Chat rooms and professional development — a story with a happy ending

What images come to mind if I mention online chat rooms? Thoughts perhaps of teenagers spending hours communicating in what seems to be some secret short-hand language? Or someone meeting the partner of their dreams and then flying across the world to be united, having fallen in love online? If I redefine my question to the ALIA online chat rooms I suspect your answer might not include these two scenarios (apologies to anyone who has met the love of their life courtesy of the ALIA website!).

But the ALIA online chat rooms (http://alia.org.au/alianet/chat/ for those who have not ventured there) are being used to support professional development and to overcome the barrier of geographical distance to involvement in ALIA activities.

The ALIA Special Libraries Interest Group in South Australia has begun using the ALIA chat rooms for committee meetings. This initiative was motivated by several factors. We all know how hard it is to get members onto committees, especially with the added 'incentives' of monthly meetings and event organisational duties outside of normal working hours. So when a committee member lives and works in a regional area that makes physical attendance at meetings impossible, we had to find a way to foster inclusion in group decisions. Committee meeting attendances were also declining for a variety of other reasons — 8:00am breakfast meetings are hardly an incentive!

Whilst communication via e-mail is an option, the group looked for a solution that emulated a physical meeting. Telephone conferencing was not accessible to members, but online chat was (corporate firewalls have not been a factor so far). The ALIA chat rooms seemed the obvious choice.

So far the group has held two meetings online, roughly alternating them with monthly physical meetings, so that the face-to-face contact, which is an important part of professional development, was also maintained.

Online chat room meetings do however present their own set of problems. Communication delays due to members' varying levels of keyboard skill (and lack of knowledge of the shorthand noted at the beginning of this article!) were quickly noted as an impediment. This also contributed to confusion as to when discussion on an agenda item had been completed. Several members felt that these and other issues could be addressed by establishing procedural guidelines for online meetings. They are summarised below:

- Online meetings are an official committee meeting. Committee members are asked to make an effort to participate from beginning to end, only logging off from the chat room when the meeting is declared closed. Observers are welcome but in line with group rules cannot vote.

- A meeting facilitator (which may or may not be the group convenor) is appointed at the previous meeting and confirmed in the agenda.

- An agenda is circulated via e-mail to committee members and observers who have expressed an interest. The timing of agenda circulation is determined by the number of items listed for discussion.

- E-mail communication is used to provide background to some agenda items — this allows the online meeting to be used for brief debate and quick decision making.

- If long postings of text are required warnings such as 'I am about to expand on' and 'end of my text' are to be used.

- A 30-second lag rule should be enforced by the facilitator to maintain flow. If no discussion has eventuated in that time, the facilitator summarises the topic debate and puts the item to vote. The 30-second rule is also used for accepting votes.

If the success of this venture is to be measured by the fact that our regional committee member has been able to participate in meetings for the first time, and other committee members have been able to join in more often, then we have achieved our aim. Minute-taking by copying and pasting text into Notepad is an added bonus.

Our chat room skills and guidelines will continue to evolve and there are no reports of online romance so far.

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