

SYNERGY
A Project Funded by LFHE

PROJECT REPORT

Using Collaborative Software to Facilitate Asynchronous Group Activities On-Line

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Introduction

This report comes out of the experience of Synergy, a year long project funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and led by the University of East Anglia in partnership with the University of Hertfordshire. The project investigated the use of web based collaborative meetings software to facilitate asynchronous group activities. The term ‘asynchronous’ is used throughout this report to describe on-line activities that take place in a ‘different time, different place’ context, as opposed to the conventional face to face, ‘same time, same place’ meetings environment.

The report aims to give an overview of the asynchronous approach to running group events, which grew from our use of collaborative meetings software to support a range of organisational development activities. It will draw on case study work undertaken at the University of East Anglia and the University of Hertfordshire, providing in each case a detailed description of the work undertaken and its intended objectives, the process and planning involved, and the main outcomes and key learning points from using this approach.

Our intended audience is the wider Staff Development Community, and our aim is to inform their practice by demonstrating both the advantages and disadvantages of this method of working. We hope to provide useful advice and guidance to those considering this approach, and to indicate the particular settings in which asynchronous working may be most effective.

‘asynchronous’
different time, different place

Project Description and Aims

2.1. Background

Facilitated meetings can be a powerful agent for planning and change. Many staff developers regularly facilitate groups in the traditional face to face 'gathered' environment. The expectation is that participants turn up at a specific time and place, and the meeting happens. In reality, availability of the right people at the right time is often a major issue and what appears to be a successful outcome for the group who attended can subsequently be undermined by the absence of a key individual. The Synergy project sought to address this challenge by offering a solution that enables people to be involved in a facilitated meeting, irrespective of their geographical location and existing diary commitments.

In recent years, conferencing technologies, including video and telephone conferencing, have enabled groups to work together synchronously when geographically distributed. The project took this a step further by exploring the new territory of asynchronous formally facilitated meetings, where those involved are not only geographically distributed but are not expected to respond to one another in 'real time', so releasing participants from a strict diary commitment. This is possible through collaborative software which can offer appropriate web-based 'any time, any place' communication.

The software in question has been in use at the University of East Anglia for some time and successfully supports face to face facilitated sessions in our Innovation Lab (iLab). It offers shared and anonymous brainstorming, categorising and voting tools. The facilitator runs the meeting using an agenda of pre-planned activities. Participants use the specialised software in conjunction with networked PCs to record questions, ideas, facts and opinions. Results are immediate and all data is captured in the process. The recent upgrade to a new web based version, Facilitate.Pro, has presented opportunities for facilitators and group participants to work together asynchronously (screenshots of the software can be seen in section 6.2.). This means that contributions are not expected at the same time, but rather within a set timeframe as specified by the facilitator.

2.2. Aims and Objectives

Synergy aimed to determine if web-based asynchronous facilitated meetings offer a useful approach to facilitated work within and between HEIs, and associated organisations. The project sought to answer the following key questions:

- *Does the asynchronous approach add value to what we do as staff/organisation developers?*
- *Can it significantly help the development of our institutions by better enabling the right people to be involved in a given facilitated meeting?*
- *In what areas can it be used to enhance the quality and effectiveness of what we do?*

We wanted to explore and describe specific examples of asynchronous facilitation and to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach in those situations, by identifying both the benefits and the pitfalls. We also wanted to include in our consideration some of the more structured approaches used for face to face facilitation, such as Action Learning Sets or Creative Problem Solving.

2.3. Methodology

Initially the project methodology was designed as follows:

1. Selection of a small number of settings in SD/OD where facilitation is used, such as Action Learning Sets, Creative Problem Solving, or World Café type of environment , and an investigation of them in asynchronous mode. (World Café is a technique designed to encourage conversations while people are seated at café style tables. Key points from discussions are captured on paper tablecloths. After a period of time, people move to a new table and the conversation continues. One person remains at the table throughout to host the new group conversations by summarising the previous discussions. There are usually three rounds).
2. Investigation of the chosen settings, in order to compare and contrast the efficacy and practicalities of conventional 'gathered' ways of working, with the distributed asynchronous approach.
3. Emphasis on dissemination to the community, through asynchronous facilitated sessions designed to provide experience of this approach and to gather feedback about it.

It was intended that each asynchronous session would be evaluated and compared with the face to face facilitated setting, using questionnaires designed specifically for participants and session owners/facilitators to provide feedback.

2.4. Changes to Project Methodology and the Case Study Approach

In practice the project adopted a case study approach to explore the effectiveness of asynchronous facilitated sessions. This necessitated a significant departure from the methodology described above. It was not possible to carry out comparisons with a range of different facilitated settings and techniques as originally intended, simply because in reality such opportunities did not materialise and could not be artificially created. However, there was opportunity to compare the asynchronous approach with conventional face to face facilitated meetings, including those that took place in the iLab environment. A case by case approach was chosen, focussing instead on the groups involved and their particular experience of asynchronous facilitation as compared to same time, same place working. This proved to be a more productive line of enquiry and therefore, it was not deemed appropriate to draw comparisons with specific facilitation techniques such as Action Learning Sets, World Café etc.

2.5. Intended Outcomes and Outputs

The intended outcomes of the project were a better understanding of the issues involved in running web-based asynchronous facilitated groups so that facilitators understand when this approach might be appropriate and how to best manage the facilitation task.

Outputs would take the form of one or more briefings to the SD/OD practitioner community; one or more workshops about the project (run as asynchronous facilitated sessions, so that practitioners experience at first hand the issues under consideration); and a report, with guidance for Facilitators who wish to use the approach (this document).

2.6. Intended Benefits to the Project Partners and Wider HE Community

The work of Synergy was intended to enhance and support activities where facilitated groups are already used to investigate and/or resolve a wide range of issues in higher education, both within and between institutions. Organisations such as Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Higher Education Academy and the Staff Development Forum may benefit from running facilitated asynchronous discussions that could, for example, help in the dissemination/embedding of information, generated by their funded projects.

Besides these higher level benefits, the project work sought to:

- *offer staff greater flexibility in the use of their time (a particular benefit to senior staff whose available time is limited and who have very full diaries)*

- *free up time from travel to/from meetings*
- *in some cases reduce travel (and perhaps avoid subsistence costs), which will both reduce direct costs to the institution, and help to reduce its carbon footprint.*

We also planned to investigate more general advantages in working asynchronously. For example, within the timescales given to participants by the facilitator:

- *contributions can be made 'as and when' a thought or idea occurs*
- *the meeting is ongoing in the sense that matters do not have to be left (forgotten?) until the next meeting, so making possible a greater continuity of thought that can allow ideas to grow and develop – also with the possibility of reference to other resources (including people) to help matters progress*
- *the facilitator has more time to reflect and better manage the overall process*

2.7. Project Management Team

The project ran from January-December 2008 and was led by the University of East Anglia, through its Centre for Staff and Educational Development (CSED), in association with members of the People Development Unit (PDU) at the University of Hertfordshire. The project was co-managed by Nigel Curson (Project Leader) and Paddy Anstey. Gurpreet Gill was the core project worker, having a co-ordinating role between team members, and working with facilitators and session owners in the design, implementation and evaluation of asynchronous events.

Case Studies

Over the course of the year, Synergy was involved in several asynchronous activities. Three key activities based in different settings have been selected as case studies and provide clear, but very different examples of practice:

- *An intensive three month project with the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, in which the asynchronous approach was used to consult staff and students in a major review of its curriculum.*
- *A study based on work with the University of Hertfordshire, which is engaged in a major strategic change initiative aimed at transforming the institution into a premier business facing HEI.*
- *A smaller scale activity, in which asynchronous facilitation was used in strategic Away day preparation by the Centre for Staff and Educational Development at the University of East Anglia.*

These case studies illustrate practice in the use of asynchronous facilitation on different scales and at different levels of the organisation – inter-organisational, inter-departmental and inter-team. They also demonstrate the flexible nature of the software used to support these activities as a medium for initiating discussion, collecting data and sharing knowledge.

Insights and learning points are drawn from the evaluations, post session interviews with session owners and the project worker's observations.

3.1. Case Study One

School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia: Curriculum Review Consultation

Rationale and Objectives

The School of Environmental Sciences (ENV) at UEA is one of the longest established, largest and most fully developed Schools of Environmental Sciences in Europe. The School takes a holistic approach to teaching and research integrating physical, chemical, biological, social and geotechnical sciences into the study of natural and human environments. ENV has a reputation for producing top rated research, with much of its output classified as internationally excellent or world leading.

In order to maintain its position as an internationally recognised centre for excellence in research and teaching, the School must continue to be responsive to the challenges presented by a rapidly changing, and increasingly competitive sector. In recent years, various drivers have combined to provide an impetus for change in the School's approach. These drivers include pressure on staff time, issues related to the alignment of teaching with research activity, differences in the value placed on teaching, changing student expectations, challenges in attracting high quality students, disparities in teaching loads, changing demography and specialisation of staff. All of these factors necessitated a major review of ENV's curricula and teaching provision, which was initiated in the Spring of 2008.

From the outset, senior staff in the School were keen that the process of identifying and prioritising changes should be transparent and inclusive. Although some preliminary discussions had already taken place at School Board meetings, they were interested in ways of encouraging participation and engagement from as many members of the School as possible. The Synergy project provided an opportunity for this by supporting a School wide consultation process, using Facilitate.Pro to capture the views and opinions of staff and students. This involved the design and implementation of both synchronous and asynchronous facilitated events, which would allow for some comparisons to be made between the two approaches. In planning these events, several meetings were held with the Head of School, the Director of Teaching, the Deputy Director of Teaching and the School's Faculty Manager to discuss structure, content, and timescales. The result of this was a schedule of staged consultative activities described below, which took place over a three month period, the culmination of which was the School Away day.

Stage 1: Small Scale Face To Face

The first stage in this process was a small scale consultation in the form of a half day synchronous face to face facilitated brainstorming session which was held in the iLab. This session involved 16 members of academic staff chosen from across the School, brainstorming anonymous responses to a number of questions about ENV's teaching provision, using the Facilitate.Pro software. This was combined with small group work and whole group discussion. People were encouraged to communicate initial thoughts and emergent ideas, and to react quickly to a rapidly changing train of thought. It was intended that the ideas, thoughts and opinions generated at this session would provide fertile ground for stimulating further discussions across the entire school.

Stage 2: Large Scale Asynchronous

From the data collected at this brainstorming session, a summary document was prepared listing the questions asked, and the main points raised in the discussions that followed. The questions and summarised data were then duplicated into five separate web based asynchronous sessions, one for each category of staff and student; academic faculty, research staff, administrative and technical staff, undergraduate students and postgraduate students. Staff and students were contacted via e-mail and invited to continue the discussions by participating in the asynchronous sessions, which took place simultaneously over a two week period. The websites were monitored throughout this time by the Project Worker and the School Faculty Manager.

Careful consideration was given to the method used to facilitate the whole School consultation on-line. The process described above emerged through several iterations and differed from earlier plans which had intended to make the Facilitate.Pro site generated by the synchronous iLab session, and its un-edited contents accessible to all staff and students, so that they could add further inputs as a direct continuation of the discussions. Members of staff who had participated in the both the synchronous and asynchronous sessions were asked to complete evaluation forms for comparative purposes.

Stage 3: Large Scale Face To Face

All responses and discussions generated from the synchronous and asynchronous sessions were compared, analysed and distilled to provide the basis for the structure of ENV's Away day programme. The Away day involved 45 members of academic staff from across the School, contributing to activities designed and managed by a specialist facilitator. The goal of the Away day was to construct a shared vision for the School's future teaching programme and to work towards the development of an underpinning strategic plan. Specifically, the Away day sought to:

- *Develop a well-rounded vision for 2012*
- *Define a set of criteria and principles to shape decision-making*
- *Identify and begin to address key issues*
- *Frame possible future directions to pursue and refine guidance*

- *Prepare the ground for a subsequent transparent and well-grounded strategic planning and implementation process*

These objectives were achieved and represented a major step forward in the School's strategic planning process.

Outcomes

The culmination of the output from the consultations, and a successful Away day, resulted in a set of proposals to make significant amendments to the current teaching curriculum with the aim of 'future-proofing' the School. Central to these proposals is the introduction of a new integrated masters degree programme at undergraduate level which will have important future implications for admissions, teaching, and research activity. An outline plan has been put forward for discussion and the school is currently debating details of how the new degree system will work, what the likely impact will be on staff and students, and how the transition to the new system will managed. This is the start of a long and intensive process of change, but the School now has a clear vision to work towards which has been shaped through the collaborative work of its members.

Key Findings

As the first major activity undertaken, the work with ENV highlighted several important learning points for the Synergy project. Some of these were practical in nature, whilst others related to process and approach itself. Despite the fact that we received a low number of participant evaluations from those involved in the sessions, these were supplemented with feedback from Head of School, the Director of Teaching, the Deputy Director of Teaching and the School's Faculty Manager who had in turn held conversations with several members of staff involved.

Transferring Face To Face Output To The Large Scale Asynchronous Context

We had never conducted a large scale on-line activity using this software before. Previously, sessions had been co-located with small numbers of participants - a maximum of 12-16. We had intended to make the contents from stage 1 (the small group, face to face iLab session) available to everyone in the School, to stimulate further discussion. However, large scale activity raised several issues which we had not anticipated, forcing us to re-consider our plan.

The difference between facilitated face to face sessions and asynchronous working quickly became apparent. In face to face sessions, interaction is almost continuous and participants are immediately able to clarify or elaborate on points of discussion or contention. This was the case in the face to face iLab session where comments entered into the software anonymously could be raised for further verbal discussions.

Therefore, the situational context in which dialogue takes place is important, particularly when it is expected that a set of different participants will become involved at a later date. There was concern that the output from the face to face session, presented as it was, might not make sense, might cause confusion and lead to misunderstandings, particularly in relation to the more sensitive matters that had been raised. This was especially pertinent given that anonymity encouraged participants to be open and direct in presenting their viewpoints. Opening up this original discussion beyond those who were present might prove problematic in this respect. Furthermore, in practical terms, the sheer amount of data generated in the face to face iLab session could potentially be off putting. In some cases people would have to scroll through very long lists of data entry in order to follow and make sense of the discussions that had developed. Making the site available for school wide discussion would add significantly to the amount of data it already contained, compounding this problem.

There was some debate as to how these issues could be resolved and whether we should keep to the original plan since there was already some expectation among staff that the results of the iLab session would be unedited and shared. The School's Teaching Team decided to proceed with the school wide consultation, but instead of one site, five separate sites were set up for academic staff, researchers, administrative support staff, postgraduate students and undergraduate students. The content from the iLab session was reviewed and condensed into key points. These were pre-entered into each site along with modifications to some of the questions.

Design And Implementation

The change from one site to five sites for the school wide consultation affected the overall time scale for consultation. The design and set up of the sites took longer than anticipated and involved extensive fine-tuning. However, the asynchronous nature of the event meant that it was vital that the questions we asked were the right ones, since these could not be changed later, as in a face face setting. It was also important to ensure that participants could navigate through the data with relative ease. Individual questions and their corresponding discussions presented as one continuous list could be difficult to navigate. Therefore, questions were grouped together, each group presented as a separate web link. This worked extremely well for participants and made the task of monitoring the software easier.

E-mails of introduction, explaining the purpose and nature of the asynchronous exercise were circulated. This was important in order to engage staff and students. We also devised a list of ground rules to ensure that the content posted was appropriate and relevant. All sites were jointly monitored by the project worker and the School's Faculty Manager over the two week period. Staff were periodically sent e-mail reminders during this time. These reminders worked particularly well for academic staff, as witnessed by the sudden flurry of activity on the site that followed and requests to extend the deadline for further contributions.

Maximising Participation

The session took place during the exam period. For many staff, particularly members of faculty, this was a busy time of year, but the School felt it was essential that as many individuals as possible had an opportunity to put forward their viewpoints and engage in the important discussions that had emerged from the initial face to face session. Moreover, there was a very short lead in time to the forthcoming Away day. Arranging face to face meetings at this time would have proved problematic. Therefore, the extended time frame and the ability to access the system anywhere and at any time was a major benefit. The asynchronous sessions helped to ensure that there was equality in the consultation process because both staff and students were given the opportunity to participate anonymously. Although the asynchronous sessions aimed to maximise participation, this varied across sites. Not surprisingly, the most activity occurred on the site set up for academic staff - in fact more than had been anticipated. It is difficult to know exactly how many academic staff participated in this session but the amount of data generated was slightly less than that produced in the three hour iLab session. There were significant contributions made on the undergraduate site but participation from administrative support staff and researchers was very low, as was expected. At this time of year there is a significant peak in administrative staff workloads. Administrative staff might have also felt that the questions were very much focussed on academic curricula issues and were of less direct relevance to them. Similarly, many research staff would not have been greatly affected by the changes under discussion.

Enhancing Intersubjectivity

Although the Head of School did not feel that the asynchronous content offered anything that was radically different to previous face to face discussions, it served to reinforce and confirm what had already emerged. Overall, both face to face and asynchronous sessions in combination drew out many issues, highlighting areas of particular importance, indicating strength of feeling, and showing where there was consensus and disagreement. This could not have happened using conventional face to face methods alone in such a short timescale. Furthermore, although one person did compare the asynchronous session to completing an on-line web questionnaire, others pointed out that it brought together a wide diversity of views from many participants on a range of topics very quickly. Unlike a survey, this was done in collaboration with others, rather than individually and the ability to share thoughts freely encouraged the interchange of viewpoints, from which clear lines of discussion gradually emerged.

Combining Face To Face And Asynchronous Approaches

The work with ENV allowed for some comparisons to be made between face to face and asynchronous approaches. It also signalled early on in the project the complementary nature of combining synchronous and asynchronous group activity. Very few individuals from the iLab session also took part in the asynchronous session which made it difficult to compare the two approaches. However, evaluations indicated that whilst some participants preferred personal engagement, the immediate interaction and

creative energy of the face to face facilitated session, others valued the asynchronous approach with its slower pace, which allowed people to revisit ideas and spend more time on reflection. The former involved elements of brainstorming in a conventional sense but the latter involved a gradual accumulation of comments as discussions developed.

Overall, a combination of both approaches catered for different ways of thinking and communicating. As one participant commented the asynchronous sessions did help to draw attention to particular issues that were to be discussed at the forthcoming Away day:

“ I do have the impression that the sessions focussed people’s attention on particular questions that will be discussed at the ENV Away day and therefore have already generated thought and discussion. ”

However, there was a sense that in certain situations - such as this one, where major strategic changes were under consideration - the software could not act as a complete substitute for face to face interaction; rather, it was a supportive tool.

The Value Of Asynchronous Working

The school’s Faculty Manager summed up the value of the asynchronous exercise as follows:

“ It enabled us to involve people not onsite (partners who work at other locations)
People it would otherwise have been difficult to consult for practical reasons (e.g. students in various groups could all be consulted without needing a large room)
It could build on the iLab results, but was not limited to only building on these earlier results
It allowed truly anonymous responses ”

These findings suggest that when large numbers of people with diverse views and opinions must be consulted, but time is limited and availability of participants is a problem, an asynchronous approach can be beneficial, particularly if combined with face to face activities. However, great care must be taken in deciding how such asynchronous activities are implemented, who will be involved and how they will be engaged.

3.2. Case Study Two

The Evolution Project, University of Hertfordshire: Organisational Change

The Evolution Project (UH Evolution) is a strategic change programme consisting of six projects, whose mission is to deliver on key strands of the University's strategic plan. One of these projects is UH Mindset. The purpose of UHMindset is to embed a business-facing culture at the university by:

- *Assessing readiness for change*
- *Recruiting and developing change leaders*
- *Facilitating both small and big steps of change*
- *Exploring language, values and behaviours*

Synergy was involved in two asynchronous activities conducted with staff which formed part of the work undertaken by UH Mindset. The first of these involved exploring the use of acronyms within the institution; the second aimed to capture the experiences of change facilitators located within schools and departments across the University. Synergy worked closely with the Project Manager of UH Mindset and UH Evolution's Strategic Change Manager in the planning and implementation of these activities.

3.2.1. The Use of Organisational Acronyms: 'Join The Dots'

Rationale and Objectives

'Join the Dots' was a networking initiative supported by the University's Language and Behaviour Network. Its purpose was to build on collaborative working across the institution. One aspect of this was an exploration into the use of acronyms which form a visible part of the organisational culture. Throughout the university, sets of initials are used to indicate departments, groups, committees, documents, policies etc. For new staff, the widespread use of initials was confusing and even existing staff familiar with most of the acronyms in circulation occasionally encountered ones that were entirely new or unfamiliar.

There was no definitive list of acronyms in existence and no single source of knowledge – rather knowledge was distributed across the institution. The purpose of 'Join the Dots' was to gather this knowledge and initiate the process of compiling a glossary, which could easily be accessed and understood by all staff. A further objective of this activity was to explore what these acronyms actually meant to people in terms of

how they understood the work or function of the entities they represented. To make the task of engaging staff from across the university and gathering the relevant data easier and less time consuming, Facilitate. Pro software was used as a medium for collecting this information, acting as a single point of entry for the cumulative contributions of staff.

The Process

An asynchronous on-line activity was designed for 'Join the Dots' and ran over the course of ten days. It was pre-populated with a glossary of commonly used acronyms, along with their full names. These were organised into alphabetical blocks. All staff were contacted via e-mail and invited to contribute to the glossary. They were asked to:

1. Consider the pre-entered list of acronyms and enter their interpretation of what the role/group/document represented by each acronym did (purpose, function, key activities etc).
2. Add any missing acronyms that they were aware of, with full titles and an explanation of it's function to the existing list

The site was monitored and at the end of the activity a report was produced. An on-line evaluation form was available on the software for participants to complete.

Outcomes

Although we did not receive any participant evaluations, the asynchronous 'Join the Dots' activity appeared to work extremely well and proved to be a simple and effective way of gathering information. The number of individual contributions on the software were not tracked but it was clear from the content that many individuals from a range of departments had participated. Feedback from the session owner, the Strategic Change Manager, post session confirmed this. As a result:

- *In a very short space of time, the existing pre-entered list of acronyms was significantly expanded, providing a more complete and up to date glossary of information*
- *A detailed picture of the functions of the role/group/document represented by each acronym emerged, but this process also highlighted where there was consensus and disagreement in people's interpretations*
- *A lively debate concerning committees and their functions developed, raising this as a communications issue that needed to be addressed by the University*
- *The data entered provides a wealth of information for staff about the universities activities and acts as a valuable future point of reference*

- *It is intended that the glossary will be published on the university intranet when it is re-launched so that it is a living document which is continuously updated*

Key Findings

This case study demonstrates that asynchronous facilitation can enhance organisational learning, foster cross institutional communication and harness distributed knowledge. It did this by providing a medium through which discussions could develop and information could be collected. It also gave staff shared ownership of an up to date 'glossary', which, in effect, they helped to construct through on-line collaboration.

Staff Engagement

Engaging staff was important, particularly as this was considered to be somewhat 'dry' subject matter. Information about the purpose and scope of the exercise was circulated to staff in advance and following the ENV example, reminders were sent out regularly (twice over the ten day period). As with the ENV case study, the importance of timing was highlighted here. This event took place in the middle of the summer period and although participation was good, it might have been even higher during term time. In addition, this project had a very tight deadline which did not leave much time for planning, preparation and execution.

Pre-Population And Site Design

The technique of pre-populating the site worked well. Although this was not a face to face session, the almost instant way in which target users could see the site being used drew people in. It also meant that because the most common acronyms had already been entered, people did not have to start from scratch. This encouraged participation and allowed staff to focus on lesser known or newer acronyms. Careful consideration was given to the design of the site and the most effective way of collecting information. In retrospect, a single alphabetical list, rather than blocks, probably would have worked better because people had to keep entering and exiting each time they wanted to move on to another block. As a result, we noticed that less content was added to the later alphabetical blocks.

Collection Of Data

'Join the Dots' showed that information can be collated using on-line asynchronous methods very rapidly. It also demonstrated the flexible nature of the software. Because the information was automatically collated and categorised, it was easy to turn the data into a coherent report. Even though some time had to be spent designing the site and pre-populating it with acronyms, the whole process was ultimately far speedier and easier than attempting to organise a series of face to face meetings, and then transcribing and categorising the output

The Value Of Asynchronous Working

The Strategic Change Manager felt that face to face meetings with staff on this issue would not have worked. Because the subject matter potentially lacked appeal, participation would probably have been very low. Yet, the asynchronous session worked well because it allowed people to contribute as much or as little as they wished, as and when it suited them. Although we received no evaluations, members of staff commented to the Strategic Change Manager that this was a good way of capturing information – ‘being able to park it all somewhere’. In this case, the approach allowed for individual thoughts to be voiced but consensus was not critical. Had consensus been important, this topic may have benefited from a follow up with a face to face meeting of some kind. The process works well on the simple level of fact finding and fact checking as well as part of a sensitive consultative process such as that engaged in by ENV.

3.2.2. The Experiences of Institutional Change Facilitators: ‘What’s Your Story?’

Rationale and Objectives

‘What’s Your Story’ was also part of UH Mindset. The University had engaged 130 change agents in schools and departments spread throughout the institution to help drive through ‘small and large steps of change, actively addressing key aspects of the University’s strategic plan. The University wished to capture the stories of these change facilitators in the form of an ‘e-book’ as a means of sharing best practice and celebrating success. Because of the large numbers of staff involved and the difficulty of speaking to all of them face to face, it was felt that a web based collaborative tool, such as Facilitate.Pro might offer a quick and easy method of collating these stories.

The Process

Working with the University’s Strategic Change Manager, a question template was designed on the Facilitate.Pro software for change agents to complete. This would ensure that contributions were focussed and that key information was captured. Staff were asked to provide an overview of their story, a summary of objectives, outcomes, impact and achievements, a description of any collaborative activities they were involved in, and advice and guidance they would like to share with colleagues.

Staff were able to make contributions to the ‘e-book’, which was available as an asynchronous activity over a week-long period.

Outcomes

The results of this activity were disappointing. Only two members of staff contributed to the site and although the content they provided was interesting and informative, the lack of participation meant that the exercise was not successful in achieving its objectives. We received no evaluations but a post session interview was conducted with the session owner, the Strategic Change Manager.

Key Findings

Software Functionality

We found that the software was not a practical tool for this activity. Editing rights had to be activated for participants so that they could re-write text. This function was not activated initially because previous experience had shown that people can accidentally edit other participant entries. If large numbers of people had used the software for this exercise, this may have been problematic. The fact that participants were editing live could also have been a factor in discouraging participation. The categorising tool used to separate questions and their related responses proved to be a problem as people kept placing entries in the incorrect location by accidentally selecting the wrong question category.

Participation

Timing again was crucial. This event took place in the middle of the summer break at a time when many staff were on annual leave. Although this may not have been the main reason for the low participation it would have certainly have had an impact. The Strategic Change Manager thought that a major reason why people had not participated was because they did not want to identify themselves. They were unwillingly to share information about their particular experiences in such an open and public format. However, for the purposes of the e-book, stories had to be attributed. Some staff said that they didn't have time to go into the site and contribute, but if they were sent a template with the questions, they would try to complete it at a later date. Interestingly, this did not happen either, and it is possible that this was due to general indifference toward completing a narrative for something that was completed some months prior to this initiative. What's Your Story? illustrated when use of asynchronous working may not be appropriate. For this type of activity, where people are required to openly share personal experiences and insights, face to face contact, in small groups might have worked better. It does seem to have been an activity which was perceived as time consuming without there being much return or benefit to participants. The software cannot compensate for lack of buy in if the task itself is seen as irrelevant.

3.3. Case Study Three

Centre for Staff & Educational Development, University of East Anglia: Strategic Away Day Preparation

Rationale and Objectives

The Centre for Staff and Educational Development (CSED) employs 19 full and part-time staff involved in a range of activities aimed at supporting the personal and professional development needs of staff and research postgraduates at the university. As part of its annual cycle of planning and review, an Away day was organised to address key issues in the light of the University's strategic plan, staff changes and shifting priorities. On this occasion it was intended that 'Open Space' methodology would be used to facilitate the Away day. 'Open Space' entails the generation of ideas for discussion by individual participants. From these ideas major topics for discussion are identified. Groups are formed on the basis of these topics, and individuals can join any group they wish. Opportunities for the entire team to come together are rare and there was concern that this approach would be time consuming. Although previous away days had been useful, lack of time was a factor in preventing in depth discussion and coverage of important topics. Therefore, it was decided that an asynchronous web based activity, leading up to the Away day, would maximise the time available on the day by initiating discussions in advance and would help to inform what preparation was required in terms of content and structure. It also ensured that all team members, including those who could not attend the Away day, had an opportunity to think about the issues raised and to contribute their views.

The Process

An asynchronous brainstorming activity was set up on Facilitate.Pro. Staff were asked to identify what issues they felt were important for the team to work on at the Away day, and were encouraged to contribute to and engage in the discussions that developed. The activity was accessible for two weeks and at the end of that period a report was produced for the Head of Department. The report was used to structure Away day content around three key questions which had emerged from the on-line discussions. At the Away day, the team was divided into small groups to work on these questions. At the end of this process, the questions were re-formulated and refined into three main areas of strategic activity.

Outcomes

As a result of the asynchronous session and synchronous face to face Away day, working groups were formed to follow up on the key strategic areas identified. These were:

- *Marketing and branding*
- *Communications, feedback and forward planning*
- *Organisational 'fit' and structure*

Each group was asked to come up with proposals and recommendations to inform future planning. A strategy group comprising a cross section of staff from across the department is currently working on a strategic plan of action, which will incorporate these proposals and recommendations.

Key Findings

This case study differs from the others included in this report because it involved a cross functional team of staff who work closely together and know each other well. Some of the people involved had also had previous experience of using collaborative meetings software, although not in an asynchronous setting. We received significant feedback about the asynchronous event and the high number of evaluations returned from participants contained valuable insights. As the session owner, the Head of Staff Development was also interviewed.

Participation

In this instance, the majority of people in CSED felt that the subject matter was important and as a result there was a high level of staff engagement. Most people felt that their participation was greater than it might have been in a face to face session for this specific activity and the topics under discussion. This was in part due to the total anonymity provided by asynchronous working which reduced the dominance of certain individuals and helped to encourage contributions from colleagues who were possibly shy or self-conscious about speaking up in public meetings. It also meant that views were elicited from across the department, ensuring that junior staff had their say in a 'safe' environment. Those with less time available also felt spurred on by the contributions of others, which encouraged them to 'get going'.

Thinking And Communication Styles

Most participants felt that their contributions were more genuine and considered because they did not have to respond instantly. They could enter the activity as and when was convenient to them, revisiting items and adding more to the discussions as they developed. Having time to reflect and digest information was considered valuable. There was less pressure to respond and more freedom to be honest and open because of the anonymity. However, some participants did say they preferred face to face sessions, commenting that although meetings can be less convenient and difficult to organise, this is more than compensated for by the social interaction and immediacy of working with others. Interestingly, participants who stated they

preferred face to face sessions did find some benefit in the asynchronous way of working – they felt that they contributed less, but what was contributed was perhaps more considered. Asynchronous group work still allowed them to feed off other peoples' ideas but in a different way. For people whose working style is less local and who prefer to think and reflect, asynchronous has advantages. For others who are confident in expressing their ideas vocally in an immediate sense and thrive on social interaction with others, the face to face context tends to be a more conducive forum. Therefore, using a combination of methods would cater for different thinking and communication styles.

Convenience

A major benefit of asynchronous working is the convenience it affords to participants. Most people said they found it more convenient than a face to face meeting because they had control over where and when they entered the session and engaged with the others. However, some perceived it as less convenient because they still had to find the time to enter the session and participate. It had to fit in with other activities. With pre-booked meetings it was noted that there is a set time frame and you are often away from your office and focussed on the business at hand, whereas with an asynchronous session there could potentially be many distractions and interruptions at your desk. There were also issues about self-discipline in terms of the amount of time spent contributing to the on-line session. Because the group meeting is not taking place in a fixed time-frame, participation might easily spill over into time that should be spent on other tasks or activities. There is also a danger that the perceived convenience of these sessions might lead to procrastination, putting off intended contributions and actually resulting in non-participation.

Time

The asynchronous session speeded up the entire process by removing the need for preliminary discussions at the Away day itself. This was a major benefit. It meant that people were already mentally prepared and able to focus on the next stage, thus making effective use of the limited time the group had together. The extended time frame allowed many ideas to be generated and discussions to develop. This amount of data could not have been produced in a face to face setting under normal time constraints. The material was useful in helping to design the structure and content of the Away day, as particular themes and issues had already emerged.

Technical Issues And Content Management

On the whole, people thought the asynchronous event worked well, but some suggestions for improvements were made. Reorganisation of the content part way through the session, so that contributions were organised under group headings and duplicate ideas were merged, would have been helpful, because as items were added, there was a considerable amount of content to scroll through. It was suggested that a limit on the number of comments posted could have been enforced. The software allows participants to enter ideas or comments. These can be built on or responded to by others. An interesting feature of this asynchronous activity was that the process of using the software meant that ideas submitted early on

received more comments and were consequently perceived to be more valuable at the follow on face to face session. Conversely, ideas submitted just before the asynchronous session ended received fewer comments and were given less attention at the face to face session. Finally, greater software functionality could allow people to express themselves in different ways, e.g. drawing tools so that pictures and diagrams could be submitted with text. The software in its current form does favour those who prefer a text-orientated approach.

Combining Face To Face And Asynchronous Approaches

For this specific type of activity and its purpose (Away day preparation), most people said that they preferred working asynchronously. However, it is important to note that there was overwhelming agreement that a combination of both face to face and asynchronous methods would work well in most situations. In fact, in this instance, the Away day was separated into two distinct phases; advance asynchronous planning and preparation followed by intensive, face to face facilitated group work based on the asynchronous output. Therefore, both methods were ultimately involved in the overall process.

Appropriate choice of methods – asynchronous, face to face, or a combination - would of course depend on the nature of the issue being discussed, and other factors such as time and availability of participants. But in most cases, it was felt that the asynchronous approach could not act as a complete substitute for face to face interactions. That said, it was recognised as a valuable addition that could be used to enhance and support these interactions.

The Value Of Asynchronous Working

Both the evaluations and anecdotal evidence indicate overwhelming agreement that the asynchronous session made a valuable contribution to the consultation process for several reasons. Firstly, there was general consensus that it enabled everyone to “get things off their chest”, to ventilate their feelings and to air issues of concern. By getting this out of the way, it meant that people were more focussed and constructive at the Away day itself. Secondly, at the same time, it facilitated honest, open and useful dialogue, aided by the complete anonymity, which enabled the group to get to the heart of some important issues in a way that could not have happened in a face to face environment (either with or without the software). Thirdly, in doing so it speeded up the process by initiating dialogue in advance of the face to face event. It also meant that the Away day itself was more productive because the material that was generated highlighted key issues, providing content and focus for participants.

The Head of CSED had not expected such a high level of participation from team members and felt that people had a sense that this was a genuine consultation on their views:

“ It enabled the group to conduct a great deal of preparatory discussion in advance, so we could make best use of a short half day together....many colleagues commented on how it speeded up the process and made good use of the time. ”

Main Learning Points

4.1. A Summary of The Advantages and Disadvantages of Asynchronous Working

Participants and session owners were asked to comment on the potential benefits and drawbacks of the asynchronous approach to group facilitation. The table below summarises the main advantages and disadvantages which they identified.

Advantages

Absolute anonymity encourages contributions from all and allows people the freedom to express honest opinions and concerns. It benefits those who may be shy or less confident about speaking publicly in meetings.

It brings together a range of viewpoints by ensuring that all participants have an equal voice and proceedings are not dominated by certain individuals or those in positions of seniority. There is no competition for 'air' time.

There is no need to put effort into finding a time and place which is convenient for everyone to meet. Finding rooms big enough to accommodate large numbers of people can be difficult, even if everyone can attend. The asynchronous approach offers an alternative to physical meeting space.

Greater convenience and flexibility provided means that participants can take part at a time and place convenient to them.

There is time and space to digest and reflect on the contributions of others. Unlike face to face meetings, where responses are often expected to be immediate, participants are able to provide more considered and detailed input.

The ability to share ideas and follow discussions which are constantly changing as others contribute. Participants can explore related issues that might lead discussions into new or unexpected directions – in face to face meetings time limitations discourage this.

Individuals can make multiple contributions. They can revisit points made by themselves and others and re-contribute over time. They can also revisit points that they might have missed or which were unclear.

It is good for collecting viewpoints and clarifying the issues ahead of face to face sessions, allowing maximum use of important group time. It can also be used after face to face sessions to continue discussions.

It is easier than e-mail to collate information into a single medium from geographically spread participants working to different timescales.

It can save time. Information from many sources is gathered very rapidly and automatically produced in report format.

Disadvantages

Lack of ownership and responsibility for contributions may be an issue. The freedom provided by anonymity can be used as an opportunity for people to have a “collective moan” - complaining or being offensive rather than making constructive comments. In face to face sessions people are accountable for what they say and (usually) think before they speak.

Participants still have to find the time to take part. They may not contribute if they do not manage their time effectively or are simply too busy.

For some participants, their working environment may not be conducive to the slower, more reflective pace of the asynchronous approach. Interruptions and distractions might mean that a face to face meeting in another location is more beneficial for them.

It is technology reliant and there could be accessibility issues.

Restriction to a single medium (PC) as opposed to, for example, use of whiteboard, group work, physical movement etc. The software is not sophisticated enough to incorporate other media, and is mainly confined to text entry.

If participants make comments early on in the process they may not get a sense of working with others unless they make a conscious effort to go back into the session.

There is a risk of misunderstandings and a potential for comments to be misconstrued which means that whole discussions could develop in a way that was not intended, although this may nonetheless be informative in a different way. In face to face sessions these situations can be addressed immediately because the facilitator and the participants are in the same room.

Lack of energy and social interaction. There is less “creative spark” and momentum in the generation of ideas. In face to face sessions there is more of a buzz.

Asynchronous working generally lacks the cut and thrust of discussion and the immediacy of responses that might be required for clarification and the development of ideas.

Body language and other non-verbal behaviour, participant reactions, tone of voice etc. are important elements in group working that are missing.

Depending on the nature and complexity of the activity, it can take a while to set up asynchronous sessions. Thought has to be given to design, accompanying instructions, and how you will prepare participants.

Questions/category headings are more or less fixed when using the software asynchronously, particularly for large scale activities. It is difficult to change content later on. In face to face sessions, there is more scope for greater flexibility and negotiation with participants.

These advantages and disadvantages are important when considering if an asynchronous approach is to be adopted, and if so what issues might be anticipated with this way of working. The following section gives an indication of how one might decide which approach is suitable – face to face, asynchronous, or a combination of both.

4.2. Recommendations

4.2.1. When to Use Asynchronous Facilitation

The project set out to explore when the asynchronous approach might be most appropriate. Although the method used will depend on the issue, availability of participants and time, the general view is that in most cases asynchronous facilitation is not a complete substitute for face to face activity, but it is complementary.

Participant comments illustrate this:



It was an interesting exercise and I feel working asynchronously is a valuable extra option to have. However, I don't believe it could or should replace existing methods, but it can enhance them and make face to face sessions more effective.

It was a good way of including more people in a session...I think it is useful as another, different method to add to the toolbox and as we've seen it is particularly useful for doing some thinking in advance of a more conventional face to face session to make it more effective.

Face to face follow up I think will prove valuable and complementary, in terms of using and discussing the thoughts generated.

..it would depend on the context of the activity. I'd also prefer to explore using a combination of both methods as they both have clear advantages and disadvantages.



We feel that a combination of methods works well because:

- *It caters for different ways of thinking and communicating*
- *There is an element of convenience for most participants*
- *It can save time (pre-face to face and post-face to face)*

Both the ENV and CSED case studies testify to the benefits of combining both face to face and asynchronous approaches, for example to help with planning and preparation in advance of face to face activities (such as an Away day) or to continue useful discussion and interaction once a face to face meeting is over.

Having said that, our experience points to a number of situations and settings where asynchronous facilitation alone might be of particular value:

- *Where views from participants based at geographically dispersed locations, or who are unable to attend a face to face meeting, must be included*
- *When information needs to be gathered rapidly but the time and resources to organise meetings is lacking*
- *If complete anonymity is desirable when dealing with some very sensitive issues*
- *When issues do not require a significant amount of time to work through, might be considered dry or do not require a high level of debate or consensus. Getting people together for discussion in this situation might seem onerous.*
- *For very large group consultations concerning a wide range of issues*

There are particular situations where we feel it would be wholly inappropriate to work asynchronously:

- *Where people do not have a strong vested interest in the outcome. If incentive to participate is low, it is even less likely that people will engage with any kind of on-line activity.*
- *For very in depth discussions, where a high degree of clarification is needed, especially if people do not know each other or if the history and context surrounding a particular issue is not familiar to all those involved*
- *For some highly sensitive or emotive situations, where there is a risk of conflict or where discussions might escalate in an undesired direction. Personal relations may need to be face to face and real time so that they can be directly mediated through a facilitator*
- *For any team building activities where personal interactions are essential, or where the group is newly formed.*
- *For any situation where input is vital from people who cannot use the technology, either through lack of access or because particular disabilities or health issues prevent them from doing so.*

4.2.2. Practical Tips

There are number of practical considerations that must be taken into account when using the asynchronous facilitated approach. Asynchronous events raise issues related to anonymity, sensitivity, content management and group interactions etc. that in turn have implications for design and implementation:

- *Consider how you will engage users. It is important to be clear about the nature and purpose of the asynchronous event. Give them background information about the activity and introduce them to the key features of the software – but keep it brief. If you are running an event for someone else, discuss this with the session owner.*

- *Careful planning and preparation is essential. Think about the questions you will pose. Are they likely to achieve the desired response? Are they too general or too prescriptive?*
- *Make the process easy and consider design issues. Are your instructions clear, precise and easy to follow? As a rule, keep the design simple. The more complicated it is, the more complicated the instructions are likely to be. Trial it extensively, because once the site is live and participants have access it is difficult to change design and content.*
- *The ENV case study demonstrates the importance of thinking about the transfer between contexts. What will work best for a particular situation, asynchronous to face to face or face to face to asynchronous?*
- *Pre-populating the site with data is a good idea. This sets the parameters and encourages people to contribute and is less daunting than entering an empty site with no entries.*
- *Consider establishing ground rules and regularly monitor software. This is especially important if participant responses are anonymous and the asynchronous event is on a large scale. For example:*
 - *Make it clear that whilst you are keen to encourage open discussion, participants should be respectful towards one another in their interactions.*
 - *It is worth pointing out that comments can often take on a different meaning when made on-line rather than face to face, leading to misunderstanding or misinterpretation.*
 - *Emphasise that they should take the time to think about what they input into the software, because once comments have been entered, they are visible to others.*
 - *Ask participants not to use inappropriate language that might cause offence, or make personal remarks about others.*
 - *Stress that the asynchronous activity should not be used as a vehicle to bring up unrelated issues.*

However, be judicious. The need for ground rules will vary depending on the issue being discussed, the people involved and their relationships with one another. Remember that the idea is to encourage participation and dialogue - if the exercise is too rule bound it will defeat its purpose.

- *Timing of the event is important. When is maximum engagement likely to be achieved? Consider running an event over a longer period of time to gain momentum. Often, a week is not long enough for significant participation levels to be achieved and discussions to develop, particularly if it coincides with a busy period.*
- *Send out regular e-mail reminders. It's a good idea to summarise the content of discussions on the site so far and to emphasise that individuals should 'not miss out' on the opportunity to put forward their views. This will motivate people to participate.*

- *Think about how you will manage content if large numbers of people are involved. Consider limiting access to particular times, or restricting the number of contributions made per person in order to manage content. However, this will not always be appropriate if you encouraging open and free-flowing discussions. If particular themes are emerging, it is a good idea to group contributions under category headings.*
- *Reverse the order of list items to increase the likelihood that all ideas are commented on, not just the ones at the top of the list, or make a point of e-mailing participants and ask them to review and comment on these ideas.*
- *If you are conducting an on-line vote, let people know when all ballots have been cast and results can be viewed. Make sure that results are accessible for a few days, so that all participants have ample opportunity to see them.*

4.3. The Role of the Facilitator

Working asynchronously with groups will require a change in the role of the facilitator. In face to face sessions, the flow of social interactions is dynamic and the interplay between different members of the group is managed by the facilitator in real time. In contrast, we have seen that the pace of asynchronous activity is by definition much slower, allowing time for greater reflection and more considered contributions by participants. Discussions develop over time and themes gradually emerge. When working asynchronously, group discussion and activities are facilitated in a different way. In some cases, the facilitator may become more of an overseer, monitoring activity on the site and checking that the group keeps on task. Intervention is still possible but there are important differences. Questions and insights can be raised with the group - but these interventions are not immediate and might not have the same impact in focussing people's attention and capturing interest, as would be the case in face to face settings. Intervention might 'feel' less comfortable for the facilitator if they have not had an opportunity to meet and build rapport with participants beforehand. Nor is the facilitator able to 'read' the group, for example, by observing body language, tone of voice and how particular individuals respond and work together on certain tasks. The only resources the facilitator has are the software tools. In a sense the facilitator role becomes one that is less centre stage and more behind the scenes.

Working asynchronously does have some distinct advantages for the facilitator. Rather than having to 'think on ones feet' in situ, it allows for reflection and consideration of the issues being raised and time to think about what the next stage for the group might be. If followed up with a face to face session, the facilitator has ample time to prepare - and this preparation can be better informed. Often, facilitators are expected to cover large complex topics or a number of topics in a short space of time. Asynchronous working can help relieve the pressure on time by starting discussions in advance. The facilitator already has a clear sense of what people are thinking and because participants are focussed on the relevant issues, this can make the job of facilitating the group more straightforward. Therefore, asynchronous working is undoubtedly a useful addition to the facilitators' toolkit.



Conclusions:

Asynchronous Facilitation as a Tool to Support Organisational Learning

The Synergy project found that asynchronous on-line facilitation is most valuable when used in conjunction with other techniques, to enhance group working. The approach might ultimately help to foster organisational learning by encouraging collaboration and intersubjectivity across different groups of people. This resonates with Etienne Wenger's (1998) concept of 'Communities of Practice', in which learning occurs through social participation with other people in the practices of a particular community, engaged in the pursuit of joint enterprise. When applied to organisations, this means that learning can be enhanced when people who are members of different communities of practice, interconnect and are able to share knowledge and understanding in order to change working practices and achieve collective goals. This requires a view of valued knowledge as distributed rather than residing in the domain of a few individuals or those in positions of authority and suggests a workplace pedagogy which promotes opportunities for shared dialogue. The medium provided by collaborative meetings software, using an asynchronous approach can potentially contribute to this. For example, research conducted by Boreham and Morgan (2004) identified three relational practices as the basis for organisational learning: opening space for the creation of shared meaning; reconstituting power relations; and providing cultural tools to mediate learning.

We found that asynchronous approaches, particularly when combined with face to face group work, can support these practices by maximising the time, space and resources for individuals with different perspectives and different ways of thinking and to working, to engage in dialogue. Hierarchies and power relations are reconstituted through complete anonymity, encouraging the participation of all, regardless of status. As we have seen, the content generated provides a basis for the creation of new knowledge in the form of joint outputs, such as strategic and project plans, glossaries of information, teaching and learning processes etc. These are essentially products of organisational knowledge and representations of working practices. Therefore, the focus on collective tasks and collaboration through shared dialogue, supported by asynchronous working in combination with face to face methods, may encourage participation and contribute to the development of shared products.

The ENV, Join the Dots and CSED case studies demonstrate how asynchronous working helped to assist change by supporting key organisational activities:

- *Consulting a range of people with different viewpoints by maximising participation*
- *Capturing distributed knowledge and promoting 'joined up thinking'*
- *Informing decisions by allowing multiple voices to be heard*
- *Assisting with the strategic planning process*

However, although our experience suggests that the asynchronous approach offers another tool that can be used to aid organisational learning and therefore organisational development, the small scope of our study and the limited amount of data it generated means that we would be cautious about the extent to which our findings can be generalised to similar settings. We would recommend that further research is conducted to investigate the potential of this powerful medium for different time, different place group collaboration.

Appendices

6.1. Appendix 1: Additional Work

One important issue we would like to stress, is that the timing of this project had an impact on the level of work that was generated. The project started in January and by the middle of the year it had gained considerable momentum and interest. The downside to this, as we have seen, is that this peak in interest also coincided with the summer period, with many staff on annual leave and Universities generally entering a quieter period of activity. This meant that some potentially useful ideas for project activities did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, some unexpected opportunities for asynchronous working did present themselves. This section contains brief descriptions of this additional work which was undertaken by the project worker in her role as a facilitator. This work was not planned in advance or evaluated as part of the Synergy Project, but presented opportunities to trial the asynchronous approach in different contexts and with different groups.

6.1.1. Careers Centre, University of East Anglia: Away day planning

The purpose of the Career's Centre (CCEN) Away day was to review performance over the last year and to plan for the following year. The Away day was originally planned as a face to face facilitated session in the iLab. and was commissioned by the Head of CCEN. However, as planning got underway, we felt some advance asynchronous working might be useful because:

- *Not all members of the team would be present at the Away day and an on-line asynchronous session would allow everyone to contribute ideas*
- *The Away day was split into two parts, a morning and afternoon session. The afternoon session in the iLab was allocated for action planning. We were concerned that there would be insufficient time to cover all of the necessary topics in enough detail*

An asynchronous activity was set up for a one week time-frame and staff were invited to input responses under three question headings:

1. What do you perceive to have been last year's successes?
2. What do you perceive to be the areas for development?
3. Now is your opportunity to do some 'blue sky' thinking!

The ideas and comments were reviewed, emergent themes identified and the data categorised accordingly. We produced a report which was edited and refined without losing the original essence of what was said. It acted as a 'working document' for the face to face session. All the original comments remained available for viewing on the software. During the face to face session, staff had time to read through the report before working in groups on particular areas, creating action plans and timelines.

As with the CSED Away day, the CCEN asynchronous session helped to save time, but in line with the rest of our findings, the evaluations showed that mixing methods seemed to work well by accommodating different working styles:



Would have preferred this on the day in the iLab as hard getting into the zone.

Not as good as when we use facilitate pro in the iLab, I think there is an energy generated there which is very productive.





It was useful in structuring the iLab session.

Good, able to access from home

Extremely useful. Plenty of time to capture thoughts. Did not feel pressurised or as competitive as last time. (Refers to a previous away day held in the iLab using the software)



6.1.2. Centre for Staff & Educational Development: Survey planning

As part of a review of its staff development provision, CSED wished to conduct a survey with all staff at the University. This was initially discussed at a team meeting where it became clear that the task of identifying and framing suitable survey questions would be complicated and time consuming and would require several meetings. Instead, an on-line asynchronous activity was set up over a two week time frame, so that staff could enter their ideas for suitable survey questions and suggestions for how the survey should be implemented and the data might be used to inform practice. The approach worked well, drawing upon the ideas and knowledge of the whole team, and provided the basis for a comprehensive set of survey questions which have since been electronically circulated to all staff at UEA. The survey is still underway at the time of writing.

6.1.3. Eastern Region Forum: Future Planning and Direction

The Eastern Region Forum of Staff developers (ERF) used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous approaches to consider future planning issues for the group. Working with the Chair of the ERF, a face to face activity using Facilitate.Pro was organised at University of Bedfordshire iLab to explore what help and support members wanted from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. This took the form of an open brainstorming session based on the question:

What Do We Want From The LFHE?

Participants entered ideas, suggestions and comments. We reviewed the input and found that some data came under the area of the Staff Development Forum; other entries did not fit into any discernible category. Accordingly, we grouped the information under three headings:

- *LFHE*
- *Staff Development Forum*
- *OTHER*

Ideas in each category were then rated using a voting scale of 1 to 10, giving the chair a useful indication of people's preferences.

Because not all the members of the ERF were able to attend this meeting we followed it up with an asynchronous session, which was open to everyone. Members were contacted by e-mail, explaining what had occurred at the previous meeting and were invited to participate in a re-vote. Those members that were present at the meeting were also asked to vote again.

In addition, all members were asked to brainstorm and vote on ideas for SDF funding bids. Finally, members were presented with the question:

What Do We Want From The ERF?

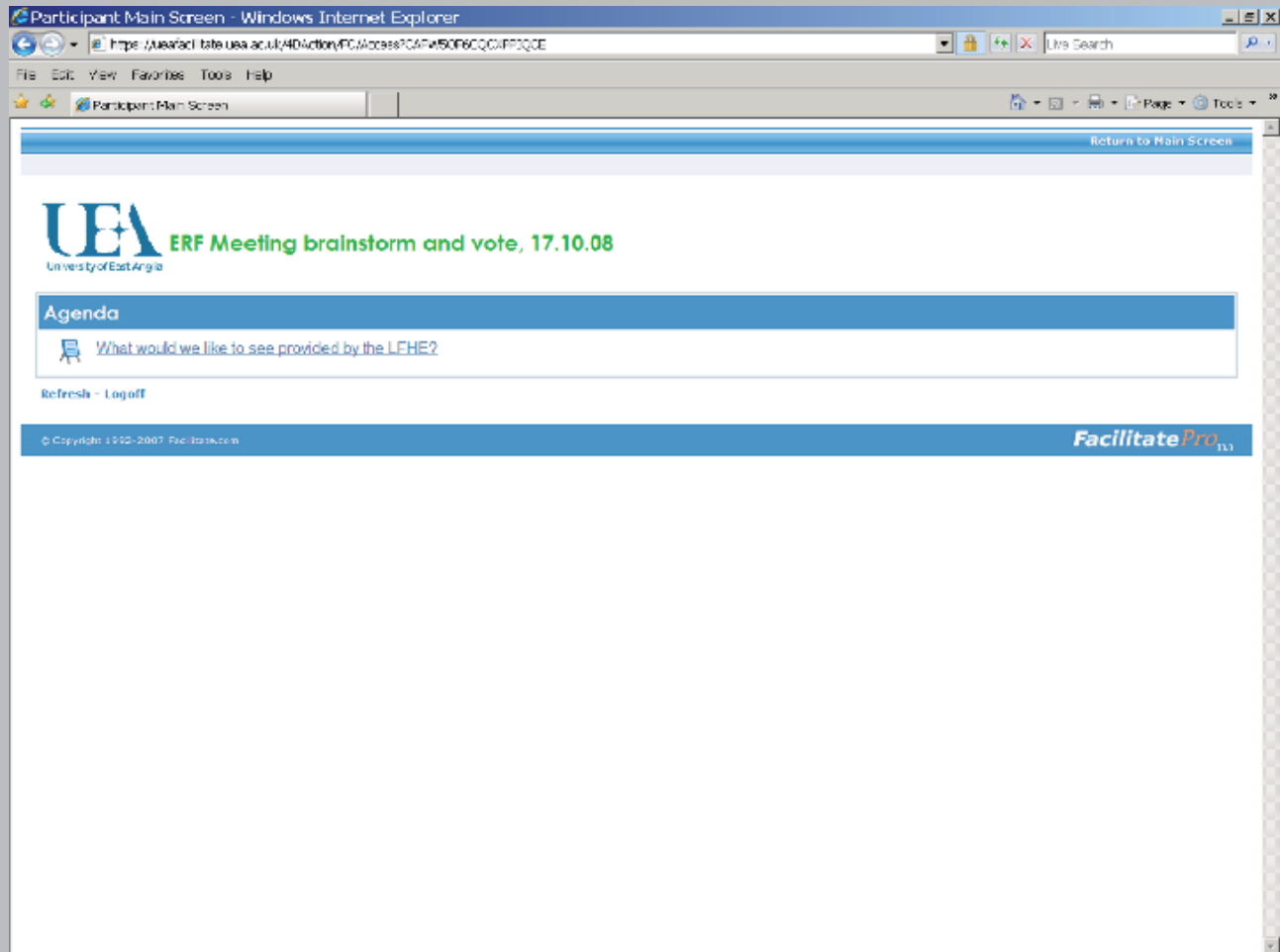
The ERF has been in existence for many years and this question arose from a concern that attendance at recent ERF meetings had been low. At the face to face meeting, there had been some speculation about the reasons for this; for example, busy diaries and workload pressures, the small number and wide geographical distribution of institutions within the region and the fact that some departments are staff development units were staffed by very few people. The Chair wanted to gain a clearer sense of members views on the future of the ERF - if they felt it should continue, and if so, in the same format or if they felt it was time for a change. Because attendance at meetings was an issue, it was hoped that the asynchronous approach might encourage people to participate by offering a convenient way of communicating. The event was held over a week long period.

Engagement in the on-line asynchronous event was low, although the voting results did broadly correlate with those from the face to face session. Given the prior lack of participation and attendance at meetings, this was not altogether surprising and seemed to reinforce the feeling that there was flagging interest in ERF activities. However, the asynchronous event acted as a catalyst for change because the Chair took this as a clear indication that a review of the ERF should be commissioned in which members were canvassed directly for their views. This turned out to be a positive step because it allowed the group to debate the purpose and future shape of the ERF, and in fact confirmed that there was an overwhelming desire that the group should continue, albeit with a wider membership.

6.2. Facilitate.Pro Screenshots

Eastern Region Forum meeting: brainstorming, categorisation and voting

WELCOME SCREEN



The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "Participant Main Screen - Windows Internet Explorer". The address bar contains the URL: <https://uea.facilitate.uea.ac.uk/40/Action/FC/Access?CAF#50F6CQC&PRQCE>. The browser's menu bar includes File, Edit, View, Favorites, Tools, and Help. The page content features a blue header bar with a "Return to Main Screen" link. Below this is the UEA logo (University of East Anglia) and the text "ERF Meeting brainstorm and vote, 17.10.08". A blue "Agenda" section contains a single item: "What would we like to see provided by the LFHE?". At the bottom of the page, there is a "Refresh - Log off" link and a footer with the copyright notice "© Copyright 1992-2007 Facilitate.com" and the "FacilitatePro 1.03" logo.

BRAINSTORMING SCREEN (Electronic notepad and flipchart)

Participant Main Screen - Windows Internet Explorer

https://uea.ac.uk/404/Action/FC/Details/Topic/2506084ED42060D394DC2427VDCJ7F1Dbrar/100/375

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Participant Main Screen

Return to Main Screen

What would we like to see provided by the LFHE?

What do want to see provided by LFHE? Enter your ideas on the electronic flipchart below. To do this, enter text into the 'Add an Idea' box and click on the 'Add My Idea' button. You will see your contributions and those of others participants appearing on the electronic flipchart below. If you would like to respond to someone else's comment, click on the lightbulb icon on the left and enter text in the 'Add my comment' box. Please try to remember to state which comment you are responding to if this is not clear. Every few minutes, click on the refresh button to update the flipchart. Do not use the back button on your browser at any point. Once we have collected a number of ideas, we will vote on our preferred options.

Add an Idea




Enter your suggestion here...

Category
Your current idea has not been placed in a category

Add My Idea Refresh List Finished Print

Electronic Flip Chart

This session is Anonymous - The following 32 items have been contributed to this Topic.

LFHE	
	Ideas on how to evaluate Leadership development <i>Comments:</i> 1. perhaps tools and expertise 2. this would be really valuable
	Different styles of Leadership Development (non-traditional classroom based activities) <i>Comments:</i> 1. cutting-edge tools...new methodologies (such as Taking the Pulse*)
	Organisational internal communication and engagement.

BRAINSTORMING SCREEN

Participant Main Screen - Windows Internet Explorer

http://www.aci.fate.uea.ac.uk/404/doi/FC.Dc46yrdhTcc?2950684ED43960039A0C242E70D0FF18rs?7J03/278

Participant Main Screen

LFHE

- Ideas on how to evaluate Leadership development
Comments:
 - perhaps tools and expertise
 - this would be really valuable
- Different styles of Leadership Development (non-traditional classroom based activities)
Comments:
 - cutting-edge tools...new methodologies (such as Taking the Pulse*)
- Organisational internal communication and engagement.
Comments:
 - How to engage staff on internal programmes e.g. management development, induction, appraisals
- collaborative approaches within my university - LFHE associate working with me to address issues
- Links to proven consultants who provide detailed advice and support on key topics
- Cutting edge ideas and techniques
- facilitated conversations: LF facilitation of joint SD and senior managers from institutions to examine positioning of staff development within an organisation and how best to use staff development professionals to support the strategic aims of the institution...
Comments:
 - a way of promoting the SD function within institutions where its a low priority
- identification of future leaders - link to succession planning
Comments:
 - support in-house with talent management and succession planning
 - at the Brighton conference last year everyone who attended the breakout session on succession planning concluded that their institution didn't have any! So this is a pressing issue.
 - there used to be an LF working party on this, but not sure what the outcomes were
 - Newcastle's leadership development centres worth a look
- Staff development masterclasses for VCs and FVCs - to improve their understanding of the purpose/value of SD
Comments:
 - and other key leaders within the University such as Heads of Service areas
 - sometimes they listen better if there's an external person in the room!
 - I think this has been the focus of much of their work to date.

VOTING SCREEN

Facilitate.com - Windows Internet Explorer

https://www.facilitate.uea.ac.uk/404/Action/FC/WE_Nav_Voting?Z9Q084E11CE5DGV7FQJ1645U05U

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Facilitate.com

Page Tools

Instructions
Rate items from 0 to 10. A HIGHER number always represents a HIGHER rating

Save and Submit Cancel

Please evaluate the following items.

	Rate 0 to 10
LFHE	
Ideas on how to evaluate Leadership development <i>Comments:</i> 1. perhaps tools and expertise 2. this would be really valuable	10
Resources aimed at all sectors <i>Comments:</i> 1. all sectors or all levels of staff?	7
Organisational internal communication and engagement. <i>Comments:</i> 1. How to engage staff on internal programmes e.g. management development, induction, appraisals	8
collaborative approaches within my university - LFHE associate working with me to address issues	9
Links to proven consultants who provide detailed advice and support on key topics	10
LFHE to come up with a list themselves of what they can offer. Do they do this already? <i>Comments:</i> 1. I second that - a bit unclear what might be on offer ...	8
Cutting edge ideas and techniques	7
research into areas other than leadership that would be relevant to my area of work	6
Different styles of Leadership Development (non-traditional classroom based activities) <i>Comments:</i> 1. cutting edge tools - new methodologies (such as Taking the Pulse?)	5

VOTING RESULTS

Administrator Screen - Windows Internet Explorer

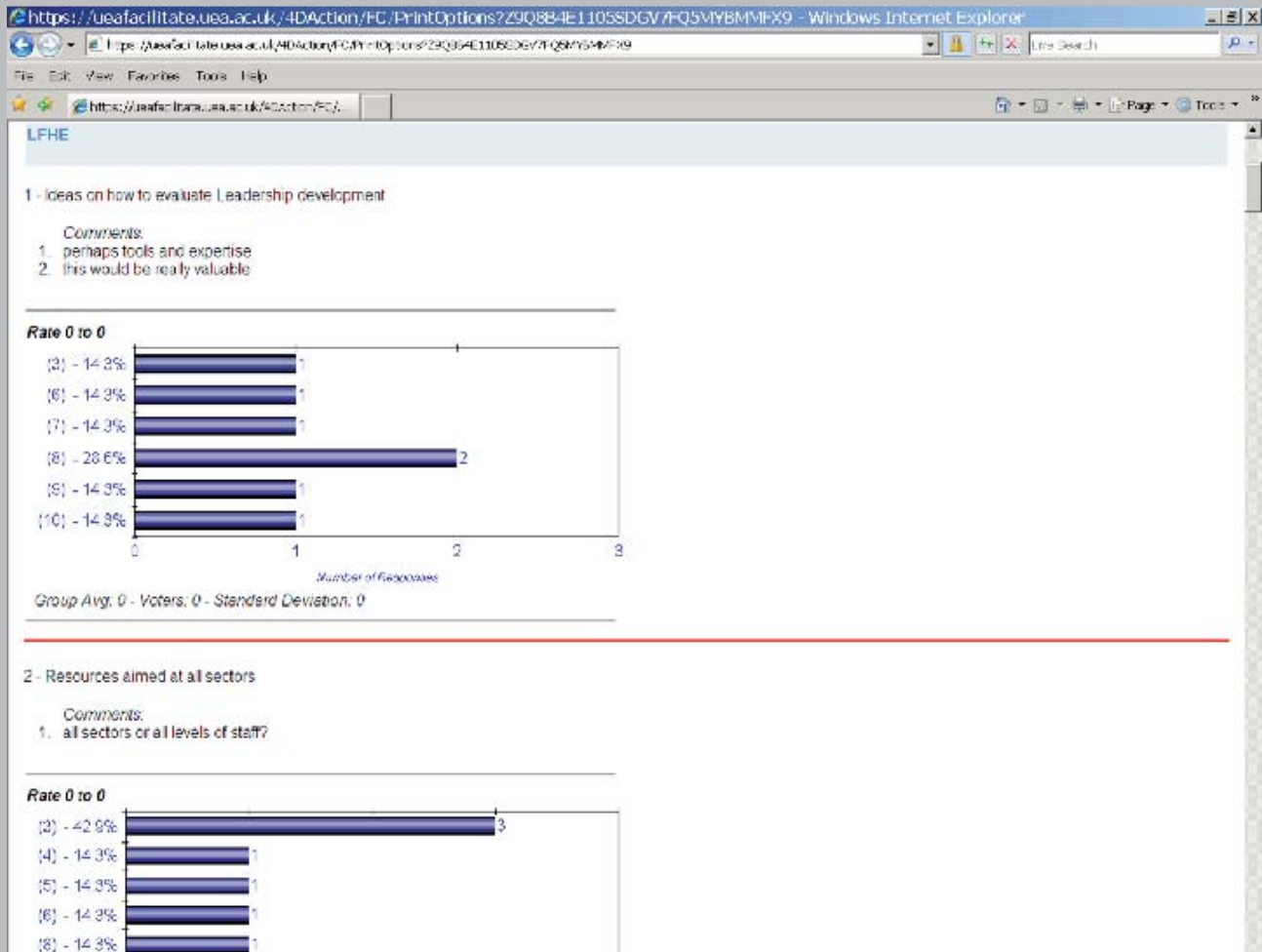
http://www.vcl.tate.usa.ac.uk/404/Action/PC/Details/290664E1-055D3V7F0F0C01564

Administrator Screen

Voting Results

	Rate 0 to 10	Std Dev	Voters	Graph
LFHE				
<p>+</p> <p>Ideas on how to evaluate Leadership development</p> <p>Comments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> perhaps tools and expertise this would be really valuable 	7.3	2.3	7	
<p>+</p> <p>Different styles of Leadership Development (non-traditional classroom based activities)</p> <p>Comments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> cutting edge tools...new methodologies (such as Taking the Pulse) 	7.1	3.2	7	
<p>+</p> <p>Organisational internal communication and engagement</p> <p>Comments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How to engage staff on internal programmes e.g. management development, induction, appraisals 	7.0	2.4	7	
<p>+</p> <p>collaborative approaches within my university - LFHE associate working with me to address issues</p>	6.9	2.3	7	
<p>+</p> <p>Links to proven consultants who provide detailed advice and support on key topics</p>	6.9	2.8	7	
<p>+</p> <p>Cutting edge ideas and techniques</p>	6.7	2.1	7	
<p>+</p> <p>facilitated conversations: LF facilitation of joint SD and senior managers from institutions to examine positioning of staff development within an organisation and how best to use staff development professionals to support the strategic aims of the institution...</p> <p>Comments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a way of promoting the SD function within institutions where its a low priority 	6.6	3.3	7	
<p>+</p> <p>identification of future leaders - link to succession planning</p> <p>Comments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> support in-house with talent management and succession planning at the Brighton conference last year everyone who attended the breakout session on succession planning concluded that their institution didn't have any! So this is a pressing issue. there used to be an LF working party on this, but not sure what the outcomes were 	6.4	1.9	7	

VOTING RESULTS GRAPH



For more information about the software, go to: <http://www.facilitate.com>

6.3. Recommendations for Improvements to the Software

During the course of this project, we identified several aspects of the software which could be improved or developed:

- *Incorporating greater functionality that would allow for other media tools, such as drawing tools to produce diagrams, pictures and mind maps etc. voice recordings, and video excerpts that could be shared on-line.*
- *Developing the technology to combine video-conferencing facilities with the software, so that participants can see and hear each other, although this would be of less direct benefit to the asynchronous way of working – although voice and video recordings could be picked up later on by participants working in a different time, different place mode.*
- *Re-designing the categorising tool by getting rid of the ‘ideas not in a category’ category heading, so that it is simpler to use. It would also be more user friendly if participants did not have to keep selecting the desired category every time they wished to make an entry into it.*
- *Greater consideration given to accessibility issues for people with visual impairments, of those who have difficulty in using a keyboard, e.g. voice recognition etc.*
- *Allowing participants to categorise information rather than the facilitator.*
- *Enabling the option for ideas to be automatically copied from the flipchart into other categories, rather than being permanently moved. The only way to do this currently is by editing and pasting. This is time consuming and impractical.*
- *If the auto-refresh function is activated, every time the flipchart is refreshed, the software automatically takes participants back to the top of the list which can be frustrating. This should be re-designed so that participants can remain at their current position on the flipchart.*
- *There is no way of tracking which comment participants are responding to in the numbered comment lists, which are appended to ideas. They have to specifically identify which comment they are responding to. It would be useful if there was a way of identifying which comments were related to which.*

