

# Can teachers' discussion lists be a tool for in-service collaborative learning? What reveals a three years analysis?

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**Abstract:** Following Wenger (1998), discussion lists for inservice teachers are often considered as examples of communities of practice. Such lists have an important role in the professional communication of French teachers and exist for all secondary disciplinary fields. The increase of users for ten years indicates that this exchange medium can be an instrument for professional development. But, many discussion lists are managed by the ministry of education, and one can wonder if such lists are open spaces for all kinds of sharing or kinds of institutional disciplinary showcase. We studied all the messages, during three consecutive years, of a specific discussion list for management secondary teacher (named IGC – 2752 messages) and an extract of a private list for librarian teachers (named CDIDOC – 935 messages) and adopted an *ad hoc* coding process (with a triple dimension) to get an in-depth view of the nature of exchanges and an understanding of list regulation. The goal of the research is to get evidence of a list as a collaboration tool but results obtained give a contrasted picture of such teacher discussion list, more normative than democratic.

## Results

The focus of this paper is to understand how works an institutional teachers' discussion lists, with a mission of accompaniment of curriculum innovation. Sociology of organizations (see Crozier & Friedberg, 1981; Amblard *et al*, 2005), help us as a guide to create a method of teachers' posts analysis including three dimensions: the regulation of the exchanges, the relations and the contents (see McGrath (1984) and circumplex and Nonaka & Takeuchi (1997) for knowledge management). Methodology and theoretical framework are detailed in Caviale's thesis (2008). See Dimitracopoulou (2005) and Bruillard (2007) about indicators for discussion list analysis.

### The traces of personal experiences are weak

Globally, the communications about personal experiences (*internalization*) are the weakest on both lists (figure 1). In the year 2000, IGC list is new, not the CDIDOC list. The IGC teachers need to compare their contexts to better know each other: the *socialization* category is thus more important at IGC than CDIDOC. Librarian teachers are also accustomed to relaying information of knowledge (*combination*).

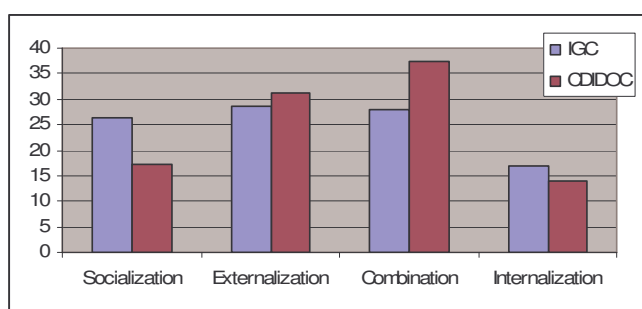
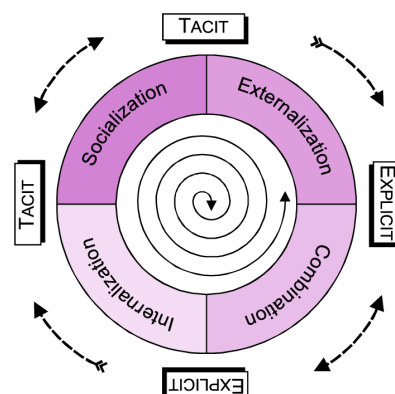


Figure 1. Comparison of knowledge exchanges in % for the two lists (IGC and CDIDOC) according to the process of knowledge creation by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1997)



### The participation of an active minority is normalized

One of the most obvious results is a gap of participation between the actors: some of them are at the origin of a lot of threads and answer the others. We named "*activists*" these actors who represent 13 % of all the participants of the list IGC on three years and contribute to 38 % of messages. In figure 2, the height of the bubble means the number of created messages and the surface, activated thread. These regular actors do not know each other *a priori* but their behaviour collects similitude as presence on the list, regulation and exchanged knowledge.

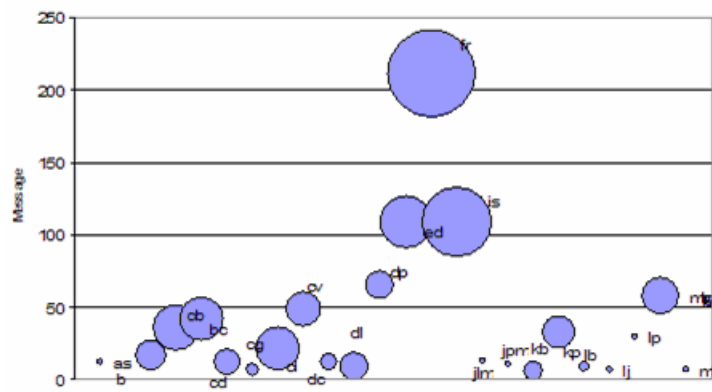


Figure 2. List IGC / activists

	Actors	Messages
Total	223	2778
Activists	28	1064

### Distribution of the *activists'* roles

The actors composing the centre of lists have not same activity every quarters, nevertheless, even in weaker period of activity, their contribution remains constant. If the number of actors decreases, their activity remains the same. If a question occurs, only an *activist* answers, not the others. Each has an implicit activity domain. These leaders possess one register of wide intervention and hold the information without being involved in controversy. To solve a problem, if one *activist* answers, the others do not overbid; each one has a domain of speciality. If one of them decreases its participation, its place is occupied little by little, not by a newcomer on the list, but by another acting which has in fact more importance.

### Contents of the *activists'* exchanges

Which types of messages dominate the *activists'* activity? This category of actor can produce without passing by a socialization step. The cognitive indicator "production" translates the production of resources (category *externalization*) or relay of necessary information (category *combination*) without passing by a phase of adjustment about the profession (category *socialization*). The occasional actors are obliged to know their context respective, before producing resources. The occasional actors are obliged to discover their respective contexts, before producing. The global analysis at the level of the answers means a relative balance of both groups.

The category "Generate" collects the productions of lessons or educational tracks. The *activists* are at work from the first quarter, for the first message of a thread. In the following messages, the tendency is inverted. This category of actor indicates clearly a tendency for the occasional actors. The category "Generate", important during the first message of a thread, has no more the same role. The production of resources does not seem to result from collaboration because teachers propose directly tracks, but messages relative to these propositions are weak.

## **Discussion**

Our results make it possible to propose a different view about training using electronic exchanges (Figure 3). First, it is necessary to observe the volume of participation. Only 14% of subscribers participated once (stage 0). The teachers do not speak about their difficulties but they seek in the speeches similar traces of activity. This attitude is translated on the list by an absence of doubts or errors; otherwise the spectator can feel marginalized. Then, the first way of intervening is to call assistance but generally on a very precise point and often technique, never on pedagogy. A discussion list is most frequently used as a fast answer problem for 30 % of actors (stage 1). At this level, the answers are not useful for the whole list because of a too personal context. It is not very likely that these questions are useful for the audience. Like first conclusion, we can say that the potential of the lists corresponds to waiting of the teachers for the LLL, but quantity and type of expression are not easily transposable and yet, in the analyzed lists, the number of subscriptions increases in an important way. Why? Perhaps teachers seek other stages necessities with their trade.

Stage 2 of participation is important: the discovery of contexts, named socialization. The model proposed by Daele (2006) also includes this stage, but it appears in its analysis like a precision of the question: "The exchange can be a question asking more information, a reformulation..." As far as we are concerned, separately the activists, we noted at the beginning of list, exchanges related to the trade, the curriculum... without particular questions. This stage of socialization seems necessary before any other form of production.

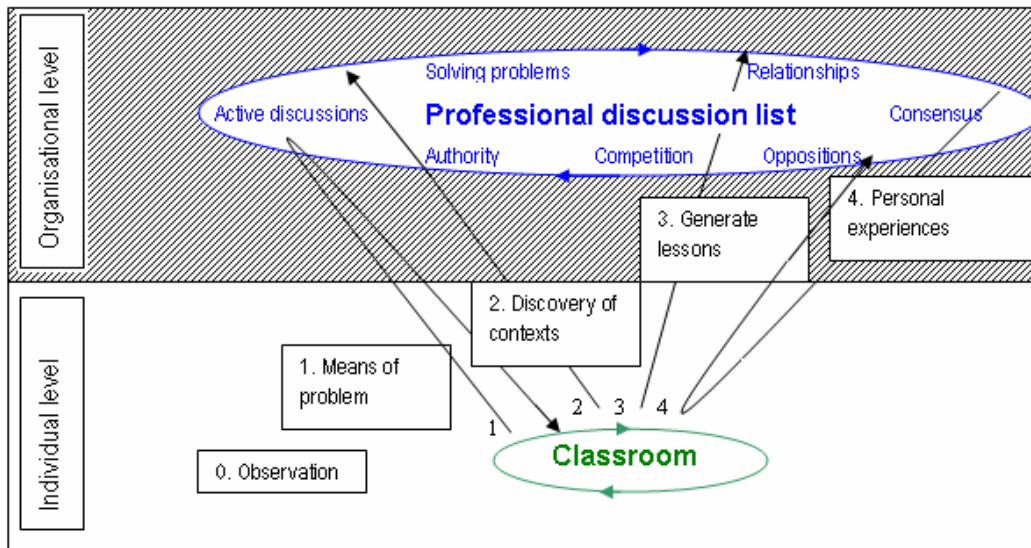


Figure 3. Stages of participation on a teachers' professional discussion list

Stage 3 of participation opens the door on another dimension: the actor does not write for himself, but for the organization. At this level, the activists are already there and produce. The spectators find the same contributions of knowledge and resources as during a "real" training session, but at home.

Stage 4 of participation, exchanges about experiences, corresponds to the weakest topic. Debates or analyzes starting from experiments were practically never met, contrary to the cycle of Daele, perhaps because of the type of list (size, culture...). Nevertheless, these asymmetries of participations bring a glance different on the place from the electronic exchanges in the *LLL*. The majority of the subscribers do not use these lists like place of exchanges and debates, but as an emission where experts bring a specific vision of trade. A discussion list cannot be easily regarded as reflection of practices, but rather as a media carrying resources.

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