

Dialectical Discourse Management through Online Collaboration



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INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents experiences of time-limited networked forums created for the purposes of sharing views and insights on specific development topics (through fixed-length, Internet-based conferences), gathering wider feedback and broadening participation. It illustrates the effectiveness, represented by global outreach and frequency of interactions, of the communication medium in stimulating an online dialectic dialogue involving multiple stakeholders. The experience described represents an example of time and scope-based online interactions in a distributed community. This distributed virtual network is organized and temporarily brought together for *ad hoc* and time-bound knowledge exchange. The chapter summarizes experiences that can be replicated to solicit knowledge creation and sharing across multiple domains.

BACKGROUND

The “Internet Conference on Knowledge Assessment” was part of an international development program for using the Internet as a tool for discussion and discourse management among stakeholders all over the world. Within this framework, the technology network (TechNet) of the World Bank was tasked with exploring the outreach potential of the Internet as a networking space dedicated to electronic conferencing. From 1996 to 2002, TechNet hosted a series of online electronic conferences called “think tanks.” The online conferences, usually run for a specified period of time, discussed and debated questions of science and technology for development to gather insights on how to promote economic development from experts located in different areas of the world.

The think tank described in this chapter dealt with knowledge management topics. It was devised to facilitate a discussion among the general public with interest both in assessing knowledge resources and in

the South Pacific as a region of the world representing small insular economies. The think tank acted as an additional vehicle for supporting a “knowledge assessment exercise” launched through a joint effort between the World Bank, governments, business and civil society representatives in the Pacific Island countries. The knowledge assessment (KA) consisted of a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of local drivers of knowledge-creation.

The Internet conference was aimed at promoting the electronic exchange of ideas, information, experiences, and opinions to increase awareness and community building around the findings of the KA exercise. Other goals were to enrich the discussion on the tools available to developing countries to improve the use of knowledge for social development and economic growth, as well as examining the KA methodology (National Research Council, 1996) to improve indicators, processes and outcomes.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE INTERNET CONFERENCE

From an organization and technical standpoint, the think tank on knowledge assessment departed from traditional conferences and online discussion boards structures. The conference had a precisely organized participation model and structure. It was designed to target three different groups of participants: (1) experts in knowledge management, (2) general public from all over the world, and (3) a team of participants to the KA ‘case studies’ in the Pacific Islands. For the latter, the conference was a tool to refine their ideas and promote the implementation of pilot proposals into more complete business proposals.

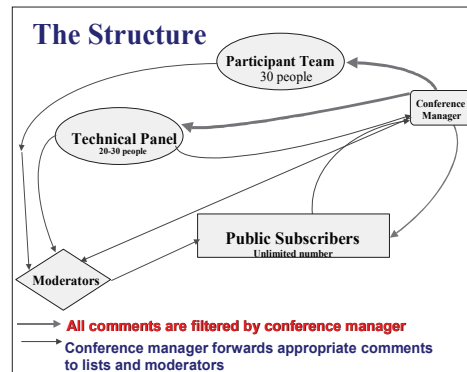
During the five weeks of the conference, a *technical panel* and *public subscribers* exchanged communications in the format of electronic mail messages distributed through different listserves. More specifically, participants included:

- **Technical panel:** A technical panel of experts from government, NGOs, academia, private sector, and international organizations conducted the discussion on the KA methodology (National Research Council, 1996; Passerini, 2003; Passerini, Jennex, & BenTaarit, 2007). They reviewed the methodologies devised by the World Bank, and other international consulting and research organizations that were made accessible as HTML documents to conference participants.
- **Public subscribers:** The conference was potentially open to anyone interested in knowledge assessment and the Pacific. This group was in the public domain. It considered the questions on the assessment process (barriers, opportunities) and central issues such as knowledge and culture, democracy, gender, governance, openness, economies of scale and increasing returns (Arthur, 1996).
- **Participants team:** This list was exclusively designed for anyone who took part in the field-work conducted during the pilot data collection in Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. This team reviewed findings and contributed to the further development of case studies. The discussion among participants in this group was triggered by the set of case studies launched in each country, which were published on the Internet through password-protected access.
- **Moderators:** The moderators conducted the preliminary work for conference set-up. They also participated in the discussion by sending opening comments to distribution lists, proposing questions to panelists, soliciting dialogue, preparing weekly summaries and conducting thread analysis. Moderators included senior economists from the World Bank, the researcher, and the leaders of the consulting firms that conducted pilot qualitative and quantitative analyses in the South Pacific.

The flow of communications occurred along the channels presented in Figure 1.

- The exchanges were preliminary sent to a *conference manager* who insured that 'netiquette' was followed by senders. Once approved for release, the messages were distributed on the Internet both as text-based communications as well as Web documents in HTML (in a discussion board format).

Figure 1. Internet conference structure



- Subscribers to a *public list* would read a *technical panel* messages and would react to them. Messages from the public list were forwarded to the technical list by the conference manager.
- The participants' *team list* was a closed list with access limited to the conference moderators. Moderators forwarded selected messages to the public forum to solicit discussion about case studies.

ONLINE DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE INTERNET CONFERENCE

From a content standpoint, the structure of Internet conference facilitated managing dissensus and dialectic argumentation in its discourse flow. The technology medium acted as a powerful tool for managing the discussion (Hightower & Sayeed, 1996) through the moderating roles discussed earlier. The articulation of the dissensus/consensus mechanisms contributed to the shaping and understanding of the different roles of knowledge in the societies being analyzed (following Deetz, 1996, four discourses framework). Schultze and Leidner (2002) analysis of the Deetz's framework (1996) displays that there are four different paradigms guiding research and enquiry in knowledge management (Figure 2). In this chapter, we only report general results and conclusions from the analysis of the discourse flow of the Internet conference and the review of global participation outcomes.

The KA exercise showed that better outcomes were achieved when moving beyond a data-driven research approach. A normative approach expressing value

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