

The impact of the Internet Forum on dissemination of EE programs

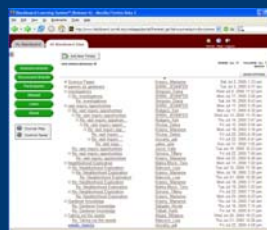
We were interested in the potential of an Internet Forum to aid educators in implementing an EE program and to create a network for educators.

An Internet Forum may offer a number of benefits for its members:

- Networking**
breaks down geographical isolation, and facilitates communication among people who have shared interests.
- New ideas**
Educators learn new pedagogical ideas from each other and engage in collaborative learning.
- Informational support**
Educators share informational resources about curriculum, funding, etc.
- Feedback**
Educators receive feedback from peers, which helps them develop their programs.
- Social interaction**
Educators feel being a part of larger community.

Internet Forum

- To set up the Internet Forum, we used the Blackboard system.
- 600 educators received the invitation to join the Forum, and 30 of them actually participated.
- All participants received free Garden Mosaics materials (Manual, Science Pages, poster, and certificate) as an incentive to take part in the Forum.
- We had several discussion boards, which hosted talks about different parts of the Garden Mosaic curriculum.
- Participants posted 350 messages with questions, feedback, ideas and resources.



Findings

1. Learning

Educators learned more about Garden Mosaics and other EE resources through:

- Sharing their ideas for implementation of Garden Mosaics,
- Exchange of informational resources on the web,
- Receiving feedback from each other.

Quotes from the Forum

"I love the neighborhood exploration project, and I think it really gets students to understand subjects such as urban planning and green space. This project can be especially powerful in a neighborhood that has a dearth of green space, a lack of markets that sell fresh foods, etc..."
Roger

Reply: "I'm glad you picked up on the endless opportunities that arise in doing Neighborhood Exploration. Certainly in the implementations I've done in the Syracuse area?, there are many opportunities for neighborhood improvement (i.e., cleaning up litter, transforming abandoned spaces into common green spaces, etc.). The youth actually seemed more interested in the opportunities for improvement than the existing green spaces. What a great segue into an Action Project - especially since it would be youth-driven (...)"
Jane

"In the meantime, anyone has tips for working successfully with groups of students with very mixed levels of English-speaking?"
Meredith

Reply: "Hi, Meredith, I'm assuming these are the indigenous people you will have in your group. They will represent a large body of traditional ecological knowledge that has great value (at the same level as scientific knowledge) that the kids and their parents need to be aware of (...)"
Lucinda

2. Social and professional networking

Social interactions and feeling a part of larger community was an important outcome for participants.

Participants say about the Forum

- "It's a marvelous venue for bringing people together to exchange ideas."
- "The Welcome Board was the most interesting - finding out who all was part of this program."
- "I'd like to see it continue for a longer period of time in the future."
- "I have made some great contacts with peers and will look forward to pursuing those contacts long after we are done."

Conclusion

Although it is too early to tell whether the Forum increased the number or quality of programs implemented, it does appear to have created a vibrant online exchange for community educators. Because many of the educators come from small organizations in low-income neighborhoods, it is possible that they have little other opportunities for networking (e.g., through national meetings of professional associations). This study is part of a larger investigation into the cost effectiveness of various approaches to dissemination, including hands-on workshops, a training DVD, and an Internet Forum.

Cornell University Garden Mosaics is a national community environmental education program that:

- Engages youth in learning about environmental science in urban settings,
- Conducts learning activities within an intergenerational, multicultural and action context,
- Disseminates its curriculum through workshops and free resources on the website.



www.gardenmosaics.org