Chapter XI

The Uses and Impact of Academic Listservs in University Teaching: An Exploratory Study

Julie-Ann M. McFann
University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact academic listservs were making on teaching at Temple University when used in conjunction with face-to-face courses. Since the study was the first of its kind, an exploratory qualitative design was used to see if themes or patterns emerged. Results indicated that listservs were primarily used for housekeeping activities, although instructors voiced their desire to tap into the potential of listserv technology. The overriding discovery was that most instructors were using listservs without a predetermined teaching goal. A demographic profile of professors likely to use listservs is also included.
Introduction

Many instructors use online discussion groups (listservs) in conjunction with the face-to-face courses they teach. Although there has been some research on the impact of networked computers for aiding discussion, research regarding the pedagogical use of academic listservs in general is only now starting to emerge in a meaningful way. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of academic listservs on teaching at a large, urban, Research I University. The ultimate goal of research regarding academic listservs is to see how they impact student learning. Before we can study how they impact learning, however, we need to find out why instructors were actually using listservs. It would be a moot point to study the effects of academic listservs on learning if most professors were not using them with that goal in mind. Because use of academic listservs at Temple University had not been studied, the focus of this study was purely exploratory to see what themes or patterns emerged. This research limited its focus to listservs rather than other types of asynchronous discussion groups, such as bulletin boards, because they are different in the way that information is delivered. Listservs are conducted via electronic mail making them more passive, whereas students must actively go to a bulletin board site to retrieve information and participate. Future research should be conducted comparing the educational impact of the two formats.

There is a dearth of empirical research regarding the effectiveness of listservs as a pedagogical tool (Edwards & Shaffer, 1999). Much of the literature on listserv usage in conjunction with face-to-face courses is anecdotal in nature or the research was conducted using the author’s own courses. Generally, the research describes how the authors were using online communication in their courses. Findings were usually based either on their successes and failures with online assignments or on questionnaires distributed to students in the course that focused on student satisfaction regarding computer usage and/or the requirement to use computer networking. As Spotts and Bowman (1995) point out, “Most articles about technology use in higher education appear to be based on anecdotal evidence about outstanding professors who are using the latest innovations in dramatic and highly effective ways” (p. 56). Although the literature is mostly anecdotal and biased in favor of using listservs, the researchers independently drew similar conclusions about the benefits and disadvantages of online communication.

The major theme that runs through the literature is the idea of students learning from each other with the professor taking on the role of educational facilitator,
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