AN ELECTRONIC COMMUNITY OF VISION THERAPY EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Communication and the sharing of ideas and experiences between optometric educators can strengthen the quality of instruction to optometry students and, therefore, strengthen the profession itself. Unfortunately, getting together a large group of educators with a common interest is challenging. Such groups meet regularly at various professional conferences; however, only a limited number of faculty may attend a particular conference. This paper describes how one group of educators has taken advantage of the Internet to create a "virtual community" which includes all interested faculty from all educational institutions. Using the LISTSERV communication program, an e-mail mailing list of members of the Binocular Vision and Perception Educators (BVPE) group was created. This mailing list allows an individual to easily communicate with all members of the group, using a single e-mail address. This method of communication has led to an increase in BVPE membership, and has resulted in important discussions on a wide variety of topics. The BVPE group continues to meet at conferences, but the mailing list permits ongoing communication between meetings. The business world has exploited the features of the Internet very effectively, and this BVPE e-mail list is one example of how the academic world can also benefit from electronic information exchange.

Key Words
Internet, LISTSERV, e-mail, mailing lists, binocular vision educators

Electronic communication using the Internet continues to make the world increasingly smaller. With e-mail addresses becoming as common as phone numbers, and the existence of tens of thousands of e-mail discussion groups, mailing lists, and newsgroup bulletin boards, as well as countless and ubiquitous websites, there is an almost unlimited opportunity to exchange large amounts of information with huge numbers of people in a very short time. Internet communication has become a vital part of everyday business practice, and so-called 'e-commerce' can represent a significant portion of a company's financial activities. Although this form of information exchange has not yet been fully exploited by the academic world, its use for educational purposes is increasing rapidly. One example of the benefits of this means of educational electronic communication is the recent growth of a group of optometric vision therapy educators.

The Group

In 1983, a group of optometry school educators with common interests in binocular vision, visual perception, and vision therapy was formed to encourage communication among members and between schools. The group was initially called Optometric Educators in Binocular Vision, Perception and Vision Develop-

ment. In 1998, A Binocular Vision Educators Special Interest Group (SIG)was proposed and approved by the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO). Members of the original educators group were involved in the conceptualization and formation of this new group. This ASCO SIG met sporadically, and its membership numbers were low. However, this group did provide a forum for the exchange of information between many educators, and the SIG met occasionally during other annual professional meetings of organizations such as the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD).

This SIG met during the COVD meeting in Miami in October of 1999. There were 24 members present at this meeting, representing seven schools of optometry. At this meeting, W.C. Maples, O.D., who was at the time the Immediate Past President of COVD, was selected to be the chair of the group. One of Dr. Maples' stated goals for the SIG was to develop and improve the communication between members.

In January, 2000, Dr. Maples sent out a letter to individuals at schools and colleges of optometry who "teach some aspect of oculomotor, binocular, or perceptuo-cognitive testing and/or therapy." The purpose of this letter was "to organize this group and to update our roster." Dr. Maples attached a preliminary list of member educators who were previously associated with activities relevant to the BV SIG, and he encouraged individu-

als to submit e-mail addresses to enhance communication among members. This letter was the beginning of the development of a very important electronic community forum.

The Medium

An Internet mailing list (also called a discussion group) is made up of individuals with a common topic of interest who communicate with each other through e-mail. Mailing lists can make sending mail to groups of people much easier, especially if the membership of the group is constantly changing. Many thousands of such mailing lists exist on every topic imaginable, and people can subscribe to these lists and receive and reply to messages. Sometimes mailing lists are public; that is, anyone with an e-mail account anywhere in the world can subscribe. Sometimes lists are private or confidential. In this case, only the list's owner or sponsor can subscribe people, and thus access to the list is limited. A mailing list is managed by a "list owner." The list owner is the person with formal responsibility for the operation and usage policies of the list.

When someone wants to send an e-mail message to the mailing list only that e-mail address is required Thus, list members do not have to know the individual e-mail addresses of the members of the list, although that information is available if desired. Various mailing list software programs exist which allow people to create, manage, control, subscribe to, and unsubscribe from electronic mailing lists. One such program is called LISTSERV, which is used to manage a large number of mailing lists. LISTSERV makes it easy to join and leave mailing lists, send and receive mailing list messages, and review previous e-mail exchanges. LISTSERV creates an 'archive' of all mailing list messages, so past communications are readily available if needed. This program is so popular and commonly used that people frequently refer to e-mail mailing lists as "listservs" or "listservers."

This is not technically correct, since LISTSERV is a registered trademark licensed exclusively to L-Soft international, Inc., and refers specifically the software used to manage a particular mailing list.

LISTSERV is available to and used by many universities and educational institutions to assist with mailing list communications. Many institutions have electronic messaging departments which provide the infrastructure for electronic communications. One example of such a department is the Indiana University Information Technology Services Messaging Team. This group provided the support and an electronic home for a Binocular Vision and Perception Educators ASCO SIG e-mail mailing list.

The Results

On March 4, 2000, the Binocular Vision and Perception Educators' (BVPE) LISTSERV mailing list was born. The first electronic message was sent to the charter group consisting of 89 list members. The initial e-mail traffic was very heavy, and the list was very well received by the membership. In fact, some members were so concerned about the resulting increase in the volume of their e-mail that they requested to receive list mail in "Digest" form. Digest is a feature of LISTSERV, and results in all e-mail messages sent during a day being put into a single daily message sent to a subscriber only once each day, rather than a separate e-mail each time a message is sent.

Membership in the BVPE LISTSERV mailing list is intended for part-time and full-time optometric didactic and/or clinical educators in binocular vision, vision therapy (VT), pediatric optometry, visual information processing, vision and learning, developmental vision and the visual consequences of acquired brain injury. There are also mailing list members who serve in administrative positions for organizations such as ASCO, COVD, and OEP. Currently, the BVPE mailing list has 114 members, with at least one member from each optometry educational institution in the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

The mailing list has sparked a resurgence of the BVPE group, which was a primary goal of Dr. Maples in early 2000. At the COVD meeting in October, 2000, 35 BVPE members attended a very productive SIG meeting. Plans are for the group to meet at least once a year at the annual COVD meeting, with perhaps a second meeting at the American Academy of Optometry annual conference. The BVPE e-mail mailing list will provide a means for group communication, planning, and activities between SIG meetings.

Topics of discussion during the first year of the mailing list have included residencies, textbook recommendations, the American Board of Optometric Practice (ABOP),ongoing or proposed research, the need for clinical trials, BV testing equipment, VT-related websites, eye movements and visual tracking, vision therapist training, and the financial realities and third party reimbursement issues related to VT.

Discussions have been lively and productive. All members of the mailing list share the goals of promoting and improving the education in binocular vision, vision therapy, and visual perception of optometry students, clinicians, and the general public. The growth in membership and participation in this very important group is another indication that the Internet is bringing groups of people together despite the distance between them.

Although still in the development phase, a BVPE website can be found at www.indiana.edu/~bvpe. This website will contain information about the SIG, its meetings, and its membership. It will also provide links to related websites. Those who desire more information about the BVPE ASCO SIG or about the e-mail mailing list, should contact the SIG chair W.C. Maples, O.D., at

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