LIVEFORUM – A NEW APPLICATION FOR SUPPORT AND SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

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1. Preface

While developing our E-Learning Course for the first time, new ways of providing support were discussed. 'LiveForum' – our application - combines the advantages of the two communication tools 'chat' and 'Threaded Conferencing'. Thus, it was possible to provide synchronous and structured conversations, which allowed quick and broad support regarding technical, expert, social and emotional concerns. This lead to high motivation among participants and a constructive work atmosphere was constructed through LiveForum.

2. General conditions

In early 2003, the authors, in cooperation with Prof. Dr. Ing. Jens Windelberg, Department for Town- und Regional Planning at Oldenburg University, developed an e-learning course. It was our first experience with e-learning support. The topic of the course was "Basics of Urban Development and Town Planning" (BUTTOP). About thirty (prospective) planners from sixteen different countries participated. Communication between participants from e.g. Bhutan, Chile, Nepal, Syria, South Africa, Ethopia, Tanzania and Oldenburg (Germany) was professional and effective. Twenty-one completed the course successfully and received a certificate from the Department of Public Planning at Oldenburg University. BUTTOP was listed in the **GDLN**[1] and some of the students became aware of our course due to that fact. Other participants were individuals associated with partner universities, partner organizations, offices or the worldwide operating **GTZ**[2].

The course software used was LotusNotes Learning Space. The Lotus replication feature allows offline work most of the time and thus substantially reduces the costs of being online. This makes the program interesting for participants in countries where an internet connection is not necessarily common. The functionality and reliability of this system (infrastructure and platform) have been tested and proven in numerous online programs in both higher education and professional development. It is continuously secured by a core team of four experts at three centres for distance education in Northern Germany (cf. homepage of DESDe).

Originally, it was planned to hold three video conferences - at the beginning, the middle and the end of the course. This could not be realized because many participants did not have access to the necessary facilities. Due to this circumstance LiveForum, which was developed at the same time as the course, became much more important for the instructor team and the participants.

The E-Learning Course BUTTOP starts again in February 2004 and a second evaluation of the application LiveForum will be conducted afterwards to prove our results.

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[1] Global Development Learning Network of the Worldbank

[2] Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit: The GTZ is a government-owned corporation for international cooperation with worldwide operations

3. What is 'Chat'?

Chat – or chatting – is a real-time, simultaneous communication between two or more people via the World Wide Web. It allows any number of logged-on and normally registered users to talk online via a network. Nowadays, this type of communication is very popular. Often, more than 100 persons are online concurrently. Each posted message pops up instantly, always at the end of all the written communication, making it a kind of 'running' text. The user has to read every new message to decide which ones concern her/him. To control the unavoidable chaos to some extent, more than one chatroom is usually offered. There are rooms for special topics, and others that are absolutely private, with restricted access only to those explicitly invited by the user who created them. Under these conditions, and with certain rules such as distinct tasks and moderation, it is favoured by some instructors: "To get structured discussions within a chat one first needs clear conceptual guidelines and secondly good moderation." (C. Bremer, 1998, translated by the authors). This effort, which seems to be necessary to make chat a useful communication tool for E-learning Courses puts many instructors off.

This tool, which facilitates synchronous communication between people from many different parts of the world, was favoured in the formation phase of BUTTOP. It was considered an interesting add-on. The instructor team wanted to get into contact with the participants, but not in the rather chaotic form and without sufficient preparation. It was necessary to modify a regular chat tool or develop a new one.

4. What is 'Threaded Conferencing'?

In contrary to chat communication, threaded conferencing provides the possibility of structured discussions. "Messages can either be juxtaposed or attached to a preceding message. The level on which threads start are often called 'main topics'." (Hülsmann, 2003) The obvious advantages to chat are

- the simplicity of following a conversation's thread
- the preservation and
- the comprehensibility.

Threaded conferencing is used in almost every web course. It permits a structured discussion with the possibility to track the thread. Some platforms allow the sorting of contributions and answers to their third level (e.g. WebTycho), others (e.g. LotusNotes) allow many more, while chat does not have any option to sort answers at all which makes it more difficult to follow the discussion. "Asynchronous conferencing can be seen as a hybrid medium sharing the communicative interactivity of 'speaking to each other' and the stability of the textual medium, which facilitates analysis and invites reflection." (Hülsmann, 2003)

In fact, threaded conferencing does not mean one has to communicate asynchronously: When two people sit at their PCs at the same time, they may talk to each other via this medium almost simultaneously.

5. LiveForum

5.1 What is LiveForum?

The advantages of chat - synchronicity - and threaded conferencing - structured communication - were combined . on the application's basic platform and which was provided as a part of Lotus Notes, used to run BUTTOP. It was named "LiveForum": "Live" because of the real-time communication, and "Forum" because of the structured form for various contributions.

LiveForum looks like any other threaded conference with the important distinction that it can be used synchronously. To read all new contributions, the "F9" key or the "refresh"-button are applied. The new messages, distinguished by a small red star, are listed below the document to which they belong. Not only the participants who take part from the very beginning of a session, but those who log in later are also able to get an overview of all the conversations and facts almost immediately. One can easily

look at all the postings made until that time. The participant enters the LiveForum and sees immediately what is important for him or her.

Other than chat, LiveForum does not list single users' names or the number of others at a glance. Nevertheless, the overall user-friendliness of the LiveForum is secured by other options. Among others, these are:

Screenshot.1: Toolbar of "LiveForum"

- Index function: Search for certain words in all contributions of a session
- Show Thread function: Contributions of a special thread are shown
- Collapse function: Overview of all main topics
- Expand function: All contributions (titles) made in a session

5.2 Why LiveForum for our course?

When joining a non-virtual course, the participant has a contact person with whom s/he can share her/his problems, concerns or wishes, either personally or at least over the telephone. In BUTTOP, these options like in many other e-learning courses (cf. Mündemann, 2002) were not given. However, personal contact with an instructor is very important for successful support. Normally, the only way to exchange information is communication via e-mail and is not always efficient. . In general it takes considerable amounts of time to answer all questions, mailboxes are always close to full, questions can't be asked back as quickly and many participants are reluctant to write the instructor about every problem they may have.

A much more efficient approach is setting up an online consultation hour. In asynchronous communication or discussions it often takes hours or days to reach a result. Regular meetings in which every student can take her/his questions and get an immediate answer from other students or the instructors is more satisfactory for both sides. Additionally, one question/answer, e.g. about a technical problem which is relevant to several persons, can be conveyed to all at once. Furthermore, synchronous communication is of high importance with regard to motivation: "Practical experience in our presentations shows that a combination of synchronous and asynchronous parts is more motivating for participation and beneficial for the group process." (Bremer, 1998, translated by the authors)

As mentioned above, LiveForum is not only synchronous and structured communication between instructor and learners, but also between participants. It may compensate the missing element of having social contacts, which can take place after a traditional course. It may also take on the role of side conversations, which are considered to be of high importance. Altogether, this may build the bridge from the single student to forming a group identity.

In a nutshell, targets focused on by using LiveForum were:

- To support of the participants in important fields (professional, technical and emotional) by direct contact and immediate responses
- To gain deeper and more qualified knowledge of the problems participants are confronted with while working on BUTTOP (especially professional, but also technical and affective issues)
- To facilitate the formation of a self-supporting and self-motivated work group

- To encourage the transfer and exchange of information among participants
- To create a convenient and positive work atmosphere for and between the participants and instructors

Of course, real-time communication also has its problems, even if it is combined with the advantages of structured conferencing:

- Technical and financial resources: Can everyone afford Internet connections and for what amounts of time?
- Time zones: Is there a time window when all participants could join the LiveForum?

6. Practical experiences

6.1 Background and general conditions

The instructor team met regularly each Thursday at 4 pm MET in one of the multimedia rooms of the Centre for Distance Education at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg to supervise the LiveForum. During our first meeting on February, 13th 2003 we chatted with two Syrian, three South African and one Chilean participant. Participation was voluntary and was considered an additional offer within the course. Two other forums for communication wre also provided: the 'CoffeeBar' for additional socializing and literature tips and the Conferences for professional discourse.

The highest participation was on May 5th with 14 chatters, the smallest on May 22nd (a public holiday) with 3 participants. On average each meeting was attended by seven to eight chatters. Some sat at their computers at home ("I am working at my home. I am hearing the snore of my family member, because it is 10.15 at night. I am relaxing with you." (Personal communication, D.A., Nepal), while others were still at work or at their university. Actually, the time frame was compatible with all participants' time zones.

6.2 LiveForum Topics

We had not planned on moderating LiveForum, so we did not know where the conversations would lead. It turned out to be both smalltalk and professional conversations. Topics were diverse and included (sometimes in their native languages) eg.:

- Personal messages:
  - Organisational: „I may pop in again for a few minutes later, but it's my wife's birthday and I'm taking her out to a restaurant." D.T., South Africa).
  - Social: Many participants talked about their daily lives.
- Professional discussions about course contents
- Topics concerning philosophy, architecture and politics. One Syrian participant spoke about their orthodox Easter celebration, which takes place one week later than our's („there are lots of Christians in Syria, about 20%. [...]I've done some biscuits with kids today. Some are burned while I am chatting." R.A., Damascus).

6.3 Formal aspects

Technical problems with internet connections or different writing speeds, which might have lead to interruptions in the discussions, did not turn out to be a big problem for the communication process. The conversations were mostly fluent. Sometimes a few minutes passed before an answer was posted, but the thread was rarely cut off. Furthermore, this speed made it possible to pursue or read other conversations as well. Overall, we noticed that the conversations did not stay on the level of a simple „how are you" but actually encompassed a wide variety of course relevant topics.

During the four months of the course some formal and content related suggestions for improvement emerged. One participant wanted us to prepare two topics for discussion in each LiveForum in the way mentioned by Bremer above. We decided against this proposal, because the organised discussions

were reserved for the online conferences. The LiveForum was to be open for less formal conversations as well. Another proposal was to list all LiveForum users logged in at the time. This only came up at the end of the course and there was not enough time to realize this.

6.4 Psychological Aspects

As mentioned above three videoconferences were originally planned, but could not be implemented due to access issues. LiveForum compensated for some of the expected outcomes:

- It allowed for familiarization with the participants' different worlds. Thus, it was possible to imagine how others who were at a distance lived, felt and thought.

- It emotionally involved participants on three levels:

  - Personal: The discussions on the war in Iraq, which started while our course took place sparked a keen interest. During that time in particular we noticed that the synchronous communications in our LiveForum let us feel spiritually connected to the people "at the other end". All participants expressed their sympathy and concerns for peace to their Syrian colleagues. While BUTTOP took place, some started to e-mail regularly with one other and the desire to stay in touch and continue their communication with regard to personal matters as well as course contents, was expressed. Some even promised to visit each other.

  - Professional: On the one hand the discussions provided new ideas and motivated to continue and learn more. On the other hand LiveForum provided the simple knowledge that others too were engaged in the topics and tasks of the course, and this facilitated active participation.

  - Social: The weekly meetings contributed essentially a positive groupfeeling which was expressed e.g. in the fact that at some point the participants nicknamed themselves „Buttops". This marked them as members of what social psychologists call the 'in-group' and additionally showed their wish to belong to the group.

6.5. Evaluation

Evaluation of the LiveForum at the end of the course showed that its implementation was rated as positive or important by nearly 80 per cent of the participants. The feedback on the course was positive in every way and our initial doubts were not confirmed:

- In spite of partially poor internet connections in Syria and South Africa, the participants did not stop logging in and attending the next meetings. („I'm looking forward to join our next chat session", R.A. Syria).

- Although most participants studied or worked during the day, had family obligations, and needed to work through the contents of the course, more than half participated in the LiveForum at least once. Six participants attended over half of the meetings and three were present almost each time. Time difference did not seem to be a problem for most, even though some had to chat rather late in their evenings. Others were still at work at the fixed time, and requests to meet later were made. We decided to prolong the meeting by one hour and this expansion proved to make sense.

- The weekly meetings facilitated the positive groupfeelings expressed in the fact that the participants referred to themselves „we Buttops".

- The Forum provided the possibility to motivate one another through their interest and enthusiasm for the course topics and even lead to arranging joint projects.

7. Transferability

After this experience, which was very gratifying and not explicitly expected, the question to what extent the LiveForum can be transferred to other courses within other learning management systems (LMS) remains. Technical aspects do not seem to present problems regarding the transferability to other platforms as a forum tool is available for almost every platform and a few modifications should be sufficient to integrate a LiveForum. Personnel requirements are low because the Forum demands

only a few hours of time per week. And, it is possible to spread the supervision of the LiveForum among several tutors. These can complement one another while chatting – with the advantage of a single tutor not having to be responsible for the whole group – or they can take turns weekly.

Technical or personnel constraints should not be expected when applying LiveForum.

8. Conclusions

Our experiences with the „LiveForum" have shown that this application can be useful in many ways. Combining synchronous communication with structured conferencing offers many advantages: it allows for quick and broad support with regard to technical, expert, social and emotional concerns and can lead to high motivation and reduced withdrawal rates among participants, which is often due to lacking support. Weekly synchronous communication contributes to the feeling of belonging to a group and motivates those who were active to demonstrate steady work habits, which in turn had a positive effect on the whole course group. Altogether, it strengthened a constructive work atmosphere andthe possibility to re-read the discussions' contents enhanced comprehensibility and stability in the ongoing learning process. We were able to convey that we took the participants' worries and problems seriously and that it was important to solve them quickly.

The application "LiveForum" can be installed with little effort. The implementation itself requires the teacher/tutor to be available at certain appointed times for only a few hours a week instead of having to deal with nearly full mailboxes and questions at all possible times of day. The user does not need additional technical knowledge for LiveForum. It is assumed that LiveForum can be transferred to any other learning management system without problems. All things considered LiveForum passed its baptism of fire.

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