

## Facilitating an Email Debate – Challenges and Prerequisites

**For a few months now Ueli Scheuermeier has been the facilitator of SDC's (Swiss Development Cooperation) internet platform "Rural Development Workspace"<sup>1</sup>. In October/November 2002 he led a three week email debate on "Rural BDS"<sup>2</sup>. We have much experience in facilitating face-to-face-(f2f)-workshops. Facilitating internet debates, however, is a new field for us. We thus asked Ueli a few questions.**

*Question: Last week I spent two days at a congress with a similar theme. At the end of it, although my head felt full, I had learnt little that was new to me, was exhausted and did not feel revived. On the whole I have the impression that meetings, workshops and conferences are increasing exponentially, so what could be the additional benefits of email debates?*

Answer: Yes, that's correct. Nowadays participants go to conferences already informed. Little new information is gained and one is left with a feeling of frustration. The additional benefit of an email debate is that every participant can simultaneously debate and reflect within his/her own context. A peer exchange (especially in COP<sup>3</sup>, community of practice) or an interaction similar to that found in farmer-to-farmer extension takes place. A direct exchange of experiences

and questions is possible with other people in similar situations. Of course, projects and programmes often have advisory boards or steering groups intended as a support mechanism, but these are usually higher in rank and have little operational experience. The extension officer, or in our case the online facilitator, must ensure that direct contact is made amongst those with experience.

*Question: Could anonymity also play a role? One exposes oneself less than one would during a direct contact?*

Answer: Yes, but many people still think that they need to be smart on the internet. Yet the internet is an excellent medium for spontaneous, unreflected contributions and creative brainstorming. Online discussions are superbly suited to fool about creatively. But many people still have to learn this. Also when playing the fool creatively, one should be considerate and not too sensitive. Mutual consideration is important. Be careful with cynicism. Neither the participants' body language nor intonation is discernible. Irony is not always recognisable. Misunderstandings are possible. A facilitator must take care. If he/she discovers hidden barbs, these must be followed up and cleared up: what exactly is meant by this, what do you really mean.... It is not like a classical correspondence where the communication frequencies are longer. Particularly newcomers to online debate occasionally need help so as not to go off on interpretations of a statement which may not have been meant like that at all.

*Question: So you need closed circuits?*

Answer: It is similar to conferences where we often have podia and group work. Online exchange corresponds to group work. Short inputs of only 1-2 paragraphs are important. Thoughts and free associations also contribute to the debate, even if they do not fulfil scientific or "serious" criteria. This is something which

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<sup>1</sup> [HTTP://WWW.BELLANET.ORG/SDC/RURALDEV](http://www.bellanet.org/sdc/ruraldev)

<sup>2</sup> The article "Summary of LBL Email Discussion on Rural Business Development Services" p. 14, deals with the contents of the debates.

<sup>3</sup> "Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their understanding and knowledge of this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". (From "Cultivating Communities of Practice: a Guide to Managing Knowledge" by Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder. Harvard Business School Press.

Etienne Wenger is an Californian, who has been involved since 10 years in researching large industries on how they manage the crucial information and knowledge that they need in order to stay in business. He coined the term "Communities of Practice".

many people do not yet realise: On the one hand, the online debate is much more relaxed and personal than a serious scientific discourse. One cannot professionally hold someone to something which they wrote on a mailing list. Nor can one reproach someone for being naive or ignorant because one cannot expect participants to analyse everything before contributing. On the other hand, the online debate is not an intimate relationship, as many readers are joining in. Asynchronous online communication is a new form of communication, neither “written” nor “verbal”. We are all still learning.....

*Question: How do you deal with garrulousness and participants seeking the limelight?*

Answer: Actually the same rules apply as in normal f2f facilitation. The online facilitator, however, has the possibility of routing a garrulous contribution. This means that the contribution is first sent to the facilitator who okays it before forwarding it to all on the list.

*Question: How does one discuss, which picture of oneself does one project? In the RBDS debate a certain degree of levity of thought was detectable.*

Answer: This is done by the facilitator and happens intentionally. I have learnt this from other online facilitators (from Etienne Wenger during my COP online training). This takes place via “modelling”, that is, the facilitator shows how. The same occurs in f2f seminars. The facilitator sets the standards by which interaction with one another occurs during the seminar. This needs to be learnt; debating online in an extrovert way is important. There is also a basic difference between written and verbal. On email answers are more thought out than in talking. During direct discussions one often doesn’t listen well. In the written form there is often a longer time lapse between contributions. One thinks about writing something or not. A contributor may be sleeping on the other side of the planet while someone is reading and replying. Philippe Capper calls this “asynchronous debating”. Many different replies are received on the same theme. Naturally the quality varies with the ever-varying context. An online discussion spreads thematically much more rapidly than in a f2f discussion. This is logical as any one contribution elicits a number of independent answers, which

in turn again call for many independent replies, etc. At this stage a facilitator is really challenged to keep an overview, as well as maintaining the overview for the participants.

*Question: What, for example, could participant XY do with the different perspectives relating to her case?*

Answer: At the moment I can only make assumptions as we have not yet completed the analysis of our debate.

- a) She was confirmed in her intentions.
- b) She has gained new ideas.
- c) She is receiving on-the-spot coaching in her ideas which gives her support and strength.

This is very similar to Bausch’s group counselling discussion (a group problem-solving procedure). A debate can take place simultaneously and in a parallel way, reflecting the views according to this “reality check” and comparing them to similar situations of other participants. That is what is so great about this asynchronous online communication: it is possible to work and reflect on an actual case at the same time and in a quality way.

*Question: What abilities are required as online facilitator?*

Answer: He/she must master f2f facilitation. Clarity of roles is also important online. I mark my facilitation role with \*\*\* in the subject. This is a clear signal that I work in a methodical way, that I am now the facilitator. Content contributions and facilitation should not be mixed. An online facilitator must provide a substantial amount of content information. He/she needs to do much summarising and set new themes. In other words: paraphrase, think ahead, formulate impertinent hypotheses and initiate discussions. For this he/she must have a greater understanding of the contents than in normal facilitation. Participants need to be animated and contributions boldly drawn out, as people normally have very little time. One constantly needs to have an overview over that which is being discussed.

A facilitator must also concern himself with and master technology, and be able to talk to technicians. A great deal of software knowhow is required.

A further challenge are the lurkers (who lurk online, always read and follow a discussion, but never contribute anything). We have approximately 80 people who are registered for the rural development platform and thus have contributions sent to all of them. 10 % actively participated in the BDS debate. A total of 20 % occasionally participate. Nothing whatsoever is known about the remaining 80 %. Initially this is unsettling because as a facilitator it is possible to keep everyone in sight and see whether they are fascinated with the process, or whether they are outside on a smoke break or feel cornered. This is impossible to see online. Then when only ten are actively participating in the debate, I as facilitator frequently have a turn. Then you ask yourself questions like "Am I too dominant? Am I doing something incorrectly?..." One has absolutely no idea how badly or well you are doing, because you are not receiving non-verbal signals from those not contributing. One can only make assumptions. One has to get used to this; eventually it will leave you cold. It is a normal phenomenon. Investigations have shown that in fact only about 20 % of participants take part in online discussions. This does not, however, mean that the others are not interested. Lurkers are also important multipliers. Sometimes you have a successful experience. You have a chance meeting with someone in the hallway who in passing tells you that a particular paper which resulted from one of your internet discussions proved to be very important on a specific occasion... The impact is difficult to measure and even more difficult to plan! Yet there is one indicator: One can easily and at any time remove oneself from a mailing list. This has so far not happened to us and is in itself surprising as most of the 80 people on the list receive large numbers of emails daily, and did so even during the intensive online debate. Yet not one person has left us. This seems to indicate that in fact many did read the debate while not actively participating in.

*Question: What about the time investment?*

Answer: Facilitating an online debate is very time-intensive. It is a full-time job like any other facilitation. Asynchronous discussion always produces a wide breadth of contributions which have to be thematically narrowed down. This is very difficult. One can picture this like a tree which constantly forms new branches.

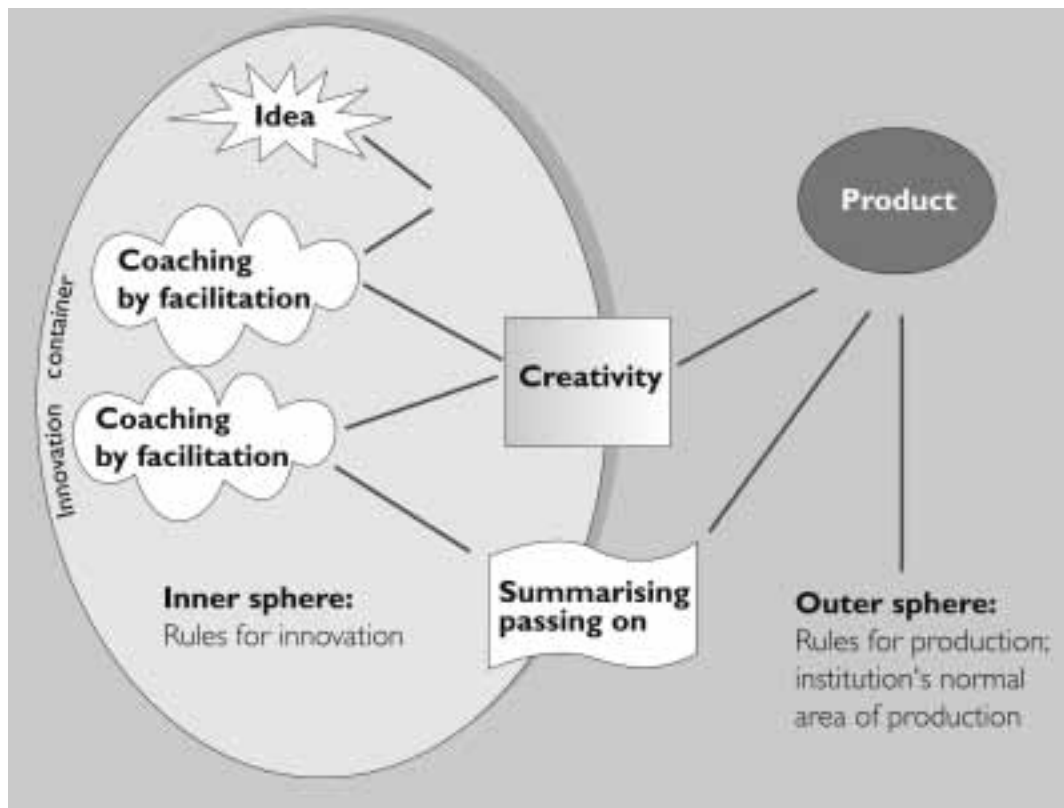
Then one asks oneself if one prefers 1000 individual blooms or whether one wants to make a wreath. To obtain a product, the facilitator must constantly summarise, paraphrase and seek consensus. It is also important to clarify at the outset what kind of a product is being sought after. What is important and interesting is that the product has arisen not from one mind, but from many who understand the theme and carry it. This can result in a completely different meaning than a study devised, formulated and carried out by one or two (often external) persons would have.

I once heard something about a mycelial thought process. Such a debate should be visualised like that. There are endless branches, but they always come together again. Not by themselves, however, and it is a great challenge for the online facilitator to perform this work exactly.

*Question: What are the benefits for the client (the paying commissioning agent) and for the participants?*

Answer: Well, in the end the client has the product. This could be in the form of, for example, contributions for policy papers (preparatory work for sectoral policies) or peer exchange amongst project workers (existing projects are supported), providing a dynamic community of practice. To my mind a COP is a very important product, especially for field workers. It is a way in which the highly regarded lessons learned and experiences can at last be exchanged without forcing people into special workshops which all interested and interesting parties may not be able to attend for geographic reasons or for reasons of schedule. So the client offers a learning system. In addition it is an action-research instrument to find out where the problems lie (problem-solving, tried and tested solutions, policy....). We have already mentioned the benefits for the participants: ideas, support, peer coaching etc.

In this the facilitator has a key function which can be imagined as follows: The peer exchange takes place on the internet - uninhibited, chaotic, creative. Around this we have a structure, the organisation of the client, e.g. SDC. This could be a tricky situation for the facilitator if the rules of the game are not clear. The facilitator should be the valve of the chaotic sphere to the structure. He serves as a mirror from the chaotic



The innovation container keeps the balance between creative chaos and productive structure.<sup>4</sup>

sphere into the structured decision levels. He moves like a shaman between worlds. Consensus is not always necessary; in many cases summarising and passing on are enough. The position of the facilitator must be clear (taking part in peer exchange) and the online forum should be a protected area, otherwise nothing will function. As soon as the structure tries to push forward into the chaos (take over the chaos), the system no longer functions.

*Question: What can be done about busy people?*

*Answer:* For most people their daily work is more important, there are time pressures etc. Online debating is not yet perceived as work; it can be postponed or printed out to read later. But one soon gets lost: The printouts do not make sense, one can no longer determine what belongs to what. The facilitator can help

by setting up “threads” (a thread shows which contribution is reacting to which contribution which helps one to follow the development of an argument, i.e. the “red thread”) or arrange all the inputs in chronological order to enable one to understand how conclusions are reached. This then also serves as the basis for a summary. It is a very text-heavy procedure compared to pinboard, representing an additional technical problem, e.g. in Africa.

The fact that many people in offices allow themselves to be so stressed by organisational matters and meetings that they believe they have no more time for online matters will have to change in the future: discussion in online debates is part of the core work of a specialist. I increasingly observe that there are busy people for whom quick replies and noting ideas on lists belong to their day-to-day work, and is as important as any scheduled meeting. And these people increasingly have greater influence on the decision-making processes in modern organisations.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to our publication “Managing innovation” for more information on this system.

*Question: What else is needed for e-debates?*

Answer: Additional face-to-face meetings are important. When the participants of an electronic debate meet each other, the basis for a relationship already exists, as there is a lot of group dynamics even during electronic discussions. I experienced the following during the COP training: We had already had intensive debates online and had even carried out some small projects together. We had, however, never met each other. Some of us arranged a meeting in Portugal. We had hardly arrived when things got moving as we already “knew” each other. I have never before worked so closely with others so quickly. Oddly enough, however, we didn’t have the need to work together conceptually. We drew, went for walks, told stories over food and wine etc. etc. In this way we were always informally doing brainstorming. And this was while knowing that we would be able to continue working together online afterwards. This switching from specific conceptual-creative work online to open f2f interaction enabled us during the f2f meetings to allow interpersonal imagination and intuition the space which was later needed to continue working conceptually-creatively together. Both are needed for good performance and a clear goal. In this way, for example, one could invite the participants of a rural development debate to conceptualise a new rural development programme for SDC. I think this is a wonderful alternative to the never-ending sequence of boring meetings and workshops and seminars with all their schedule stress. The social context enables the debate to become useful and continue in a better way. This is important in the general workshop and meeting fatigue which I have observed everywhere in our organisations. Someone expressed it as follows: “Online is for conceptual work, f2f is for social stuff”.

By the way, there are also relay-type f2f, especially for worldwide COPs: 10 persons meet in Europe; of these 3 go to America and meet another 10 persons; of these 2 go to Thailand to attend a f2f meeting for 15 people. From this meeting 4 go to India to attend a meeting of 20; of these 3 go to Moscow, etc. etc. Each meeting is documented photographically and published on the web. In this way the whole group “meets” worldwide again and again, and always in a different combination.