

IFIP Working Group 3.6: distance learning, activities and plans for the future

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the history of IFIP Working Group 3.6 on distance learning, its aims, activities and electronic information service. The role of the WCCE95 Professional Groups is described and plans for the future are outlined.

Main conference themes: distance learning

Educational areas: primary education, secondary education, higher education

Study topics:

Secondary keywords: communication, electronic mail, networks, teleteaching, telecommunications, teleconferencing

HISTORY

The creation of IFIP Working Group 3.6 (WG 3.6) was the idea of a Hungarian, Gyozo Kovacs, who in October 1986 organized a conference on teleteaching in Budapest, Hungary. This was the first Teleteaching conference and possibly the first use of the word teleteaching, a word which still gives rise to mixed feelings. The proceedings of that conference were published by Elsevier North-Holland [1] and are an interesting reflection on work at that time. Notably absent in the proceedings is any reference to the use of conferencing systems which we now see as an important way of enabling teaching at a distance.

In 1988, at the European Conference on Computers in Education held in Lausanne, Switzerland, the Working Group held a panel session on distance learning [2]. The Working Group was still mainly concerned with the use of distance learning in higher education, but at the next major event, the IFIP World Conference on Computers in Education which took place in Sydney, Australia, in 1990, the Working Group broadened its interests to encompass distance learning at other educational levels. The Working Group organized a miniconference in Sydney as part of the World Conference and called it Teleteaching'90 [3]. This miniconference was a joint conference with IFIP Working Group 3.1 (on secondary education) and the association with that group flourished sufficiently for a major IFIP conference of 1993 to be again jointly organized: Teleteaching'93 was held in Trondheim, Norway [4].

AIMS

The aims of WG 3.6 can be explained by looking at the activities of the group and considering these in terms of actors, technology and activities:

Actors: There are two distinct groups of actors. One consists of the different actors in distance and flexible education, mainly teachers, tutors and students at tertiary levels. The second group consists of teachers and students using telecommunication services in the classroom (primary and secondary education).

Technology: WG 3.6 is concerned with Information Technology (IT) which means software and multimedia packages, in the local workplace and telecommunication services for communication between the different actors. These services include: data communication, TV/Video (one-way and two-way) and audio. We are not so much concerned with the technology of the services, but more with the use of these services by the different actors.

Activities: We are trying to satisfy both groups of actors by organizing small working conferences on particular topics of interest to members of the working group. These workshops are WG 3.6's main activities. In 1994 a working conference on 'ISDN in Distance Education' was held in Nantes, France; this activity was mainly aimed at actors in distance and flexible education. The working conference which will be held in 1996 in Australia about the use of teleconferencing aims at both groups of actors. Teleteaching'93 was a major conference and was concerned with all types of actors and technologies. The Group is involved in this World Conference Computer in Education (WCCE95) and will organize a major conference for all actors in 1997: Teleteaching'97.

ACTIVITIES

The main activity of the working group is to organize working conferences. In addition we have organized the following activities:

- Electronic information service;
- Professional Groups;
- A Newsletter;
- Electronic discussion forum.

All these activities are described below.

Working conferences

The organization of a major conference like Teleteaching'93 is a time consuming activity and so there is a gap of a few years between such conferences. The world of distance learning and the technology to support it are however developing very quickly and to satisfy interest in these topics the WG 3.6 is currently organising working conferences in the years between the larger teleteaching conferences. The success of the collaboration with Working Group 3.1 on Teleteaching has led the group to consider cooperation with other working groups and other organizations. Our first working conference, a joint venture with Working Group 3.3 (on research), was on "Research issues relating to adults in innovative learning situations" and "ISDN in distance education". This joint working conference took place in Le Mans, France in October 1994. As a result of personal involvement in organizing a stream on Distance Learning for EDMEDIA'94 the working group was recently formally approached to organize a stream on Distance Learning in June 1995 in Graz, Austria, as part of the very successful ED-MEDIA conferences organized annually by the Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education. The next teleteaching conference is scheduled to take place in 1997. It is the

belief of the author that in any one year there is a finite number of possible attendees for major international conferences and so the proliferation of conferences sponsored by different organizations is having a detrimental effect on attendance at such conferences. Whenever it is appropriate and possible Working Group 3.6 will therefore seek to organize conferences jointly with other international organizations in an attempt to maximize attendance and answer criticism that there are too many competing conferences. We hope that we will be able to join with another major international organization in organizing Teleteaching'97.

Electronic information service

The working group has organized an electronic information service which supplies information about IFIP Technical Committee 3 (TC 3) on education (the umbrella organization within IFIP for all educational working groups) and WG 3.6. The service is set up on a file server in Trondheim and contains the following files about WG 3.6:

- WG36-MEMB Members in the group
- WG36-MINUT Minutes of meetings
- WG36-INFO Information about the Working Group and TC 3
- WG36-NEWS Newsletter
- WG36-CAL Calendar of events

To obtain instructions on how to receive these files send an electronic mail to the following address:

info@tt93.tih.no

By writing HELP in the Subject field, you will receive the necessary help about commands.

The next step in the electronic information service could be to set up a World Wide Web server. This server may supply information about TC 3 and all the working groups.

PROFESSIONAL GROUPS AND WCCE95

As part of the program for WCCE95 in Birmingham WG 3.6 is organizing the following three professional groups. We aim to attract many new members to the working group from amongst those participating in the professional groups.

Learning support through e-mail

How to support the normal curriculum in schools through the use of e-mail projects, how to integrate pupils with special needs into normal school using e-mail, how to provide help to teachers and pupils.

Our earth—My place

(This group is a joint project with IFIP WG 3.5 on primary education)

When working in an on-line project different pedagogical contents should be easily integrated in a classroom setting. However, others should easily be able to participate who do not like to work on this in the classroom.

Our earth—My place should allow this. In the project description there are the following suggestions:

- Write about your thoughts about our Earth and your role on it.
- What is special about your place, what is there?
- Where on earth is your favourite place?

These questions could be addressed in subjects such as environmental studies, geography, geology, history, etc.

Creating an infrastructure for projects using data communication

Four databases with information about institutions, persons and projects will be designed. The databases should contain useful information including:

- institutions;
- persons;
- project(s) which is/are open for participation;
- projects which is/are not open for participation or is/are finished.

Newsletter

The working group has started an electronic newsletter with information about the working group and its activities. In addition the newsletter contains other useful information. The first edition of the newsletter came out in May 1994 and up to now two further issues have been produced. If you want to be added to the distribution list, the editor, Pieter de Vries, may be contacted at:

jfrppv@rulmvs.leidenuniv.nl

Electronic discussion forum

The discussion forum was introduced in the fall of 1994 and many members have taken part in the discussions started by Catherine Fulford. We will start a discussion about the Aims and Scope for the working group in the spring of 1995. The result will be presented at WCCE95 in Birmingham.

If you want to be added to the distribution list, the editor may be contacted at:

fulford@uhunix.uhcc.Hawaii.Edu

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Working conferences

- 1995: The Group will be involved in the Birmingham world conference.
- 1996: A working conference will be held in 1996 in Australia (IFIP Congress 1996) about the use of teleconferencing for both group of actors identified before.
- 1997: We aim to organize another Teleteaching conference in cooperation with another major international organization.

Other activities

The activities we have started (electronic information service, newsletter and the electronic discussion forum) will continue. Success depends very much upon the activities of the members in the group. We are currently investigating the possibility of holding a workshop on Guidelines for Collaborative learning, possibly in conjunction with ED-MEDIA'95.

recent collaboration between WG 3.2 and WG 3.6 has been very successful and the working group would be pleased to discuss the possibility of organizing a workshop with another working group which has the potential of attracting wider participation.

The use of INTERNET and other telecommunication services is rapidly expanding in education. Our hope is that the work of the group reflects on this through the different activities. We have not yet chosen topics for our working conferences after 1997 and invite the readers of this paper to come up with suggestions both for conferences and other activities.

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