and meetings. Frequently more important, however, are the opportunities for members to *give* information, to become involved and visible in the profession.

Initially, the computer teleconferencing system will be used for association meetings and networks. By our definition, a *meeting* is a situation where information is exchanged around common tasks or products such as committee and task force efforts. A *network* differs in that the information exchange is driven initially by self-interest and later by mutual interests. While not organizations in the traditional sense, networks are potential organizations that come into existence only when information is exchanged between two or more of their members.

The new system is being implemented in small steps. The ASCD officers and Executive Council will use it to supplement their regular face-to-face meetings: the High School Futures Planning Network was introduced to the system at their July meeting in Colorado, and the Publications Committee will learn about it in October. If these early efforts prove successful, we will expand to other applications.

We know that the use of a tool like this must be motivated by purpose. This observation seems only common sense until you think of the times that new technology is promoted as an end in itself. Consequently, the ASCD staff will be seeking purposeful applications and learning how to transfer group facilitation skills to this new medium. As use of the system increases, we hope to develop within ASCD's membership a cadre of electronic meetings facilitators who could, without leaving home, conduct networks and meetings on the computer teleconferencing system. Thus, the challenge and the opportunity of these new high touch media will be available for both members and staff. Let's reach out and touch each other □

What Is Computer Conferencing?

Computer teleconferencing uses computers and phone lines to break down some of the time and space barriers that constrain interaction. Telephone conferences require that all parties be on-line at the same time. Face-to-face meetings require, in addition, that everyone be in the same place. Computer conferencing, however, allows participants with access to equipment to communicate at their convenience, day or night, without regard to geographic location. No telephone tag or mailroom drag. In addition, because the computer maintains an accessible record of all transactions, summary memoranda and synopses are unnecessary; final documentation can simply be edited from the computer memory.

The following three elements are essential components:

1. Each participant must have access to a *computer terminal* or a *microcomputer* equipped to operate as a terminal, in order to send and receive information. A *modem*, or an *acoustic coupler*, is also required; this device allows the microcomputer to communicate over the telephone lines.
2. A *host computer* serves as a central storage and switching point for all information exchange. ASCD will use a system called "CONFER."
3. *Telephone lines* provide the connections between the host and the participant computers. These special lines make transmission of computer communication less expensive than a traditional voice telephone call. These services, such as Telenet and Tymenet, can usually be accessed through a local phone call or WATS call.

Two related forms of computer communication are electronic mail and electronic bulletin boards. An *electronic mail* or *message system* allows an individual to send a message to one or more other individual(s). These messages are stored in a central computer until the intended recipient calls for them. An *electronic bulletin board* is an easy-to-update list of information—news items, meeting announcements, book titles, and so on.

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