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ABSTRACT

"Active readers" are silent members of telecommunications networks who read but do not contribute. Often derided as lurkers, active readers benefit from their network participation and in turn professionally benefit others. A study, still in progress, is interviewing 20 silent participants of the LabNet community who have posted fewer than 2 messages. LabNet is a telecommunications-based National Science Foundation-funded project whose main purpose is to promote teacher development through reflection on teaching experiences. Preliminary findings show that active readers choose not to participate for three main reasons: (1) they prefer to choose to "learn and listen" before publicly participating in the network; (2) they prefer to use the materials from the network to enhance their professional lives in ways other than participation on the network: namely, they download materials from the network and experiment with them in their classrooms or share them with other faculty members; and (3) they use electronic mail to carry on conversations with other professionals about information they have learned about on the network. Often the professional exchanges that occur privately resemble those on the public forum in scope and content. (TB)

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ACTIVE READERS--WHAT BENEFITS DO THEY GAIN FROM AN EDUCATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS NETWORK?

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Network participation for teacher professional development holds the potential to alter traditional notions of professional learning. Typically, participation in any professional group is distinguished by levels of involvement and visibility. However, with the surge of electronic networks as vehicles for professional collaboration, one's participation in a community can be invisible if a member chooses not to make his presence known to the group through public messages. Public messages are the only way to document participation in an on-line environment. However, there are other forms of participation in telecommunications networks. These modes of involvement often take place "behind the scenes"-in teachers' classrooms or in professional meetings.

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This paper is about *active readers*, the silent members of telecommunications networks who read but do not contribute. We look at activities of the active readers of the LabNet {1} community as an example of how off-line uses of telecommunications are enacted. Often derided merely as "lurkers," {2} we assert that they benefit from their network participation and in turn, professionally benefit others.

There are three types of active network participation possible in an on-line community: putting forward topics for discussion, posting messages in a discussion, and reading messages in an on-going way. Many networks have members who read others' messages yet rarely write any. Little attention, however, has been paid to the somewhat intangible role that readers play on-line. From our research on the LabNet project, we know that there are teachers who primarily read messages and rarely post public message, yet view themselves as members of the community (*Jacobs & DiMauro & Gal, 1994*).

With this in mind, we raise the following research questions? Do "silent" network members use their network participation to enhance their professional development off the network? If so, how? Do readers participate in the community "behind the scenes," such as through e-mail? In order to explore these issues we use LabNet as an example of the way active readers use telecommunications networks for teacher professional development.

Method

To involve members of the LabNet community in a discussion about the issues of off-line network use, we are in the process of interviewing 20 silent participants, members who have posted 2 or fewer messages on-line. We are conducting the interviews using on-line-real-time chats on America Online (AOL). In the interview we focus on the question: In what ways do active readers use conversations or information from the network to enhance their professional development? Additional data sources include network messages, a teacher questionnaire that was sent to all LabNet participants (with a response rate of 66%), and field notes from teacher interviews.

Preliminary Findings

Our preliminary analyses of interview transcripts suggest that LabNet members who are active readers frequently use the network in similar ways. Active readers create uses for information and discussions found on LabNet, yet not in ways that are obvious to community members who post messages, engage in network conversations, etc. There are many reasons why teachers choose not to participate in public conversations. We have identified three--"listening & learning," "sharing with non-members," and "private professional conversations." In the paper we discuss all three, drawing examples from teacher dialogues.

Some teachers choose to "listen & learn" before publicly participating in the network. Teachers have reported that they feel intimidated by

the number of participants and the level of these participants' expertise. In addition, silent members are sometimes new members who choose to spend time becoming acquainted with the "culture" of the network before posting-observing the subtleties and nuances of the on-line community prior to becoming a public participant. One teacher told us about his need to feel comfortable before posting:

> There is a definate comfort level that has to be achieved (sic) before you put your innermost thoughts out there for THE ENTIRE WESTERN WORLD to read. For me, potential spelling errors alone could wipe out any significant contribution. But I'm getting there. I know there is a valuable resource in LabNet....and I'm making use of it as much as I can. But it's like a new club or organization that you join. You don't just barge in there and take over (ok, I know some people do, but we tend to respect our elders, take time to check out the lay of the land, etc. here in Oklahoma). I am beginning to move more in that "active" mode. My response to your original offer (via e-mail) and my actions here (in this interview) are evidence of that.

The second category active readers reported was using materials from the network in their professional life: either in the classroom or in conversation with other teachers about teaching issues. Teachers discussed how they downloaded projects or curricula from the LabNet library and experimented with the materials in their classroom. It is clear that some teachers who do not post public messages on LabNet are using LabNet as a professional resource, "Sharing with non-members," off the network in ways that are not visible to the community. For example, teachers reported that they frequently tell their colleagues and supervisors about conversations on-line, and share printouts of messages. In addition, they often try out network projects in their classroom. One teacher told us about how she shared some information from the network with fellow teachers. She said:

> We plan on team teaching some of the meteorology unit using some of the information I have downloaded from the LabNet library...Our grades 4,5 and 6 are all studying weather so I brought (the lesson plan) to the staff meeting and we all talked about it. The 4/5 teacher and I spent our collaborative time on a Friday going through it and figuring out how we could use it...We made some changes (to the curriculum). We adapted some of the activities around our own available materials.

A third vehicle for active readers is private e-mail, "private professional conversations." Frequently, teachers who are not comfortable writing messages that are accessible to the whole community form professional collaborations through private e-mail. Often the professional exchanges that occur privately resemble those on the public forum in scope and content. When asked about e-mail correspondences that enhanced professional development, one teacher said:

> I have a biology teacher friend way out west. He has run into a problem with fundamentalists taking over the local school board. All of a sudden he can't teach anything about reproduction or evolution. Well, take those two topics away from a bio teacher and there ain't nothin left worth teaching. We discussed this (via e-mail) and looked for alternative ways to approach both topics without using the words "Evolution and human". It is a universal problem all bio teachers these days and I am sure all bio teachers deal with it. In this case, just having an outside viewpoint helped break the block...We came up with a set of tactics (fight fire with tact) that taught all about human reproduction without using the word sex or human, and about evolution without using the word evolution.

All three examples provided above describe individual experiences with off-line telecommunications for teacher professional development. Active participation in network-based communities can be opaque yet can offer significant contributions to the professional group. These types of off-line teacher use need to be explored in-depth to better understand the impact and implications that network communities have on active readers. Throughout the paper we explore this issue: In what ways do active readers contribute to the community?

References

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Footnotes

1.-LabNet is a telecommunications-based NSF funded project whose main purpose is to promote teacher development through teacher reflection on teaching experiences. LabNet is a private area on the commercial network America Online.

2.-A description common in the on-line literature to describe network members whose involvement is not visible to the rest of the community.

LabNet Research Page

LabNet home page

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