

# **Information Management Resource Kit**

## **Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks**

### **UNIT 5. ONLINE FACILITATION**

#### **LESSON 8. WORKING WITH HUMAN DIFFERENCES**

##### **NOTE**

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.

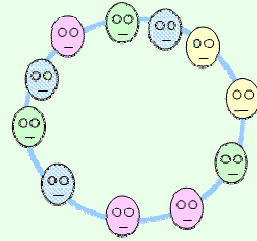


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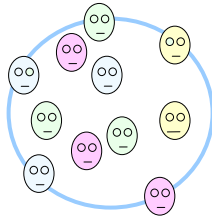
## Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- identify the ways in which human differences affect online interaction and online communities; and
- apply basic techniques for working with diversity.



## Introduction



"Human differences" is a term that covers all sorts of differences. These include culture, gender, physical and mental ability, status, as well as different levels of access to resources and knowledge.

You will need to consider all these factors when setting up your online community.

### Diversity in online discussions

Before starting, let's focus on an important issue.

The following are two different opinions on how human differences influence online communities. Which of them better matches your idea?

- Everyone is equal in an online space: human differences do not have the same relevance as in a face-to-face situation.
- Communication in online spaces reflects human differences as well as in face-to-face situations.

Please click on the answer of your choice

### Diversity in online discussions



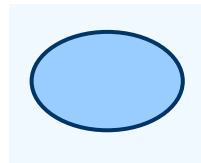
The online environment also adds **new challenges**: for example, in an online situation participants lack the visual clues such as facial expressions and gestures that help to add meaning to their words, clarify their intention, and avoid misunderstandings.



There are certainly **advantages** to the online medium if it is used well. With good facilitation an online community can be more socially inclusive and enable participants to interact with different types of people who they otherwise may **never have met**. The lack of visual distraction can mean that more attention is paid to the person's ideas.

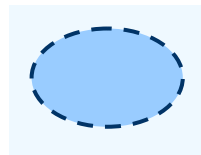
**Private and open discussion spaces**

The choice of a private (closed) or public (open) discussion space can affect the degree of "difference" among participants in an online discussion.



**Private (closed) groups**

These are discussion spaces that are restricted to participants from a particular group. Examples of private or closed lists include those for online tutorial groups, working groups, and lists used by members of particular organizations. These groups are not advertised publicly, and list archives are not publicly available.




**Open groups**

In completely open discussion spaces anyone is free to join the list or forum and start participating in the discussion provided they abide by the accepted rules for behaviour in the community. The archives of these discussions are usually available publicly.

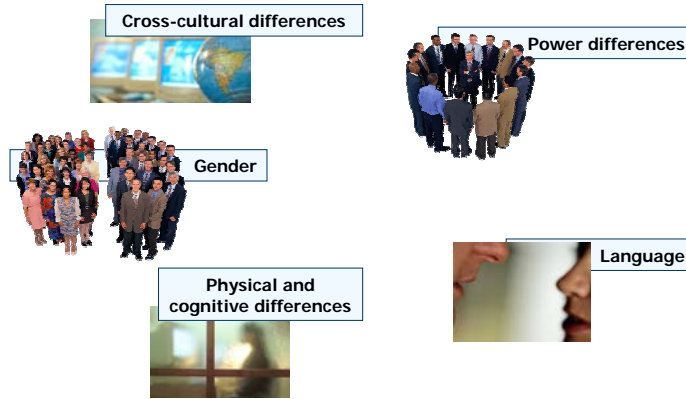
**Private and open discussion spaces**

The following are the main advantages and disadvantages related to human differences of private and open groups.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p><b>PRIVATE GROUPS</b></p> 	Participants may feel more secure in them, because they have a better idea of who they are talking to, especially communities with sensitive or personal issues to discuss. E.g: a group campaigning against human rights abuses, or a women's list discussing sexual abuse.	These groups may miss out on useful input from a more diverse audience, and they may become a clique to which new members find it hard to be accepted. Even if a group is closed, it should always be open to new members from the particular community it serves, and make them feel welcome.
<p><b>OPEN GROUPS</b></p> 	A free flowing discussion can take place with many different opinions from a diverse range of people. Facilitation is an important tool to help keep the discussion flowing and ensure that everyone has an equal chance to voice their opinion.	Without good facilitation the space can become dominated by participants with extreme views, or descend into conflict. This limits the discussion because other participants feel intimidated or uncomfortable and are less likely to take part.

### Understanding human differences

There are many types of human differences, including culture, gender, physical and mental ability. People bring these differences with them to the online communities in which they participate. If we are not aware of and sensitive to these differences they can become a barrier to effective online communication.



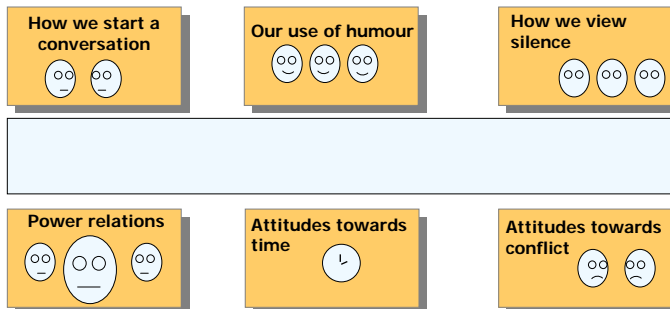
### Understanding human differences

#### Cross-cultural differences



Culture influences our communication styles and our expectations about what is and is not appropriate behaviour in a group, and with this our interactions in an online community.

It may influence, for example...



## Understanding human differences

### How we start a conversation

Whether we start talking business immediately or first exchange some social information (about our families, our health, or the weather).

### Our use of humour

...and of what we consider humour.

### How we view silence

Whether it is seen as normal and comfortable ("people are silent because they have nothing to say") or disturbing ("people are silent because they are intimidated").

### Power relations

In some cultures, there is a high degree of formality between "bosses" and "subordinates", and it is not usual for subordinates to question their bosses' decisions or criticize them in public if at all.

### Attitudes towards time

For example, in some cultures a "10 o'clock meeting start" means the meeting business starts at 10 o'clock precisely; in others, it might mean that participants arrive at about 10 o'clock, have coffee, chat to each other, and start the meeting business when everyone is ready.

### Attitudes towards conflict

For example, whether conflict is viewed as "normal" and something to be brought out into the open and resolved, or as shameful and best kept hidden.

## Understanding human differences

### Cross-cultural differences

This Paul is deliberately insulting us!



Paul is a very polite person!

Culture also influences the way we **interpret other people's behaviour**.

In multicultural groups, this can be a recipe for misunderstanding, and these problems can be worse in online communities because online spaces lack visual and other cues.

We can act in ways that are not understood by others, or are misunderstood by others, or give offence to others.

We can fail to understand other people's behaviour or communications, or we can misinterpret it through the lens of our own culture.

### Facilitating cross-cultural communication

There are a number of basic steps a facilitator can take to facilitate cross-cultural communication:

- Help community members to be aware of the potential for misunderstandings, and encourage them to bear this in mind both in the way they send messages, and in the way they interpret messages – don't rush to take offence!
- Encourage members to communicate meaning directly and explicitly. At first this may seem blunt to some group members, but if people do not share a culture or "communication history" it reduces the potential for misunderstandings.
- Intervene to clarify misunderstandings which may result from cultural diversity. For example, if a university lecturer from a country with a formal and hierarchical communication etiquette is getting irritated by strangers calling him by his first name, a little behind-the-scenes clarification might be in order. In most of cyberspace first names are used, even among strangers, and no disrespect is intended.
- The exchange of cultural information can be useful from a social perspective, and to help group members understand one another.
- Promote tolerance. You are not expected to agree with all cultural practices, but even if you find them hard to understand you should try to be sensitive and tactful. For example, in some countries women are treated very differently to men, and sometimes there are practices and attitudes which could be very hard to understand in countries where women have fought to gain equal rights. The answer is not to attack people because of their cultural background: it is much better to be open and respectful and describe the situation in your own culture and why you prefer it.
- Finally, while it is essential to be sensitive to culture, it is also important not to **stereotype** individuals according to their cultural background. Knowing about their cultural background does not tell you **who the individual is**, although it may offer some clues. People are all different – individuals are the product of many factors, and culture is only one of these.

### Understanding human differences

#### Power differences



Power struggles can spread from offline to online spaces.

People in positions of authority may be used to taking the lead, while their subordinates may fear repercussions if they express views contrary to the policies of their own institution.

Another type of power difference is between "experts" – who may feel that they know all there is to know about a topic – and "non-experts" – who may have important experience and insight, but who do not have the same formal qualifications or mastery of technical language as the "experts".

### Power differences

To some extent, simply being together in online spaces can help to break down traditional power relations and hierarchies – but this does not mean that all differences are miraculously swept away.

- If you think that some participants are silent because of issues relating to power differences, consider contacting them privately and encouraging them to participate.
- Encourage participants to ask questions. Publicly commend the questioner, and the value of asking questions.
- If community members in positions of power or authority seem to be dominating the conversation, call for input from other community members as well.
- Encourage participation from all of the community, but don't try to overturn members' "real life" power dynamics and preferences. Members may come from organizations or cultures with a high degree of power separation, and may need to retain some of this distance to function effectively in their organizational contexts.
- As a facilitator, encourage the community to see the diversity of experts/non-experts as a strength. Everyone has different skills and experience, and so each has something to offer the group.
- Discourage the use of jargon, acronyms and other specialist language without explanation. Encourage experts to communicate in a succinct, clear manner without recourse to jargon.
- Encourage experts to engage with non-experts. Often "non-experts" have extensive field/first hand experience to share.

### Understanding human differences

#### Gender



It used to be thought that online communication could be gender neutral, that no-one could tell whether you were a man or woman when you posted a message. This would mean that all postings would be equally valued and respected and mean that men and women would be able to communicate equally.

However this is not the case. Men and women tend to use different language when they post, and this means it is often easy to spot female or male participants.

Gender traits influence the online dialogue and reflect the wider social reality.



### Gender

Women-only spaces may be appropriate if the list centres on issues that women are more comfortable discussing with other women, such as domestic violence or sexual abuse. However, women **friendly** doesn't have to mean women **only**. As facilitator you can help to make your community spaces gender sensitive and women friendly:

- Ensure that your list has a strict policy against sexist postings (including jokes, attacks based on gender and other materials unfriendly to gender), and enforce it.
- Challenge sex role stereotyping in discussions.
- Watch out for men dominating the conversation, and encourage women members to contribute both publicly in the list and in private off-list communications.
- Recognise that men are frequently used to having power offline and this is communicated in their online language.
- Make sure fair or equal attention is paid: recognize women's messages, encourage further feedback either to their posts or by others. In male-dominated spaces, frequently when women do participate their comments go unrecognized.
- Challenge all personal attacks, a frequent problem when discussing sensitive issues such as race and gender.

You may also consider having two facilitators for your space – one male and one female.

## Understanding human differences

### Language



If your community involves people from different countries then you are probably going to have people who speak different languages. Usually you will have to choose a language that most are able to communicate in, and this will make it harder for some.

There will be different levels of familiarity with the chosen language across your participants, some will be very experienced and others may be struggling to understand or to express themselves.

Some people may be completely excluded from your community because they cannot speak the chosen language at all.



[Click here to view and print the article "Using English with non-native speakers" by George Simons.](#)

### Language

- If you are a native speaker of the main language of the online community, be prepared to simplify the language you use and avoid slang and colloquial expressions.
- As facilitator, be on the lookout for postings which contain language which might not be understood by all community members, and clarify where necessary. Look out also for members who may not be participating because they cannot express themselves easily in the primary language of the community, and see if you can find ways to assist them.
- Use the technique of "restating" if you feel that someone's posting is not sufficiently clear, but don't overdo it or you may end up embarrassing the person.

### Understanding human differences

#### Physical and cognitive differences



Another type of difference that may affect your community is that between able-bodied people and those with physical or mental disabilities.

The online environment is helpful for some disabilities. For example, deaf or partially deaf people will be able to communicate with hearing people more easily online. However, people who are blind or have visual impairment will find it more difficult.

Cognitive disabilities such as dyslexia may affect the way that people use language in their online communications.

#### Physical and cognitive differences

- There are technologies and software that can help those with physical disabilities use the Internet and take part in online discussions. As a facilitator, you may need to alert some members of your community to the possibilities.
- Be tolerant! Avoid correcting other community members' spelling and grammar.
- There are many types and levels of disability that affect people in different ways, and therefore affect participation in different ways. The important thing is to be aware of this and to do research and try to make your community as accessible as possible.

#### Understanding human differences

The general principles of good facilitation will take you a long way in dealing with human differences. In addition....

Some facilitation techniques help USE diversity. For example:

- Asking people to offer their perspective on an issue, and summarizing how the differences help us see an issue in a new light.
- Inviting different people to co-facilitate sub-discussions so the community expands its repertoire of interaction.
- People translating for other members of the community or outside the community.

If you have participants from all over the world on the list, you could have focal points for each region: people who are familiar with the cultural and language issues for that region and can help you to ensure their needs are met.

Look out for negative language or stereotyping. Remind the participants involved privately that this is not beneficial to the community.

If you feel there is an issue of conflict or inequality, ask the community for their views. For example, if there has been a heated and sometimes personal debate, you could send a message asking people if they felt comfortable with the language used.

As the community develops you will get to know the participants and their particular styles of communication. You can sometimes tell someone is unhappy without them actually saying so, just from the way they write. For example they may reply in an uncharacteristically short or curt way, because they are feeling offended by the previous post.

### Understanding human differences

Here are some examples of how facilitation can help to diffuse tensions between different groups of people online.

#### A participant posts an unintentionally racially prejudiced comment

The facilitator sends a reply, to the list or privately if it seems more appropriate.

The reply explains that this sort of language is offensive and so not acceptable in the list, and suggests that the participant apologise to the list.

The participant does apologise for any offence caused.

Various other participants send messages accepting the apology and explaining why the original post offended them.

All parties have learnt from the experience and are more careful about their use of language after the incident.

#### A participant posts an intentionally racially prejudiced comment

The facilitator sends a message to the list saying that a racist remark is not acceptable according to the community's rules, and asking for the community to decide whether or not the participant should be excluded.

This gives the community a chance to discuss their feelings about the offensive post, and it gives the poster a chance to retract and apologise for their comment.

The sender stays silent.

the community agree to remove him/her from the list.

The facilitator removes him/her, sends a private message to explain that he/she breached the acceptable use code for the community and that he/she have been removed as a result.

### Understanding human differences

#### A Spanish speaker posts a message saying that they are spending hours translating posts for other Spanish speakers in their country, who can't speak English, and want to be involved in the community.

The facilitator posts a message to the list asking for comments from the community about the language issue and how to include Spanish speakers in the community.

There is an animated debate about the issues involved in multilingual communities and two main proposals are raised, having two lists or allowing both languages to be used on the list with translation.

The facilitator summarizes the discussion and puts these two proposals to the community to make a decision.

It is decided that there are no resources to translate everything but the community would rather have one space, so Spanish posts will be accepted and bilingual participants will translate key messages when they can. Otherwise it will be the responsibility of participants to use an online translation service or other method to translate messages they are interested in, either from English to Spanish or vice versa.

An invitation is sent out to Spanish speakers, via the original poster.

### Understanding human differences

Let's consider the following situation. What should the facilitator do?

A list has become dominated by a few vocal male participants

- The facilitator sends a message asking why others are not participating, and says they particularly want to hear from the female members of the community.
- The facilitator sends a message to all female members in the community, asking them to more actively participate in the discussion.

Please click on the answer of your choice

### Understanding human differences

What should the facilitator do once he/she has understood the reason of the silence?

A number of women reply, some privately, saying that recently the discussion had become more of a personal debate between two participants and so they had not felt inclined to contribute.

- The facilitator sends a message to the list asking the two participants to keep the debate constructive and concentrate on the issues rather than personal attacks.
- The facilitator sends a private message to the two participants, asking them to keep the debate constructive and concentrate on the issues rather than personal attacks.

Please click on the answer of your choice

## Summary

There are many different types of human differences, both physical and cultural and power differences which can affect communication in an online community.

Public spaces are open to anyone to participate: they need to be carefully facilitated to avoid miscommunications and ensure all participants are given an equal chance. Private spaces are restricted to people from a particular group: this can make them feel more secure for those involved in sensitive discussions.

Gender influences the way we communicate through our use of language, and power dynamics can cause men to dominate discussions.

Cultural background may affect communication styles and norms. A facilitator should be aware of how physical and cognitive differences can affect the way people communicate.

Facilitation techniques that help people feel more included and support them in gaining experience and skills in the online community should be used.

## If you want to learn more...

### Online Resources

FAO Sustainable Development Department "Knowledge - Communication for development"

[http://www.fao.org/sd/eims\\_search/webpage\\_result\\_know.asp?agrovoc=35704&category=32&lang=en](http://www.fao.org/sd/eims_search/webpage_result_know.asp?agrovoc=35704&category=32&lang=en)

Honey Bee "A Newsletter of Creativity and Innovation at the Grassroots" <http://www.sristi.org/honeybee.html>

Lars T Soeffestad, Koffi Alinon, Daniella Diz, Michael V. Flyman, Tanja Kleibl, Lakhsara Mint Die, Community-Based Natural Resource Management Network (CBNRM Net) "Language, culture and communication in development cooperation: on the role of ICTs in networking online communities of practice" (2004)

<http://www.eldis.org/cf/search/disp/DocDisplay.cfm?Doc=DOC15294&Resource=file>

Webheads "Cross Cultural Communication Online: perspectives from around the globe" (2002)

<http://users.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/ccp/pres.htm>

Mackie Chase, Leah Macfadyen, Kenneth Reeder and Jörg Roche "Intercultural Challenges in Networked Learning: Hard Technologies Meet Soft Skills" (2002)

[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7\\_8/chase/index.html](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_8/chase/index.html)

William Gudykunst & Young Yun Kim "Communicating With Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication" (1998)

<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/gudy6816.htm>

"Systems: Contradictions in Community" (2001)

<http://aniteberg.org/projects/systems/contradictionsincommunity.pdf>

Language and intercultural training

<http://www.lts-training.com/journ98.html>

Culture and Ethics - Michel Labour, Charles Jumah, Nancy White and Sarah Tolley

<http://otls.scolcit.ac.uk/onlinebook/otls-t6.htm>