
A WORD FROM A TECHIE

"THE COURSE DOES NOT END WHEN IT ENDS, IT STARTS THEN"

- USING DISCUSSION GROUPS IN TEACHER TRAINING

by Jarek Krajka

jkrajka@batory.plo.lublin.pl

It is widely known that during or right after teacher training courses its participants still have the skills and knowledge they acquired during the course, but as time passes by they tend to forget and fail to implement the knowledge. A solution to this problem might be setting up a discussion group, which can be used both during the course, between course sessions or after it.

What is a group? One email address and one website to let you share photos & files, plan events, send a newsletter, stay in touch with students, friends and family, discuss sports, health, current events. It is now possible to do that very easily for free with Yahoo Groups, formerly egroups. What should you do?

1. Go to <http://groups.yahoo.com>
2. If you are a new user of Yahoo, you need to register by clicking on "New users - click here to register" in the top left corner of the page. Then, you need to fill the registration form, with your Yahoo ID, password, security question, birthday, etc. The Yahoo ID that you choose will identify you when using all Yahoo services. After clicking on "Submit this form" button, your registration is completed, and you get back to Yahoo groups.
3. Before starting a group, you need to verify your email address, to make sure that it is really you who want to make set up a group. To do that, click on "Account Info" at the top of the page, click on "Edit" next to "Member Information", then on "non-verified" next to your email address, and "send verification". Yahoo sends a confirmation code to the email account you have specified, so you need to check your email box, open the message from Yahoo, type in the code that they have given to you in the "Email Confirmation Code" box and your Yahoo password. In this way, your email address has been verified, and you may continue setting up your discussion group.

4. Click on "Start a New Group" and follow the instructions by specifying the group owner's email address, the name of the group, the group's email address, its description, primary language. It is important to think carefully about "Select directory listing type", where you either can make the group accessible to all Yahoo members (listed) or make the group remain private (unlisted). It seems that for teacher training courses the latter option is much more useful, as you will be able to use the group with your trainees only. Also, think twice about "Select membership type", where your group can be open (with members joining freely), restricted (where you approve the members) or closed (where only the invited members can join). Finally, you choose your group to be unmoderated (members can post freely), moderated (you approve all messages) or newsletters (only you can post messages). After that, click on "Continue".

5. Then you need to classify your group by specifying the category it belongs to. Finally, if you are in the category needed, click on "Place my group in" on the right to add your group to the directory. Click "Continue" to agree to your Yahoo profile and email address. Then you may invite members to your group, by adding their addresses, or you may skip this step, proceeding to the final screen, congratulating you on having created a discussion group, giving the name of the group, its website URL, and the email address to which the messages to the group should be sent.

6. Next, you are given the choice either to view your group page, customize it, or invite people to the group. As for this last option, type in the prospective members' email addresses in the box. Then, choose either "Send invitations", when your members join by answering the introductory message, or "Directly subscribe members", so that they automatically become members, but may leave by replying to the introductory message. Finally, edit the welcoming message, explaining the purpose of the group, its subject matter, members, etc. Finally, click on "Add Members". Of course, you may add members at any time you want, by choosing "Members" and "Add/Invite" in your group website.

7. When people join your group, you can start sending postings to a single email account "yourgroup@yahoogroups.com", and all the members receive them. Of course, they need to be made aware of the difference between replying to the message (meaning replying to the whole group) and replying to the individual member.

Your Yahoo group website has the following parts:

- Messages: view all the messages, listed by date or thread

- Chat: chat between the members only (which can be used for a discussion session as a part of the follow-up to the course)
- Files: make files available on the website
- Bookmarks: create a common bookmark list, available to all members
- Database: include tables and figures
- Polls: ask members to participate in an online poll
- Members: add/invite members, edit the profiles of existing members, change their subscription options
- Calendar: create a calendar of events for your course, automatically reminding members of upcoming events
- Promote: here you have the HTML codes and buttons to include in your website if you want to ask people visiting it to join your group
- Invite: inviting people to become members
- Settings: where you can change the group name, the group description, posting options
- Activity: recording all activities of group members

After the technical tips on how to create a group, a word needs to be said about using it. It is extremely easy to create a group by the teacher trainer, invite members automatically (so that they do not even have to answer). Then, all members have just one easy-to-remember email address (yourgroup@yahoo.com), where they can start sending messages. However, if you want to make full use of the features offered to you on your group website, such as chat, bookmarks or files, all members of your group must register with Yahoo setting up a Yahoo account, then link this account to the group. This process is fairly complicated and difficult to accomplish by trainees without the trainer's help, as it is the same as setting up a new group, and certainly trainees should be guided through that during the course, and the trainer should make sure that all members have their Yahoo accounts, have the group linked to their account, and know how to use the features of the group website.

After such a group has been created for the course, it is possible for course members to stay in touch with each other as well as with the teacher trainer, even though they may live quite apart from each other. Thus, the trainer may distribute assignments by email or include articles to read as files on the website. Then, the course participants might meet together in a chat session at

some time. The whole course schedule may be kept using the calendar option available on the website, automatically reminding members to take part in chat sessions or send assignments. Members can post interesting ideas or problems to the whole group, seeking solutions or advice. Finally, they may create a common bookmark list.

As can be seen, a discussion group, very easy and quick to create, opens great possibilities for distance education, helping the group to keep in touch with the instructor after the course has finished, in this way consolidating their knowledge and giving support in implementing the ideas acquired during the course.
