5
Collaboration in International Online Teams

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) by four international online teams active in rural and environmental development projects on three continents. These cooperative teams engage in mutually supportive learning, as they utilize electronic mail and computer conferencing facilities, to help overcome challenges to effective communication presented by geographic isolation and time zone complexities. The groups’ experiences are examined in terms of their transition to CMC use, the types of communication tasks carried out via CMC, problems encountered and benefits received. CMC is reported to play a key role in developing an electronic or paper database to act as a project’s ‘collective memory’, increasing the feasibility of inter-continental projects, and viewing modern team communication as an orchestration of media. Recommendations are made regarding the effective use of CMC in international project management and the benefits of team learning to advance communication at the frontiers of cross-cultural problem solving.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, rural development, CMC, collaborative learning and international development projects, CoSy, electronic mail, computer conferencing, CMC and project management, time zone challenges to communication, collective memory, team work across time zones.
**Introduction**

The present vital need to accelerate human learning has a deeper meaning than the desire to graduate more experts from our centres of higher education. We urgently need to assist open-minded and cooperative teams to engage in mutually-supportive learning, as they endeavour to ameliorate some of the world's increasingly more pressing problems. The four case studies that follow recount the implementation experiences of cross or multi-cultural teams engaged in rural research and development. Each team described herein is learning-as-a-group at the frontiers of cross-cultural problem-solving. They demonstrate how CMC technology is being used to restore the synergistic process of 'learning together' to the forefront of practical human welfare.

**The Four International Teams**

**Rural change in Europe: A research programme spanning 12 countries**

The European Community sponsored this five-year research program to examine trends in 24 farming areas dispersed throughout nine EC member states and three non-member states, namely Austria, Switzerland and Sweden. Arkleton Trust (Research) Ltd., the executing agency, coordinated the 24 study teams from its own base in Scotland using a wide area network and computer conferencing software [1]. The research examined current evolution of farm household behaviour, including the phenomenon of multiple income sources (referred to as pluriactivity), in relation to common policies of the Community regarding such agricultural structures as quotas, levies and other planning restrictions. Each of the 24 study areas encompassed baseline and final surveys of 300 farming households, and required in-depth annual interviews with 60 selected families during three years of the project. The 12-country study required integrated planning and collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, and joint analysis at different spatial levels in order to understand better the socio-economic evolution of these regions. Formidable communication challenges resulted both from the distribution of the project staff throughout most of Europe, and from the complexity of qualitative data analysis required, which involved relating farm decision-making patterns and diversification of income sources in response to a variety of socio-economic conditions, agro-rural environments, and trends in structural policies regionally and nationally, in a comparative cross-national framework.

The need for integrated planning and close coordination led those initially involved to seek alternatives in communication technology that would be equal to the scale, speed, and complexity of the project. The diffusion of CMC tools into project work followed a classic sequence: the Project Director adopted conferencing (using the CoSy software) in 1984; some of the project steering group undertook design work with it in 1985; a joint meeting of most research staff participated in discussions, demonstrations, and training in its use in 1986, after which it was formally incorporated as a key communication tool in the work of the project [2]. The actual, daily, informal adoption of CMC by staff also followed a now-classic sequence: confidence in the reliability of the physical links (microcomputer to modem to telephone lines); logging on and off the system; reading messages; sending messages; downloading, working off-line, and