

**“ARE THEY TALKING YET?”  
ONLINE DISCOURSE AS POLITICAL  
ACTION IN AN EDUCATION POLICY FORUM**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the dimensions of user engagement with an online forum on British Columbia's new policy on educational technology. Contributors to this site included elementary and secondary schoolteachers, distance educators, parents, students, researchers, BC Teachers' Federation staff and officers of the Ministry of Education. In the main, they did not respond to Ministry documents directly. Analysis of the site discussions reveals that participants mostly used the forum to debate the principles of teaching and learning with technology. While many messages included collegial expressions of support, others revealed the political, ideological and pedagogical boundaries between the various education sectors in BC.

In follow-up interviews, participants reported that the discussions were often fragmented and hard to follow, that it was virtually impossible to tell if anyone else was listening, and what the impact of their contributions was. They were conscious of their professional status and uncomfortable about not knowing the size or identity of their audience, which included the Ministry of Education (BC). From the interview data I argue that the forum did not significantly increase public contributions to policy debate. However, while they acknowledged the shortcomings of the medium, participants still agreed that a forum of this kind was a valuable feature of their professional and political landscapes.

In conclusion, I argue that different users differed enormously in their expectations of what the site offered, what their contribution might be and how such a site contributed to the realm of policy discussion at large. The political and educational agendas of those who did participate remained separate, fragmented and occasionally conflicting. The terms of engagement and motivation, as well as the shortcomings of this type of discussion, form the subject of this analysis. The conclusions reached here are critical to understanding the potential of this new medium for encouraging greater dialogue around political and professional issues in education and other fields. Finally, I argue that, if the Ministry of Education could show a more effective listening presence, the texts which are produced on a future site would be more likely to answer their policy consultation needs.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the intersection of three critical areas of concern: information technology, policy development and public deliberation. More specifically, it investigates what happens when technology is used to facilitate deliberation among members of the public as a contribution to government policy on educational technology. It is about how this technology, as well as our own private, political and professional contexts can influence the extent of our access to and benefit from that discussion. Using the example of a website developed in the Canadian province of British Columbia in conjunction with the BC Teachers Federation and the Ministry of Education, known as the Public Knowledge Policy Forum (PKPF), this study examines how technology was used by educators and the public within the public realm of policy discussion and development. In short, it explores some initial efforts to transform the political landscape by altering the kinds of information shared and the facility with which they are used, with the intention of making the process of policy development more transparent and inclusive.

Throughout this discussion, I write with the understanding that public deliberations about policy - and their potential contributions to policy itself - are not “rational, objective and systematic” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 92). They are not described by a set of linear processes. Instead, and like the numerous, other texts which mediate our experiences of the social world, these discussions are shaped by “the discourses and ruling relations that regulate and coordinate beyond the particular local setting of their reading or writing” (Smith, 1999, p. 80). In turn, these political discussions may also be understood as talk which, rather than being *about* the world, they are instead a way of intentionally “[making] and [remaking]” it (Barber, 1984, p.177). The full import of these discussions may therefore not be appreciated until one considers the contexts in which they are created, as well as their attendant, symbolic meanings for those who have taken part in them.

The research I shall discuss here springs from my interest in educational conversations which take place online. While I am certainly interested in the new information technologies themselves, they are described here as the stage on which an emerging human drama is enacted. I am interested in exploring how the human actors on this stage contribute to a growing body of digital discourse. How do educators develop, manage and describe the

discourse that arises in text-only environments? And what are their motivations for doing so? I will ask how far coherent, engaging and fruitful dialogue is produced, to what ends, and what the effects are of interventions by teachers, moderators or emergent leaders. I also want to understand the way in which other forms of information find their way into this talk as newspaper articles, research materials, staff-room conversation, policy group meetings. What kinds of information are shared and what contribution might this make to other policy discussions within schools and government offices?

This study examines the contributions of 69 participants to the threaded discussions on a web site designed to gather feedback on a new education policy initiative being developed by the Ministry of Education, BC. The site, which had a three-month life span, also housed a collection of research articles, ministry publications and other background resources for the discussion. Among the participants were high school and elementary teachers, distance and home school educators, high school students, officers of the Ministry of education, staff of the BC Teachers' Federation and university researchers. This analysis draws on both the content of contributors' messages as well as on interviews with sixteen of these authors about their experience. These interviews asked questions about the significance of the PKPF and forums like it; the actual impact of the PKPF on current policy and educational practice; and finally, they inquired about the very quality of contributing to the online forum. What was it like to take part? Which features promoted fruitful debate and which did not? Were there any extraneous, limiting factors?

### Background

Between January and June, 1999, I was employed by TLETAC (Teaching and Learning Educational Technology Advisory Committee), the group which generated the first document (*Conditions for Success*) leading towards the Ministry's technology plan. This was the intended subject of public dialogue on the PKPF web site. I was fascinated by the ways in which various texts were developed through the course of the group meetings. Among these texts were the group discussions, the numerous reports and articles which were read and written in the process of establishing policy, and finally, the policy itself. Groups of stakeholders met, conversed, inscribed their concerns in documents which were then circulated among officials at the Ministry and other groups and individuals within the education community. However, only limited numbers of stakeholders could be present at

these meetings, hosted by the Ministry and moderated by an external author with policy deadlines to meet. Debate was restricted by group schedules and by the requirements of the policy process: the group would close in June 1999, whatever conversations had taken place.

This experience led me to ask questions about the practice of inviting public consultation in the development of education policy. Who was invited? Why? When? And what form did their contributions take? Further, I was curious to find out what the impact of these contributions would be, both on the individuals concerned and the policy debate at large. During numerous conversations with committee members, I found myself believing that these contributions were crucial to the creation of a policy which genuinely represented the majority of stakeholders. The voices of teachers, parents, students and administrators simply *must* be solicited if decision-makers were to develop a policy that truly answered to their needs and experiences. When asked, “Do you see yourself in this document? Does it reveal an understanding of what teaching with technology means to you?,” a teacher would be able answer, with complete conviction, “Yes, absolutely.”

What I found, however, was that soliciting the voices of “stakeholders” can be only one step towards truly participatory policy making. The process demands finding stakeholders who wish to speak, creating a forum in which they are able to do so, listening to them, creating written records of their goals and concerns and advice to government, responding to these concerns, asking for more information when they are unclear or contradictory, developing policy which reflects both the desires and the conflicts and communicating back to the contributors just *how* their needs have been answered. These were just a few of the steps which – to me – seemed crucial if the public consultation efforts were to be effective and credible.

This research has grown from the professional climate among both educators themselves and the governors of education in BC. The BC Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) not only advocated the formation of the original TLETAC group, but continues to advocate growing participation in the policy process (Listserv discussion, April 24, 2000). It asks questions about who should take part and why, and what form each party’s participation should take.

#### Thesis overview

In this chapter I offer an overview of the thesis structure, with a brief description of the research conducted and the findings this work has generated. The chapter which follows

describes the literature which has informed my inquiry. This account fulfils several purposes. Firstly, I review the literature in order to explain the role played by dialogue in shaping public thought, and the contributions that this dialogue can make both to individuals and society at large. This literature is concerned with the ways in which agendas for discussion are established, how these agendas are debated, who is present at these debates and the kinds of activities we understand to signify "participation." All of these factors are understood as contributions to an activity generally construed as policy debate.

Next, in order to provide a context for the PKPF, I review literature which explores the contribution of information and communications technologies to the realm of public policy dialogue. I contrast research material which reports on current projects in online activism with the PKPF. All of these sites have used the Internet to increase public awareness of social issues and the part that individuals can play in seeing that these issues are handled appropriately by governments. These sites reside on servers in British Columbia, across North America and internationally. I shall argue that these applications of technology reveal an increasing dependence upon and demand for ICT as the tool for raising public awareness and converting talk into action. These applications are not straightforward, however, especially in the many countries where governments may actively prevent debate through explicit or implicit threats to the citizens' safety.

This is followed by some cautionary tales about the assumptions we bring to these online, political endeavours. What do we believe about the interface between technical facility and human frailty? What kinds of assumptions and principles do we bring to our use of computers as mediating devices in our communications? Do we know what we value and are we able to articulate it? Do new technologies alter our moral or political outlooks? Do we know how?

This chapter closes with a look at some directions we might take to focus our research efforts. I sketch out the research questions which brought me to my inquiry, namely, what can we expect from an online environment designed specifically to solicit greater participation in the policy-making process? What do we take away from our interactions in these settings and are they as emotionally or professionally affecting as if they had taken place in an embodied, face to face environment? Where do minds meet when there is no gathering place?

In Chapter Three, I describe the Public Knowledge Policy Forum in detail, giving an account of its development, moderation, maintenance and closure. This third chapter also offers an account of the research interviews with participants which followed the site's closure. As both researcher and moderator, my interest in fostering productive dialogue on the site was two-fold: I hoped for a large body of research data but I was also keen to promote public awareness and use of the site. Here, the methodological and ethical concerns which accompanied my work on the site are explored. These ethical concerns begin with the moment of determining one's research population to gaining access, developing relationships with participants through to "leaving the field." I ask, what do these features of qualitative research mean to the online policy researcher, and how can we ensure that the same degree of tact, empathy and responsibility is shown to online participants as the subjects we might meet in a school building, a museum or a government office? I argue that the process of establishing ethical research practices in virtual settings is a dynamic process of constant exploration and re-negotiation.

Chapter Four explains how the themes and categories of analysis were established for the site discussions. It offers a detailed examination of the site discussions. It describes the types of information offered, the topics which emerged (such as access to ICT, the value of improving existing teachers' skills, the relative merits of distance and school-based learning), and the ways in which policy materials and other information were used. In this chapter, I also explore the rhetorical strategies employed by participants to develop convincing arguments. I look at the ways in which individual messages either paved the way for further discussion or brought it to a close, and the ways in which professional and ideological positions were established. I argue that the contributors were often more motivated to discuss educational matters such as the ICT curriculum, and their pedagogical, ideological and practical concerns around implementing it, rather than examining policy documents or making further recommendations. From the forum data, I also argue that, while many messages include collegial expressions of support, others used the environment to render explicit the political, ideological and pedagogical borders between the various parties responsible for education in BC.

Chapter Five reports in detail on the interview responses of PKPF participants about their experiences of the site. These participants include officers of the Ministry of Education who

read the site as well as a staff member responsible for analysing and interpreting the data resulting from public consultation exercises. I also heard from several teachers at elementary and high school level, as well as home school, distance education and online teachers. These teachers brought a wide range of experiences to the PKPF in their use of technology, their years spent teaching and their previous contributions to policy. The interview materials offer some insights into participants' own interpretations of the site's impact on their own learning and their views on its limited efficacy as a public, political tool.

Next, I report on the participants' accounts of their own contributions as readers and authors. These include reports of dialogue which was often fragmented and hard to follow, where it was virtually impossible to tell either if anyone was listening, or what the impact of one's contribution was. Audience proved to be a key factor in contributors' postings. In the last section, I show how contributors were conscious of their professional status and uncomfortable about not knowing the size or identity of their audience. In being unsure about the number and identity of their audiences, contributors to the PKPF (as well as the other education stakeholders I consulted) were occasionally guarded about speaking frankly or even speaking at all. The public nature of the forum was a common concern in the online discussions, the interviews and other professional settings in which the activities of the PKPF were debated.

All in all, this penultimate chapter describes a population which believed in the value of the forum and hoped to see it – or an endeavour like it – continuing, but who found it challenging to communicate effectively online, both in terms of following others' contributions and in making oneself understood. This chapter closes with a look at the lessons afforded by the PKPF for the designers, policy makers and moderators who might contribute to future sites of this kind.

A key division was clear in the participants' motivations towards discussions which either concerned educational matters (the reality of classroom practice, the IRPs) or political matters (how policy was developed, who attended the virtual debate, who was excluded). Such divisions, as well as the sparse and occasionally stilted nature of the forum as a whole, create a sense of tension between different participants' understanding of what counts in information technology policy.

In conclusion, I show that the different writers and readers on the site exemplified a diverse set of online reading and writing practices. I argue that different users differed enormously in their expectations of what the site offered, what their contribution might be and how such a site contributed to the realm of policy discussion at large. This thesis is therefore not about the teachers' positions on the policy itself, because the conversations they chose to have did not place policy at centre stage. The following analysis pursues the direction taken by participants, both in the postings themselves and in the follow-up interviews. At one extreme, I found educators who hoped to share ideas with colleagues, socialising, developing a sense of collegiality and sharing anecdotes and references. At the other extreme were authors who only wished to express their individual concerns to the government and had no interest in developing peer group relationships. If these divided themes, expectations and topics do indeed merit different discussion sites, then designers must facilitate the creation of these separate environments in the future. Finally, I argue that, if the Ministry of Education could show a more effective listening presence, the texts which are produced on a future site would be more likely to answer their policy consultation needs.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The Public Knowledge Policy Forum was a response to recent developments in education policy in British Columbia. This policy would be concerned with the way in which educational technology was used in BC schools, and was an ongoing concern for the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF). The BCTF wanted the new policy to reflect the values and recommendations of members of the public, and in particular teachers. It was therefore vital that the largest population possible gained access to the ongoing conversation about this policy.

In reviewing the literature, I shall be describing the theoretical context of the PKPF. This context describes the context for the site's development as well as the research which has emerged from it. This chapter introduces the key preoccupations and themes from which my final research questions emerged. These include participation in policy development; transparent or inclusive policy processes; deliberation in public spaces; ownership and mediation of communicative spaces; online discussion and last but not least, challenges to deliberation in both traditional and online settings.

Current events in the news today confirm that the public is also being encouraged to question the nature and importance of inclusive policy development. The recently elected Liberal government announced that twenty members of the public, including a number of journalists, would be invited to attend the first televised cabinet meeting. The CBC morning show coverage focused almost exclusively on the extent to which this gesture was actually a meaningful attempt to open the ordinarily closed doors of government. While this discussion pushed aside the policy topics of the day, such as transit and healthcare strikes, it revealed the media's enduring skepticism in the face of such developments. This skepticism is a theme I will pursue in Chapter Five, which accounts for Forum participants' experiences of the discussions.

The role played by online media in political activities of powerful nations is also gaining media coverage. While watching an evening bulletin on CTV (July 4, 2001) about the trend among young Russians to idolise Vladimir Putin, I heard that the government now retains almost full control of the electronic media in that country. In China, too, the government

recently shut down 1943 Internet cafés altogether and temporarily closed 6071, citing the mass circulation of pornography and “information harmful to the government” as the reasons (*International Herald Tribune*, June 15, 2001). Such sudden gestures betray an anxiety on the part of some governments, eager to restrict the communicative potential of the medium, which, as this thesis aims to show, we have only just begun to explore.

### The role of deliberation

In this first section of my literature review, I shall describe the significance of developing public spaces for dialogue in tandem with policy processes which are under pressure to become more transparent and accessible to the population at large. I take the view that, while we might understand the notions of “freedom of expression” and “freedom of information” to be ends in themselves, they are in fact the means to larger ends: those of creating education policies in ways which both include the contributions and recommendations of the public and ultimately reflect those contributions in the final publications. Discourse is construed here as the medium through which one may develop a greater understanding of one’s social context. In turn, this understanding enables individuals to take more active roles in the changes which are being wrought on these contexts.

So why might it be beneficial and desirable for members of the public to engage in discussions about political matters? What impact would this discussion have on the individual? What effect would this have for the public at large? First of all, we must consider the impact of political debate on the private individual. According to J. S. Mill (1859) dialogue is essential to each person’s learning about his or her environment. Open discussion is not only a right, it is the responsibility of each individual to put forward his or her opinion in order to have it challenged, he says. It may be toppled or it may be reinforced through discussion, but the testing of one’s ideas against those of others necessarily implies taking a step toward a mature intellect:

No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this... the steady habit of correcting and completing his opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation... is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it: for, having been cognizant of all that can, at least obviously, be said against him, and having taken up his position against all gainsayers - knowing that he has sought for objections and difficulties instead of avoiding them, and has shut out no light which can be thrown upon the subject... he has a right to think his judgment better than that of any person, or any multitude, who have not gone through a similar process... (p. 82)

This account shows how people learn through challenge; the process of debate refining and sharpening our ideas, leading us towards a fuller understanding of the issues. It describes a competent political actor, sharing his or her opinions with courage in the face of possible opposition, denial or outright rejection. It describes a rational situation devoid of professional risk or a significant but burdensome personal investment in one's convictions. It also implies that our political opinions are being entered into some kind of ideological stock exchange and that a process of natural selection by truth value will determine the currency of each of these ideas. The problem with this, as we shall see, is that the sharing of ideas through our own texts is not value neutral, nor do ideas "survive" owing to their quality. It is erroneous to assume that Darwin's "fittest" intellectual creatures are also the "best" when it comes to human communication. The resilience of a species is not dependent on moral or ethical factors, or, as Primo Levi has observed, it is only the strongest - not the morally superior - who survive.

Furthermore, the advancement of one's ideas is not a process devoid of personal risk. The value of each individual idea is not equal. Rather, it depends to a great extent on who has said it and in what circumstances. Cherryholmes (1988) observes two features which alter the apparent strength of one's arguments: "some beliefs are treated as unproblematic because of institutional pressure... or some individuals may dominate because of their positional authority" (p. 89). Here, Cherryholmes is pursuing the arguments of Habermas, concerning the "social arrangements that constrain and distort communication" (p. 89). He is rejecting the notion that any speech can occur in a vacuum, "institutionally unbound" to the interests, ideologies and power structures of the human, social world. I will pursue this theme later, throughout Chapters Three and Five.

The contribution of an individual to talk in public settings can, however, alter more than just that individual's horizons. Each person's opinion can, J.S. Mill (1859) argues, be construed as a public good, a commodity to which others may also claim ownership because of the contribution this makes to the discussion. He explains the value of this commodity by describing the opportunity cost of its loss to society:

Were an opinion a personal possession of no value except to the owner; if to be obstructed in the enjoyment of it were simply a private injury, it would make some difference whether the injury was inflicted only on a few persons or on many. But the

peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error. (p. 79)

In other words, if public opinion is silenced, both society and the individuals within it will suffer now and in the long term. The “collision” of truth with error results in greater wisdom, he argues. For Mill, this wisdom is seen as the output of a market in which the competing commodities are truth and falsehood. There is a sense in which an absolute truth may be reached, and reached through some kind of battle between good and evil (truth and falsehood) which will inevitably lead to equilibrium or consensus. Schmitt (1923) describes a similar situation in which “The truth can be found through an unrestrained clash of opinion, and the competition will produce harmony” (in Kester, 1998, p. 35). Talk, it would seem, can find a natural equilibrium if allowed to flow freely in the public sphere, but as I shall show, the free flow of talk cannot be taken for granted, whatever our best intentions may be.

In this thesis, I am specifically concerned with the role of public contributions to policy debate, or the ways in which these contributions can alter the political landscape. I understand the three themes of technology, dialogue and policy to exist in the relationship of an equation, where the status quo implies that the equation is balanced (whatever our ideological judgement of that balance may be) and where a change to one factor in that equation unavoidably influences the others. So, given that this talk does not occur in isolation but in relation to other societal factors, how might it be used as the intentional tool for change?

Barber (1984) takes up this challenge in debating the nature of and possibilities for “strong democracy.” He is concerned with the ways in which we engage in “the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life (p. 165), and argues for a political epistemology that is socially constructed, where our judgement can only be formed through interaction with others, and where the sum of these interactions form the political establishment: “In designing our political institutions we are sculpting our knowledge. In founding a constitution, we are determining the shape and character of our own political epistemology” (p. 166).

For Barber, then, dialogue is what moulds the vessel into which our understanding of public life is poured. He breaks down this political epistemology into nine stages, or elements of talk, which he characterises as strongly “democratic.” These elements include the moment where interests are articulated; where persuasion occurs amongst the parties concerned; where the agenda is set; where mutuality is explored; where affiliation and affection are developed; where autonomy of each party is maintained; where witness and self-expression take place; where reformulation and reconceptualisation of ideas occurs; and finally, where community building occurs. At this point, public interests, common goods and active citizens are nurtured.

Reading about Barber’s nine stages of talk was a significant turning point in my understanding of the policy development process. In having attended Ministry committee meetings, I had seen several of these stages in person. I had not, however, been present at the moment where the agenda had been set. This, I have learned, is where power resides. As Barber himself acknowledges, “what counts as an ‘issue’ or a ‘problem,’ and how such issues or problems are formulated may predetermine what decisions are reached” (1984, p. 181). The arguments in favour of promoting public discourse around educational matters therefore gain in currency, since a topic which has not been discussed in staff rooms, newsrooms, government or union offices cannot make its way onto an agenda or be included in future policy. It must register as a concern or it will be ignored. There is simply nothing to resolve. The agenda which then reaches the policy table is seen as “fixed and self-evident, almost natural, and in this sense, incidental to... deliberation and decision making” (op. cit., p.180). It is this semblance of naturalness with which I take issue in the next few paragraphs.

Apple (1993) takes this notion of “what counts” a step further, placing it in the context of a political epistemology in education. He interprets what counts to be a question of legitimacy, arguing that “What counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power struggles among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups... it is at times of social upheaval that this relationship between education and power becomes most visible” (p. 26). The question of visibility is key, since, as I mentioned above, that which does not register on the radar of political discourse will not be taken up and acted upon (or rejected) by others. Apple’s honest appraisal of the political origins of the agenda for discussion hearkens back to the commentary of J. S. Mill, who understood discussion to be a symbolic

battle between the ideas and opinions of individuals. Apple's take on this subject is deeply politicised and acknowledges the power inequalities between people, arguing that "those in dominance almost always have more power to define what counts as a need or a problem and what an appropriate response to it should be" (p. 10). Both Mill and Apple thus accept the reality of people and their ideas competing for the public spotlight, for media attention, legitimacy (or currency) and dissemination. Or, as Burbules and Rice (1991) show, it is one thing to be furnished with the requisite information and quite another to possess the psychological, political wherewithal to step into this spotlight:

...there are dimensions of power and privilege that divide [different communities] and set their interests in conflict. Furthermore, communication across such subcommunities is not simply a matter of goodwill and persistent effort, and it is unrealistic and unfair to ask groups already put upon also to take on the burden of trying to understand, and make themselves understood by, those who harm them or benefit from their deprivation. (p. 403-4)

So while Barber understands that there is an element of competition in the act of public dialogue (p.191), he still considers the main task of those who would improve this situation to be one of "stimulating artificial kinship" among strangers (p. 189). He advocates intimacy, affiliation and affection as the remedies for "the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries" (p. 175). Like Mill, he seems to ignore the significance of subjectivity, implying that there is some absolute quality of truth or meaning in the contributions of speakers to public discourse. After all, what he considers "mindless convictions" (p. 190) might be true beliefs for me. Who is anyone to assess whose convictions are mindful? If we genuinely believe that members of the public need a forum in which to debate issues which concern them, we cannot simultaneously promote the cause of public discourse and censure those discourses we consider inappropriate or unproductive.

There is, however, acknowledgement in the literature that the desire to speak does not always come naturally. Sometimes this desire must be learned: in other words, while the act of speaking out may itself be educational in broad terms (we learn from listening to the commentaries of others), sometimes just getting to the point of speaking out requires further education.

This education can occur through greater access to information which is pertinent to the policy in hand. If we do not have the necessary resources for discussion and on which to form and reform our opinions, the conversations we will have will be limited by our limited

knowledge. For this reason, Pateman (1970) advocates the circulation of more information about policy processes to the general public. She argues that members of the public are inhibited by a lack of information, which places them at a disadvantage compared to those who may be in direct contact with decision makers, have access to government committee meetings and be copied on correspondence and publications throughout the policy process.

Stichler (1998) and Page (1996) agree with Pateman (1970), arguing that the public needs more than to have their political desires gratified. They need to have them nurtured and developed so that their full potential can be recognised:

...If we consider how social and political conditions can restrict and deform people's ability to desire certain kinds of information... promoting intellectual freedom should aim not only at satisfying but at actually educating people's desires so that they are able to desire a form of fully human functioning (Stichler, 1998, p. 172).

In Stichler's view, information is the key to altering the political landscape. There is therefore a direct relationship between texts and the degree of success with which individuals operate in political societies, or as Page (1996) argues, "Even if the public is capable of a high level of rationality and good sense, public opinion is bound to depend, in good part, upon the political information and ideas that are conveyed to it" (p. 2).

So who will show leadership in altering the public's relationship with this information, vital to the "fully human functioning" of the populace? Stichler believes that the role of the government in this climate of open talk is one of facilitator:

If the informed citizen is a person who has the ability to deliberate and think critically about a wide range of decisions that affect the well-being of his community... the broader task of the government ...is to identify and remove the obstacles that prevent people from using these resources effectively. (p. 172)

Doctor (1998) agrees, stating that "only government actions can create equitable distributions of information resources" (p. 237). What we are seeing here is another step towards making policy processes more transparent and inclusive, a motive which Barber (1984) also applauds. He argues that "the task of democracy must be to invent procedures, institutions and forms for citizenship that nurture political judgement" (p.166). While I concur with the spirit of his argument, though, I am wary of personifying (and romanticising) democracy in this way, since it takes our attention away from the human beings who bear real responsibility for instituting these procedures and forms of citizenship. It renders abstract the

very real burden of political leadership on decision-makers, union staff, teachers, parents, students and any one else who has taken on this “task of democracy.”

I would also take issue with Barber’s argument against information élites, since it separates the notion of equality from democracy, as if one were not a vital condition for the other: “If we reserve talk and its evolution to specialists - to journalists or managers or clerics or packagers or bureaucrats or statesmen... Then no amount of equality will yield democracy” (p. 191). If all equality means is an absence of overt oppression, then it would be straightforward to maintain that all is well with the world and that there is no need for change. As far as Apple (1993) is concerned, though, equality (a precondition of a healthy democracy) is not a state that anyone can take for granted, it is one which must be made and remade to ensure its endurance. It is not a hardy, self-propagating plant, but one which needs nurturing and constant surveillance.

The research literature published over the last five years shows a continuing concern for this theme of public deliberation. Fung (2000) argues in favour of deliberation as the means to creating more effective policy in many sectors, including education, policing and environmental management. Increased citizen participation would, he claims, encourage states to be more responsive and prevent the majority from leaning towards tyranny.

Payne (1996) agrees, observing that “deliberative political mechanisms featuring relatively open participation... seem to offer a promising means for identifying, recognising and/or constructing generalisable interests” (p. 129). Benhabib (1994) neatly parcels up the value of deliberation in public life as “procedures for generating necessary information; for revising beliefs and for the articulation of ‘good public reasons’” (p. 26).

Having now seen the arguments in favour of promoting dialogue among members of the public. We have understood that more information pertaining to policy-in-progress and issues at large is necessary to inform and refine this dialogue, and we are beginning to understand what kinds of actions might be taken with respect to roles and responsibilities associated with making information more widely accessible. The government - or whoever decision-makers are - might *themselves* take an initiative in nurturing the curiosity of the people. In asking more direct and searching questions, the people will then demand information of a higher quality, greater accuracy and relevance to their needs. In combination with the arguments of Mill, Barber and Pateman, we begin to see how the impetus for a more representative policy

development process comes from the joint desire of the public to debate their concerns and the government themselves, who - more than simply providing information - might actively promote its sharing and remove any obstacles to its application in resolving social problems.

Dialogue, then, is to be an essential part of developing the collective knowledge base of a society. It is also essential for the people to debate new policy directions as part of the general endeavour to improve the quality of society in which we live. Collective understanding (if not "truth") can be approached by the sharing of contradictory opinions. The tension, the "collision with error" Mill describes, is thus evidence of living democracy in progress, not evidence of its failure.

### Challenges for deliberation

While we may believe wholeheartedly in the necessity for public deliberation as part of the policy making process, we should be wary of assuming that its achievement is straightforward. Public consultations are not always conducted in a smooth and trouble free manner, nor can we expect the discussions to have the outcomes we anticipate or hope for. Pelletier et al's (1999) research investigates the influence of deliberation on participants' views of the policy domain. He conducted participant observation concluding that the outcomes were not fair or good and that the discussion perpetuated inequalities, rather than resolving them. Button and Mattson (1999) also concluded that deliberation was "a complicated process marked by conflict, differing orientations, and political inequalities" (p. 609). Even more outspoken is Sanders (1997) who actually argues against deliberation on the grounds that "preconditions of mutual respect and equal participation" have not been met (p. 347). Finally, another complaint is launched by Page and Tannenbaum (1996), who argue that "in modern mass societies much political deliberation is mediated by professional communicators, who may fail to represent the values of ordinary citizens" (p. 33). This echoes the authors concerned with public confidence in cybersystems, since the appropriation of issues by newspapers and television reports means that deliberation is mediated, is not held directly between citizens.

Overall, though these arguments are, rather than being a case against deliberation altogether, simply signposts for the bends in the road, or maybe notices of hazardous rock-fall. They do not suggest that promoting genuine deliberation is a futile or worthless endeavour, merely that achieving this goal is a significant challenge. Even knowing when

this goal has been achieved can be a challenge. If opinion is not shared publicly, citizens who might have been persuaded by new information will be deprived of the opportunity to expand their political judgement.

Given that we now recognise the importance of taking part in public debate, and have learned to gain more - and higher quality - information, we now desire to do something with it: namely debate in more depth, examine our sources, challenge them and perhaps make decisions based upon what we now know. We may even take on leadership positions in society as a result of these activities, developing policy documents for our own professional situations, bringing them to the attention of colleagues and superiors. My purpose in describing this process is to remind my readers that, whatever the impact of these activities may be on individuals, there are other outcomes to consider. Concerning ourselves solely with the act of speaking out suggests that we are ignoring the goals of these speeches. Barber (1984) claims that:

Citizenry [speaks] to power in a voice rich with affect and commonality, a voice coloured by its origin in autonomous wills seeking imaginative self-expression and by the public medium through which it is conveyed. (p.167)

It may be easy to let ourselves be over-awed by the “imaginative” potential of public discourse. However, while the act of engaging in political dialogue may include an element of artistry, the artistry is the means to a political end, not an end in itself.

Members of the public - and, in particular, professionals contributing to policy which will affect their profession - can bring diverse perspectives and a wealth of experience to the policy debate. More than simply being heard, however, they must be recorded and explored for their value to be recognised and understood. As Mill observes, “[Man] is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted” (p. 82). Furthermore, there must also be *action*. The research presented in this dissertation will demonstrate that even when avenues for further dialogue are provided, even when a wealth of information is supplied in order to bolster the quality of that dialogue, there are still obstacles remaining in the path between talk and action.

#### The Internet: A Deliberative Space

In recent years, research on the use of the Internet as a political medium has developed into its own discipline. More and more, governments, interest groups and individual citizens are

using the medium to expand their inquiries about and contributions to their political lives. At the same time, there is an abundance of literature restating and re-examining the significance of online dialogue in public life (Adler, Gent & Overmeyer, 1998; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Whillock, 1997). Who should be debating political issues, in what kinds of arenas, and to what end? Taken together, although not always overlapping in their concerns, these two realms of research describe a need for thorough inquiry into the potential of web sites which both foster productive dialogue and supply accurate up to date information, and which are developed with the cooperation of governments and interest groups so that each party's information needs are met and so that the climate of open discussion might be nurtured.

Politically oriented, virtual media have proliferated in many countries since the early 1990s. My first search on this topic turned up results gathered in fifteen countries across Asia, North and Central America, Eastern, Central and Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Australia. These countries include Denmark, the UK, China and Tibet, Indonesia, Qatar, Afghanistan, Russia, Northern Ireland and the US. Canadian content is extremely limited at present.

What do these online facilities look like? In this chapter, I shall refer to bulletin boards, listserv discussions, newsgroups and web sites. Since I am largely concerned with media which facilitate discussion, let me illustrate some key distinctions between the first of these three items. All of them allow ongoing discussions to take place, but in slightly different ways: on listservs, the messages arrive in one's private inbox and are typically addressed to a group of subscribing members. These members must have previously expressed an interest in the topic of discussion in order to receive these messages and will receive this mail until they choose to unsubscribe. The messages they receive can be treated the same way as all other messages, being read and filed, or read and deleted, depending on each individual's habits of information management.

Text-based listservs are often (but not always) moderated. While the moderator is typically responsible for making sure that the facility is used appropriately, definitions of what is appropriate can vary, as can the extent of the moderator's presence. In some lists, the moderator is virtually invisible, only stepping in when he or she finds a member using the list in ways for which it was not designed. An example of this might be posting an advertisement for an apartment sublet or a boat sale to a moral philosophy list. The list may offer access to a

large number of people at once, but such bulk mailings are considered taboo and thus junk mail. Continual posting of inappropriate messages can be considered foolish at best and a rude or aggressive flouting of group etiquette at worst.

On an internet-based bulletin board, the discussion is housed on a web site, with all of the messages showing at once. Unlike listservs, which deliver messages to individual mailboxes, the user must make a conscious decision to “visit” the discussion if s/he wants to read or post to it. Again, unlike a listserv in which all participants receive messages in the same order, the bulletin board format is non-linear, allowing numerous different topics to be pursued at once; many of them only gain the attention of a few visitors. The messages are also surrounded – by and large – by others tackling the same or related topics. In one’s email inbox, they may be sandwiched between letters from friends, notes from colleagues and listservs mailings on another topic entirely.

Newsgroups operate in a similar fashion to bulletin boards, in that users must visit the location where the discussion is actually housed. The comments appear in a separate window, rather than being emailed to individual contributors’ inboxes.

Having clarified the subtle differences between bulletin boards, listservs and newsgroups, I shall now explore some of the arguments in their favour as appropriate media for fostering productive, collaborative dialogue between members on the public on topics of a political nature.

The uses of ICT for political ends are several. Web sites and email are being used by legislators to interact with constituents (Adler, Gent & Overmeyer, 1998), by government ministries, interest groups and individuals. The appeal of ICT is easy to understand: it is an infinite space, ready to accommodate an unlimited number of opinions; in the absence of time zones and conversational immediacy, it fosters a permissive and welcoming environment for dialogue; that it operates as an effective medium for storing and sharing information and that, since all comers are able to read and reflect upon all of the public contributions posted there, the impact of the contributions on government officers and decision makers reading this material might be richer owing to the extent and conviction of the ideas represented.

As Stromer-Galley (2000) notes, the medium diminishes the effects of geographical distance, allowing campaign managers to store and disseminate vast amounts of information

with much less effort than traditional mailing procedures would demand. She argues that political messages can be targeted more effectively using online communications and provide more interaction between candidates and voters. Her research examines the extent to which these facilities can enable participants to enact the nine stages of participation for strong democracy articulated by Benjamin Barber (1984). The nine stages include the articulation of interests, agenda setting, the articulation of affiliation, bearing witness and reconceptualisation of the original agenda. Stromer-Galley's finding is that, if the will of the people is behind them, the technologies will ultimately help participants achieve Barber's goals.

Governments and would-be governments are also using online communications to further their own ends. Online marketing was employed during the 1996 US elections (Whillock, 1997) and the internet was also used extensively by Chinese authorities defending their rule in Tibet (Bray, 2000). Bray argues that the Chinese web site had an identifiable impact on the World Bank, which subsequently altered its programs in the region. In other words, information is not only being disseminated, it is being read and acted upon in ways which materially alter the fabric of our social and political lives.

Given the potential for free circulation of information, the internet is already being used in response to power imbalances and the limits to freedom of information which are being exercised in some countries. Political protestors are using online media in order to promote and share their ideas and strategies worldwide (Ayres, 1999). Hill and Hughes (1999) found that newsgroups devoted to countries governed by non-democratic regimes carried a significantly higher number of anti-government messages than those discussions on democratic countries. Finally, Hill and Sen (2000) have made a case for the internet as a significant factor in the decline of President Suharto's fortunes in Indonesia. On the basis of these accounts, one might reasonably argue that the medium has done something to redress the imbalance of power by altering the nature of information being shared, something which would likely be impossible in regions where, for example, publishing a subversive newspaper or broadcasting a controversial radio program would constitute a serious life risk. Ghareeb (2000) actually found that information technologies have "transformed political discourse in the [Arab] region within a few years" (p. 395), allowing discussions to take place across national borders.

These discussions may certainly help to redress an imbalance of information and power in regions where citizens feel that the government does not represent their needs accurately. As Henderson (2000) argues, the information sharing capacities of the internet enables opposition groups to damage the public image of totalitarian regimes quite effectively. Ott and Rosser (2000) also make a case for increased access to ICT in Africa, in order to remove the obstacles between members of the public and the policy processes which govern them.

In areas where political situations are less hazardous and the possible dangers of speaking out are less immediate and severe, there is a greater likelihood of bringing the government and concerned members of the population into closer contact. Using web sites such as the Public Knowledge Policy Forum, it is, theoretically, possible to bring members of the public together with the decisions makers themselves, so that each party's concerns can be articulated, debated and attended to properly.

Given the rapid rise of politically motivated, online media, there is now a need for further inquiry into whether the positive changes to public participation in policy processes have indeed materialised (Coleman, 1999).

Several significant challenges to the productive use of virtual media have already emerged. First of all, there is the question of public confidence in the systems being used. As Feldman (2000) found, many users of online political media are reticent about speaking up themselves and do not trust them, on account of the parties who own and manage the web sites. He argues that user confidence in these systems would rise if the information they carried was more reliable, the medium more straightforward to use and the site owners more accountable to the public. Feldman is correct in drawing our attention to the element of site ownership: if a reader suspects the motives of the site producer, he or she will be most unlikely to trust the information carried on it. This finding is supported by Taylor and Burt (1999), who argue that the philosophy of the initiators has a profound effect on the extent of participation enjoyed by any politically motivated web site. Fandy (2000) also comments on the importance of trust in Arab countries, where oral sources are often considered more reliable than written ones.

This guardedness would seem to be justified at the moment. Researchers who have investigated email and internet use of congressmen in the US were interested in seeing how the new media had, as promised, made the politicians more accessible, more responsive and

more accountable to their constituents. The findings were, however, that rather than altering the ways in which these politicians conducted their business, the new media merely reinforced old habits. Email and websites are thus being used to advertise political candidates and constituents' needs are scarcely being addressed (Carter, 2000; Owen, Davis & Strickler, 1999).

Researchers in Slovenia have also found that, while the government is providing more information, public use of the websites on offer is still limited and cautious (Vintar, Decman & Kunstelj, 1999). In other parts of Europe, civic networks have suffered from low adoption rates and inequality of access (Tambini, 1999). Furthermore, a review of 270 Californian municipal web sites which examined the extent to which participatory models of reform were being supported found that most sites lacked a clear mission and favoured entrepreneurial endeavours (Musso, Weare & Hale, 2000). Only one of the articles I turned up in my search of political science abstracts unequivocally stated that digital media had made a federal government more accountable and responsive to its citizens (Mambrey, Neumann & Sieverdingbeck, 1999).

These findings illustrate a key aspect of political (and other) web sites and remind us not to assume that all sites are of the same species. This feature distinguishes those web sites which are created to disseminate or broadcast information on a one-to-many model, versus those which deliberately promote discussion on a many-to-many model, within the very medium of the site. The distinction reminds us that, while deliberation itself is understood as a desirable and necessary feature of a participatory democracy, fostering discussion without accurate and reliable information is largely unproductive. Citizens who are well-informed but have nowhere to share their information amongst themselves are unable to refine their understanding and discover new perspectives. Individuals and groups who have a forum to discuss political matters but have no way of accessing government documents or their sources, will also be at a disadvantage; even if they contribute to policy discussions, they will only have their own opinions and experiences to draw upon. For digital media to serve a real purpose in informing policy, provisions must be made for circulating reliable information which contributors might use as the springboard to their learning. If the information and discussions are housed in one place and can easily be referenced within discussions, using

live URLs for example, the medium will have been used to its advantage as the place where information can be stored, retrieved and discussed with ease.

The concern over ownership might also be resolved if web sites with a political orientation were developed by groups or individuals who were known to the public, or whose affiliations were considered acceptable. The web site I describe in the following chapter, the Public Knowledge Policy Forum, was created in circumstances quite unlike those described so far by the research. Apart from the fact that it was hosted by a university research team with an interest in academic inquiry (and without a specific political affiliation), its inception was itself the result of an unusual collaboration: that between a government ministry, two universities and a teachers' Federation. While the teachers' federation has a high profile in the provincial media in the interests of its members, it is a professional organisation, not an elected body in need of campaign time to secure votes. Hence, while the issues promoted by the forum under investigation may be seen to advance the concerns of the Federation in some way, the site did not rely on promises of government reform, which might be interpreted as voter manipulation.

Let me return to the question of access for a moment. Even where individuals have computer access, there is no guarantee that they will use the tool for the task intended by policy developers or interest groups. As Docter et al (2000) discovered, many web site visitors only look at the first page, neglecting to explore any other materials or possible discussion areas. They consider this to be a result of voter apathy, concluding that only a highly active political minority would actually use and benefit from a political forum online. This is a concern for any web site developer hoping to gain the attention of the populace, but it is also a problem for researchers interested in gaining access to a reliable sample of participants. As Rosenblatt (1999) observes, research into the value of online polling is still extremely limited in its findings, owing to this problem of sample selection. These limitations reveal the need for the wide promotion of politically motivated web sites. If deliberation is to be a political possibility for the majority of voters, they must know where and how to find the forum. To that end, the job of moderating the Public Knowledge Policy Forum included liaison with the local media, direct correspondence with parties who might be interested and postings to numerous professional and educational listservs.

Where governments and private citizens are communicating directly with each other, it is easy to understand the power inequality felt by some contributing to the exchanges. We might expect, though, that among peers who share professional or political motivations, digital media could foster a spirit of collaboration and therefore participation in policy procedure. To date, however, this has not been established. Day (1999) found that interest groups using email were no more likely to develop inclusive decision making procedures than their counterparts, who relied on face to face meetings. The increased potential for information sharing did not have a positive effect on the social behaviours of group members.

Overall, then, and in spite of increasing use of and good faith in the medium, empirical research seems to show that, rather than overturning power structures in democratic countries, digital media are still reinforcing these structures (Lofgren, Andersen & Sorensen, 1999).

The current lack of qualitative, locally relevant data which ties the motivation of site developers, the political context of its creation and the actual outcomes for policy makers and participants alike demanded that research be conducted in this realm, within British Columbia. In securing the cooperation of the provincial government, the site was not intended to be an antagonistic move, rather a gesture towards collaboration which opened the doors to conversation with the Ministry of Education about the genuine impact of the Forum on decision makers.

The Public Knowledge Policy Forum has therefore paid attention to the challenges described above in terms of site development, ownership (it was not owned by the government or the public media, but by a university) and moderation; its concern with ongoing deliberation rather than one-time polling on pre-established issues; its interest in developing a collaborative space for both information sharing and discussion; the opportunities it created for gathering qualitative data regarding the number and quality of contributions as well as the participants feelings about those contributions after the event; the impact on policy makers of these discussions.

The research I discuss also describes the actual dimensions of authors' contributions to an online discussion forum. More than just providing recommendations for analysis (Lascher, 1996), it examines actual data collected during the course of debates surrounding a policy

which was in the process of being drafted. These discussion data are examined along the lines of discourse analysis models developed in educational settings, not according to the lights of political science theory. In so doing, the analysis reveals how members of the public accept the invitation to participate in policy creation in an authentic context, rather than “identifying the inadequacies of existing discourse relative to an ideal model of democratic deliberation” (Gastil, 1992). My goal in doing this research has been to expose the practical application of online discussions so that future policy makers, site developers, moderators and participants might bring realistic expectations to the discussions and to their intended impact on policy development.

The ideas of free speech and freedom of information have long been central to the culture we understand as the internet. “Cyberspace” has been conceived of as a public good like air, free to those who desire access and in which no passions, no opinions can be quelled. Software is to be shared freely, any accessory that can conceivably be downloaded should be downloaded and the prospect of government regulation or ownership was positively horrifying. The Internet’s cultural origins are, however, a peculiar and ironic mixture of academe and the military. Beginning in 1968 with the establishment of an email system, its purpose was the protection of a cautious superpower against the threat of war; the network’s cultural significance has since undergone a drastic transformation. Ironically begun as the tool of a powerful government, the network rapidly expanded throughout the world’s universities; with academic abstracts being swapped online and the establishment of listservs in numerous disciplines, free speech became an end rather than a means. Certainly the technology aided the rapid transfer of information, but it was the principle of the thing that counted. The internet has come to be seen as the abode of alternative views, the place where free thinkers reside when they find the physical world too (intellectually) restricting. Unsurprisingly, this preoccupation with digital spaces has spawned a new generation of science fiction in which humans transcend their mortal capacities by connecting themselves, bodily, to the technology, such as in *The Matrix*.

But to what extent can this environment be fertile ground for social action? How far can political desire be represented online, where the medium is largely silent, text-based and more often than not, asynchronous? Heated debate must surely cool rapidly when subject to the delays of days and weeks. The teachers I know in BC are among the busiest, most

committed and passionate individuals I have met. Imagining how these people might invest themselves in the silent virtual world of a moderated web site has seemed more like a flight of fancy than a real possibility at times. The literature about online policy debates only takes us part of the way towards an understanding the nature of this possibility, but it is a start.

### Online Equity

In a setting where participants are all invisible, their age, ethnic origins, social class and sexual orientation all unknown, it might be reasonable to hope that the following finding may be generalised across all settings:

We came to understand how anonymity frees some students from inhibitions about writing and critiquing each other's writing, and how it dissolves class, race, gender and even personal identity issues (Handley & Oaks, 1997, p. 114).

Teachers who correspond online may also be freed from the social hierarchies that affect their daily, professional lives. "People actually listen to each other without making judgements about the person talking based on pre-conceived stereotypes" (Fusco, Email Correspondence, 1999). Correspondingly, Harasim et al (1995) assert, "While recognising the role of authoritative information and teacher [or moderator?] guidance, many new networked learning systems aim to give learners "increased control and agency in the knowledge-building process" (p. 272; citing Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991). If an author wishes to contribute to a discussion on a bulletin board, all she needs to do is read the previous postings, reflect on her response, type it and hit send. She need not wait for another person to finish speaking before she submits it and is in no danger of having the bell ring before she gets her moment.

Willinsky's book, *Technologies of Knowing: A Proposal for the Human Sciences* (1999) discusses the challenge of managing vast amounts of research data which are scattered on servers and hard drives worldwide; in the meantime, the public has little knowledge of, access to, or application for this valuable data. Willinsky's concern is for the way in which data are transmitted and translated into useful knowledge and - potentially - action among members of the public. He proposes that a centralised corporation for information management be created which would house publicly accessible and multiply hyperlinked research findings, which could be examined and debated freely by everyone. Not only this, members of the public could add their questions to the research agenda, which could lessen the potential for self-serving but cumbersome and socially irrelevant research. The

corporation would help to rationalise the social science research endeavour, minimising duplication and making it more responsible to the people it was ultimately designed to serve. Willinsky stresses the public service aspect of research, demanding that technology be used to nurture and promote a participatory intellectual climate which would, ultimately, ensure that government could become responsive and accountable, while also being founded on solid research findings. If a field of research remained in conflict throughout the decades - for example the "Phonics vs. Whole Language" debate in reading instruction - the two sides of the argument could at least be easily discerned and the core principles behind each side extracted for practical application to policy making.

If used effectively, then, communications technologies might help to promote a greater degree of civic engagement among all members of the public. With access to accurate and relevant information, researchers and non-researchers alike would be able to meet their own information needs swiftly, addressing whatever social concerns are nagging them. New avenues for dialogue would be opened up, enabling the population greater access to peer groups and decision-makers alike, flattening the traditional structures of communication among different sectors of the population (Schuler, 1996).

#### Cautionary Tales

If we are going to adopt these new channels for communication, we must be aware of the real reasons for doing so, and be able to discriminate between decisions based on theoretical or ideological advantages and decisions based on the tested, proven value of these channels. In recent years, ideological arguments have been made repeatedly in favour of virtual discussion environments. These complement the technical and logistical arguments about the speed of information transfer and the facility for many-to-many communication.

Cautionary questions about the nature of online interaction are also raised by contemporary writers in philosophy. These authors ask what our reliance on these new media really means for our moral lives. They ask questions about the equations we draw, not between the factual elements of, for example, the time- and paper-saving features of email, rather the abstract, ideological notions attached to this technology. What do we think it brings to the quality of our lives and why? What abstract - after the fact - justifications do we make for living with and depending upon these media?

Kester (1998) criticises our adoption of new media, not on the grounds that they are useless, rather on the basis of what he perceives to be a moral economy. He argues that we attach value to information as an end in itself, rather than as the means to fulfilling some other purpose (such as participatory policy development); thus, where information is free flowing and accessible, we draw the conclusion that society has moved ahead and that we are now living in a morally advanced, satisfying world, regardless of the uses to which this information is put. "The flow of information... is taken as a paradigm for a broader cultural progress towards the telos of a democratic society" (Kester, 1998, p. 213). As a result, Kester argues, new information technologies are understood as the tools of unequivocally positive change, since they facilitate the rapid transfer of vast amounts of information, stored in numerous formats and media.

At this point, it is important to distinguish between the two ways in which the plea for improved "democracy" is made, with respect to new technologies in general and online discussions in particular. Firstly, it is used to refer to the ways in which participants in online discussions treat each other and is a result of either the medium's asynchronicity or the absence of spatial and conversational cues, gesture, movement and other information such as race and gender. Secondly, however, the term "democracy" is favoured in conversations which pertain to the impact of the technology on society at large. In other words, the arrival of the technology is seen to alter some facet of our public, social, political lives by interrupting the ways in which we habitually seek and use information, and by the kinds of information to which we have access. Using the technology as evidence of social progress (rather than the impetus for social change of any kind) is seen by some authors (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Kester, 1998) as an error of interpretation and one which only repeats the mistakes of those who saw the advent of educational television, chalkboards, steam power or electricity in the same light.

Online discussion environments do not necessarily facilitate egalitarian discourse, nor are they settings in which every visitor will feel comfortable speaking out. Internally, they can be characterised by as much tension and politicking as our everyday, face-to-face interactions, although with less cunning and more bluntness.

In this section, I shall attend to some of the reasons given in support of an increased use of ICT for political and educational purposes. These reasons typically depend on a set of

equations, where change and progress are considered to be equal; where computer-mediated connections are equal to community building efforts in physical spaces and where the very provision of new applications is equal to their use, and their use is equal to to positive effect. These positive effects are typically described in terms which appeal to a sense of profound hope in the improvement of society. These improvements are suggested with language that promises greater prosperity and more equitable arrangements for sharing information and education. I write with the intention of steering around some popular conceptions about online communication and discussion forums in particular. I begin with a look at the uses of “Democracy” and “Community,” followed by brief visits to “Information” and “Knowledge.” I have taken my lead from Kester (1998), who observes that:

New technologies or technological forms... are celebrated - or feared - for their capacity to generate unlimited power, mobility or productivity, and to transcend the boundaries of existing forms of social experience and organisation. (p. 207)

Open access to information is not a public good - an end - in itself *unless* it is read, assimilated, understood and used by the citizenry to inform choices and shape educational change. Just because the facility is there, people cannot be expected to communicate in different or better ways than they have before.

It was, however, worth creating an environment which *might* effect change. However marginal the change, it could be a first step towards the general application of similar facilities in future. Staff at the Ministry of Education’s Technology Branch recently expressed this hope, while acknowledging that it may take more than one experimental phase to establish a workable model.

While we may hope for an improvement in the social dynamics of online discussions over their face-to-face counterparts, we should not expect that our own groups will necessarily conform to this positive model. Hollenbeck’s (1998) article purports to be an analysis of the claims to improved classroom democracy via computer-mediated learning. His introduction promises a balanced, critical inquiry:

Coupled with the rhetoric of school reform, the Internet-driven curriculum is seen as a place for students to create meaningful knowledge on their own, using an environment of experts waiting to be interviewed and vast amounts of information ready to be mined. It is my contention that most of these knew promises remain based upon the computer delivering information to the student. (p. 38)

However, having asserted that “there is a sense of a more democratic... environment” (p. 39), he does not actually explain what he means by “democracy” (Freedom of speech? Freedom of information? The possibility of a party in power and an opposition? Consensus among the population?). He then brushes aside the difficulties he has himself observed in an online classroom. Among these difficulties were student loneliness, a lack of collaboration, a feeling that interactions were dominated by the medium and the length and number of postings submitted by certain individuals. This latter problem persisted even when conference size was altered. Any of these problems might be interpreted as diminishing student ability to contribute meaningfully to the governance of the learning space. That may sound like an “undemocratic” learning environment, however loose one’s definition of democracy, but it wasn’t the conclusion reached by Hollenbeck.

Resiliently, the author declares that inequities are greatly reduced when we move classes online, that teachers in this setting become “learned peers” (p. 42). I am not disputing Hollenbeck’s conclusions, but I remain unconvinced by them because, although his study involved the collection of data in the form of transcripts, none of this material is made available to his readers. We are therefore unable to decide for ourselves whether the data, the analytical procedure and the conclusions are of the same family. Most importantly, we are unable to judge whether the data met his (unstated) criteria for “democracy.” With scant proof such as this, critical readers are left wondering whether the researcher adopted the results through prior bias alone. He advocates “the challenge is to be aware of... difficulties while seeking evidence of truly democratic action that is a result of computer conferencing”(p. 44). I would respond that our first task is actually to define what we *mean* by democratic actions in educational CMC (computer-mediated communication) via discourse or other analysis, to make our thinking transparent to our peers and only then ask, to what degree these actions are achievable. Otherwise, we risk doing just what Kester, Doctor and Stichler have cautioned against, that is, assuming that the technology - and not the user - determines the kind of communications (and therefore social dynamics/power structures) that people have in this setting.

Participants in online forums can adapt and experiment with their textual self-presentation far more easily and whimsically than they can their physical appearance. Blundering around in eWorld, I enjoyed the new sense of mastery that can be derived from re-writing oneself

online. However, this genre manipulation as a way of altering one's self - empowering though it is - represents a degree of online fluency or literacy at the high end of Markham's scale. It comes with hours and weeks of practice and the sense of control it affords can be appealing. As Markham (1998) quips, "I could find that backspace button on the keyboard in an earthquake, on my deathbed or with amnesia" (p. 135). We may know that this is possible, but we may not immediately assume that this degree of freedom and fluency with the medium can be expected from educators participating in an online debate about policy. It may be time for a conversation about the kinds of communication skills we expect of ourselves and our peers; it is also imperative that we allow time for this renegotiation. As Misanchuk (1997) observes, it takes time for these skills to develop.

Let's pause for a moment to think through some of the other ways in which the medium might "fail us." It allows for absolute anonymity. It allows for name, shape and gender shifting as well as the uninhibited articulation of our worst prejudices and greatest intolerance. Walther, Anderson and Park (1989) found:

Name calling, swearing and insults, flaming, impolite statements, threats or put-downs, crude flirtations of a demeaning or sexually explicit nature and attacks on individuals. (Walther, Anderson & Park, p. 473)

Rather than hoping for an invisible but egalitarian group of disparate participants, then, we might reasonably expect the social and linguistic structures that permeate our real-life practice to be lived online as well. Gruber (1995) found that existing hierarchies, gender prejudice and racial stereotypes persisted in online settings. The performances of gender in men and women were consistent with classroom interaction analyses. Wolfe (1999), too, found similar relationships between gender, discourse and power online. In her study of mixed groups, men received more directed questions than women; women agreed with men more than with each other; tangential comments were more likely to come from male participants; women were less likely to respond to oppositions but responded well to tangents, taking the discussion a step further.

In addition, Coate (1997) draws our attention to the personality traits which describe a comfortable contributor to online debate. We are reminded that this environment appeals to "people who love wordplay, language and writing... [It is] a place to debate, to joke, to schmooze, argue and gossip" (p. 167). He acknowledges that "if the balance tips to anyone's

advantage, it's in favour of those who are better at articulating their views. Some people are amazingly skilled at debating" (p. 173). Many, however, are not.

Educators may find Coate's analysis somewhat limiting in the lack of attention paid to equity factors: we must remain aware that online interaction is not always and only liberating, that it may in fact silence and exclude those who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the medium. The empowerment of online discussions - as the place to develop both a sense of "mastery" and "community" - described by Davie and Wells (1991) is not necessarily the norm. The medium of online bulletin boards allows for the close examination and critique of other debaters' comments. As we shall see in the case of the PKPF, authors can use the medium to pin their adversaries down more forcefully than they might in everyday conversation. Comments are not issued contemporaneously, they are not fleeting observations, rather they are printed, (possibly) permanent and can be read and mulled over during the course of several hours. More references can be found and other arguments marshalled in opposition, and in the absence of the first author. Where a site is created for the express purpose of interrogating policy documents, these oppositions can promote an atmosphere of formalised academic debate. It is worth noting that this style of debate can lead to verbal sparring which makes some participants extremely uncomfortable:

The academic culture often rewards acquiring an aggressive style of communication, epitomised by an 'adversary method' that assumes that the best way to evaluate another's ideas is to subject them to rigorous and severe questioning. This communicative style impedes dialogue in many situations, especially given contexts of previous frustration, insecurity or silencing. (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 412)

In these closing sections, I shall examine the use of some terms which have gained currency in publications about online communications in education in recent years. By revealing what I do not assume about the nature of these communications, I hope to add some background colour to the methodology chapter which follows. These assumptions are extremely significant because, as I shall show here, they often mould the questions we bring to our research, the way we conduct it and the conclusions we reach.

First, I'd like to look at the term, "community." Commonly used in texts investigating the character of "democracy," it should be applied cautiously, since it carries powerful intimations of an ideal collection of human relationships. We should also be wary of labelling casual groups as "communities, since "Not every collection of people... form the

sense of trust, mutual interest and sustained commitments that automatically deserve to be labelled as communities” (Kling, 1996, I-V, p. 426). One example of this use of the term can be found in the writing of Serim and Koch (1996), who describe communications between Russian students and American teachers as a community without examining or defining the term. They have not described a sustainable community, developed over several months or years, rather they offer a narrative about the fleeting excitement of making a new contact via email. We do not learn about the values brought to the online interaction by the students, nor whether any of his students made comments that were ill-advised or blundering. We only learn that the communications, while brief, were unequivocally positive, which should make their readers suspicious of their conclusions.

According to Harasim et al (1995) “Networks are group communication environments that augment social connectivity” (p. 274). If we compare them to sitting alone with a computer terminal at home, sure, but not if the alternative is sitting in a classroom with my fingers covered in glue sticking blobs of tissue paper onto Kirsty’s drawing of a sheep. Again, the network is said to promote “shared interest rather than shared geography.” It is rather ironic that the most popular argument in favour of (remote, computer-mediated) online instruction is that the medium allows students to be more *sociable*.

Finally, what have “information” and “knowledge” come to mean in this new climate? And what relevance do these features have for the education system? Firstly, I would like to assert that information and knowledge are *not* the same thing. Despite popular rhetoric to the contrary, I interpret information to be text, graphics or other audio visual representation; it is not elevated to the status of knowledge until it is assimilated in the mind of a reader or viewer. The OECD recently published a book entitled, *Knowledge Management in the Learning Society*. It is described as a text which “analyses and compares concretely the processes of knowledge production, dissemination and use.”<sup>1</sup> Even bearing in mind the OECD’s preoccupation with economics, we may still doubt the relevance of applying the language of production lines to a debate about educational systems. In other words, knowledge is not something that we produce via rational systems any more than policy is the result of some machine process.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/bookshop/education/?isi>

The term, "knowledge," applies to a learner. It is not a discrete product which stands apart from the knower any more than "democracy" can be separated from its constituent features. Furthermore, there is no single, measurable "cognitive diffusion gradient" (Hodas, 1996) between the information (or the teacher) and the taught. Where information is increasingly being seen as a commodity to be bought and sold (Stichler, 1998), it is inappropriate to refer to employees as "knowledge workers" and the market as a "knowledge economy." In a society that claims to value an equitable public school system, are we promoting the value that knowledge "should" be bought and sold? This is in direct contradiction to the rhetoric of improved "democracy" achieved through computer networking (Agre & Schuler, 1997).

If we are looking for neutral terms, we must surely resort to "text." Ignoring for a moment the political nature and origin of all texts, we might at least abandon the fashionable assumption that all text is information and all information is valuable. There is a great deal of text on the Internet, but I am loath to promote it to the status of information and even less willing to credit it with the label of "knowledge."

Information, and that produced through dialogue, is commonly understood to be a public good and a right, not a privilege (Kester, 1998; Murdock & Golding, 1989). With information becoming more of a commodity than a public good, however, it follows that our values will shift around the process by which texts, information, and therefore knowledge, wisdom and power reach individuals in society at large. That process is what we usually call education and as we know, this process is never value neutral. It is as vulnerable to the structures of power and inequity as any system described by, influenced by so much information. There is the information that passes from Ministry to school district, from principal to staff, from staff to students and parents and from the media to just about everyone. How we manage the role of the Internet in future education policy development depends on the values we attach to information: What we think it is for, who we think "deserves" to have it and (most importantly) who "deserves" to *use* it. As Charles Ungerleider has commented (Western Research Network on Education & Training, March 24, 2000), public policy is the evidence of values - and not rational systems - at work. We would do well to bear in mind that former generations have regarded political judgment as being based in "doctrine" rather than in truth (Mill, 1859 in Acton (1972) p. 173).

## Summary

The literature draws our attention toward the importance of public dialogue both for the individuals concerned and society at large. It convinces us that, if we are to promote the engagement of private individuals in the processes of government, then they must have both the incentive and the means for doing so. The literature has also shown me that what people say online – as in every other realm - shapes both the world they live in and their understanding of it. In creating texts, authors are announcing their presence, populating a virtual environment and contributing to the moment of negotiation in which the norms of discourse and behaviour are established. I have learned that participants in online settings understand their contributions in many different ways, using metaphorical terms which speak to their different investments (or literacy) in that setting. I have also been reminded that the relationship between conversational texts and their audiences is fluid and dynamic, not static and concrete. Audiences help to determine the very texts created for them, which should make us particularly wary in settings where the audience is unknown in number or identity.

The literature has described the potential of and rationale for using the internet as a locus of political dialogue, but so far, has failed to establish with any precision the dimensions of doing so; furthermore, there is an absence of material concerned with dialogue about government policy, especially by those professionals who will be charged with the responsibility of enacting that policy. Frameworks for understanding casual, social interactions in online settings abound, as do interpretations of student discussions in virtual classrooms. The quirky, imaginative and often ungrammatical uses of English in chatrooms, listservs and MOOs have been central to numerous literary and sociological studies (Markham, 1998); they have asked questions about the psychological profiles of individual users (Turkle, 19xx) and the formations of groups; they have explored the behavioural norms and infringements which arise in many settings and have looked at notions of social equilibrium and justice as well. They have asked whether the communications which occur here are “real,” whether the connections one forms are tantamount to relationships and whether the discussion groups merit the description of “culture” or “community” (Jones, 1996; Kling, 1996).

Nonetheless, these studies have yet to integrate their interest with the sociological and linguistic norms (or idiosyncrasies) of online settings with the current interest in examining

purposeful, political discussion spaces. Wilhelm's (2000) analysis of a political newsgroup has been a valuable addition to research in the realm of online discourse analysis, but the environment he explores is one characterised by incidental meetings of dispersed contributors, not professionals or members of the public who are personally invested in the education system of the province they live in.

While there is a move towards this kind of inquiry, research has not yet asked questions about the relative value of these spaces in either uniting groups of like-minded individuals or bringing together those with strongly opposed convictions. They have focused in general on the social qualities of the discourse and, while there is a growing body of ethnographic research into online discourse, there is little information about the relationship between the online discourse and the professional and political discourses into which the online discussions are inserted. Online discourse may seem to be abstracted from the world in which we live, but it is certainly not "new" in the sense that the terminology and shared understandings of many participants are often borne of years spent as an educational practitioner.

#### Framing the Question

In moderating the Public Knowledge Policy Forum, I therefore tried to lay aside the assumption that simply creating the site had improved the quality of civic participation in policy development, the quality of "democracy" in British Columbia. If the quality of public debate has indeed been improved, it must be because there was a need for the tool at that time and because its potential users saw its immediate value. I do not understand the technology to be a "metaphorical embodiment of democratic organisation" (Kester, 1998, p. 208). The metaphors to which Kester refers are not merely linguistic toys that will vanish from our speech in the way that once fashionable words do. Metaphors show what we have learned about ourselves; they illustrate what we think the significance of our world actually is. As Hodas (1996) observes, "each shift to a new metaphor drastically affects the way cultures view the natural and human worlds" (p. 203). In other words, I have been prepared to have my expectations of - or hopes for - the technology weathered by my experience of it.

I also understood that the PKP was becoming party to an online culture with specific and amply catalogued features. It is a culture that values (and indeed promotes) intellectual freedom, as is evidenced by the activities of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, dedicated to

preserving free speech in cyberspace; it is only one of many such organisations ([www.eff.org](http://www.eff.org)). I did not, however, assume that “material abundance, decentralisation and democratic community” (Kester, 1998, p. 209) would necessarily result from the mere provision of these new technologies; I recognise the significance of the existing human structures into which they are assimilated (cf. Hodas, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Kester, 1998). Many contributors were new to forums of this kind. They had not spent numerous hours online, nor were they comfortable or knowledgeable about managing their self-presentation in these environments.

While we might hope for Habermas’ “ideal speech situation,” one that might be “free of [sic] repression and argumentative inequality” (Dallmayr, 1990, p. 9), we cannot necessarily expect it, and if we do, we risk producing self-fulfilling research like that of Hollenbeck, explored above. The Public Knowledge Project attracted a diverse group of individuals, even within the public education sector, among whom there were (in no particular order) elementary and secondary teachers, students, administrators, distance educators, BCTF and Ministry of Education representatives, academic researchers and parents. Where some participants had no teaching experience, others brought twenty years of experience to the conversation. Others brought doctoral degrees, masters research (in progress) and the challenges they faced as online teachers. Clearly, hierarchies would emerge among this diverse population.

I knew, however, that not all participants would be experienced, keen contributors to online discussions. I was also conscious that some of them might have been burned by previous exercises of this genre: being asked to contribute their time and energy in a field they felt passionately about, but finding that their efforts made no difference or were simply ignored.

In setting up a web site with the express purpose of (re-)creating a political domain, we hoped to facilitate dialogue which would contribute both to the educational and political landscapes of the province. By altering the nature and extent of information available, we wanted to find out how a change to one part of the equation might unbalance the other factors. Having read the theory defending such an application of ICT, I was no longer interested in fulfilling the imaginative predictions of authors who would advocate a growing reliance on computer-mediated communications in which change was taken to mean

progress, information was construed as knowledge, or where a fleeting connection might be understood as the construction of a learning community. In short, I wanted to see what political actors would actually do with the new informational, educational, political and technical reality. As Schmitt (1923) observed:

In the domain of the political, people do not face each other as abstractions, but as politically interested and politically determined persons, as citizens, governors or governed, politically allied or opponents – in any case, therefore, in political categories. In the sphere of the political one cannot abstract out what is political, leaving only universal human equality.

Would this be the case online? Who would speak out? Who would be listening? What kinds of contributions would participants choose to make? How would they respond to each other, what would they learn and what kinds of action would they take as a result of their learning? The PKPF activity was a determined effort to find answers to these questions.

In conclusion, the literature examined here has brought to light some key areas of concern in the field of online, political discussion. It has enabled me to refine the general questions about whether people would take part into more detailed questions. These questions concern the conditions which enable or hinder prolonged, purposeful discussion. They also include questions about the participant population and the moments when they choose to contribute their perspectives and to whom.

CHAPTER THREE  
METHODOLOGY: THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER,  
THE ROLE OF THE MODERATOR

Building the site

Given the climate of inquiry around public contributions to policy using the web, the site I shall describe here was designed to find out just what would happen if an open forum were created for this purpose. The site I describe was developed specifically to facilitate discussions about, and contributions to, recent developments in BC education policy. The policy in question concerned the new information and communications technology applications in BC schools.

While teachers are currently invited to contribute to BC Ministry policy, these contributions usually take the form of a single letter or email, from an individual or group, to the government. One example of this sort of public review was the Special Education policy consultation, which was conducted in 2000. This review was conducted by means of a coordinated email campaign by the BCTF and addressed to teachers throughout the province. There is, however, no prolonged public discussion, nor does the Ministry usually engage in two-way exchanges with the educators who contribute in this way. The Public Knowledge Policy Forum was therefore designed to increase both the volume and quality of public contributions to educational technology policy by offering discussions lasting up to three months.

In November 1999, I was offered the position of online moderator for the Public Knowledge Policy Forum. The software for the forum had already been designed, intentionally shadowing the structure of the Ministry's planning document, *Conditions for Success*. The Public Knowledge site offered a niche for me to combine my research interests in policy, educational technology and the possibilities for online discourse. The online discussions would offer data for comparison with current research in the field of educational telecommunications. Further material could also be gathered on the quality and sense of purpose behind participants' contributions by interviewing them when the forum closed.

The site was the second in a series of initiatives organised by the Public Knowledge

Project at UBC. The project's overall goal was to bring salient questions and findings of academic research into the public sphere to promote public inquiry and understanding about them. The first stage began at UBC in early 1999 with a web site developed in collaboration with the *Vancouver Sun*. This site was tied to news articles on education published in the paper. The emphasis was therefore on local circumstances: the newspaper's readership were residents of BC concerned about education in their own province. The agenda for discussion was effectively set by the newspaper so that its numerous readers would, literally, be on the same page when they logged onto the site.

The PKPF was developed to tie in with the concerns articulated in *Technologies of Knowing* (Willinsky, 1999). It was an experiment in nurturing open communication between decision-makers and the public, specifically members of the public with an interest in education. The project developers hoped to answer the need for teachers and the public at large to have a greater hand in offering policy feedback. As Beane and Apple (1995) observe, teachers and other educators have a right to contribute to the governance of a field which they have themselves shaped. The aim of the site was therefore to draw out some of these problems and issues. The PKP site's database of approximately 300 articles and other references was created to give visitors a context for the discussion and an opportunity to become better informed about the subject in hand. This database included numerous research articles and links to newspaper reports, organisations and educational web sites. Like the discussion area, the database was organised according to the headings used in the original *Conditions for Success* publication and in the headers for the PKPF discussions themselves.

The PKPF was created at a specific juncture in policy development. By November 1999, two documents had been published by the Ministry on the subject of ICT in BC schools, *Conditions for Success* and its sequel, *Plan for 2000 and Beyond*. The policy process was therefore well under way. An original advisory committee on technology (TLETAC; the Teaching, Learning and Technology Advisory Committee) had closed in June 1999. The ministry doors were not closed to public contributions, however. Educators were given until January 14, 2000 to respond to the two documents, either through hard copy or email.

In spite of these efforts, by January 18, 2000, only 37 written responses to the Ministry's planning documents had been received from the following groups: education partnership organisations, school districts, individual teachers and technology coordinators. Does this

figure indicate a lack of interest in the new policy? Are teachers simply not concerned? Are they happy to wait for new curricula to emerge without their engagement? The answer to all of these questions is clearly “no.” When the Education Technology Branch at the Ministry advertised the provincial forum at Vernon they were deluged with responses and had to turn at least forty applicants away. The motivation was there but the facilities simply didn’t allow for their attendance. Other would-be delegates were unable to secure the funding to attend. The provincial forum took place April 6-8, 2000. It was attended by up to eight representatives from each school district in the province (Ministry of Education, Conversation, March 14, 2000).

Further to this, the BCTF hosted an invited policy seminar to review the draft policy (January 21-22, 2000) which was attended by several members of the original TLETAC committee. Issues discussed here included professional development, distance education, online education and funding. I presented the Public Knowledge Policy Forum on the second day of the seminar and chaired a discussion about its potential and some challenges we still faced. Lastly, the BCTF has itself a number of established listservs, which anyone can join to discuss a wide variety of concerns for education in BC.

The following table shows the order of events during the period of research:

<b>Period</b>	<b>Activity</b>
June 1999	TLETAC committee closes and <i>Conditions for Success</i> completed.
October 1999	<i>Conditions for Success</i> made available to PKP team for publication online.
Nov. 22, 99 - March 3, 2000	Forum open Invitations sent out
November 1999	<i>Plan for 2000+</i> made available for publication online.
January 14, 1999	Ministry deadline for submission of formal responses to <i>Conditions for Success</i> and <i>Plan for 2000+</i>
March 2000+	Forum closes, research interviews begin
June 2000	Research interviews completed and transcribed
July 2000	Writing

Table 1. Research schedule

The site was the result of a collaboration between UBC and the BC Teachers’ Federation (BCTF); the BCTF had been instrumental in forming a committee at the Ministry in 1999

(Teaching and Learning Educational Technology Advisory Committee; TLETAC) which ultimately reported to the Deputy Minister for Education, Charles Ungerleider. In addition, technical development personnel were housed at Simon Fraser University's Centre for Policy Research on Science and Technology, with database support being provided by the BCTF's research personnel. Access to the Ministry's latest publications on technology was granted by its Education Technology Branch and I was in occasional contact with the information officer there throughout the life of the forum.

Welcome to the Public Knowledge Policy Forum! This is where you can join discussions about teaching, learning and education technologies. You can view the [Conditions for Success' Recommendations](#) or the [Ministry's Plan for 2000+](#) in a second browser window.

If you have any comments on the design or purpose of the site, you can join the discussion in [Public Knowledge Policy Forum Concept](#). You can also contact me privately at <[shulamit@interchange.ubc.ca](mailto:shulamit@interchange.ubc.ca)>, for any comments or concerns. I look forward to seeing you online!

**Shula Klinger**  
**Public Forums Moderator**  
 Research Assistant for *Conditions for Success*.

Available Forums		
<a href="#">Visions and Principles</a>	Posts: 17	Last Post: 03-02-2000 15:45
<a href="#">Student needs and expectations</a>	Posts: 44	Last Post: 03-02-2000 23:29
<a href="#">Curriculum and Learning Resources</a>	Posts: 21	Last Post: 03-02-2000 15:47
<a href="#">Educator Training and Support</a>	Posts: 32	Last Post: 05-25-2000 10:02
<a href="#">Social Impact</a>	Posts: 22	Last Post: 03-02-2000 15:49
<a href="#">Electronic Delivery</a>	Posts: 57	Last Post: 03-02-2000 15:50
<a href="#">Research</a>	Posts: 5	Last Post: 03-02-2000 15:50
<a href="#">Decision Making</a>	Posts: 2	Last Post: 11-24-1999 14:57

Figure 1. The Public Forum home page.

### Furnishing the Site

The site was designed to tie in closely with the Ministry documents, with discussions divided into two main areas, the public forums and another section entitled "My Advice," for people to write directly to the Ministry. Each of these two areas was divided into nine subsections according to the chapter headings in *Conditions for Success*. The design team did this to facilitate easy cross-reference between the report and the forum conversations. In addition, an area entitled "PKPF Concept" was included for participants to comment on the use of the medium itself.

The forum software, "Phorum," was a free package downloaded from the Internet, chosen for the clarity of its interface (and of course its price). The topics were laid out on a

Forums home page at [www.pkp.bctf.bc.ca/forums](http://www.pkp.bctf.bc.ca/forums), as shown in Figure 1, above. Clicking on one of the topic choices takes the visitor to an individual discussion such as “Visions and Principles.” Within this discussion, the moderator and contributors can post new topics as threads. These appear with responses at hanging indents, spreading out like a family tree (Figure 2)(Additional screen shots of the site can be found in Appendix 1).

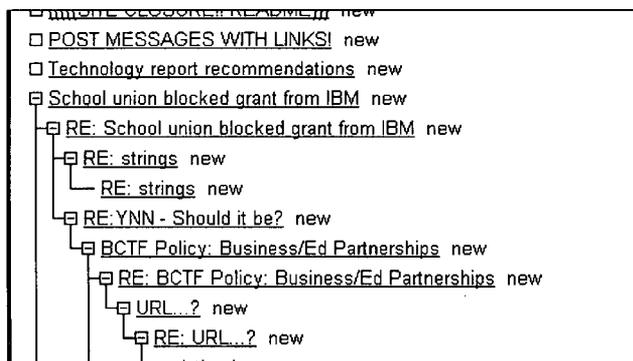


Figure 2. Forum threads

Contributors could choose whether or not to give their names and email addresses, but many did not realise this and gave both sets of details. They did not have access to their messages once posted, so as far as they were concerned, any posting was permanent. As the moderator, I had privileged access both to my own messages and those from contributors. I could return to my old posts for editing or deletion if I determined that they were no longer necessary or were incomplete. I also kept an eye on those messages which included URL links to research sites and went by to paste in the HTML code to make these addresses hypertext, rather than plain text. For the web address <http://www.ubc.ca>, for example, I would paste in the code A HREF= “<http://www.ubc.ca>” to the left of this text, and “/A” to the right.

Numerous efforts were made to recruit participants to the debate. The PKPF team hoped for large numbers of visitors because we were hoping for material which could be used as research data later on. The more contributors we had, the more data we had on which to base research papers and conference presentations. Furthermore, a high number of contributors would validate our claim that the site fulfilled a real need among BC teachers to be heard on matters of education policy development.

The BCTF was also keen to see the forum adding momentum to the emerging conversation about educational technology, as they have argued that “information and communication technologies can and should be used as tools for democratisation and citizen

influence, not just for economic ends” (BCTF response to *Conditions for Success*, 2000). Some teachers (pseudonyms used here) had already gained access to the debates within TLETAC, but many more “concerns could be articulated in the public arena” (Joe). A BCTF staff member described the PKPF activity to a reporter from the Vancouver Province in late 1999. Faxes were also sent out alerting schools to the forum on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, ten days after the site opened. At this point, the forum was expected to last from November 22 until January 31, a span of just over two months, or 70 days. A flashing notice was also posted on the BCTF web site on November 19, 1999, three days before the site opened, and a further message was added indicating that the discussion was indeed under way. Messages were sent out to the Computer Using Educators of BC (CUEBC) listservs and to other lists organised by the BCTF. A colleague whom I met at a policy seminar also posted a message to a separate social justice list.

The Ministry was also hoping for large numbers of responses to support their policy development activities. In interview, officers of the Education Technology Branch described it as an “opportunity ... to provide us with lots of useful information” (Catherine, March 14). They promised to circulate messages about the site among their own contacts.

Having searched the web for other interested parties, I wrote to school principals all over BC, having found email addresses listed under the Web66 school network. I specifically contacted schools in remote districts, for example, in Northern BC. None of the principals I wrote to responded in person, although they may have visited the site with or without posting (the site statistics alone do not identify them). Finally, I listed the PKPF in the “Yahoo!” search engine and joined a Microsoft web community for technology in education for this same purpose.

I encouraged colleagues at UBC to drop by via emails to the faculty and student lists. I wrote to a faculty member the University of Victoria who I heard was working in a similar area, with a request to publicise the site among his colleagues, but got no response from him. I also was in regular contact with an education reporter at the Vancouver Sun who promised to write an article about the PKPF in December 1999, but (in spite of regular phone and email communication from me) failed to follow up in the new year.

### Moderation Skills

The web site went live on November 22, 1999 and I was employed as the moderator for the public discussion areas. My tasks were to include the recruitment of participants, as described above; welcoming newcomers and offering support where needed; adding research literature to the resource database and promoting the ongoing dialogue with occasional prompts and suggestions. Ultimately, my public role fell into three main parts: convening, maintaining and closing the site.

I developed my goals and expectations as a site moderator through three strands of experience. The first was the position I had held as volunteer moderator for eWorld, Apple's now defunct online service (1995-96). I had visited and chatted in the women's section several times when one of the hosts suggested I apply for a position. Even though most of the hosts were US-based, my location (Cambridge, UK) did not count against me and I interviewed in real-time chat at midnight my time. My interviewer coached me with the basics of online expression and I was hired on the spot. I received further online training through eWorld as well as informal pointers from other hosts during chat sessions. The atmosphere among the hosts was supportive but not uncritical. If a new host were to speak out of line or present herself inappropriately, she would be notified immediately. Suggestions on how to improve one's style were always forthcoming and delivered with grace.

The eWorld environment itself was generous and welcoming. It was easy to become familiar with regular visitors, since we would all share information about our whereabouts and interests. In 1995 news of Internet stalking had not broken and, with a subscriber base of only 125,000, eWorld hardly counted as a teeming, online metropolis. It didn't take long before I recognised, for example, the login names of a doctor in San Francisco and a young woman in Germany who had recently had a knee operation. It was friendly and the conversations were easy, like the chatter at a yard sale or in the lineup at a concert. I credit the women who created this environment with having established this kind of discourse. It was a safe place, which welcomed a brand of humour characterised by wordplay, irony and comic reflections on the medium itself.

My work at the Ministry also helped me develop a sense of what moderating a policy forum might entail. Early in 1999, I had been recruited by the Ministry advisory committee on technology (TLETAC) as a research assistant to one of their sub-committees. In writing

an annotated bibliography for the final report (*Conditions for Success*), I drew on many of my own readings. These pertained to the social impact of technology, the inherent value of bringing new technologies to bear on education practice and – in particular – the implication of teaching children remotely, via the Internet. In working for this committee, I had an opportunity to attend meetings moderated by a policy consultant who had been jointly recruited by the BC Teachers' Federation and the Ministry. I watched how she kept time and order amongst these people while, on occasion, several would request the floor at once. These people had a very limited amount of time in which to agree on the principles for planning educational technology policy in BC. Despite the evident conflicts that arose, the meetings swept ahead regardless and (incredibly, to me) documents were submitted, edited and published. I do not say that I hoped to mimic all of the skills she displayed, especially since the PKPF did not aim to produce a collaboratively authored document, only the discussions themselves. Nonetheless, I certainly learned how it might be possible to steer a straight course around numerous conflicting opinions without aggravating the conflict further. I hoped to convey a similar sense of generosity and hospitality toward a diverse set of opinions in my own work as a moderator. This was a space for others to shape as they would. I exhorted, "Please feel free to contribute your own [questions] and to direct the debate as you see fit" (*Educator Training & Support*; 23 Nov. 1999). Here I actually used the word "free," suggesting that we value the freedom of expression in public spaces.

The second strand of experience was my reading of the online moderation literature. I drew heavily on the work of John Coate (1997), who emphasises the importance of hospitality in online settings. As a moderator you are effectively the host of a gathering and must learn to hold entertaining exchanges or your guests will not return. They might need to be gracious, informal conversations, but they could equally be characterised by hostility and ritualised put-downs. The point is, the host needs to establish the colour and character of the environment from the outset. Knowing how to establish rules of engagement with participants and when to step in to see that these are followed are both crucial aspects of the host or moderator's role. Visitors must know - more or less - how they are expected to behave from the outset, so that everyone can be sure of a consistent environment in which the rules are clear. There are bound to be skirmishes on the periphery if people disagree about the "true" character of the environment, as described by Giese (1996), but an element of soul-

searching can be a valuable ritual to members of any community (Dibbell, 1996). If we assume that most of the visitors are strangers to each other at the beginning, it is important to err on the side of caution if you want your witty, provocative comments to cause laughter rather than offence. I drew heavily on Howard Rheingold's recent guidelines for online behaviour (<http://www.rheingold.com>); these were a great help in shaping my attitude towards - what I hoped would be - a mature, professional environment characterised by informed debate.

The education literature corroborated my understanding of what made a "good" conferencing environment. Kuehn (1994), for example, found that "a conversational style of teacher messaging produces the highest levels of student participation" (p. 175, in Mackinnon & Aylward, 2000). I deduced that maintaining a somewhat casual interaction style would encourage people to post; excessive formality might make the environment seem forbidding to those visitors who were unfamiliar with the bulletin board format or with the material we had posted. I was conscious that, since a person's presence is declared by their text alone, I would have to be careful with what I said. How might the online discourse be affected (or not) by the removal of all physical and spatial cues? These include nodding, smiling or gesturing, "go on" (Kimball, 1996); as moderator, I would also be unable to walk among the participants as they worked, observe the groups they formed by themselves, or notice which discussions broke away from the assigned task and covered new ground. Nonetheless, I could follow the advice of Mackinnon and Aylward (2000), offering "periodic input" (p. 59) posting messages to "clarify, to focus, to pose related queries, or to lend closure to non-productive asides" (ibid.). My initial concern, then, was with promoting cohesive, collaborative groups in online settings. I was interested in the possible development of new language practices here, with specific reference to the role of teachers' interventions (Kimball, 1996; Powers & Mitchell, 1997; Johnson, 1995; Tagg, 1994). I asked, "What was the impact of these interventions on the shape, direction and 'classroom' atmosphere? How did the literature describe these phenomena? How might I help to foster fruitful, engaging and relevant discussions?"

In conceptualising what this environment actually was and how it might be perceived by our participants, I found Markham's (1998) categories of online interactions to be invaluable. She divides her own, online research participants by those who view computer-mediated

communication as a *tool*, those who conceive of it as a *place* and those for whom it has become a *way of being*. In some settings the communications may be viewed as a tool, simply for getting information across, for getting the job done. Her second category, *place*, has resonated most strongly with me because it takes our thinking about online interaction a step further. It suggests that forum or classroom contributors might conceive of their activities as the means to co-construct an environment in which they can (to a limited extent) live, share experiences, negotiate appropriate behaviours, reflect on their thinking and, in fact, replicate a number of the interactions which characterise staff room or policy committee talk. In this way, a shared virtual space can also become something of a collective virtual brain: a reflective, inquisitive, inspiring place. So much has been made of the lack of physicality (Streibel, 1998) in virtual classrooms that it is easy to be sidetracked. While our physical beings and voices can be filtered out online, I would argue that, as educators, reflection on our language practices will allow for the preservation of a significant portion of the linguistic richness of in-person policy debate.

For educators, the last category – “Way of Being” - remains troubled. Two teachers commented to me in January that, while their children were more than happy to invest many hours and a great deal of emotion in their online interactions, for them it remained a cold medium, with the same personal and cultural significance as a red letterbox in the UK. They did not see it as an environment which they might “inhabit” psychologically. Such large scale personal transformations - to a situation where our sense of agency is greatly invested in the life online - have not taken place yet. As one interview participant observed, “the web is not a place where I feel I can participate... I use email for that” (Joe, May 30).

The literature in online forum moderation also offered valuable insights into managing online discourse warmly and reminded me that vigilance in our online language practices is essential (Rheingold, 1993; Coate, 1997). Since my main goal was to promote dialogue, I wanted - if it were at all possible - to diminish participants’ (possible) communication anxiety in any way I could. The more our visitors spoke up, the greater the possibilities for improving the quality of public participation in decision-making. This participation might then be the means to developing a more sophisticated public understanding about the issues at hand and the processes by which they are resolved.

I therefore hoped to appear friendly, approachable and - most importantly - available for

comment or assistance within an hour or two of an email being sent. I wanted to stay away from feedback that seemed too critical or divisive. I knew that many opinions could be represented and that consensus would be unlikely if not impossible. I therefore gave an account of myself in the forum (Public Knowledge Policy Forum, ) as follows:

Author: Shula Klinger (research4.csci.educ.ubc.ca)

Date: 11-22-1999 15:48

*"A community... online?"*

As I'm sure many of you know, there has been a lot of talk about "online communities" in recent years. The potential of the Internet to bring together people of different cultures and beliefs, to share knowledge and build understanding, to forge bonds with colleagues and peers whom we would never have met otherwise and still may never meet in person...

To some extent we hope to promote a sense of community here. We invite the opinions of people who share a common interest in educational technology, whose interest is rooted in the province of British Columbia and who have a stake in the policy determined by the Ministry. It is, however, a brief gathering, akin to a professional development conference or a public debate at a town hall. The site will be running until January 31st, 2000, so we do encourage you to step up to the podium as soon as you choose.

*New to online discussion?*

This is the first site of its kind in BC and it may be the first opportunity you have had to take part in a web-based discussion. As you find your way through the site, please don't hesitate to ask me by email if you find any part of it difficult to navigate. This is an experiment in public policy, so we'd like to hear how we might improve later incarnations of the site.

*Come in and relax*

In the meantime, I'd like the forum area to be a welcoming place for us to share our experiences and perspectives. If we were able to furnish this site, we'd include comfortable chairs, endless supplies of coffee and plenty of cinnamon buns.

*Your forum, your privacy*

You can remain anonymous in your contributions if you wish<sup>1</sup> by omitting your name and email address from the message fields. However, if you do include your personal details, your pithy observations may well be featured in our "quote of the week" section.

Any questions or concerns voiced to me privately, by email, will remain so. Nothing sent to my inbox will ever be copied, pasted or distributed without permission. We

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<sup>1</sup> This offer directly contradicted the wishes of the Ministry of Education Technology Branch. They wanted to know who each contributor was, they told me; this would allow them to "filter" their understanding of each message depending on its origin.

value your contributions and trust that all contributors in this space - although virtual - will be afforded the same dignity as if they were speaking before an audience.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you,  
Your moderator,

Shula Klinger

I had read that "it is fundamentally important to encourage the psychological feeling of belonging to a group" (Davie & Wells, 1991, p. 18), and took this advice seriously. I hoped to convey my desire for a gracious, dignified environment in which differences of opinion could be respected. Since the PKPF was a non-linear document, I knew that not all visitors would find their way here, so I also posted individual welcome messages to each topic. The welcome messages included a brief reference to *Conditions for Success* and a short, bulleted list of suggested topics for further discussion. Although it closed with a friendly salutation, my language was more formal than the friendly address above. This was because I was imagining myself standing on a podium, giving a keynote address, a responsibility to which I am genuinely unaccustomed. My formality was a way of raising my (graduate student's) voice both in terms of status and volume. I was responding to a ministry document. It seemed fitting to boom a little, even if few of these welcome messages developed into threads of any length. In the end, visitors mostly started their own threads, interpreting the forum topic (such as *Visions & Principles* or *Student Needs & Expectations*) as the question on which further discussion should be founded. In my efforts to maintain the dialogue on the forum, I also sent private welcome messages to every participant, where email addresses were given.

The questions I faced as the moderator of this site were many. Which conversations did I join? Which participants did I respond to in private and which in public, on the forum itself? As Mill (1869) comments, "all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility" (in Acton (1972), p.79). Was the power to silence discussion mine? What other influences were at work among the participants in their external social, political and professional lives? I was challenged on what I thought constituted "useful" and therefore "good" discussion. For example, did I expect or hope that everyone on the forum might agree by the end of the debate period? Did I value resolution over conflict, answers over questions? And what kind of information did I privilege? Did I read accounts of personal experience more closely than densely referenced arguments? Or was I pushing visitors toward Ministry materials? What value did I appear to attach to the Resource section?

As the moderator, I represented the PKPF team, based at a university and working in collaboration with the BCTF as well as the Ministry, to a limited extent: I described myself on the site as a former research assistant to the Ministry committee. It said nothing about my engagement with the BC Teachers' Federation, but it did not reveal my origins (i.e. that I was not a BC teacher). I wanted to remain as neutral in my presentation as possible, to avoid giving the impression that I was pushing the Ministry documents at people, or that I was uncritically pro-technology. My understanding of the site population, based on my conversations with teachers, was of people who had plenty of one-way information streams delivered to them already. They were, I felt, in greater need of a forum in which to expand their *own* understanding and to form collegial links. I do not attach an atmosphere of resentment to this observation, I merely wish to convey the sense that the teachers see the Ministry as a population separate from their own. At the risk of stating the obvious, this research will demonstrate that teachers seemed not to see the Ministry (or the BCTF, for that matter) as being of the same "community," as having the same priorities, goals and understanding of their profession.

Even as I worked on the PKPF site, my understanding of the parties involved deepened, through face-to-face conversations and extensive email correspondence. Several site participants were extremely frank about their concerns, which greatly challenged my confidence in the contribution we could make. A researcher's growing understanding of an environment increases the richness and detail of the report she is able to give, but it also teaches her what to expect from each party. These expectations of a research environment and the people who inhabit it will direct the research questions a researcher asks. I struggled to remain neutral and lay my expectations aside, fearing that the unthinking enacting of them would skew both the questions I asked and the results I got.

Most of what I know about hosting in asynchronous, virtual settings I learned through doing it. I struggled throughout with a set of challenges quite apart from my research interests in policy debate and educational technology, wondering what is "good" moderation? How far can and should the moderator influence the form and content of conversation about education policy? The biggest challenge was - of course - bringing participants to the forum at all. The hypothesis that a moderator would be sufficient for this task (without the coordinated efforts of a marketing and public relations team as well) seems to have been

disproved.

The site was changed continuously, even after the November launch date. We wanted to keep the home page lively to reinforce the impression of a dynamic environment, so that regular visitors (including ourselves) did not become bored with its appearance. These changes were also made with the cooperation and assistance of forum participants. An elementary teacher in Coquitlam who was also enrolled in the Masters Program in Education at SFU wrote to me asking if she could post her questionnaires on our site. I encouraged her to do so and flagged her request on the home page that week. She had also drawn up a comprehensive list of BC-based web sites and research resources, so I added a link to this too, entitled "Made in BC." This was in direct response to a comment from another participant who had found the database lacking in BC-specific content.

Each week we quoted recent participants on the home page. Any comments which struck me as being observant, witty or simply heartfelt were copied with links to their home location within the forum. The HTML was changed by Henry Kang as soon as he received the URLs from me. One week we quoted a high school student from the island who had posted a thoughtful comment to the site. I later heard from the student's teacher that he had been delighted by this.

#### Closure: March, 2000

The site closed its doors to contributions on March 1, 2000. This came after a correspondence between myself and a colleague at the BCTF about the possibilities for continuing the forum after the end of February. The final decision was made in correspondence between the site's project manager and the BCTF. Since the site was under their auspices, my role was coming to an end. They were not able to employ a moderator of their own at this point, so continuing seemed impossible. The other route open was to freeze the site, so that it would remain online as a "read-only" document. This proved to be impossible, however, so I was advised to post notices of closure on the web site with immediate effect. It was a brief message and one which I was sorry to post. Having developed good working relationships with a number of participants over the previous three months, I contacted this group individually to let them know what was happening. Then, as soon as I had finalised the text with the project's lead investigator, I posted official (public) closure notices to each forum.

Also, a message was posted on the home page in red text, advising chance visitors that, “The feedback process is now complete and the site’s effectiveness is now being analysed. Although the site’s discussion and advice forums are closed, you are still welcome to use the resources database which provides links to key topics in educational technology.”

#### Participant Interviews: March-May, 2000

Interview questions were developed in early March, in consultation with the project’s principal investigator, Dr. John Willinsky and Dr. Pamela Courtenay-Hall, a UBC professor with whom I was taking a policy course at the time (for interview questions see Appendix 2). I had initially been curious about the number and identity of site participants. Who would step forward? Would they be teachers, parents, students, principals or policy makers? How many would there be? It soon became clear that the vast majority of participants were not members of the public but professionals: teachers, distance or online educators, staff of the Open Learning Agency or the BCTF. I then started asking more detailed questions. Why were teachers choosing or not choosing to participate? If they did join, what had their experience of policy making been beforehand?

Although every school in the province received notification about the site, teachers in the vast majority did not take part. For those teachers who did not contribute, was their silence owing to lack of time, the technological expertise to access the debate or perhaps a lack of confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully? There was also the chance that they had simply not heard about the forum. Of course, accessing the views of non-participants was my biggest challenge, because visitors who had read without posting left no evidence of their stay. Most of the commentary I have on the silent majority is therefore derived from accounts given by teachers who did actually speak up but were also prepared to recount their experiences with less confident or technologically fluent colleagues.

As soon as the forum closed, I wrote to every participant who had posted an email address asking for an interview. I offered a face-to-face conversation, a telephone interview, or the opportunity to respond by email. I originally suggested that interviews be conducted as a correspondence by email, but once I had been interviewed myself by email (March-April 2000), I started to realise the time commitment this implied. They can be draining and rather intense, since it is hard to convey “I am tired and need a break” to a person one barely knows. The conversation can also proliferate, being unbounded by time, and the questions

may seem relentless.

The emailed interview questions were then sent as an email attachment on two pages of a Microsoft Word document. I saved it as an RTF file so that Mac and PC users were able to read it. I also emailed the document to participants who had consented to a telephone interview. Since I did not know several of them in person, this gave them a chance to do some advance preparation and to feel as relaxed as possible during our conversation.

Having established some basic background data, (years in teaching, patterns of computer use, involvement in policy-making) my questions elicited general feedback on the site design and on the ease with which they had found their way around. I also asked them how they had engaged with the various materials provided by the site: did they focus entirely on the conversations or did they spend some time reading documents in the database? Which aspects of it had been the most helpful and which had been less so? Why?

Next, I was interested in learning about the impact the site had had on their understanding of contributing to policy in process. I therefore took the conversation toward a discussion of the site's general principles. Were its general aims appropriate? Did it respond to a genuine need of BC teachers? Did they feel that the site had an impact on the degree or nature of public contributions to the policy making process? I then asked them to reflect on this question from their own experience. Had the site allowed them to find mentors or peers with similar experiences to share, or to locate literature which supported or added to their pedagogical knowledge? Finally, I asked them if they contributed to policy development before so that I might establish whether there was a link between their previous experience and the expectation that they had something useful to offer on this occasion.

Of the 69 authors who contributed to the forum, I interviewed 12 men and 5 women. I also interviewed one Ministry participant who'd chosen not to post, a member of the BCTF development team and a Ministry staff person responsible for collating the results of public policy consultations. Although these individuals had not posted, they had a keen interest in the progress of the forum. Our conversations helped to broaden my understanding of the site's implications for policy makers, and the lessons learned for future debates.

I received responses from ten participants within three days of sending out my requests. However, not all participants who agreed to be interviewed sent back the online questions I had written. I wrote again some weeks later, but received no replies and let the matter drop. I

interviewed the site's most regular contributor and another who had read a great deal but expressed none of her own opinions. I interviewed two others who had read little but posted twice and another contributor who had read everything on the site, posting only replies to others.

Each interview was subtly different, depending on each respondent's motive for contributing. The Ministry personnel were asked about the site's value as a medium for gauging and responding to public opinion. From them, I hoped to learn about its potential as the means to enhance the quality of discussion between government and professionals. Their feedback was especially valuable to me since the Ministry was the ultimate destination for the text we had facilitated; furthermore, the officers of the Education Technology Branch only posted one message between them, making our interview dialogue all the more valuable. As I mentioned above, most conclusions reached by online researchers about lurking participants can be no more than conjecture (if not complete fiction). In our case, we were able to review the project methodology in cooperation with the government, learning from our early attempts to facilitate dialogue from numerous angles. Was the site immediate and engaging? What other kinds of data might we have sourced from this medium, and was dialogue (social exchanges of information and opinion) the only possibility? What about instant polls based on simple agree/disagree questions?

Likewise, an interview with a BCTF staff member brought material on the value of online communications media to a union. In this conversation I learned a great deal about the BCTF's twenty-year history of using networked computers among its leadership. I found that protocols of communication had long been in place, but the web was a new tool and one which operated on a different set of social assumptions. I also interviewed a former CUPE staff member and journalist (now a teacher), teachers who had taught from between two and thirty seven years located in the lower mainland, on Vancouver Island and in the Kootenay region, a graduate student whose work had itself been in online communications and a graduate student in education from Denmark.

The PKPF was not operating in a political or professional vacuum and it was far from being the first opportunity that some of our participants had contributed to policy development. Knowing that these processes can be complex and challenging, I hoped to develop a medium that was open and light (without being trivial) and yet which merited the

contributors' intellectual and political efforts. It responded to the BCTF's call for greater participation in policy processes without limiting attendance to eight delegates per school district, or demanding that teachers find replacements for their time out of the classroom. Participation was not limited to school hours, nor was it influenced by school budget considerations.

As part of my research approach, I felt it important to establish the participants' attitudes towards and experience with previous policy consultations. Several participants described their previous experiences of policy development to me. One said that she "enjoyed [her previous contributions to policy development] immensely." However, she added ruefully, "in the end, I thought it produced little in terms of change and results for classrooms. I was naïve, I thought something might come of it... I would think carefully about spending the better part of a school year working on something that produces negligible results" (Anna, March 26). Another participant commented that "All curriculum is politically determined and I don't think educational considerations or educators' opinions are the foremost determining factors in Ministry policy" (Alan, March 26). Another participant argued for urgent changes to the communications infrastructure in BC Education, say that "teachers' voices finally have to be heard in the policy making process" (Joe, May 30). Kevin was totally in favour of "anything that can be gathered and used as ammunition to get the government moving" (April 2). He described his response to hearing about the PKPF, "I wasn't so sure how it would actually move the powers that be, but you just never know, and I thought... maybe this is the time... things were on the move... momentum was building... maybe this was the big push that would do it."

The PKPF participants quoted above range in perspective from skeptical to guardedly optimistic. Others, however, spoke warmly about the opportunity the site afforded them. For example, Gregg considered that "it is tremendously empowering to participate in such a forum and have one's comments seriously considered. Educational practitioners need to have a forum" (March 26). I shall pursue this theme of empowerment in Chapter Five. I understand the characteristics of empowerment to be "the courage to state an intellectual position, to support one's stand with well-constructed arguments, to be flexible enough to consider challenges to one's position and to modify one's position as a result of dialogue with others" (Davie & Wells, 1991, p. 16).

Derek, too, commented that the site was “a good way to ‘take the pulse’ of the education community” (April, 2000). He added that “The PKPF was an effective way to bring together the thinking of a diverse population of educators and others.” Emma also responded warmly, arguing that “this is a good way for...someone like me [a beginning teacher] to get involved” (March 25).

A Ministry officer working in the area of public consultation also spoke positively about the potential of online fora from the government’s perspective (for full interview transcript see Appendix 3). He had not taken part in the PKPF, but as the person responsible for developing research methodologies at the Ministry, his task was to handle the logistics of interpreting and summarising public feedback to new policy developments. He described the benefits of conducting feedback through the medium of dialogue rather than survey instruments as follows:

A disadvantage [of soliciting feedback through questionnaires] is that provision of crude response categories can entirely miss unanticipated responses, lose nuances that give real understanding or even suggest responses that participants might not have made unprompted. Unstructured responses give a richness of texture that is entirely missing from most surveys. [They] can flesh out a wider range of responses.

In more detail, he went on:

A strength of the medium is that venues for input can probably be operated at lower cost, so that more frequent measures can be taken of public positions on issues. Turnaround time for information might be reduced. Another strength is that this medium can support continued dialogues and evolving positions and perspectives. It goes beyond a single, fixed response and can operate more like a panel or a longitudinal study. (Andrew, email correspondence, 15 May 2001)

### Methodological Concerns

Before describing the analytical backdrop against which I examined the PKPF discussions, the following section tackles some of the methodological concerns which arose during the research process. It unravels some of the complexities of conducting participant observation online, arguing that, while the notion of participant observation may be familiar to us, its practice in online settings presents some unfamiliar conundrums. Put simply, this section takes into account the human context in which the PKPF text was located. It serves as a reminder that, while the online discussions did not take place between people who could see each other, they were nonetheless real interactions between individuals and groups who were thoroughly invested in these exchanges. It also responds to the concerns, recently articulated

in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, that “on-line researchers are not consistently employing the safeguards that are used to protect participants in traditional research” (Hamilton, 1999, B6).

Since I had two roles within the PKPF, my methodological concerns were twofold. First, I hoped to conduct academic research using the web site, both as the means of collecting data and as the “field” itself. It was here that the participants would congregate, share and debate ideas; it was also here that I would be copying and pasting text into my own research writing. Next, I had been hired to work as the moderator and therefore hoped to provide a “sense of continuity” (Gregg) for visitors who might otherwise feel that there was no “central link” (Kevin) to the gathering.

The moderator’s role, as I have said before, was largely to fuel the conversation by drawing attention to appropriate reading materials and encouraging those with similar interests to continue the discussion together. I hoped that my contributions would support and validate the author’s efforts. Most of all, I was cautious about striking a good balance between being interested and simply being intrusive. I understood this dual role to be somewhat delicate and spent a great deal of time considering what it meant to research *and* to moderate “ethically.” At times, the dual nature of this work presented me with ethical challenges of its own. These concerns are expressed as a continuing thread throughout this chapter.

This chapter reflects the view that our current methodological – and ethical – preoccupation needs to be in understanding how contributors operate within a virtual, political medium. It is concerned with how, as educators, we can use this understanding to create an environment in which contributors can approach new topics and revisit old ones safely, and possibly take action as a result of their learning. My concern has been with developing and sustaining online groups in which individuals can enjoy a sense of engagement and ownership of their virtual space for as long as this is deemed necessary.

Although I had read about the ethics of conducting online research before I embarked on this project, it was my first opportunity to put my theoretical understanding into practice. The reading showed me that choosing to conduct one’s research online meant grappling with many unfamiliar ethical challenges. Having determined what one’s questions are, “access” to the desired population will likely be gained via email or the Internet. Word of mouth referrals

may also help to promote interest in the research project, but the researcher rarely knows when this is the case and certainly cannot count on it. But what does it mean to “gain access” to an online population? Does it simply mean that you have secured the email address of a participant? And do you use the address as soon as it arrives in your inbox, courtesy of the forum administration software? Or is there a polite period to wait before entering into private correspondence with the author? Email and other online communications can help to shorten the period between learning of potential participants and getting a message to them. However, time is not always of the essence. Email may not require paper but it can still qualify as junk. Moreover, an online researcher needs to learn patience because teachers are not living in “Internet time” like graduate students do: they may not get to their email more than once every few days, if that. It may only take a second to send an email, but, unless someone is explicitly asking for help, a rapid response time may come across as impatience or excessive eagerness, both of which may prove irritating.

As the site moderator, I was also responsible for raising public awareness about the site. In this role, the period of “gaining access” was continuous. Although the number of participants rose at varying rates throughout the life of the forum, there was no point at which I could say that we had “enough” participants. When a project’s aims have to do with the quality of public debate, there is no fixed sample size and no point at which you can say you have “finished.” Until it was clear that the forum was coming to a close, I continued to send out welcome messages, encouraging participants to carry on the conversations they had started.

As both moderator and researcher, I hoped that a large number of contributors would visit the site. However, even though the desired outcome was the same, the dual motivations sometimes seemed to be in conflict one another. As a researcher seeking participants, one hopes to invite rather than advertise. However, given that our field was online, we could not approach them in traditional ways first and this “advertising” was a necessary factor in raising awareness about the policy debate and the research. As time went by and I realised that Ministry officials would not be contributing regularly to the debate, I also became concerned about the kind of advertising we were doing. The home page described the site as a place to deliberate about, and advise the government on, the direction of the new policy. While Ministry staff were indeed reading the site, they left no evidence of their visits and I

was concerned that their invisibility might perpetuate the sense, among disenfranchised teachers, that they were simply being invited to talk amongst themselves, a conversation which might be helpful but would certainly prove less influential than one targetted at decision-makers.

I had also thought of inviting public figures in education such as well-known researchers in educational technology. The idea had been to profile them and, perhaps, bring their work into the spotlight for discussion. Eventually, I dropped the idea for several reasons. First of all, there simply weren't enough participants to merit inviting a "speaker." The pace of discussion could not be guaranteed and I did not want to give anyone the impression that they were speaking to an empty hall. Furthermore, I had quickly become aware that some participants were acutely aware of their own status within the BC education system, and they brought this awareness with them in the forays online. More than one participant told me that this affected the amount of time and effort they put into composing their messages, while others simply chose not to post at all, preferring to read instead. Were I to draw attention to the profile of "visiting" academics or government personnel, I reasoned, this might exacerbate the sense of status inequality within the discussion. In the end, I did contact professors who I thought might be interested, but did not flag any postings as being more influential or weighty.

Developing trust with research participants was also a key preoccupation. How does one do this in qualitative research settings? By asking questions which demonstrate the researcher's concern for the people who live and work in that setting, by attending to the routines and rhythms of that setting and taking care to excuse oneself from situations in which one's attendance may inhibit those routines.

However, in a silent environment which prohibits the engagement of our physical selves, even the most scrupulous scholars find themselves challenged to conduct their inquiries responsibly and compassionately (Thomas, 1996). We cannot ascertain from a participant's body language that he or she is becoming uncomfortable with the direction our conversation has taken. We cannot hear an altercation in the school gym resonating down the hallway and know that this is a place to avoid for a while. We cannot offer the subtle physical cues of nodding or smiling to teachers whose virtual classes we are observing. "Listening" to our participants takes on a new meaning, as we are unable to practice the tact and empathy we

have learned in methodology classes in familiar ways.

With a potential population as large as the number of working teachers in British Columbia, I was aware that a wide range of technical ability could be represented. This ability might range from first-time internet users to experienced real-time chatters, typing sixty words a minute while simultaneously projecting a web-site to a colleague. This range of experience - or literacy - would have a bearing on the ways in which different visitors to the PKPF would use it: the longer one has used the internet and the more chatrooms, discussion boards and listservs one has participated in, the more one begins to see the nuances in etiquette between these various media.<sup>2</sup> How could I be sure that my attempts to develop trust with members of this diverse population would not be misconstrued? My understanding of what constitutes a gentle approach might not be the same as somebody else's, which can lend a feeling of walking on egg shells to one's early correspondence.

In situations where I felt a good rapport was developing, such as with Bruce, Leah, William and Gregg, I let down my guard a little and developed a more social correspondence style. With Derek it was more straightforward, since I had met him before seeing his messages on the forum. I already had a sense of what interested him and what his concerns were, and could therefore pinpoint appropriate readings for him without a lengthy correspondence beforehand.

In one case, however, trust had to be regained even before it had been properly established. Here, a staff member of a BC education agency had been reading over Electronic Delivery and felt that I was promoting antipathy towards his organisation. The gentleman in question wrote me a personal email letting me know of his dissatisfaction, at which I swiftly apologised, deleted the posting to which he objected. I also saw to it that the news of his agency's research program was posted on the forum home page. He was pleased with the result, but the exchange left me feeling extremely wary.

It can therefore be as intimidating to approach strangers online as it is in person, especially when one senses that discontent is brewing. While we are invisible and largely anonymous to these people, we are still more than capable of embarrassing ourselves and experience a degree of social anxiety. The job demands tact and an ability to recover one's

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<sup>2</sup> Over time, email users drop the greetings and salutations of printed letters, capital letters become scarce and full sentences become optional. Entire words are never capitalised in conversation with a stranger since this is understood as "shouting".

composure as an earnest seeker after truth rather than as someone who looks blundering and ill-informed.

In cases where an online researcher loses the trust of the research participants altogether, it is difficult to bring them back into a study. The researcher cannot “run into” them by accident and strike up a friendly conversation, and she doesn’t necessarily know of any mutual acquaintances who can be relied upon to encourage them back into the study. Contacting the former participant by email to ask “are you still interested in being a part of this project?” more than once might be construed as heckling. In an environment like the PKPF, the roles of watcher and watched may also be reversed: where once the researcher posted occasionally but read every message which appeared, a disgruntled participant may now come to the forum incognito, reading messages but leaving no mark of his or her attendance. This participant has effectively jumped off the stage into the audience, leaving the researcher in the onstage “performance” (Anna, March 26) with the remaining contributors.

Compare this situation to a more traditional field-work setting. Suppose that a child feels that there has been a breakdown in communication with a researcher and withdraws from a classroom study. The child still knows that this person will be on the periphery of classroom conversations with other participants. In watching others interact with the researcher, the child might regain her confidence in the researcher and enter into dialogue once more.

#### Virtual “Fieldwork”

What do we mean by “field work” when the field is virtual, not physical? Online, there is no physical school and there are no set meeting times. As the host of the medium, I may be aware that I am in a research environment with every foray into the PKPF. However, my research participants may have forgotten. Of course, the “Terms of Participation” indicated that this was indeed a research environment, but since a web site is not a linear document, some readers may have never even seen it. As Hamilton (1999) notes, even if an online researcher is exceptionally scrupulous, including a debriefing page for participants on completing the project, one cannot make a participant read it. “Researchers have... little control over the nature of participants’ experiences in on-line research” (Section B, p. 6).

As the site’s moderator, I was mostly concerned with the policy debate we were hosting and therefore did not take pains to remind visitors that we were using their contributions as

data (evidently, my priorities switched around the moment the site had closed). Had they taken the trouble to read about the PKP project team on the site, they would have come away with a more detailed understanding about who we were and what we hoped to achieve. In talking to some participants after the site closed, I found that, in several cases, their memory of the site was sketchy. They were unclear on how the site had been laid out, which parts of it they had used and even - in some cases - the number and quality of their own contributions. The participants who were absolutely clear that it had been a research environment said that this had not bothered them. One respondent even said that it had added weight to his conviction that taking part was imperative. The interviewees who had not been clear about the PKPF's status as a research site told me that this would not have altered their decision to contribute; it is important, though, to recognise that those who did experience some discomfort - perhaps on receiving my request for an interview - simply deselected themselves from the study. This potential for rendering oneself invisible to the researcher can prove frustrating. A researcher may be satisfied to find an online population with the capacity to help her answer her research questions. At the outset, she may feel as though she has secured a sure population, but her grasp on this population is extremely tenuous, as are the bonds of trust which emerge between her and individuals within the group.

In essence, then, my work may have included covert observation, but it was a strangely complex situation: in physical settings, a researcher knows when she is covert. She simply omits to tell the members of the community she is in that she is recording their activities for research purposes. For as long as they are ignorant of her intentions, the same relationship is maintained between researcher and researched. This may also be true online, where, like Herring (1996) and Wilhelm (2000), one seeks naturalistic data which has not been skewed by the presence - or the "glare," as Wilhelm puts it - of an outsider. Both authors rely on the fact that the internet is a public medium and that permission to use the communications of others for research purposes need not be sought or granted. Certainly, there are tremendous advantages to this kind of research because the medium of interaction and the medium of recording are one and the same: text. Online conversations represent instant data: there are no tapes to rewind or transcribe and we can enter the material in our own writing in only the time it takes to select "copy/paste."

In the PKPF, however, there was potential for discontinuity in the understanding of the

research participants. I could not know whether the message I was reading was written by someone who knew that I was a researcher, who knew but had temporarily forgotten, or who never knew. I might think I am doing overt participant observation, but the participant himself has no idea. On the other hand, a different participant may be in regular contact with me, sharing research literature and asking me how my studies are going. The relationship between the PKPF researcher and the participants was therefore complex, where the understanding of different participants of the environment had the potential to differ greatly.

There were other considerations, too, which concern the nature of a teacher's work and domain and the relationship between the teaching and research communities. Unlike adults in many other professions, teachers are commonly observed during their daily work. Not only are they subject to frequent scrutiny in the media, they may, reluctantly, be accustomed to having their practices observed by outsiders (Emma, interview). Having called teacher librarians to gather quotations for my TLETAC work, I found that an educational technology research project is not always the most welcome calling card. A slow approach was often best. In one case, I took several minutes to explain that, while I was indeed working with technology, I did not expect the teacher to bear witness to the tremendous, enabling value of technology in elementary schools. As a researcher in the PKPF, I therefore took care not to assume that a teacher's door was always open, even if the door was only a virtual one. The real-world corollary of covert online observation, then, would be entering the classroom while the teacher's back is turned, sitting down and fixing one's gaze on her, unannounced.

There is a reported tension between authors who advocate covert investigations and those who call for ethnographic descriptions of lived experience with online participants (Baym, 1996; Markham, 1998). Herring (1996) and Wilhelm (2000), both discourse analysts, argue in favour of covert research practices. In making text the main player, these discourse analysts explore the sociolinguistic features of online talk. This talk may be used as a tool for examining group formation, knowledge sharing and power structures. In admitting the theories and practice of conversational analysis in classrooms and other group settings, it can be readily transposed to the online environment.

As mentioned above, Wilhelm and Herring defend their data gathering methods in the name of securing naturalistic data which have not been tampered with through the interactions of the researcher. On the other side, we find Waskul and Douglass (1996), who

advise us to advance cautiously and purposefully within our research environment, seeking to understand the population's *own* definition of the borders between private and public spaces.

Thomas (1996) also argues that:

Responsible and ethical research is not a matter of codes, policy or procedure. Rather, responsible and ethical research centres on a commitment to protect the participants of one's study from potential harm. Such a commitment necessitates a keen eye on... the interpersonal dynamics of the group, and the implicit, as well as explicit, structure of group interaction. (p.130)

Thomas uses "harm" to mean "the loss of dignity, self-esteem, personal autonomy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and the disruption of day-to-day activities (Sullivan, 1993)" (p. 133). Online, where "it is not possible to safeguard the emotional well-being of participants in [familiar] ways" (Hamilton, 1999), it is doubly important to take this advice seriously. In talking to PKPF participants, I heard harmful situations described as "professional risk" and their fears for self-expression as "being too contentious." This contention concerned one cautious participant who feared damaging her academic progress by "things [she] might say online" (Leah, Interview).

Thomas (1996) goes on to describe ethical research in virtual settings as a continual process of negotiation. Discourse analysis, however, does not necessitate this type of commitment to a setting. It allows the researcher to determine an inflexible ethical code or policy, collect data and then retreat. Where the socially defined meanings of "public" and "private" are established through dialogue with participants, Thomas says, the researcher can be a great deal more certain that a high standard of ethical inquiry has been met. Here, the sensitivities and boundaries observed have been those of the group under study, and not those imposed by the researcher.

These subtleties may not be immediately evident to the online researcher, especially when she is not party to the teaching culture to which her contributors belong; when she is also the moderator of the forum, it is doubly challenging to determine where these boundaries lie, because she has a hand and a spade in building their foundations. King's (1996) work offered powerful corroboration for my sense that caution and patience would be important features of my own manner of conducting online research. King describes a research project conducted in an online support group for sexual abuse survivors. Members were not asked for their permission before publication and subsequently suffered great

distress at finding this safe, private environment destroyed.

These discussions over the boundaries between private and public are evidence of a concern greater than the location of our academic flagpoles. They tell us that – apart from not knowing where we should plant our stakes – we don't even know what the territory *is*. If we conduct research on our participants' discourse alone, we are treating the environment as a set of symbolic exchanges, the exchange of text. We are not necessarily accepting its potential as the place where a person's self-esteem, private concerns and political beliefs may also be invested. Furthermore, there is no sense that the interactions as a whole represent the articulation of a culture or a community and that any external code of etiquette needs to be observed. The researcher who, like Wilhelm (2000), reaps the text and retreats to harvest his meaning has invested none of his own social being in the environment, nor has he considered the quality of his own responsibility to the speakers whose words he is now using to further his own ends. Are their words now his? Was their ownership ever in question?

The vague distinctions between covert and overt research in this domain are not merely a matter of concern for the researcher concerned about “doing her best” in the environment. Let's set aside the ethical problem of covert research now, and pay attention to its methodological features. After all, what is an emotionally charged ethical question for one person may simply be a momentary methodological dilemma for someone else. Wilhelm (2000) tells us, for example, that he was only interested in the dialogue which he found online and paid no attention to any external features of his research population:

Political postings and the threads of discourse in which they are embedded comprise a defined context or horizon from which a discussion can be evaluated. It is not necessary to know who the participants are, from what walk of life they come or with what political parties they are affiliated to paint a compelling portrait of the deliberativeness of these discussions. (p. 91)

Wilhelm's language tells us that he is considering analytical procedures here; he is not interested in whether or not the participants were politicians, primary school students or pet shop owners. This dismissal of the participants' identities, however, gives a critical reader room to question the claims he has made, based on this particular set of data. Here, the author brings to mind the question posed by Dorothy Smith (1999), “How can consciousness operate as if it had no body and were not located in a particular local site, in place and time?” (p. 76) The answer to Smith's question would thus seem to be “online.” In virtual spaces, one

can abstract one's political self from one's physical, emotional and social self. However, as I shall reiterate throughout this work, my concern has been that such exercises in abstraction are unproductive and unenlightening. In other words, "human belief cannot swing free of the nonhuman environment" (Rorty, 1999, p. 32).

Based on this material, Wilhelm argues that the messages are "powerful" evidence of the "wide-ranging effects of CMC" (p. 91) but he does not convince us of this range since his own inquiry is limited. The author opens his discussion by asking, "Is there a sense that the messages... comprise a series of conversations? Is the knowledge and information transmitted in any way discursive, geared towards coordinating action among participants?" (p. 89) He then develops a covert research exercise which positively prevents him from answering this question. Acting covertly, one cannot break one's silence and ask the participants if they have pursued these conversations elsewhere, in private. He cannot ask them about the extent to which they have moved "from the state of disengagement to one of salutary involvement in public life" (p. 87). And there's the rub: he has created a situation in which only he has the privileged understanding that this interaction *was* in fact public. Nobody else present knew this, which calls into question Wilhelm's very claim to be conducting political research at all. In such a situation, the researcher, protecting his participants from his own inquisitive "glare" (p. 91), is also prevented from checking his interpretations with them. He has no way of knowing whether or not his assessment of the situation was accurate. Ultimately, however, he dismisses the gathering of additional material such as questionnaires or ethnographic interviews on the basis that participants "may exaggerate the extent to which they participate politically and deliberate on party platforms" (Ibid.).<sup>3</sup>

By remaining covert, then, triangulation – and therefore the testing of ideas against other data sets for accuracy – is impossible. In conducting research on the PKPF, I wanted to learn as much as I could about the ways in which participants engaged with the medium, whether or not some of their answers were guarded, exaggerated or distorted in their recollection. As it turned out, the follow-up interviews were extremely valuable, revealing that a significant portion of some users' engagement was invisible. In other words, users engaged with the forum in a fashion which had as much to do with conditions in the external, social world as

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<sup>3</sup> If this were indeed the case, the vast majority of qualitative research could be dismissed as unsound.

they did with the ongoing discussions or the intentions of the site. Burbules and Rice (1991) remind us that the discussions can never be divorced from their social, political context:

It is not enough merely to create the conditions of a forum in which all parties present have the right to speak. In a society structured by power, not all differences reside at the same level. Therefore, further questions may be posed: Who may feel unable to speak without explicit or implicit retribution? Who may want to speak, but feel so demoralised, or intimidated, by the circumstances that they are effectively 'silenced'? What tacit rules of communication may be operating...? (p. 397)

Thus, although the coding categories developed by Wilhelm have helped me to evaluate my own observations of the PKPF, his arguments seem to be divorced from the human, political reality of government, in its broadest sense and including the actions of people who cast their votes. Earlier on, I described a site which was created to foster public discussion, but this discussion was not an end in itself. Participants were offered a clear invitation to join the site on the grounds that this would *intentionally* alter the communicative landscape of discussions about BC education. Furthermore, the site was furnished with policy documents and declared itself the locus of localised, professional and public inquiry and discussion. On the other side, the Ministry of Education officers who read the site explicitly asked for contributors to name themselves because they felt that each speaker's identity lent meaning to the posting. They wanted to know to whom they were listening and, if action were taken as a result of their readings, they would also want to know which group's - or individual's - interests had been represented.

This element of anonymity was the most immediate and gripping concern for several actual and would-be contributors. On giving a presentation at a BCTF policy symposium, I found the delegates to be concerned with this feature above all others, excluding the appropriate number and roles of contributors to such a discussion. This symposium contributed a great deal to both my understanding and my dilemma as the moderator and researcher in one. My political sensibilities told me that participants should indeed be allowed to contribute anonymously. I understood their self-consciousness in addressing a public, virtual and potentially influential void. However, I also believed that names added credibility to this conversation as a public document. My concern for conducting academic research contradicted this urge, of course, since I knew full well the promise of confidentiality where human subjects were concerned. Finally, as the moderator, I thought this confidentiality element to be a hindrance, since, the better a group knows each other's

true identities, locations and roles, the more in-depth, lively and productive that gathering is likely to be. In the end, the PKPF research is a strange hybrid. The forum site is still public, so that any reader of this work can visit it and match my quotations against named contributors. I shall take up this line of thought again in chapter five, where I discuss the implications of anonymity for the quality of talk generated by the PKPF site. It will be presented in the context of a discussion about the influence of various kinds of texts within education, government and the public media; it will consider the different language practices and information needs of these communities, and therefore, the impact of audience on the texts we may hope to create in the name of “public knowledge.”

### Knowing the Participants

Throughout this work, I have been preoccupied with the strange sense that I did not “really know” many of the PKPF contributors. I was concerned that, despite my best efforts, I was merely working within a transient “pseudocommunity” where what looked like participation was really no more than observation, the illusion of “being there” (Franklin, 1990). Even those authors with whom I had some continued correspondence were scattered between the Kootenays and the west coast of Vancouver Island. As I moderated, I tried to visualise the policy discussions I had witnessed in person. With no other physical cues to go on, I imagined the a group seated at a conference table as a reminder that this was still a gathering and that all speakers needed to be acknowledged. If I confused two contributors whose names sounded familiar, I cringed and re-read their messages to help reinforce their separate identities in my mind. Having only “known” these people for a short time, it was hard to maintain a sense of their individuality.

As the forum developed, I learned to recognise the textual practices of regular contributors. In a sense, they *became* their textual practices. One author posted numerous newspaper articles, but rarely articulated his own position on them; another was recognisable by her pithy, laconic posts. I knew roughly where she was teaching but had to reach for a map to be sure. I settled for picturing a woman in her mid-forties with dark brown hair, both of which features may have been wildly inaccurate.

Does any of this matter? If one is only the moderator, perhaps not, but I was also intending to gather research data from and with these individuals and felt that the better I “knew” them, the more at ease we all felt with each other, and thus the more fruitful the

research endeavour would be. Still, one might argue that familiarity with a participant's physical characteristics, tone of voice and facial expressions are redundant information; needing a sense of them might just be force of habit. At this stage, though, we are still more accustomed to dealing with research participants who have bodies. The adjustment to dealing only with the latter brings with it a certain discomfort.

As a research site, the PKPF was a strange hybrid. Whereas a researcher might ordinarily enter a field inhabited by people from another community or culture, the PKPF was created by the research group and its inhabitants were invited *to join it*. In a sense, it removed the research population out of their own environment, in the same way that we might remove children from school in order to observe their behaviour in a different setting such as a science museum or a public library. While they have not literally been removed from their own settings - they are likely using computers in their schools or homes - they are in an unfamiliar *intellectual* space. A researcher who is concerned about doing "good" work online would therefore be wise to acknowledge the potential discomfort of a first-time visitor in the virtual setting. The protocol of "going into the field" is thus reversed, putting the researcher in a position of greater ownership or belonging than her participants.

But is this really so? The culture of public schooling in British Columbia exists independently of the PKPF and continues to develop and grow long after the forum closed. In moderating the forum, I may have invited the participants to take seats at a debate of our making, but I could not have done so as effectively had I not spent more than two years in the province already, volunteering in schools, working with the Ministry, and learning the ropes of academic research in North America. Much of the work I did was internal: learning how my own perspective was culturally distinct from those of people who have both taught and been taught in British Columbia. In other words, I spent this time working my way into the culture of BC schooling, not the other way around; so, just as the feature of covertness may be turned on its head online, the question of whose culture is *really* under investigation must be asked and asked again. Which features of the "real world" culture are being replicated online? Which features have we left behind or demolished, and, perhaps, rebuilt in the image of our own choosing?

In the early days of online research, there was a great deal of debate about the assumptions researchers brought to the setting. Was it fair to this particular brand of

qualitative research, “ethnography”? Could we assume that the online “gathering” was indeed a culture with social, linguistic and other mores which would stand up in the academic court? There are plenty of arguments against it: the population may never meet; they do not share food or drink in public spaces; they do not engage in leisure or community pastimes or protests; they do not know what the other members of that group look like because their engagement is purely textual-cerebral and probably don’t have an accurate mental picture of their home or work environments.

However, social mores have certainly grown out of these online gatherings, offering evidence for those who would argue that textual engagement leads to shared understandings of what is “good” online behaviour and what is “bad” online behaviour. Granted, we cannot engage our physical selves in these interactions, but, some argue, people are inventive and corollaries have been developed within the parameters of the online setting.

The Public Knowledge Policy Forum exists, as I have said before, with one foot online and one foot in the door of a more traditional policy symposium. While the forum itself took place online, it would be inaccurate to describe it in any way as an “online community.” Certainly, there are indications that a sense of “community” exists between participants in some of the discussions: there are collegial expressions of agreement, gracious requests and thanks for information supplied, and solid, sincere expressions of disagreement backed up with evidence and anecdotes. Some of the participants I interviewed also told me that they found professional kinship in the postings of the other visitors. However, as a relative newcomer to the online landscape in BC, this community only exists within the context of other, previously established communities. These include the long-term communities which grow up around regular events such as staff meetings, the AGM, PAC (Parent Advisory Committee) groups and district planning committees. Online, there are the BCTF’s PSA (Provincial Specialists’ Association), bctf-news, pd-issues, edtech-news and bctf-research listservs. Some of its contributors may well run into each other in future and develop professional connections as a result, but I do not consider the forum, with its short life span, to have gained the status of a “culture” or “community.” Furthermore, given its entirely public nature, it offered - and still offers - free admission to all comers. While this feature was in keeping with the BCTF’s political values, it generated a great deal of discussion at the January, 2000 policy symposium. The key challenge, as described by the symposium

delegates, was in practising the theory of participatory democracy: a tension existed between hosting a public forum which welcomed all perspectives but which might have a limited sphere of influence, and hosting a forum for a group of invited contributors; this select group would be specialists in their field. This would mean taking the forum out of the truly public realm but, potentially, extending its sphere of influence as an instrument of policy development.

All of these concerns - over gaining access, developing and maintaining trust, collecting data and writing up our participants - point to one key division. This division is between that which is "private" and that which is "public" in the virtual domain. Is it always clear which is which? Since I am using a mixture of data from public forum discussions to interview transcripts and email correspondence (private but covered by informed consent agreements), I am reminded of the need for absolute scrupulousness. Clearly, a web site - and particularly one called the *Public Knowledge Project* - is a public research document, and most people are clear about the protocols of tape recorded interviews conducted over the phone or in person. Emails, however, are a grey area. Someone might email me with something I find funny and I might select "forward" while still chuckling and without thinking. While I'm at it, I might cc it to the entire list of graduate students in my department or teachers in my school district. In a fraction of a second, that email has gone from being a hastily scribbled gag between two colleagues, to being a document which is widely circulated among people who will now recognise another name on a conference badge (it's too bad that I forgot to delete that part of the message). On another occasion, this person had no problem with me forwarding something which started off in private, so I've taken the liberty of assuming that this is always the case. This time, though, I was wrong.

The borders between private and public are not only described by the simple functionality of our email programs, however. Different users of the same medium, such as an online discussion board, may have vastly but subtly different understandings of what it means to participate in that medium. The teachers and members of the public participating in the PKPF were not a homogeneous group of computer users. Even the contributors I interviewed described a broad range of comfort in using the public bulletin board format, and these had, with one exception, been people with the skills and confidence to actually post messages. Given the diversity of ability, we cannot necessarily assume that every visitor to an online

research setting has the same understanding of the medium, meaning that each correspondence - and perhaps, each interaction - with an online research participant must be negotiated in isolation.

What can we know about a visitor who reads but does not post? As the researcher, I was keen to see the numbers of authors increasing so that my pool of potential interviewees would be larger. I also knew that a higher number of participants would act as an implicit endorsement of our research endeavour. As the moderator, I wanted more people to participate so that the discussion would be more lively and a wider variety of perspectives shared. In both of my roles I was frustrated that I could not offer any encouragement or incentive for shy readers to declare themselves. It would have felt like calling children in from the garden for dinner when they are playing hide-and-seek. You have a faint sense they are out there, you just don't know where (The simile has a weak spot, of course. Online, you could call "Dinner!" to six children and find yourself feeding thirty seven, one of whom is actually a forty five year-old bridge builder. Online, identities can be fabricated). It is hard to be sensitive to the needs of a research population you cannot see and whose number you don't know. At times I felt as though I was walking on eggshells.

When doing field-work in physical settings like schools, police stations or union offices, a researcher can be confident that the participants understand the boundaries between private and public life. They are used to making personal choices about the kind of information they give out and the kinds of environments to which their colleagues have access. As adults who are used to interacting in the social world, they can mostly understand and control the boundaries around these environments. However, where the environment is virtual and the visitor a "newbie" or novice, that person may not be as socially literate as we might hope, or even as they might think. Just as a small child is unaware of the mores surrounding when we speak, when we are silent and when we choose to move around:

It's a different way to communicate with people and we don't have the social rules in place yet for how to behave. I mean people who go there all the time definitely have solid rules in place and if you break the rules, boy! They let you know it. They'll freeze you out in a second... not everybody knows how to dial up access to the internet, go to a chat-room and communicate in a socially responsible and acceptable way. (Adam, March 9)

As the moderator, I hoped that the participants would place a high priority on conversing with respect for a diversity of opinions and respect for conducting dialogue across difference

(Burbules & Rice, 1991). I hoped that they would be able to contribute along the lines described by Davie and Wells (1991), described earlier in this chapter: being able to state opinions while remaining open to differences and able to modify one's position based on new information.

As a researcher, I also hoped that visitors would speak frankly about contentious issues, and that these two ambitions would not conflict. As long as any disagreements were professional and not personal, I reasoned, I would have no reason to delete any messages. If all were welcome to post and be heard, then all are able to become part of the emerging debate and thus gain a sense of ownership or belonging in that environment. On the other hand, by deleting another person's message a forum administrator may be letting the author know that they are not welcome in the conversation. Even if that same person is happy to contribute material which is deemed appropriate, that sense of being "[frozen] out" may remain and the author is left with the impression that the forum is not for them.

In January 2000, a message was posted which raised the hackles of at least one other participant. It prompted a flurry of emails between myself, Bruce (a regular contributor), and the project leader about whether or not it should be deleted. The PKPF was new. There *was* no party line. The correspondence which resulted turned into a discussion about what the rules were and should be for living responsibly in this setting. We also wondered about how those hosting (or in power) are seen to behave by the general population. Bruce told me that "a few meteor showers" were inevitable (correspondence, January 19), and that this was valuable experience in teaching us to expect in future. Bruce wondered how many other people were represented by this man's point of view and whether it was a response to someone or something specific. My conclusion, as you will read later, is that it was not a response so much as oratory, but it led to some useful discussions around the value of having a forum which was entirely open to the public.

On one occasion, however, I did choose to delete a thread. Ironically, it was immediately after I had attended a class in faculty of Computer Science in which the professor described the challenges of patrolling online discourse. I returned to my office to find that four of five messages had been posted in which the contributors purported to be arranging a sexual liaison. I deleted them as soon as my inbox chimed with their arrival. One of these messages remains because in the time it had taken me to return to my office, somebody else had

already responded, reprimanding the author for his/her coarseness. I did not feel comfortable deleting the respondent's message as well, and thought that this exchange might serve as evidence of where the virtual boundaries of the discussion had been drawn.

It is important to recognise that moderators have more privileges than simply deleting whole messages. They are also able to go in and edit after the fact, which is how I managed to create live links from all of the URLs posted in the bodies of messages. The short life span of the forum did not allow for the time to bring everyone up to speed on including HTML tags in their messages. A moderator might also edit ferociously, changing the subject headers of messages to make the top layer of the discussion more fluid, and she might even fix typographical errors in punctuation or spelling. I did not do any of these things.

As the moderator, I wanted to remain neutral and unobtrusive but, on occasion, I wondered if I should have been more open in my communications with participants, restating (or explaining) the dual policy/research goals of the site. I didn't want to deluge contributors with email and therefore settled for keeping my research profile modest, in the hope that my label of "Doctoral Student" would convey the academic as well as educational and political backdrop to our efforts.

In moderating the PKPF, I found myself challenged to reflect on what I really believed the medium was and, therefore, how far our current ethical sensibilities were applicable to it. I felt a considerable degree of communication anxiety in my hybrid work, finding that it can be as intimidating to approach strangers online as it is in person. While we are invisible and anonymous to these people, we are still more than capable of embarrassing ourselves by failing to observe some vital aspect of etiquette. An email address alone does not convey a person's status, but they – and you – can often forget this. A great deal of tact is therefore necessary. A simple, off-the-cuff response to a contributor who is used to being treated with great deference may be interpreted as rudeness. A discussion about the shortcomings of an educational program might be conducted in the spirit of earnest inquiry but be understood as hostile criticism by a coordinator in that program.

#### Language as Social Organization: The Vitality of Text

As a researcher who participated in the research setting, I write with the understanding that, online, we conjure ourselves – like our participants – through type and must therefore strive to be conscious of our textual practices. Our language use will depend on our comfort with

the setting and will act as our citizenship papers for the online group. We cannot pretend that language is invisible, can be taken for granted, since it is the only material proof of our presence. It is both the currency of culture and its artifact. As Van Maanen (1988) says, "Culture... is created, as is the reader's view of it, by the active construction of a text" (p. 7). Online, the culture under observation literally *is* a text as well as the internal constructions of it formed by its individual members.

In text-based virtual spaces, then, we write ourselves into being. In other words, "the body is a text controlled by the user" (Markham, 1998, p. 209). Our presence is established by the fact that we have said something to a participant; in real-time chat scenarios, our arrival may show up on someone else's screen, but until we speak, we are no more than a faceless ID. Once we begin to type, we can determine how others perceive us, carefully choosing the words we use to shape their perceptions. The text we generate is inextricably linked to our perceptions and representations of self, our sense of space and human dialogue, or engagement. If we consider that:

Language is how social organisation and power are defined and contested and the place where our sense of selves, our *subjectivity* are constructed. Understanding language as competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning and of organising the world, makes language a site of exploration, struggle. (Richardson, 1994, p. 518)

we begin to see that the online environment is one in which our textual practices, and thus our social organisation of power, can be rendered visible. It is here, in text, that we can find out "who has the power to initiate, terminate or interrupt the exchange" and where we learn "what counts as valid knowledge, and how knowledge is validated" (George, 1995, p. 29). It is here that we find out which kinds of information are treated as knowledge and wisdom, which kinds are – and are not – afforded a high status and our continued attention. In this setting, researchers must be prepared to seek out the expressions of these relationships and boundaries through texts. After all, "the ruling relations are text-mediated" (Smith, 1999, p. 77). There are, then, no "best" ideas, competing in the same currency. The politics of human life are such that human interactions are not created equal. There are exchange rates between speakers and between individual utterances, all of which determine the kinds of attention which are afforded to them.

Online, there are also no other physical clues to the structures of power in virtual settings,

no observable seating patterns at lunch time, and no way of casually observing the students' social groupings. Our invisibility online prevents us, too, from casual encounters over newspapers at lunch time or the passing conversation in a hallway. Privacy is heightened by sending individual emails, but this can fragment rather than galvanise our research population.

In an environment that is entirely disembodied, gesture is impossible (Rice & Love, 1987) paralinguage and non-verbal cues can still be represented by text. Numerous writers (Reid, 1991; Marvin, 1994) have accounted for the use of smileys and acronyms denoting moods. Examples of these include happy, sad, thoughtful, sickened "emoticons" and acronyms such as IMHO (in my humble opinion), LOL (lots of laughs), ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing) and BRB (common in chat rooms - [I'll] be right back). Learning to use these symbols represents nothing less than a rite of passage, an initiation into the select group. Like any other discourse community, including the one I am typing my way into right now, our language shows where we belong.

In MOO settings, the user can convey mood or gesture by typing "emote" followed by whatever action he or she desires. Among the commonest are expressions such as "emote smiles/nods/shrugs/scratches her head in disbelief." It is important to recognise, however, that these contributions are all conscious. We might laugh out loud at a colleague's posting, but nobody shares our mirth until we think to type "emote laughs out loud." We must actively choose to share our moods, and the way in which we do this tells our readers something about our approach to life online. If, instead of saying "emote is pleased," a user types in "emote does a little dance" or "emote chuckles smugly," the other members can imagine or visualise our mood even if they cannot see it. The added detail gives the impression, too, that the author is happy giving away more than a minimal amount of detail about her inner life. In the PKPF, however, we asked visitors into a medium which carried with it all of the language practices, hierarchies and prejudices which governed their daily working lives. This was not textually disembodied, free from the restraining factors of their professional lives, but an embodied actor in a rich, flawed and political human setting. We might therefore expect the language practices of the PKPF to have more in common with other forms of dialogue common to the political system which it inhabits, rather than a social, online culture within which it seemingly resides.

As Markham (1998) amply demonstrates, a large investment of time and emotion in an online setting can bring a sense of living in that space; a sense that the online medium develops from a textual format to a place we inhabit, and finally to a way of being. Baym (1996) fully endorses Markham's position, advocating the use of ethnographic research methodologies. Ethnography is preferable to discourse analysis as the means to understand a population because it allows us to explore how groups "communicate social information and... create and codify group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships..." (p. 160). Only ethnography, she argues, would enable researchers to describe how cultural contexts develop and are validated in this environment. Since the PKPF was only in use for a matter of weeks, its lifespan prevented me from undertaking a full ethnography of communication in this medium. Nonetheless, and as my analysis will show, ethnographic methods of gathering data and interpreting human discourse within the context of their lived environments have greatly influenced my research practices.

In mid-January 2000, I was copied on an email correspondence which had taken place over the holiday period between the PKPF project leader and a BC teacher. Since the correspondence had taken place between two individuals - with myself and another team member being cc'd on it (ie. lurking) - I was asked to post it to the forum. I understood that the correspondence was evidence of our rising profile and was pleased that our advice was being sought by practising teachers, but felt ill at ease with the task. It had taken place in private and we were posting it in a public bulletin board. Nowadays, few emails are spell-checked, edited for grammar, or flanked by the appropriate salutations. Should I edit these fragments of conversation? Should I post them all in the same thread (or even the same message?) or should I scatter them like hoops at a side show? Finally I bit the bullet and posted the entire thread.

I was, however, playing with time as well. The original conversation took place over three days, but I was copying all of the messages in within half an hour. Anyone looking at these messages would be amazed at the dedication of these two correspondents. What rapid-fire emailers they were! The two correspondents' computer clocks were set to different times, so on occasion, it looked as though responses had been sent before the questions. It took a while to sort them out.

Having read about, experienced and now reflected upon the challenges of conducting

ethical research online, I have reached several understandings. Firstly, that while the technology facilitates the speedy collection of data, it does not diminish the need for empathy, patience, courtesy and humility when working as a visitor in someone else's professional terrain. Doing the research online might limit the mileage on your car and the drain on your expense account, but the emotional investment required by this work is still considerable. Gaining the trust of research participants is not optional simply because you do not see them, nor are the consequences of poorly chosen words any less weighty. The messy and occasionally unsettling aspects of qualitative research - the sense of self-consciousness in an unfamiliar environment, the knowledge that you are scrambling to communicate effectively and appropriately in it - are constant.

#### Message summaries

The last part of this chapter offers two aerial views of the site. In the tables which follow, I summarise the site contributions first by message. The table shows which of the topics drew the most interest according to both the number of threads and the total number of messages. The feature of "replies" shows the instances in which authors joined existing discussions rather than striking out on their own. The table also offers an overview of the gender balance of contributions. The last row shows total messages in each column, excluding the column entitled "Longest Thread," where this sum was deemed to be redundant information.

The second summary offers a breakdown of contributions by participant. In other words, I looked at each contributor and followed their individual paths through the site discussions. This table shows who we actually reached, according to (where possible) their professional affiliation and gender. By offering these two kinds of summaries, I hope to convey how the site content could be interpreted both by an outside reader and by the individual contributors.

In all cases, the numbers in parentheses indicate my contributions. For example, where the total messages reads "17 (10)," there were seventeen messages in total, ten of which were mine. I have also indicated the numbers of threads I started, since this shows my move to start new discussions. Where I have contributed to the number of replies, my messages were part of the ongoing discussion, an attempt to keep it going. The column marked "female authors" emphasises the far greater propensity of men to respond to the call for feedback on policy matters. Having discounted my own messages from this column, the number of contributions by female visitors is strikingly low. In these circumstances, it would be simple

to judge contributions by gender according to the simple number of men and women who took part. These numbers would be misleading. If a forum is visited by equal numbers of men and women but the men each post three messages and the women only post one, there is a clear gender imbalance in communication.

Forum Messages: Summary

FORUM	Total msgs	Total threads	Replies	Threads started by other	Longest thread	Tot. authors	Male authors	Female authors	Msgs by males	Msgs by females
Visions & Principles	17 (10)	5 (4)	12	1	13	7	4	3	7	10 (10)
Student Needs	44 (7)	8 (3)	35	5	18	24	16	8	24	20 (7)
Curriculum & Learning Res.	21 (5)	7 (4)	14	3	6	10	6	4	9	12 (5)
Educator Tr. & Support	32 (9)	12 (7)	20	5	13	12	7	5	18	14 (9)
Social Impact	22 (8)	8 (14)	14	5	6	7	4	3	11	11 (8)
Electronic Delivery	57 (12)	12 (5)	44	7	18	11	8	3	41	16 (12)
Research	5 (3)	2 (2)	3	0	4	3	1	2	1	4 (3)
Decision making	2 (2)	2 (2)	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	2 (2)
Funding	31 (9)	6 (4)	25	2	19	11	9	2	21	10 (9)
PKPF concept	14 (6)	5 (4)	9	1	8	5	4	1	8	6 (6)
<b>TOTAL FORUM</b>	<b>245 (71)</b>	<b>67 (49)</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>91</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>106 (71)</b>

My Advice: Message summary

<b>ADVICE</b>	Total msgs	Total threads	Replies	Threads started by participants	Longest thread	Tot. authors	Male authors	Female authors	Msgs by males	Msgs by females
Visions & Principles	7 (1)	3 (1)	4	2	5	6	3	4	4	3 (2)
Student Needs	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1 (1)
Curriculum & Learning Res.	3 (1)	3 (1)	0	2	1	3	1	2	1	2 (1)
Educator Training & Support	12 (3)	3 (1)	8	2	9	8	5	3	6	5 (2)
Social Impact	2 (1)	2 (1)	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	1 (1)
Electronic Delivery	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1 (1)
Research	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1 (1)
Decision making	7 (3)	2 (1)	5	1	6	4	1	3	1	6 (3)
Funding	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1 (1)
PKPF concept	1 (1)	1 (1)	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1 (1)
<b>TOTAL: ADVICE</b>	<b>36(14)</b>	<b>18(10)</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>28</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>22(14)</b>
<b>TOTAL: FORUMS + ADVICE</b>	<b>281 (85)</b>	<b>85(59)</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>37</b>		<b>91</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>128(85)</b>

Summary of Participants

	Name	M/ F	Who?	Location/ School board	Posts	Forums	Advice
1.	Bruce Policy experience	M	Teacher; BCTF staff	Vancouver, Langley	14	Visions (3) Social (2) E-Delivery (8) Funding (1)	
2.	Lauren	F	Ph.D. student	Vancouver	2	Visions (1) Curriculum (1)	
3.	Brent Policy experience	M	High school teacher	Burnaby	2	Visions (1) PKPF Concept (1)	
4.	Adam	M	Elementary teacher	Coquitlam	9	Visions (2) Social (1) Funding (3)	
5.	Valerie	F	Teacher		10	Visions (1) Curriculum (3) Educator (1)	Curriculum (1) Educator (2) Decision (2)
6.	Howard	M	Teacher		3	Visions (1) Students (1) Curriculum (1)	
7.	Mathew	M	Homeschool teacher	Kootenay	45	Student (6) Curriculum (3) Educator (9) Social (6) E-Delivery (14) Funding (6) PKPF Concept (1)	
8.	Mark Policy experience	M	PDAC chair	Lower Mainland	7	Student Needs (2) Educator (2) Funding (3)	
9.	Cole	M	Teacher	Elementary Teacher	1	Student (1)	
10.	Luke	M	Masters student	UBC	2	Student (1) E-Delivery (1)	
11.	Nicholas	M	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
12.	Etienne	M	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	

13.	Ariel		M	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
14.	Richard		M	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
15.	Siobhan		F	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
16.	Orly		F	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
17.	Sian		F	High school student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
18.	Clarissa		F	High school student	Vancouver Is.	2	Student (2)	
19.	John		M	Teacher	Surrey	7	Curriculum (2) Educator (1) Funding (1) PKPF Concept (3)	
20.	Joe	Policy experience	M	BCTF	Vancouver	3	Curriculum (1) E-Delivery (1)	Decision (1)
21.	Anna	Policy experience	F	Teacher	Maple Ridge	3	Curriculum (1) Educator (2)	
22.	Alice	Policy experience	F	Distance ed teacher	Abbotsford	2	Curriculum (2) E-Delivery (1)	
23.	Aaron		M	Open School director		3	Curriculum (1) Funding (2)	
24.	Blake		M			1	Curriculum (1)	
25.	Simon		M			1	Educator (1)	
26.	Kevin	Policy experience	M	Teacher	Burnaby	2	Educator (1)	Educator (1)
27.	Dan		M	High school teacher	Vancouver	1	Educator (1)	
28.	Lewis		M			2	Educator (1) E-Delivery (1)	
29.	Gregg	Policy experience	M	Teacher	Nechako	5	Social (1) E-Delivery (3)	Visions (1)
30.	Emma		F	Teacher	Comox	1	E-Delivery (1)	
31.	Derek		M	Teacher	Courtenay	5	E-Delivery (4) Funding (1)	
32.	Tom		M	OSCAR student	Vancouver Is.	1	E-Delivery (1)	
33.	William		M	Teacher	Vancouver Is.	5	E-Delivery (4) Research (1)	
34.	Bernie		M			1	E-Delivery (1)	
35.	Leah		F	Researcher, teacher	Coquitlam	1	Research (1)	

36.	Michael	M	Grad student, teacher	UBC	1		Visions (1)
37.	Gordon	M			2		Visions (2)
38.	Alannah	F	University student	UBC	1		Visions (1)
39.	Fred	M	Teacher		1		Educator (1)
40.	Christopher	M	Teacher		1		Educator (1)
41.	Dale	M			2		Educator (2)
42.	Deirdre Policy experience	F	Teacher, CUJEB	Langley	1		Educator (1)
43.	Patrick	M			1		Educator (1)
44.	Julie	F	Teacher		2	Social Impact (1)	Social Impact (1)
45.	Kirsten	F	Teacher		1		Decision (1)
46.	Paula	F	Researcher	UBC	1	E-Delivery (1)	
47.	Tony	M	Professor	UBC	3	PKPF Concept (3)	
48.	Alan	M	Teacher	Unknown	1	Funding (1)	
49.	Catherine Policy experience	F	Ministry	Victoria	1	Funding (1)	
50.	Shula Klinger Policy experience	F	Moderator, Graduate Student	UBC	85	Visions (10) Student (7) Curriculum (5) Educator (9) Social (8) E-Delivery (12) Research (3) Decision (2) Funding (9) PKPF Concept (6)	Visions (1) Student (1) Curriculum (1) Educator (3) Social (1) Funding (1) E-Delivery (1) Research (1) Decision (3) PKPF concept (1)
51.	Wendy	F	BCTF	Vancouver	1	E-Delivery (1)	
52.	Amy	F	Elementary student,	Vancouver Is.	4	Student (4)	
53.	Sujeet	M	Student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
54.	Parul	F	Student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
55.	Laxmi	F	Student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
56.	Alon	F	Student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
57.	Baron	M	Student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
58.	<i>Anonymous</i>	M?	Student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	

59.	Hannah	F	Medical Student	Vancouver	1	Student (1)	
60.	Bryn	F	Professor	Vancouver	2	Social (2)	
61.	Connie	F	Teacher		1	Educator (1)	
62.	Jackie	F	Teacher		1	Educator (1)	
63.	James	M	Teacher		1	Funding (1)	
64.	Devon	M	School Student				
65.	Joel	M	School Student				
66.	Sarah	F	Grad Student	Denmark	1	Visions (1)	
67.	Sholto	M	PKPF team	Vancouver	2	D-Delivery (2)	
68.	Don	M	Teacher	Lower Mainland	1	Curriculum (1)	
69.	Leo	M	School student	Vancouver Is.	1	Student (1)	
	27 Women 42 Men 39.13% women 60.87% men						

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION OF THE FORUM POSTINGS

#### Examining the Data

The first set of data gathered in the course of this project were in the form of postings to the Public Knowledge Policy Forum (PKPF) discussion boards. In working through the messages, I looked for common themes which might describe the dimensions of user engagement with the site. Having established what the patterns of discussion had been, if any, I hoped to draw a link between the discussions themselves and the site's value as a policy feedback mechanism, as described by those who contributed to it. Having examined the content of the site, I therefore went on to match the themes against the interview material I gathered later, to see whether there was material to support or explain the participants' impressions. During my readings of the forum messages, I divided my observations between those which described simple message content (for example, "Internet addiction" or "social isolation among online learners") and those which described the type of message; these latter labels included "teacher autobiographies," "formal responses to Ministry," "FAQs" or the simple posting of news articles in the spirit of "FYI."

I was initially interested to see how far the participants had actually followed the agenda set out for them by the nine chapter headings from *Conditions for Success*, which had been used to establish headings for nine distinct forums (see Screen Shot 4.1). Did the messages show - however subtly - that participants had read the Ministry literature before speaking up, or did they head straight to where the other people were? Where the Ministry documents had not been followed explicitly, I paid attention to the new topics which arose through discussion. Within this feature of message content, I noticed that the messages each had a social - as well as informational - character. The degree of warmth in each contributor's posting conveyed the author's patience, tolerance and willingness to listen (Burbules & Rice, 1991). I also looked at the participants' tendency to respond to the specific concerns or commentaries of others and to express affiliation and understanding (Barber, 1984), which were also features of productive discourse. Coloured by collegial expressions of support, validation for the arguments of others or simply by friendly greetings and salutations, these

messages encouraged me to consider the affective, relational aspects of site contributions as well as the extent to which its overt political and educational intentions had been fulfilled.

In examining the online texts, I found that participants' contributions showed two significant and quite distinct preoccupations. One was concerned with the pedagogical challenges for teachers and the strategies employed by learners when using ICT in schools. An example of this would be a message concerned with Grade 7 Geography teaching. The author told her readers which software package she'd used and which curriculum goals she'd set out to meet. The second preoccupation was with the structural and political aspects of introducing new technologies to schools. These latter concerns could be found in discussions about decision-making in schools and government, the challenge of securing funding for hardware and software and the possibilities for increasing access to computers among students and teachers.

Clearly, these preoccupations were not mutually exclusive. Individual respondents often tackled both sets of concerns within the same message, and forum threads frequently paid attention to both at various points in the discussion. While the forum participants discussed these matters in the context of their own work as teachers and the material they had read, the threads paid scant attention to the policy documents and research materials provided within the site. In other words, the discussions were mostly used to establish brief discussions and professional connections according to the general concerns of the Ministry documents, but they did not pay close, discriminating attention to their recommendations.

Nonetheless, the themes and descriptors which emerged from close analysis of the online discussions helped to provide a framework for understanding their overall content. From participants' communicative strategies, I hoped to discern what their motivations had been in contributing to such a website, as well as their expectations of how the site might best be used. Was it a place to meet like-minded colleagues, or those whom one hopes to challenge through disagreement? Was it a place to have one's mind changed through debate, a place to promote reflection and perhaps alter one's professional perspectives? Having read that "electronic discussion groups represent a different conversational dynamic than [face-to-face] discussion" (Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1993, in Mackinnon & Aylward, 2000, p. 57), I tried to keep my expectations of policy talk – derived from in-person meetings and seminars – at bay.

I was also cautioned by Wilhelm's (2000) observation of online political forums as being used typically for "facilitating self-expression and monologue, without in large measure the 'listening,' responsiveness and dialogue... such as prioritising issues, negotiating differences, reaching political agreement and plotting a course of action to influence the political agenda" (p. 98). In reading over the forum postings with the interview transcripts close at hand, this concern about listening had been among the first to emerge during analysis. The concept of conversational coherence became key to my understanding of the site discussions as an intellectual space inhabited by professional educators. I deal with this concern in more detail later on in Chapter Five.

The taxonomy of online conversations described by Jenlink and Carr (1996) has been helpful in keeping this analysis focused on where the PKPF discussions were headed. In their analysis, there are four kinds of online interaction patterns, ranging from the posting of numerous, discrete orations to rich exchanges in which authors learn from each other, and suspend their own judgments and subjectivities; they add new information to their knowledge base and ultimately alter their entire outlook on the matter in hand. These conversational types are respectively named dialectic, discussion, dialogue and design. In keeping these categories in mind as I developed my own set of codes, I have stayed alert to the instances of information sharing, collaborative knowledge building through critical interpretation of various sources and articulated assumptions and the transformation of ideas with well-supported arguments and respectful debate. In short, this work has reminded me that if learning does indeed depend largely on social interaction (Sauntson, 1995, p. 39), the online exchanges provide ample information regarding the extent to which the site performed as the locus for fruitful, educational dialogue about a specific policy initiative.

The methods I describe in this chapter have been developed through readings of various forms of textual analysis. While they all offer the means to explore and understand the dimensions of public deliberation in online spaces, they have been developed in a variety of educational settings and are based on the traditions and premises of a number of disciplines. These include discourse analysis in classroom settings (Flanders, 1970), linguistics (Herring, 1996), socio-linguistics (Stubbs, 1983) and semiotics, in which we are concerned with the meaning received through text rather than the intention conveyed by its author (George, 1995). While all of the methods employed by these authors offer useful examples of textual

analysis, they do not apply themselves equally to examining the social, political, cultural and institutional contexts within which these texts are generated. In this work, these contexts were extremely important, affecting individual contributors' messages even when the discussion board appeared to be quite removed from them.

The process of visiting a wide variety of perspectives and methods has been valuable and essential for two reasons. Firstly, the field of inquiry into computer-mediated communication is still relatively new, so it seemed wise to advance with caution in establishing the foundations for my inquiry. Secondly, as a body of information, the PKPF has something in common with both formal, published text and casual, ephemeral conversation, despite the apparent differences between these two forms of communication. The parameters around the inquiry in this interactive medium were less clear, and the process of inquiry less immediately obvious than they might if, for example, we had been handling a work of narrative fiction. As Herring (1996) observes, "[computer-mediated communication] is both [conversation and published discourse], at different times and in different places, and other things besides" (p. 165). Selecting the appropriate analytical tools for this medium has therefore been a process of extensive review, revision, selection and dissection. It has permitted an exploration of the contributors' behaviours as writers and readers; of the effects of individual messages on the discussions within which they sat; of the site as a communicative space, and finally as the place to offer feedback on specific government documents.

In dealing with data which were derived from online exchanges, my first resource was the literature on discourse analysis. Discourse analysis offers the means to explore the texts which arise from interactions between real people, typically accessed through audio recordings taken during periods of overt observation and/or participation by the researcher. This is a method of breaking down a complex mass of textual data by themes or codes, "a way of identifying categories and relationships between exchanges, sequences and episodes of messages" (Sherry, 2000, p. 39). Not only does it permit the examination and categorisation of individual utterances, then, it allows the researcher to explore the ways in which some utterances can influence the ways in which others achieve (or do not achieve) expression.

Further, having originated in the classroom, discourse analysts have been preoccupied with “what teachers say... and the consequences for pupil achievement and involvement.” (Flanders, 1970, in Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975, p. 15). Given its educational preoccupations, this method has traditionally been used to explore the ways in which dialogue reveals student interest, focus, participation and learning. Although the Public Knowledge forum was not a typical online classroom, the discussion was certainly intended as the medium for learning and the text may be therefore be used as the means for assessing the contribution of these discussions to the participants’ understanding of issues and of other people’s ideas or perspectives.

The early literature on discourse analysis in educational settings provided me with the foundations of my inquiry. Many of the key concepts described by Flanders, Sinclair and Coulthard and Edwards and Westgate were applicable to the PKPF exchanges. One example of these concepts, which you will see recurring through my own analysis, is the idea of lexical cohesion between exchanges. Taking the lead from Stubbs (1983), I read the PKPF messages to establish whether participants had used a “common store of semantically related terms” (p. 26). Where speakers share the same terminology, there is a greater chance that the discussion will progress smoothly without further clarification of terms or assumptions; in other words, this shared vocabulary reveals an implicit endorsement of someone else’s perceptions and therefore creates a sense of cohesion between messages. Not only does it make for easier reading after the event, it is evidence that participants understand each other and are able to enjoy, at the very least, a “polite surface consensus” (op.cit., p. 28). This concept was extremely valuable in analysing exchanges which tolerated a high degree of disagreement without overt expressions of hostility. In these cases, authors took care to respond with terminology carried over from earlier messages, conveying a sense of shared concern and mutual understanding. Conversely, it was also helpful in understanding why some exchanges read like challenges when contributors were, in fact, agreeing with each other. Where language use is not carried over between messages, the apparent (not actual) change of subject creates a sense of dissonance which, on closer reading, undermines the real motive of the author.

Secondly, the concept of the “boundary exchange” – one which opens or closes a lesson section or alters its direction – has been extremely helpful, since these messages acted as

linguistic signposts. According to Sinclair and Coulthard, the boundary exchange is made up of two linguistic moves: framing and focusing. These two moves help listeners to negotiate the limits of an activity, concept or exercise, making it easier to understand as a discrete unit of “knowledge.” In thinking through this concept of the linguistic boundary, I have learned to pay attention to the ways in which some interactions flourished and others perished, and encouraged me to find stimuli for both of these scenarios. It also encouraged me to pay close attention to the actual effect of each message on the discussion, and whether or not these effects were intentional.

It is also important to recognise that the context of the PKPF discussions differed greatly from those which have typically been explored by many discourse analysts. The first obvious difference is that, even though the discussions may look like transcripts when printed out, they have only ever existed as text, never as a live debate. This means that, however much we gratefully appropriate some of the conceptual foundations of discourse analysis (or any other method designed to examine the dynamics of human talk), it is important to be aware that the text was neither generated in the same circumstances, nor were the emerging mores of contributing to that medium necessarily the same as in other environments, however much those other environments had influenced participants’ expectations of it.

First of all, the conversational dynamics are structured around different assumptions: unlike in the classroom interactions which have commonly been examined, no one contributor “[retained] the conversational initiative” (Stubbs, 1983, p. 29) of the PKPF. In other words, nobody performed the role of teacher, initiating conversations, tracking their progress according to right or wrong answers and offering feedback or constructive criticism on these answers (Flanders, 1970). Although my messages may be understood as validation or support for contributors, I was in no position to shut lines of inquiry or exchanges which I considered unprofitable. Clearly, the IRF model (“initiation-response-feedback,” describing a teacher’s utterances (Edwards and Westgate, 1994)) would be insufficiently complex as the means to describe the interactions on the PKPF.

Let me pause for a moment to look at the area of conversational analysis, a subset of discourse analysis (Klinger, 1996). This has been described by Edwards and Westgate (1994) as “talk between equals” (p. 27), as opposed to that of a single teacher. We might be tempted to consider the PKPF discussions as a set of conversations because, as mentioned above, no

single speaker was in the position to manage and redirect the talk. Furthermore, Edwards and Westgate (1994) admit the very real possibility of power inequities within conversations, even if the speakers do appear to be “equals.” Very often, speakers reveal an “implicit claim to superior knowledge and insight” (p. 48). This perspective was of particular importance in examining the discussions housed on the PKPF because, as you will see, a significant element of the contributors’ energies in argumentation were spent on lending maximum weight to their positions. With this in mind, close analysis would be more likely to reveal the ways in which contributions encode the social relations of power into their language. In other words, “who has the power to initiate, terminate or interrupt the exchange, what counts as valid knowledge and how knowledge is validated” (George, 1995, p. 31). These social relations might become apparent through movements within individual exchanges. This could happen where a contributor posts a message about a specific classroom experience, where the respondents take the exchange into a discussion about the policy recommendations pertaining to some aspect of that experience.

Since these exchanges took place in text alone, however, many of the conversational cues on which speakers generally rely were actually missing. Many publications have described the challenge of holding discussions with people one never sees (Streibel, 1998; Harasim, 1995; Marvin, 1994). Their focus has been the absence of aural, visual and physical cues such as tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, physiognomy and so on. However, there are more subtle and abstract (yet influential) absences, which depend on the combined factors of time and audience. As George (1995) observes, written and spoken language differ in their “level of abstraction, and the potential for spontaneity, immediacy, retrievability and reflection” (p. 36). These features may be less obvious to the researcher who is preoccupied with comparing online discussions with face-to-face debates, but their subtle implications are nonetheless extremely significant. For example, as Stubbs (1983) observes, “[conversationalists] constantly take account of their audience by designing their talk for their hearers...” (p. 21). The conversation itself offers “ways in which speakers can check on whether their hearers are following, ways in which speakers provide feedback to keep the talk going, and ways in which hearers can claim or prove their understanding” (op. cit. p. 22). In other words, “conversation is a joint production composed in real time.” This joint production depends on many unarticulated contributions to the flow of discussion such as

approving facial expressions, murmurs, incomplete sentences or nods. So while other authors have brought to our attention the lack of physical cues in online discussions and the sense of unease this can arouse in participants, the meanings of physical cues themselves are less important than their actual influence on the depth and direction of the ensuing conversation. This is the work I shall address here, in exploring how rhetoric is actually used in the absence of speakers' bodies. I also look at how claims to knowledge are made and how far the exchanges are conducted in ways that contribute to the development of fluid, dynamic, generative discussion.

So while the material collected on the PKPF may have been a "joint production" of the seventy-two participants, it was an asynchronous medium which did not always allow them to "take account of their audience." In actual fact, in most cases, authors did not know who their audience was because they could not know who would open their messages without posting replies. This factor of knowing whom one is addressing in order to tailor our self-expression had, as we shall see later on, a significant impact on contributors' comfort in submitting public messages to the forum. Given these concerns about the kind of medium to which the participants were contributing (and which they, themselves, were actually making), I have therefore chosen not to refer to the body of text as a set of "conversations." While contributors certainly batted ideas back and forth amongst each other, this was not in real time, and, as the following analysis will show, much of their rhetorical preoccupations was with getting their points across with maximum gusto and conviction.

George (1995) interprets this gusto as evidence of the lack of neutrality in all forms of communication. He argues that "the production and interpretation of texts [is] a political endeavour," meaning that both the PKPF participants and myself (both online and here, on this page), were communicating in a medium ripe for "exercising power within social relationships" (p.30). This perspective has encouraged me to look for the meanings and implicit actions connoted by PKPF messages, as well as their explicit content, so that I might understand more completely the character or genre of the medium I was investigating, and therefore its potential contribution to the existing channels of policy development and feedback in BC.

The concept of turn-taking protocols, familiar to classroom teachers, students and observers, is also redundant in an asynchronous medium. While "speakers" are prevented

from actually interrupting each other mid-sentence, this does not necessarily imply that participants showed each other a greater degree of courtesy in their interactions. It does not even mean that we know what "courtesy" looks like in an environment such as the one under discussion here; it simply means that the data are evidence of a group which is sharing ideas, testing each other's suppositions and reading new interpretations into their messages in ways which are unformed and developing on the fly. I may have been moderating, but my role gave me nowhere near the kind of authority afforded to the teachers we find in discourse analysis transcripts. As mentioned before, I may have been seen to endorse contributions (the "F" of "IRF") simply by responding to them and I may have had the administrative power to delete them, but I was not in a position to instruct others in what counted as valid knowledge or a useful contribution. The authors' understanding of what constituted useful, valid or significant postings were determined by their own interpretations of what one does when responding to policy documents as part of a group discussion.

Without the familiar student-teacher dynamic or the turn-taking protocols common to classrooms and chaired meetings, one might suppose that the forum was an unstructured and informal encounter, that "speakers" would congregate casually, engaging in spontaneous, unplanned dialogues. The PKPF was, however, an environment which had been created with the specific intention of provoking thoughtfully composed contributions. As interview respondents would later tell me, these contributions endured up to an hour of editing and revising before being posted publicly. They were also directed towards policy makers as well as the visible audience, meaning that their purpose was broader than a set of simple exchanges between a group of declared participants.

In this way, the forum messages were far from being examples of natural or unselfconscious utterances. This feature does not, in my mind, limit the quality of the data to which we have access. It simply means that we must allow for the fact that more chairs were occupied in this debate than might have seemed the case at first. I also make these distinctions in order to show how I am steering some familiar methods, using unfamiliar data as the impetus for re-examining and renewing them.

The lens of discourse analysis has been an extremely valuable start in focusing this analysis. It has given me the tools to distinguish between the content of PKPF discussions and the specific rhetorical strategies employed by each of the participants. Having closely

examined a number of exchanges within it, we begin to see how the more productive and engaging of these elements were fostered, and how they might be extrapolated and adapted in other settings. Apart from other policy consultation endeavours, these might afford some insights into the negotiation styles among dispersed work groups in the private sector, in online literature discussions among university students, or indeed any setting in which the element of advocating and supporting a perspective on any problem - abstract, theoretical or practical - is demanded.

The analysis which follows is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the frequency with which certain kinds of messages or exchanges were posted to the PKPF. It is instead an illustrative account, which draws attention to some key features of participants' discussion strategies and the ways in which these individual strategies fed into the site's effectiveness as a whole.

#### The forum content

In the sections which follow, I'll be looking more closely at the individual messages and threads on the site, asking "What were people *actually* 'talking' about?" Throughout the chapter, I assume the role of researcher, laying my concerns for effective online moderation aside for the moment. For the most part, contributors did not comment specifically on the Ministry publications. Instead, they used the forum to discuss the broader values, principles and priorities on which teaching and learning with technology should be founded.

The contributions were extremely rich and diverse, including, among others: position statements or essays about government planning and priorities; autobiographical material about teacher's professional lives; descriptions of specific classroom activities; references to, summaries of and discussions about research (and newspaper) literature; "FAQ" type questions and requests for input to BC professional development plans. As mentioned earlier, this analysis also pays attention to the actual content (not simply the type) of the messages. These included, among others: the problems and meanings of "equal access" to technology and to the PKPF debate itself; the importance of student choice in taking provincially examinable courses online; and the degree of importance we attach to furthering teachers' technical skills.

I was initially interested in exploring the communication styles exhibited by participants. These styles were evidence of what these authors understood to "count" in this environment,

as well as of the social, educational, political and rhetorical ends served by these styles. As Wilhelm (2000) notes, there is a significant tendency in political forum participants to start new “seed” threads rather than reading, reflecting on and responding to what other contributors have said already. The tendency, then, is to start one’s own conversation instead of finding out where the conversation - which is already in full swing - is going. The extent of engagement between the participants themselves was therefore determined - rather than looking at the simple shape of the forum threads - by the detail of the messages, namely the extent to which participants demonstrated a close, listening attention to other’s opinions, values or anecdotes. This engagement was further evident in instances where participants refined the arguments of others by building upon or adapting them (see Appendix 1, Figures 7 and 8), adding anecdotal data of their own, supplying references for their arguments or simply arguing in strong language and with zeal. The social element of discussion (as distinct from “task oriented” elements (Walther, Anderson & Park, 1989)) was established by their use of each other’s first names, expressions of common interests, friendly salutations and expressions of personal support.

I also looked into “Reply” protocols vs. “New thread” protocols, asking, “What does the opening of a new thread suggest? Do the authors look for connections with each other before they post, and are these connections profitable? How are themes of the various discussions integrated and mediated among participants? What are their respective points of reference and rhetorical strategies?” A message which visually appears to be a reply but – semantically – is not makes for confusing reading. Was there a sense of overall consensus regarding when to start new threads and when not to? I understood new topic initiation to signify, “This is a new conversation,” and understood it as another indication of conversational etiquette on the site. It also showed the desire of participants to negotiate new topics around the themes laid out for them.

#### Participant Connections

In many instances, there were clear indications of social connections between participants, whether they were born within the forum or whether they were carried over from other environments.

In Electronic Delivery, Bruce responded to Bernie’s comments about distance education with a welcoming “Good to hear your views.” While Bruce agreed with Bernie’s view, he

amicably described it as “cynical;” the adjective thus brought a sense of irony and familiarity to the exchange. It closed warmly and diplomatically with the comment, “I welcome this opportunity to find the best in both [distance education and school based learning].” Later on, we encounter Gregg responding to Mathew with a solid “Well said..!” (17 Jan) Restating Mathew’s case with some vim (he makes his case strongly *before* posing his questions), Gregg may give the impression of sparring but he is actually offering his full support. Later in this same exchange, Gregg offered some material with a concerned, “Hope this helps” (17 Jan).

A while later, on 26 January, Alice joined the discussion using another strategy. Rather than engaging with an individual posting, she showed that she had read and understood all of the previous messages in that thread. Her posting addressed four other contributors by name, summarising her understanding and contributing her own take on the established topic, “Electronic Delivery” (based on *Conditions of Success*). “Electronic Delivery” was the most heavily populated forum and included the longest, most topically coherent exchanges. Its fifty-seven messages included both brief exchanges and longer debates, attesting to the strength of feeling of the contributors, several of whom posted numerous times to this forum.

A similar corralling strategy was employed by Mark, but to a different purpose. Whereas Alice was summarising the messages of others in order to bring forth a new point on a structural theme (about the tensions between parents, public schools and educators), Mark’s goal was to elicit information from his colleagues directed toward educational ends. As the chair of a professional development association, he had been on the lookout for advice regarding the association’s course of action. In other words, like the PKPF team, he was using the forum as a sounding board and research medium. To that end, he retold the story he has heard so far from various sources, and asked if the participants had any more to contribute.

Other messages which exemplified the theme of social coherence can be found in *Visions and Principles*, where Bruce opened the debate on a congratulatory, political theme note: “I am delighted to see the web being used for its true democratic purpose” (25 Nov). Lauren then addressed me by name and Joe responded personally and personably to her as well.

As the moderator, I hoped that the atmosphere would remain warm and tempers cool, or at least cool enough to sustain an ongoing debate. In the interests of fuelling dialogue, I

referred contributors to other conversations where similar views were being expressed or related topics being covered, for example my post to Valerie on December 4 in Curriculum & Learning Resources. The outcome of these directions, if heeded, would ultimately be the segregation of a total population into groups of like-minded individuals. In retrospect, I see that skillful moderating means finding a subtle balance between encouraging conversation and collaborative inquiry without effectively herding people into contact with others who think alike and may be less likely to challenge them. As Burbules and Rice (1991) caution, one might actually discourage dialogue by herding discussants into homogeneous groups. This promotes separatism among the total population, preventing anyone from making approaches to those who think differently.

Nonetheless, in reviewing my own comments and the (overt, textual) actions of participants, I found that my direction was heeded on at least one occasion. The visitor to whom I had suggested mingling did indeed return to the forum two days afterwards to engage in a discussion with the participant I had named. This was the thread about the potential and limitations of the Ministry's Instructional Resource Packages that served as official curriculum guides. At this point, Anna responded to Valerie, articulating the belief that technology should not be employed as an add-on, rather as a feature infused throughout the curriculum (In so doing, she echoed the values which are explicitly declared in *Conditions for Success* regarding the Ministry's intention to "enhance learning across the curriculum by applying ICT skills" [Catherine, *Funding*; 14 Dec]).

Having offered support for Valerie's observations on the scope of the IRPs, however, Anna went on to disagree with Valerie's theoretical take. She positioned herself in allegiance with Joe's comments about Constructivist Theory but ultimately changes the topic, focusing her questions towards "What are the IRPs enabling teachers to do?" This alters the original route of the discussion, introducing a much broader question, and Valerie did not reply.

The gesture of sharing reading materials contributed to the social climate of the forum. In finding research interests in common, contributors (including myself) opened up opportunities for further conversation. While this feature may also be considered an element of citing sources (see below), I have included it here because of its evident contribution to the warmth of interactions between speakers. One example of this comes in *Electronic Delivery*, where I learned that Derek and William shared my interest in online education. Derek

contributed a reference for people to consult on 28 January, to which I responded with questions. I supplied another URL and the exchange continued. Both of us expressed gratitude as more readings arrived, this time about learning styles on the web. During this week of regular interaction, I suggested that Derek talk to Bruce about this topic, since I knew that he was also interested in online education. Sure enough, Bruce joined the discussion having visited Derek's recommended site. The site, he said, concerned university education, while he was interested in younger students. Specifically, he was interested in the meaning of "moral attentiveness in online classrooms" (27 Feb). So, while I had been encouraging these contributors to speak to each other, the common literature we shared also enabled a sense of social cohesion. Five more messages were posted on this educational theme before this interaction closes, including personal anecdotes; a journal reference and an argument against its main supposition; a moment of advocacy for collaborative, networked learning; the argument that "stemming the flow of social isolation is... a moral issue with which teachers are entrusted" (Bruce, 28 Feb); and finally, one last resource from the Canadian Homeschool Resource page about student socialisation. This last message functioned as more ammunition in the pro-homeschooling debate, pursued elsewhere. As this same author returned to another posting by Bruce (his regular sparring partner), the message implied a jarring change of agenda, specifically to an agenda which had been declared and exhausted somewhere else already. Prior to the arrival of the last author, the conversation was progressing amicably and well. The frequency of the posts, the spirit of collaborative inquiry and the evidence that authors were reading both the messages and references contributed by others describes a high level of engagement. With nothing further to go on, I can suggest one of two tentative reasons for the abrupt closure of this fruitful dialogue. The message about homeschooling was not followed up either because the literature itself was not deemed relevant to the ongoing conversation, or because the other authors had specifically chosen to excuse themselves from the company of this last contributor. In any event, the conversation came to an immediate close.

#### Message and Thread Coherence

Individual messages often pursued numerous points, with elements crossing the boundaries of several discussions at once. Messages in which single arguments were pursued were, in fact, rare. However, one exceptional example of message coherence can be found in *Social*

*Impact*, between January 13 and 14. Responding thoughtfully to the declared topic of the forum, Adam argued that technology-shy, older teachers tend to distance themselves from younger colleagues whom they perceive to be technology enthusiasts. He agreed with Bruce (8 Jan) that “common sense will prevail,” demonstrating that he had read the first author’s message. This agreement set up a sense of allegiance, which was then modified by his urgent desire to see results “expediently.” He tempered this urgency with some detail concerning his own situation as a teacher-on-call and reached out to the assembled company, “I am curious if anyone else has noticed this or if anyone perceives it as a problem.” The problem described by Adam is that of novice teachers losing their most valuable resource: the wisdom of more experienced educators. This straightforward point was clearly framed within a response to a colleague explaining that his good faith is guarded; it was further clarified with personal experience and took a moment to find out whether or not others shared his perspective. It was well measured and carefully composed, situated within concerns about the teaching profession as a whole.

The following day, I responded to Adam, asking him - rather tangentially, it seems now - whether or not he thinks that online mentoring might, in part, compensate for the loss of mentors within elementary schools (I was trying to focus the discussion towards finding solutions beyond simply identifying problems). That same day, this line of thinking was taken up by Gregg, at which point Adam’s invitation was effectively derailed. I had nothing specific to offer Adam in response to his actual question, and evidently asked him a question about a topic with which I felt more confident. The unfortunate derailment went unremarked, however, as Gregg told me with some enthusiasm that he had written an article on this exact topic. He added the names of the authors he has found useful - revealing that he worked within a context in which academically supported argumentation was the norm. In favour of online mentoring himself, he supported his thinking with material by Tyack and Cuban (1995), a text with which I was familiar and had enjoyed reading. My response, as you would expect, is friendly, a reflection of our common interests. By this point in the forum (mid-January), I had seen his name appear a few times and felt modestly comfortable with our conversation. I included a smiley (☺) in my message and directed him towards Kimball (1996) and another text about promoting meaningful discourse online through clickable hypertext. Feeling pleased to have encountered a like-minded researcher, my

message cheerfully (and wordily) addressed those who were reading but not posting. I invited the participants to “join” me in *PKPF Concept* so that we might discuss how best to use the forum in its very setting.

Reflecting on the exchange described above, it is clear that an initial idea from Adam (mentoring) did survive into the next message, which I authored. However, this concept was abandoned as soon as the discussion took on the specialised flavour of *online* learning research. Almost a month earlier, in *Educator Training & Support*, Kevin had also raised the problem of the aging teaching population, but these two authors did not have a chance to recognise their common concerns in public, nor how they could be directed toward aspects of the ministry’s proposed policy initiative. Their discussion remained within the realm of educational issues they faced as professionals.

In *Educator Training and Support*, Anna joined the discussion about teacher training *with the specific intention* of changing the agenda. Rather than altering the group’s perspective on the matter at hand, she wanted to alter their very perception of “what counts.” As far as she was concerned, training teachers is *not* the answer to teachers’ technology woes. It was far from being at the top of her list of priorities. She cast the challenge within the politics of daily school life as “roadblocks...to the use of computers in [her] classroom... lab access, software problems, licensing issues, insufficient technical support.” She closed with a question, “Am I unique?” (16 Jan) In this message, the author reasserted what she perceived to be the main concerns for decision-makers. Jumping in to offer training is, she says, mindless if the teachers who already have skills are being prevented from achieving their current goals. She herself was a confident computer user and has no need for training, she said.

In response, Mathew asked Anna how she had developed her technical competence, directing the conversation back towards an educational concern, or how one learns to use the computer. He offered his own story with gentle humour, “I learned by borrowing school computers... and letting my kids teach me” (16 Jan). He considered home-computer use the key to developing teachers’ technical skills. The discussion was thus pursued in a friendly fashion, but look at what has happened: Anna’s question, “Am I unique?” has not been answered. More significantly, she had categorically told her audience that teacher training was *not* the answer and therefore not the core of this debate; meanwhile, the real concerns of

managing an uninterrupted, bug-free computer classroom *were* a high priority. With Mathew's response, however, the conversation has wheeled around, returning to the very topic which Anna had already discarded. Her attempt to change the agenda for discussion and develop a conversation about the relative priority of solving administrative and legal problems over teacher training has been sabotaged by the change of subject.

Anna and Mathew's "misses" are common in online conversations, but they are all the more concerning where the goal of that very conversation is to promote the authors' sense of efficacy in online discussion environments, and with a view to increasing their participation in the processes of government. When a conversation ends abruptly like this, there is little incentive for the original author to return. The potential for conversational coherence is limited, which in turn limits the sense of agency and reward experienced by the speaker.

#### Classroom narratives

The PKPF received numerous messages discussing abstract theories and principles around which the new technology curriculum might be constructed. Others among them actually offered descriptions of what was *actually going on* in schools. These messages showed the real, daily concern of participants in doing their jobs well. They portray some of the hardware, software, pedagogical and curricular applications of new technologies. Since the messages were part of a larger debate on policy development, these descriptions were naturally interspersed with position statements and expressions of personal values, to put the description in context. Here, for example, is Valerie's list of school technologies, her impressions of their use and the curricular value of doing so:

Even now that I am working in schools which have fairly sophisticated computers (iMacs) and good networking capability (macJanet and proxy server) the basic program is Appleworks (previously Clarisworks) and we also have Hyperstudio. We use a digital camera, can use video although we haven't done so yet. We use Yahoo!igans as our search engine of choice and students have not been disappointed as yet. The District subscribes to World Book on-line and students have been very happy with the results.

I work in rural schools with multiple grades. Grade ones have developed number books and alphabet books as slide shows in their first few weeks of school. Grade sevens have both Appleworks and Hyperstudio to use as tools for curriculum related topics. The computer is no longer the issue. What students are asked to do with this tool is (15 Jan).

Note that this message followed a similar pattern to those written by Adam, who began his message with a classroom example from which he developed a set of principles before

closing with an argument or new question. Such messages were semantically coherent and thus straightforward to follow, since they only pursue one avenue per posting. Those messages which visited several arguments or topics were much harder both to comprehend in terms of the author's positioning and to respond to, as a secondary author. When several baits have been laid, one is never sure which one to bite.

In the forum on Curriculum & Learning Resources, Valerie also offered accounts of her own practice, telling us about a specific topic (weather phenomena; Grades 6-7) and its impact on society. She explained how the topic was chosen, the assessment criteria determined and the IRP requirements met:

Together (i.e. We and the students) articulated several questions that needed to be researched. Students looked for information in electronic and print resources. They learned how to move between Internet applications and other applications for the purposes of noting information. They are working on a Hyperstudio project where they are depicting, with animation, how the weather phenomenon starts, progresses and results in devastating consequences. With the students we have established criteria for the content and for the presentation (please note, expertise with technology is not an issue). We are working within the guidelines of the Science K-7 IRP. We are integrating technology. We are using a variety of instructional strategies. We are in tune with pedagogical best practice (4 Dec).

This description grabbed the interest of John, who wanted to make contact with Valerie's partner teacher. Their conversation did not continue on the PKPF.

Cole's tale of the field was also mixed with a position statement in which he "fully [supports computer and ICT training in elementary school if it's done properly and effectively]" (*Student Needs & Expectations*, 17 Jan). Like Adam and Valerie, he also developed an individual perspective out of the classroom narrative:

At [my school] we have developed an extensive ICT program with a focus on research skills. We are training and gaining skills in several areas: a) familiarity and comfort with ICT; b) learning general strategies such as Internet Workshop and learning more specific teaching strategies to teach navigation, content, and curriculum; c) developing a research model to apply both in the classroom and the computer lab; and d) using ideas from other curricular areas such as 'Assessment Across the Curriculum' to examine what students' writing / research look like and how to assess it. This idea has been pushed further into examining how students are processing and handling the information. We realize it's a long road but a worthwhile one.

The author's value statement showed approval of the long-term goals determined by his school. He framed his position statement in the context of the working wage: the average

income is lower in Canada than it is in the US. This opened up a conversation with Luke who argued that our priority should be the curriculum, which he placed within the political theme of the school's responsibilities, namely that "the fast pace of technology makes us think that an economic urgency is the same as an educational one" (17 Jan).

*Electronic Delivery* housed a sustained conversation which might just as well have taken place in *Social Impact*. In fact, to a lesser degree, it did. It centred around the question, "Should we do distance education by computer?" (Emma, 23 Jan) and tackled the problem of students' ability to learn in complete isolation. Like the discussion about the value of teacher training in ICT, the thread addressed the question, "What are teachers concerned about, and how does technology fit within these concerns?" This thread restated Bruce's earlier concern, adding, "We construct our culture, our reality, together. Learning in isolation... is like watching TV: it's almost all one-way." In making this point, Emma unwittingly revisited Lauren's original question about transmission-based versus Constructivist pedagogies. Her comment took the discussion towards social, political concerns with how we engage with and construct "our reality." The topic was applied to a concrete teaching situation, namely the distance education model with a new (electronic) twist. Tom, a student from Vancouver Island, responded to Emma. He told her that OSCAR courses are indeed isolating and therefore challenging. This experiential material supported her contention that isolation hinders learning.

The theme of student isolation had also been raised by Mathew in a previous exchange; this elicited a question from William. He wanted to understand the difference between OSCAR and "traditional" distance education courses from the learner's perspective. "How do these different delivery models impact interpersonal skills, in your opinion?" Note that here, William's interest, in returning to a more strictly educational theme, was categorically in "your opinion." He had made contact with a person whose concerns lay in a similar field and wanted to know how that other person understood the situation. In the meantime William had also joined *Research*, asking about studies of OSCAR learners, a question he had also posed to Alice, within *Electronic Delivery*. This participant was a determined researcher who repeatedly approached the other contributors with the same question. His approach to the forum might be characterised - like Mark's - as a fact-finding mission, in which he tries to broaden his knowledge before offering further recommendations.

### Challenge and conflict in the online debate

In many cases, exchanges on the PKPF were continued because the discussants did not agree. How did participants express disagreement? What kind of language did they use and were these disagreements expressed as personal, intellectual, professional or political differences?

In contrast with the exchange between Anna and Mathew, who were exchanging views in *Educator Training & Support*, Dan pursued the same topic as the previous speaker, but disagreed with the content. In other words, although he challenged the opinion, he allowed the agenda itself to remain intact. Dan argued that ongoing, seamless integration of ICT into teaching practice is impossible. In principle, he agreed that it's a good idea, but that he has found it impracticable. In support of his argument, he offered the model of inservice developed at his own school. This kind of disagreement was professional and pertained only to the education of the teachers themselves.

Kevin's comment in *Educator Training and Support* about the "aging, tired group of teachers trying to get up to speed or simply ignoring the problem because they will be retiring" (18 Dec) aroused the displeasure of at least two of his colleagues. Valerie (12 Mar) took exception to the suggestion that older teachers were inflexible or anxious. Jackie, too, told us that she is (13 Feb) "a long way from retiring" and that the problem is deeper than Kevin has described. She described her working life as a "constant state of frustration with technology," and bitterly reported how, as a single mother of two, she has been told to go home and "play around on [the computer]." Her District Technology Manager clearly has "more time on his hands" than she does, she said. Apart from the evident strength of feeling in Valerie and Jackie disagreements, these messages are also significant as examples as a form of disputation. Rather than simply preferring a different course of action in technology training, they claim that the very assumptions on which the original argument was based are false. Her message is cutting but professional and sharpened by the nugget of emotion it carries. This conveys the strong message that one's station in life determines one's opinions, or rather, that one holds the beliefs that one can afford to have. In sum, for this author, one's political and educational orientations are dependent on the privileges one enjoys.

In *Funding*, Adam posted a message (27 Jan) which followed a similar argument structure to his earlier (*Social Impact*, 13 Jan) contribution about the lack of valuable mentors to novice teachers. His message - on the subject of a news story, "School Union Blocked

Grant from IBM” - followed a linear development from a personal statement, from which he then extrapolated to reveal its wider implications; from this he developed a set of questions which he then interrogated in order to reach conclusions:

Does anyone give you a million dollars with no strings attached? As I choose to remain living in a liberal, capitalist society I am not really against big business, but I recognize the pervasive feeling that big business wants our societies education system to reflect what has made them successful. They want our education system to have clear achievable goals and to reward those schools that achieve them. I don't blame them for wanting this. It reflects the culture they live in. The question is, “Is this the same culture our schools are in?” Should it be?

Is it fair to criticize a person for being socially irresponsible if they feel or have no connection to the society to which they are being irresponsible? Is it fair to say slaves were socially irresponsible for running away from plantations? Is it fair to say that IBM is being socially irresponsible for wanting to set up conditions that helped make them into the company they are today? Is it socially irresponsible for schools to resist the push? Are we resisting because of philosophical differences or because we fear change?

Big business has a lot to offer our schools, but it will always come with strings. The more we understand ourselves and our motivations the more I think we can successfully integrate their help. IBM and corporations like them are a part of our existing society (not the only part), but to leave them out in the cold when we badly need their funds doesn't make sense. Their fundamental beliefs are a part of our system already (not the only part) and I think we are strong enough to take their funding, maintain the integrity of the other parts of our system, and not have to bash big business for wanting us to mirror them.

What do you think?

These conclusions form the basis for a closing moment of advocacy. The closure, “What do you think?” is typical of this author. Note also how Adam answered his own question at the beginning of the second paragraph. This is the hook he needed to pursue his argument, which is delivered persuasively, yet in a detached, depersonalised fashion. Overall, it is cautious but optimistic message, with historical detail (the slaves in plantations) tactically helping the author to seem less confrontational than if he had stayed with immediate, local concerns.

The motivation of this message was clearly a disagreement, but his disagreement did not bring the conversation to a close. In contrast with the messages surrounding his, he believes that it is possible to retain one's dignity and integrity despite reaching business agreements with industry. He advocates self-knowledge on this point and his closing invitation brings Mathew back with more readings and another question about the ethics of the current

education economy. Should students be “For sale to the highest bidder?” he wanted to know, bringing his mentoring concerns back to the political issues of classroom influences.

A keen and committed reader, Adam thanked Mathew for the article and reiterated his position. He did not take an unshakable stand on his opinions, qualifying, “I am still thinking about this, but would love to know what you have come up with (or anyone else reading this).” Courteously acknowledging the possibility of silent observers, Thor invited commentary on what was clearly a sensitive subject. Since Mathew had wondered (28 Jan) about policies governing industry donations, I posted the URL for the BCTF policy on business partnerships. The discussion had, by then, travelled through agreement, through disagreement supported by personal experience but tempered with expressive caution, and the sharing of external resources. Since Mathew chose not to accept Adam’s invitation, the exchange between these two contributors closed.

In spite of this conversational closure, a latecomer posted another resource to the thread. This came from Aaron, and included the Conference Board of Canada URL. A conversation that began on the theme of industry gifts to the education sector ultimately became a clearinghouse for reading materials about business-education partnerships.

As anyone who has joined a listserv will know, there is a great difference between a courteous, rationally explicated disagreement and a “flame.” While no “flame wars” erupted on the PKPF, the atmosphere could certainly be described as cool at times, if not overtly hostile. To clarify, by a flame war, I mean a situation like the ones described by Walther, Anderson and Park (1989) in which personal invective over-rides the members’ capacity for reasonable conversation. In such a situation, veiled threats and self-aggrandizing language can silence the textual activities of the whole list. While I would not describe it as necessarily good-humoured, the apparent conflicts on the PKPF were never more than sparring. Disagreements were occasionally pointed. Participants bristled on several occasions, but thankfully, no personal invective was posted.

In the debate over the value of distance education and electronic delivery, Bruce posted a powerful argument to the ethical debate about online learning (19 Jan). He placed this argument in the context of his real priority, however: the students. Online tools, he explained, “add a certain panache, gusto, salience, timeliness to my lessons. But first and foremost... I

value the interaction between teacher and student AND student to student.” For this reason, face to face teaching is essential to public education, he concludes.

On the same forum, Mathew started a new discussion entitled “Given the Choice,” elaborating on why *he* believes that distance education is a “good” thing. In response, Bruce defended his position on distance education, but at this point, Mathew abandoned the exchange. He returned later, however, for an opportunity to call Bruce on one of his previous points. This he copied and pasted into the body of his message. This capacity for copying and pasting may, baldly, be a good way to call other people on the strength of their arguments. It allows us to point clearly to self-contradiction and inconsistencies. However, it can also come across as a rather ruthless gesture, as if one were barking at one’s “opponent” or pinning them against a wall.<sup>1</sup> We might be interested in hearing clarification because we agree with another person; alternatively, we might want clarification in order to understand the opposition. In either case, pointed questions can be interpreted as antagonism or as mere posturing.

The function of the text as a tool can therefore be undermined by the other meanings conveyed by our use of that tool. Bruce’s reply suggests that he has understood the gesture in this way. Somewhat defensively it seems, he referred Mathew to his degrees in psychology and administration rather than building a new argument based on reasoning, referenced literature or his own teaching experience. He countered, “How do you base your beliefs? Do you require documentation, certification, research results, or do you believe that there is common sense about nurturing a child?” (17 Jan) The message was clear and forceful. While Bruce was prepared to stay and defend himself, he would do so by deflecting the conversation away from himself and in so doing, he let Mathew (and the rest of us who observed from the sidelines) know that he considered the line of questioning pedantic. If we remove the emotional content of this exchange, we are left with a pair of individuals who began their arguments from an entirely different set of assumptions. Bruce believes that, through experience, there is a collective wisdom - or “common sense” – about teaching that all professional educators inevitably share. Mathew, however, wanted to debate the fine

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<sup>1</sup> This communicative strategy is commonly used by this particular participant. On 20 Jan he addresses a BCTF staff member by name with a pointed question about the future of distance education. His message also argues various points. It receives no public reply.

detail and again, opted out of the conversation. This discussion took place at the intersection described by Cherryholmes (1988):

What counts as sound argument, proper authority, appropriate norms and reliable evidence are different for theory and practice. What is published in research journals is evaluated in terms of its scientific persuasiveness.... Practical discourse has different immediate interests...Because [it] often occurs face-to-face, there is less need to document and validate assertions. Tacit knowledge is not derogated; it is often elicited and elaborated. External validity of practical knowledge claims is not a major issue (p. 86).

At such an intersection, Bruce and Mathew were talking at cross purposes, one seeking external validity in keeping with academic, theoretical discourse (and the print medium) and the other sharing professional anecdotes or “commonsense about nurturing a child” (in keeping with the spirit of a professional meeting discussion). In future, designers of sites like the PKPF would do well to make a statement at the outset with respect to this apparent dichotomy. Here, the different approaches ruffled feathers even though, in separate circumstances, both would have been deemed appropriate. Shared concerns are set aside in favour of conflicting expectations of discourse and the discussion came to a standstill.

The same day, however, a diversion was caused, which seized my attention and that of another participant, Bruce. In a politically motivated message, Lewis issued a direct, scathing attack on public schooling. “Our public schools have become more a conditioning ground... than a healthy conduit for concerns and ideas,” he said. He went on to describe the BCTF as “social engineers” who have abandoned “real academics.” The school system, he said, is “in the process of collapse” under the weight of the BCTF “social engineers.” He closed with a rallying cry that it can only be rescued from complete annihilation if teachers would “take back control of the BCTF.”

This message certainly gave me pause for thought. On the one hand, it was a tremendous example of how the PKPF had brought together representatives from populations with differing views (could they *be* more different?) It was a sobering reminder that this was an open, public forum, and that the politics of education were not simply a professional concern. As I write, I have a much better understanding of what he meant. On the forum’s closure, I wrote to Lewis to ask for an interview about his experience with the forum. His reply was direct - “I’m not sure you want to interview me!” - and told me about his grave concerns for

school discipline and the manner in which BC public schools were “promoting” the Gay-Straight Alliance.

While I had been wondering what to do about this message, if anything, Bruce jumped in to take issue with Lewis. I was glad of this intervention because I wanted to maintain my position of neutrality, such as it was. Bruce described Lewis’ comments as “uninformed” and took the opportunity to articulate his belief - reiterated elsewhere in the forum - in the BCTF as a democratic institution. Perhaps Lewis’ posting is what one Ministry officer referred to as an “off the wall” comment? Whatever our understanding of it, the exchange closed following Bruce’s defence of the Federation.

No other participants took up Lewis’ point and the virtual, political border rested where it has been laid, around this single author, shooting arrows at the BCTF battlements. Of course, the PKPF was not set up to discuss the epistemologies and teaching beliefs of the various education sections in BC. Furthermore, we had not anticipated its role to be in rendering explicit the ideological boundaries between these populations or individuals within them. However, this would seem to be the evidence represented by the textual contributions of these authors, who, while they were discussing the relative merits of distance and school-based education, or home schooling in the context of an “anti-democratic” union, were categorically not offering detailed feedback on the Ministry’s latest policy publications. Alternatively, we might say, this is the manner in which they had chosen to interpret the invitation for feedback. Clearly, all of the parties involved in creating a site like the PKPF - its designers, partners and participants - need to reconsider how a policy focus is to be maintained (if this is indeed desirable) and where the boundaries between “on” and “off” topic debate lie.

Before closing this section, I would like to return to my point about quotations because I do not wish to give the impression that contributors exclusively quoted each other as an act of aggression. They also did so as a gesture of solidarity. On 2 March, Mathew quoted Al to establish agreement, a way of saying “well done;” Al showed the same courtesy to Brian Walker on 28 February, prefacing his quotation with “We are talking the same language here” (*Electronic Delivery*). This clarity showed the audience without doubt that this act of quotation was not a sparring tactic, or one intended to diminish or humiliate the listener.

Invitations to Speak

Various messages fall into the category of “invitation.” Overall they may be recognised by specific requests for information or by their initiation of a new line of debate which includes an element of soliciting feedback. I have not considered the simple initiation of a thread as an invitation as such, since I have chosen to explore their significance as moments in which the agenda of the discussion is established. They are evidence of the close, listening attention paid by participants to each other.

The most obvious of these messages was the question posed by Michael in *My Advice*. He was looking, very specifically, for implementation models for school computer labs and issued his question in much the same way as one would frame a contribution to an FAQ board hosted by, say, a software manufacturer. This kind of forum use was a long way from the anticipated activities of individual reading, collective inquiry, critique, debate, advice and, quite possibly, consensus forming. Correspondingly, this message was addressed coolly to the other conference participants and includes no social or emotional features, little detail concerning his own teaching situation and no efforts to connect on an abstract or philosophical level. John also posted an FAQ-type question to *Funding*, asking “Does anyone know anything about the relative maintenance costs of IBM/Mac?” (3 Feb) He also hoped to learn something from Valerie, asking her on 4 January if she might be prepared to swap notes on her classroom practice (*Curriculum & Learning Resources*). Their conversation may have continued offstage since we do not see it in public.

Mark also offered a specific invitation, but his search was for information which would contribute to the professional development association. His request was initially uttered as a one-time offer, but once the request was heeded and advice began to arrive, he re-issued his invitation in order to continue the discussion. In the end, it seems, a longer and more in-depth consultation process suited his needs. All of the invitations referred to above reveal moments in which contributors set forth new agendas, letting others know “what counted,” in their opinion.

There were also numerous instances of Mathew posting news articles. Unlike my exchanges with Derek, Bruce and William (in which we shared material we valued and with which we agreed), Mathew’s motivation in posting references seemed to be the spark of a debate. The articles he chose were contentious, often characterised by political themes of social justice. He did not always explain his perspective on this material or defend his

position (This is not the same as citing sources, because sources are typically used to support the argument being made within the author's own narrative. Invitational messages are simply instances where participants have offered either more material or another incentive to speak up). Nonetheless, I did appreciate his efforts as a voluntary moderator greatly. He copied and pasted articles into the body of his messages, which was a real boon because the newspapers themselves do not provide easily accessible archives. His reference to the article from the Province about internet addiction sparked off one of the site's longer exchanges, including 10 separate messages, most of which were from BC students.

Invitations also took a more subtle form, as invitations to share debates and intellectual inquiries. Anna wanted to know whether what counted to her also mattered to others on December 4. On January 16, she also asked "Am I unique?" at the end of a message about her technical concerns. It is not surprising that, by January 16, she was unwilling to discuss the nuts and bolts of teacher training: she had already done so over a month earlier, in a message to *Educator Training & Support* (Mathew was, we may suppose, not reading this section and has therefore had no chance to follow this line of thinking). Here, Anna stepped past my initial posting about equal access to the PKPF, instead thinking aloud, or issuing the invitation, "I wonder how other participants in this discussion feel about training teachers in tech skills and providing a bit of pro-D...." While I (tangentially) suggested to her that she take her comments to *Curriculum & Learning Resources*, Simon accepted the invitation to pursue Anna's agenda. He pursued the idea of teacher training, looking at the values of project-based and just-in-time learning. Like Dan (4 Feb), he showed a preference for inservice that is directly related - rather than abstracted from - the classroom. Dan and Simon did not engage in any discussion on this site, so the two exchanges remained isolated under different topic headings.

Another example of this kind of material came mid-message, as William asked, "I am very interested in hearing from others who are involved with OSCAR delivered programs, or who are managing Pathfinder / Nautikos / Successmaker / TLE programs" (*Electronic Delivery*, 25 Jan). This invitation came between a direct question to Mathew about his opinion and a moment of advocacy for online learners. Each of these questions, expressions of opinion and moments of advocacy may be understood as the moment in which each individual steps up to the podium to declare, "This house believes...." Each contribution

represented a subtle shift in agenda, another issue which must be counted and yet another moment in which the government documents were set aside in favour of test-running new ideas. In the cases quoted above, the author's self was largely used as the point of reference, rather than the Ministry documents or any other research material.

Adam offered a similar, but more specific invitation in the posting described above (*Social Impact*, 13 Jan). Since his invitation was framed by "I am curious if anyone else has noticed this...", he was not so much thinking aloud or abstractly as issuing a gentle but direct offer to pursue a new line of inquiry. This is a strategy I used myself as the moderator (29 Nov) in response to Paula's message about the privatisation of online schooling: "Would anyone like to respond to this?" While this is clearly an appropriate tactic in face-to-face meetings where the conversation lags, its significance online is somewhat different. Online, the very posting of a message may be interpreted as an invitation to others to speak, meaning that this explicit articulation is redundant. Nonetheless, at this stage, I still consider the overt expression of hospitality to be a common courtesy which can diminish the sense of oratory signifying as it does, "I am aware of your presence and I wish to listen to you."

Even in the short set of exchanges described above, there are several lessons to be learned, not the least of which is that the initiating thread established by the moderator was often side-stepped completely. Clearly, no exclusive obligation was felt by PKPF participants to follow the lead set by the first message of any given thread or, for that matter, the lead of PKPF itself with its policy focus; at the very least, it showed that there was no need for a moderator to set new agendas in the semantic space between the forum headings and the subject headers of messages posted by visitors. In speaking from their experience and understanding, the teachers worked through the issues which they faced, leaving it to others to draw out any potential policy implications. They were more than capable of showing leadership in choosing their own agendas, above and beyond the goals of the PKPF and the Ministry documents at its source.

#### Citation of sources

Apart from Mathew, the site's most regular contributor, other authors such as Mark (*Funding*, 15 Feb and 16 Feb) submitted URLs for news and research reports to the bulletin boards. I posted these contributions to the resources section and added HTML to make the URLs live. One contributor conspicuously did not reference external literature, putting his

opinion forward as follows “I don’t remember reading what I consider the most valuable type of support for teachers trying to integrate computer technology into their instructional repertoire: TIME” (*Educator Training & Support*, 2 Dec).

In *Electronic Delivery*, the topic of online pedagogy brought with it additional reading. On 28 January, Derek offered a reference to a report on this topic. He did not comment on it himself, but his posting of it may be understood as implicit endorsement. One assumes that, if he had disagreed strongly with its argument in any way, he would have said so explicitly. Following this, I went in as the administrator and turned the URL into hypertext. This gave Mathew easy access to the material in his browser and he responded the same day. His response took the debate deeper as he commented on specific sections of the article, with reference to the relationship between “quality teaching” and class size. His message was a productive mix of quotations and personal commentary, showing that he had internalised his reading and was prepared to build on it:

Thanks for the link.

I think it is important for EDE teachers and students to have a maximum “class size.” DE schools should have student “class size” limitations just like “regular” classrooms in B.C. schools.

I like this comment:

“iii.How many do I teach? (Section 5)

High quality teaching online requires smaller student/faculty ratios. The shift from the classroom to online has been described as a shift from “efficiency to quality.” We also believe a motivational human touch must come into play as well in the online environment as it does in the classroom. Students should feel they are members of a learning community and derive motivation to engage in the material at hand from the attentiveness of the instructor.”

The exchange closed, however, when he posted another message in rapid succession - in a reply to himself - with an article from the *Edmonton Journal*. While we may speculate about why this exchange closed when it did, we can be fairly certain that, when a contributor is effectively talking to himself, the discussion is less than inviting to another party. In spite of this and any other reservations we might have about the pace of the discussion, the views shared or the impact of this exchange on decision-makers, it is extremely valuable in one significant respect: by contributing several readings on one topic, contributors revealed an active interest in developing their understanding of an area about which little reliable, local research had been published. These contributors have gone further than simply musing aloud

or asking others a question based on their experience, thereby revealing their priority concerns amidst the many which arise on the PKPF.

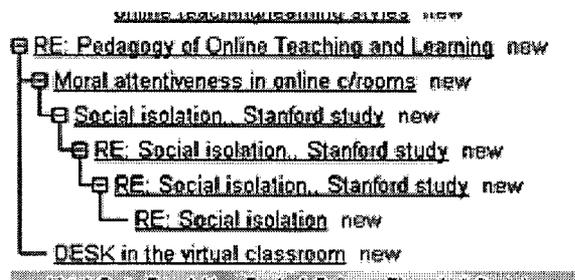


Figure 3. Sharing readings

Figure 3 shows a busy thread in which there was a strong sense of cohesion. Derek, Bruce and I were discussing the pedagogy of online classrooms. Derek commented that “studies such as the Stanford one are valuable,” showing that he had either read the document, skimmed over it or at the very least, appreciated its general research questions and concerns. Unsurprisingly, the same day (28 Feb), Bruce responded with the supportive observation, “Derek, we are talking the same language here.” Although Mathew’s next intervention was supportive, much of his message was autobiographical. He described his own school experience as follows:

We were taught that helping others was considered cheating and not fair to others. There was no such thing as cooperative learning! The teacher had all the important information and we had to listen so we would know what was on the exam. Our ideas were irrelevant. Lower level thinking (memorization) was the only learning style. We were sitting in a classroom but I wouldn't call it socialization. It was robot training.

This message closed the discussion off, delivering a narrative without inviting commentary or additional insight. Having responded to both the first and the last messages in this thread, the discussion was closed off from two directions. Judging by the agreement between Bruce and Derek, their correspondence may well have continued away from the forum, via email. This is an example of a conversation being interrupted by the arrival of a latecomer who is not on the same page either conversationally or literally. Mathew had not read the same materials as Bruce and Derek, leaving him on the fringes of the conversational circle.

In this thread, I responded to Bruce by directing him towards the URL for Derek’s message in the same forum, but which was in a conversation between only Derek and me. In this way, I could refer a contributor to a conversation which I had with someone else, which was previously private; I could also do so after the conversation has been frozen in time. In this fashion, I was effectively in three places at once, in three conversations at the same time.

In this case, it may be that the Stanford name helped to oil the wheels as well. At any rate, the reference prompted thoughtful, sustained conversation both about its progress and the principles underlying it.

On 4 February, I posted a message in response to the thread about the IBM school funding issue. Learning from Mathew, I included some extracts from the IBM site text to draw the readership in, as well as a hypertext link to IBM's own comments page:

If you want to read what IBM plans for schools, why not drop by the site? (<http://www.ibm.com/ibm/publicaffairs/education/index.html>).

Here are some extracts...

*Nothing is more important to the future of the United States than the 51 million children now attending some 100,000 schools. However, the plain evidence is that student performance continues to be disappointing.*

.....

SCHOOLS AS E-BUSINESS..

*When it comes to transforming your school, college or university into an e-business, your greatest assets are your own vision and ingenuity. Next, you need the right technology partner. IBM offers proven, end-to-end solutions for bringing your vision to life and securing a lasting competitive advantage. IBM e-business solutions can fundamentally change the way students learn, educators instruct and administrators manage.*

Here, the forum was being used as the place for contributors to work out their own political positions on public and corporate domains. Mathew seemed fairly certain of his ethical position on this material, but this was not the case for all contributors. Others – including Adam, Keith and James – all qualified their opinions.

Since the main thrust of opinion seemed to be against the industry giant, I thought that a message in the spirit of “know thine enemy” would add some flavour to the discussion. Nobody responded directly to this. Only Mathew replied, posting his message about corporate control and the threat to democracy. Without explicitly rejecting my attempt to present the other side of an argument, he did so implicitly with a return volley of contradictory findings. Behind the protective shield of other people's writing, this contributor did not invite others into direct discussion with him and the communication was largely one-way. One might engage with the points raised in the material he had circulated, but still, his readers were not given any direct insight into his own perspective on this material. Where readers were not put off replying altogether, they were encouraged to continue the discussion

in abstract terms, aside from the matter of one's personal stand on any of the issues represented.

### Speaking with Authority

On occasion, participants sought to strengthen their arguments with extraneous personal information. Rather than offering supporting evidence via research literature or professional anecdotes, they added authority to their messages simply by drawing attention to their own credentials. These postings were often delivered with strong feeling and direct language, abandoning references to the literature or Ministry documents altogether. Kevin (ET&S, 18 Dec) told us that he had been teaching for 37 years, supporting his claim to professional wisdom. He told us the location of his school, its demographics and the fact that he was their Technology Committee Chairperson. He added that he was currently “[dealing] with the very issues that this Ministry is addressing.”

Alice told us that she had been teaching since 1963 and referenced comments made to her by a school superintendent. Don included the detail that he had been teaching for 25 years. Gregg included the detail that he held an Ed.D. Deidre let us know indirectly that she sat on the TLETAC committee and Bruce used his degrees in psychology and administration as added ammunition. As a reader, one might be taken aback by these contributions. One might read them as evidence that authors were using their own person to add credibility to their statements. It might be understood as the equivalent of demanding, rather haughtily, “do you know who I am?” Online, and in the absence of any non-textual cues such as a person's physique, mode of dress, vocal intonation and volume or facial expression, this question *clearly begs the answer, No, I haven't a clue*. My interpretation of such details is that, far from being aggressive, attention-seeking devices, they are bids to let one's reader know something about oneself, an attempt to declare one's bodily presence when such information is not implicit simply by occupying a chair. In real life, in conversation, one encounters these contextual details in passing, simply collecting one's coffee in a conference break. One is used to conveying authority through one's presence, but online, there is no hiatus in which such gentle details can be added. In the context of reasoned political debate, they become ungentle, almost prickly and - somewhat absurdly - delivered at the same volume as a stinging commentary on the politics of funding a provincial education system.

### Political content

One feature of forum usage lies at the heart of this analysis: namely, that the PKPF participants rarely mentioned the Ministry documents directly. At the time of the Forum this was a surprise, and one which altered the direction of the research project altogether. I had expected a large body of discussions on which to base my analysis. I had expected to follow up with interviews about the content of the final policy and the contributions each author had made to it. In the end, however, the policy was attended to only peripherally, shifting the focus of my inquiry towards the nature of the environment and how this was received by those who visited. As the following chapter shows, the climate of such a forum can have a direct influence on which topics are raised, which are not and the circumstances in which an individual visitor seizes the day and decides to post at all.

Among the postings which did refer directly to the documents is that posted by Gregg and a colleague, who contributed their response to the Ministry in *My Advice*. Nobody replied. *Conditions for Success* or the *Plan for 2000+* may well have been read by many contributors but their content was far from attracting any sustained debate. By “sustained debate,” I refer to the kind of discussion in which it is evident that contributors engage each other in three or more exchanges in which positions are articulated, shared and supported, examined, challenged, developed or refuted. We did not see prolonged, joint interrogations of the Ministry publications, where an author took issue with a set of recommendations or list of priorities, debating them with his or her peers. Far more, we saw new concerns and positions being articulated time and again, with each author situated on a podium of their making.

There was, however, one two-message exchange in which policy matters were attended to, on the basis of a factual inquiry. During the Ministry interview, I confirmed that this was the only basis on which they were prepared to participate. On December 14, Adam asked the assembled company about their views on funding technology: funding technology in isolation runs the risk of “unwittingly [harming] other existing programs,” he says. This message got a response the same day from Catherine, a Ministry officer; this was the only Ministry message posted to the site:

[Adam’s] point regarding funding the entire set of educational priorities is an important one, and it is something that the Teaching, Learning and Education Technology Advisory Committee (TLETAC) took into account from the earliest meetings.

One of the five key themes in the committee's report ("Conditions for Success") is a Curriculum-Driven Agenda, meaning that teaching and learning will be supported through the integration of ICT with the curriculum. In short -- a cross-curricular perspective of education with ICT used to support all educational goals.

In the "Information Technology in Education Plan for 2000 and Beyond" this is reflected in the introductory statement of intention to enhance learning across the curriculum by applying ICT skills.

The message restates Adam's case and explains that the Ministry committee has shared his concern. The message then explains that his theme has been central in the recent publications. What does this mean, though? It is a difficult message to follow because it equates the contents of a document with human action, as if advocating an action is equal to performing it. This is a thorny point here, because the actions advocated by the document authors would largely be performed by people just like Adam. We also read that an "introductory statement of [intent]" in a later document argues for the cross-curricular integration of technology. At this point, it may be helpful to recall that public deliberations about policy are not "rational, objective and systematic" (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 92). They are not described by a set of linear processes. In this case, any linear processes are interrupted because arguing for something is not the same as doing it, especially where those who publish and those who *do* are not the same population.

The site did include an example of detailed policy critique, but it did not pertain to *Conditions for Success* or *Plan for 2000+*. Instead, it tackled the BCTF's own response to these publications. This is not a document to which all PKPF contributors would have access. Entitled, "Technology report recommendations," it was posted by Mark in early February, about two weeks after the BCTF policy seminar on technology:

In the working draft report and recommendations from the Technology Policy Seminar, I see a lack of congruence between Recommendation 22, which advocates for the positive impact of Electronic Delivery/Distributed Learning, and Recommendation 23, which advocates against public funds being used to supply hardware and software for those learners in ED/DL.

Recommendation 23, with which I do not and did not agree, seems to militate against those learners from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds being able to participate in ED/DL, which could have the tendency to make this an elitist model of education. This seems not to be in line with the notion of equal opportunities for quality education.

The message was not addressed to anyone in particular and does not receive any replies. This kind of detailed analysis simply did not draw a crowd. Furthermore, since the BCTF response to *Conditions for Success* was not posted to the site, other visitors would probably not have seen it and thus be excluded from a discussion about it. The message clearly situates the author as a person within a particular circle of policy debate and development, to which others had no access. With this message, a border is drawn between its author and those with less information on which to base their contributions.

Messages in which policy-related matters were discussed in the context of another purpose were, however, relatively common. For example, Joe mentioned “Conditions for Success” in *Visions & Principles* (3 Dec), but he only did so in passing, to clarify what he meant by “technology.” While he addressed the theoretical underpinnings of the document, it was in response to a question from a graduate student about Constructivism. Bruce also commented on current policies in *Electronic Delivery*, but again, his commentary did not pertain to the agenda set specifically by *Conditions for Success*. Its main purpose was to engage with the previous point made by Derek and to advance another about parental choice and public debate in order to “[stem] the flow of social isolation” among distance education students. “Current policies allow a parent to determine that other options are not available... Public discussion of what is acceptable in societal terms is in order to establish funding policy” (*Electronic Delivery*, 28 Feb). Here, policy became the context of the conversation rather than the goal.

Contributors also found ways to think about policy-related matters without (metaphorically) pinning the policy documents to a board and highlighting sections of them. In *My Advice* (Educator Training & Support) a discussion took place which looked at the priorities on which policy *might be made*. On 2 December, Christopher described his top priority “for teachers trying to integrate computer technology into their instructional repertoire: TIME

- time to learn
- time to practice
- time to improve”

Valerie joined Christopher on the same day (2 Dec), agreeing that, “Time is a big issue” but qualified, “It’s not the answer, though. We have time for Professional Development. People need to have a commitment to use what they have learned.” For Valerie, the psychological

attitudes of teachers towards the task in hand were more important than time, which is scarce. Valerie also recommended a reading to Christopher, "How Teachers Learn Technology Best" with an accompanying web page (<http://fno.org>).

Fred (3 Dec) followed this thread about teacher attitudes with the observation that, "Research has shown that teachers with computers at home are willing and ready to incorporate technology into the classroom at school" (The introductory three words conveyed suggest that this point is more valid by having been expressed by others. These others are published researchers which, his reader might suppose, lent his argument greater credibility. With this message, the author positions himself politically: as a legitimate and authoritative contributor to this debate.). In other words, home use is the key to getting teachers up to speed. He went on to list his step-by-step recipe for "fast and efficient incorporation of technology in schools," based on the principle of increased home use, removing the issue from the politics of professional time use and placing it squarely within personal responsibility. This agreed with what Leah told me in interview about how teachers learn to use technology; Mathew also said elsewhere on the site – to Anna – that he learned at home, from his own children. Bruce's prescriptive 1-2-3 solution is the only message of its kind on the forum.<sup>2</sup> Steps two and three were, consecutively, "give them the inservice on how to use [technology]" and "give access to the students." His emphasis was on introducing technology to schools when the *teachers*, as private individuals, are ready for this. Only at this stage should computers be brought into schools, and only then should the students gain access to them.

Christopher's message undoubtedly struck a chord. I took up his terminology to show that I had been listening, using "canned content" in my own message header. Patrick ultimately used it on which to hang his own ideas. Finally, Dale posted the last message to this rich thread on 6 December. The whole thread has lasted only five days, but it included a reference to new literature, a set of argued priorities, topic change (from "Teachers' Time" to "Teacher's Attitude") and finally a sudden change of topic by Dale, who wanted to discuss teacher training programs and funding. Dale referred us to his own investigations, mirroring the referencing in Bruce's message: "My research leads me to believe that teachers have to

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<sup>2</sup> Valerie and a colleague shared policy priorities in My Advice/Educator Training and Support between December 2 and 6, but these were not in strategically ordered lists. See Appendix 1, Figures 8 and 9.

change how they teach if they're to incorporate ICT successfully.” He closed with an element of advocacy for structural change: “The College of Teachers needs to incorporate a technology component into the certification process and districts need to make proficiency with ICT a requirement in new postings.” No responses were posted to this message, which pointedly offered solutions as well as problems, nor was it remarked upon in my meeting at the Ministry.

While the Ministry may have sought this kind of post as a clear indication of professional sentiment, it seems to have done nothing for the flow of discussion. In sum, this thread did discuss material which might have been relevant to future policy, but it did not reveal an awareness of the current events within which it sat. To clarify, it came *after* the Ministry had already broadcast its principles and general directions for educational technology. By the time the PKPF went live, the priorities and principles, had, as far as the policy process was concerned, been established and circulated, and were available on the website, if not exactly within the view of the participants in the forums.

Christopher’s initial point about time was pursued by two other authors, Deirdre and Patrick (Meanwhile, Kevin and I exchanged views about the possibility of roving technology mentors). They did not do so by joining the bottom of the thread; instead, they sidestepped the digressions and add two more posts, dangling at the bottom of a long thread with seven other messages in the middle:

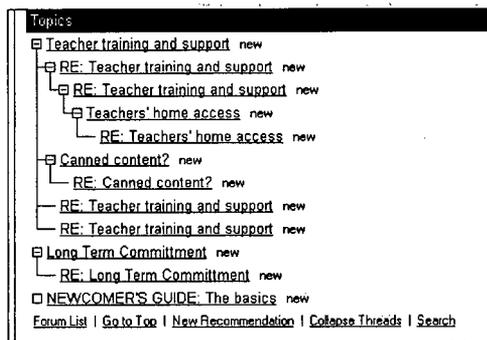


Figure 4. Side-stepping digressions

In this way, Deirdre and Patrick determined that they wished to stay “on-topic,” or at least on the topic established by Christopher. The conversation between myself and Kevin was certainly a meeting of minds – Kevin responded to my question with “Great idea!” – but, like Dale’s training comment, it did not advance the general direction of the overall discussion. (In accordance the instructions I had been given, I followed the lead established by participants and allowed the debate to proceed, away from the policy documents we had assumed would

lie at the heart of the debate). Such comments come under the heading of “me too” postings which were dismissed by two interviewees as redundant. In effect, we were talking separately while the main buzz of conversation continued in the same room. This suggests that my comments on “canned content” belonged in a new thread altogether. Although it may look like a response to Christopher’s original concern, it is in fact a digression, which - if it had taken place in person - might be considered a non-sequitur, if not rude.

It is interesting to note that Deirdre’s message referred to *Conditions for Success* by name. Like Joe, who brought it into the discussion in the forum, she was involved in its authorship: I had met her while working for the Ministry’s advisory committee on technology. These messages show their author’s sense of connection to both the document and the policy development process. However, while Joe referred to the document as a text, explaining its theoretical principles, Deirdre’s message revealed the process of its development and her own contribution to it (this message is also examined in context in the following chapter):

Time was very much a part of the discussions in *Conditions For Success*. The aim of the committee was to ensure that teachers were provided with time, hardware, and incentive to upgrade their skills. We realize that teachers are expected to do it all and if we want them to become familiar and proficient with technology we need to provide them more than just time but incentive as well (7 Dec).

In restating the goals of TLETAC, Deirdre’s voice comes across as that of the policy maker; here, teachers are “them” and policy makers are “[us].” Her closing comment – “It’s difficult to teach technology when most teachers do not even have it readily available for their own daily use” – shows empathy for the work of teachers, but her professional positioning remains in limbo. This recalls the messages quoted above from the exchange between Adam and Catherine (Dec 14). In this exchange, too, there was a twitch in the curtains which still shielded policy discussion and development. We now understand a fraction more about what was considered, what was discussed and what was written down in this process. For the moment, we have yet to see what it is that teachers will do.

Another example of a thread in which policy priorities were debated was initiated by James in *Funding* (11 Feb). He felt that “too much time and money [are] put towards Hardware and Software for [our] IT programs in school. The school board should spend more time looking for qualified teachers.” Note that, while James did not actually use the

word “priorities” or “recommendations,” he was in fact talking about *his own* funding priorities.

The lack of material directly addressing *Conditions for Success* is not an indication that the forum participants ignored it entirely. Having interviewed several of them, I knew that several had spent many hours poring over the publications. For example, I know that Adam read the documents from beginning to end, but still, his comments on the site do not refer to them by the letter. He also told me that his postings were largely replies to other people. In other words, and like me, he was pursuing an agenda set by other contributors to the forum, not by the documents or resources we’d published. By joining the discussion in this way, talking on-topic (as the research team understood it) would – by the sheer force of postings about other things – have become *off*-topic. We have already seen, the sustained analysis of policy documents does not appeal to the masses. The agenda, having been set by the PKPF, the Ministry and its publications, was altered by the speakers who had chosen to come forward. In response, Adam talked about his own experiences and concerns; he responded amicably to his colleagues; he raised new questions, developed arguments and requested feedback from his audience. Leah, who also read the documents, declined to post her own opinions, for reasons which become clear in the following chapter. The immediate concerns of the participants, as well as the making of brief professional connections largely seemed to prevail over other motivations.

Having established a site as a learning opportunity, the people who did contribute spent their time responding to each other - in the absence of an articulated, Ministry presence with which to engage - and in debating abstract, philosophical points. This discussion was quite removed from the practicalities of policy debate, where common terms are agreed upon through discussion that sometimes takes place over several days. An overall mission for the document could be established before sections are devoted to stakeholder groups and writing tasks assigned to individuals or groups. The result is a linear text which presents a unified front in terms of its preoccupations with whatever has been determined to “count” (whether or not this is an accurate reflection of the dynamics and concerns of the various stakeholders). By contrast, the discussion on the PKPF came to a halt - for reasons both intrinsic (such as the participants’ wavering commitment to the various threads) and extrinsic (such as the project’s life-span) - before any of these last agreements could be reached.

Among the messages which were explicitly political in either content or intention was that of Aaron, who was hoping the balance of discussion about OSCAR courses (Online, Distance Education Courses offered by the Open Learning Agency). He had taken exception to what he perceived to be my bias as moderator. This was extremely unfortunate because I did not moderate in the ordinary sense: I did not impose order on the speakers; I did not determine closure for any discussions, nor did I declare the moment at which a consensus had to be inscribed in official documentation. Nonetheless, this contributor felt that I was encouraging a discussion which presented OSCAR (online, distance education for high school) courses in a bad light and had posted a press release counteracting this direction. This theme was continued in the various messages offering moral support to the coordinator of Network Nuggets, who had recently taken sick leave from his job. While Mathew and Alice offered gracious good wishes for his health, Blake came straight to the point telling us that he was “somewhat cynical of this sudden offer to provide staffing after allowing [said employee] to twist in the wind for so long.” He added, “My faith in Ministry of Education altruism just hit rock bottom!” (2 Feb) Again, in *My Advice/Decision Making* we heard from a contributor who hoped to comment on the policy process itself:

I am delighted to have this opportunity to provide you with input on the implementation of technology in our schools. Too often decisions appear to be made by “gatekeepers” who are not really up to the task and without real consultation with those affected by the decisions. (*My Advice/Decision Making*, 18 Jan)

These messages are examples of political positioning, in which contributors took up the problem of responding to the event of the discussion, rather than to its content. Bruce also used the PKPF to position himself politically in *Social Impact*. Apart from a powerfully articulated allegiance to his profession, he conveyed a sense of gracious optimism in the changing educational landscape. On the topic of establishing an online schooling infrastructure for BC, he said, “I don’t seriously believe that anyone can control online education. I believe that ‘meddling governments’ have a role in determining into who or what they’ll invest their trust, authority and certification.” He took some time to explain the reasons for his good faith: “The path taken by this government is unique across Canada, in asking the end users what they think should be the way.” Showing less timidity and a good deal less suspicion than other PKPF contributors, Bruce chose a middle ground between the

extremes of opinion, owing, perhaps to his belief in the historical meaning of democracy: he describes his community, the community at large, as “We, the government.”

Alan, on the other hand, declined to see himself as part of “we, the government” (*Funding*, 8 Dec). He argued that “Many of the older schools in BC are hurting for the basics” and that “ICT are denying my students those basics.” Funding, he believed, was scarce and funds are being reallocated, preventing schools from having their fundamental capital needs met. He explained why “old” technologies are being neglected: “new desks and telephones don’t give the politicians exciting press releases!” Alan’s indignation is hard to miss. It is also not surprising that a thread on funding would attract such outspoken political commentary. Funding is a common sore point: what we choose to spend public money on shows where our values lie. If a teacher believes that his or her own ideology is in conflict with decision-makers’ thinking, he or she will be faced very material evidence - the absence of desks and telephones, for example - of this difference. Given the high price of computers it is unsurprising that paying for them became an immediate political issue in the PKPF. While Alan’s commentary was ostensibly directed at the Ministry, there was also a sense of media collusion here. “Exciting press releases” are only exciting if they match the demands of an information-hungry newspaper and a media-hungry public. Alan’s message, then, described the ideological choices of the public, the media and finally the government who tread a fine line between the organs of the press and public schooling. This message echoed the exact concerns articulated by Adam on December 14, but this time they were articulated with gusto and irritation. This time, no Ministry personnel stepped into the debate.

The nefarious influence of the market economy on the public schooling system was a theme which Mathew also pursued on the day of the forum’s closure, 1 March. In *Funding*, he argued that:

Helping the likes of IBM and Microsoft colonise education using IT has been an essential task of the Chrétien government. The result will be the gradual disappearance of shared public information and community values, hallmarks of Canadian education since the 1841 School Act.

Another biting comment was posted as “Letter of the day: The real responsibility of public officials in B.C.” It came from Mathew as another paste from the Vancouver Sun site (*Funding*, 2 Feb). Whereas in *My Advice* the “how-to” flavour was posted sincerely, this

message is actually a satirical commentary on the way in which public officials manage their public relations:

First and foremost there must be no bad news. Absolutely no conflict with unions. End your fiscal year precisely on budget. That proves the politicians and bureaucrats gave you exactly the right amount of money. If money is left over, spend it. If not, make do.

Stage a big public event to celebrate, for example, Valentine's Day or, better yet, a new fire alarm. That shows a commitment to child safety. Hand out awards. Serve lots of free food.

Shortly after the big event, organize focus groups for teachers and staff. Emphasize that everyone should feel free to express feelings without fear of penalty. After two days of this, send everyone home early. Next morning, hand out teacher-staff happiness questionnaires. If the results are good, leak this information to CBC TV."

It is hard to miss the author's ironic intentions here. Mathew implicitly endorses the article by posting it. His political leanings had already become clear through his numerous other postings, for example his belief in the importance of funding equity: "My main concern is that corporate grants do not lead to an equitable funding system for technology in schools." He also posted an article entitled "Corporate controlled Internet threatens democracy" on 1 March 2000. The resource was rich and entertaining, but the only response to it was an FAQ-style inquiry from John asking about the cost of maintaining Macs and PCs. Certainly, Mathew was not afraid to post material that might be construed as "contentious," but note that he has not posted these words in as himself. In this case, he has used the literature as the means to express his views indirectly, a gesture which places him behind metaphorical sandbags.

Almost as soon as the forum opened, one central, political concern announced itself about the population we were actually reaching, or who were reaching us. Their early messages, between November and December 1999, pondered on the low numbers of postings and furthermore, asked if we were even hearing from the "right" people. It was clear from the beginning that many readers were troubled rather than encouraged by the medium we had chosen. They did so in both the Public Forum (*Visions and Principles; Electronic Delivery*<sup>3</sup>) and in My Advice (*Decision Making*) as well as in interview following the forum's closure. A short debate followed, scattered across these two arenas on the technical, professional and

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<sup>3</sup> Where William advocates engagement of students with the PKPF.

psychological reasons why teachers (and students, and other members of the public) had abstained from the debate.

At first, contributors asked whether or not the technology really did mean adding more chairs to the forum or whether it actually prevented many educators from taking part. Bruce introduced the idea of equity on day three (25 Nov), questioning whether or it might, genuinely, improve the quality of public consultation:

Would that the suggestions and comments contained within this forum truly represent the views of the majority. We may still, even with best intentions, be catering to those in the know.

Kirsten added fuel to this debate about élitism in *My Advice* the following day. She pointed to the irony of our decision to host a forum on technology in a *virtual* environment when many teachers are unable to reach it. She worried that, even as the Ministry solicited feedback, it excluded the teachers with strong opinions and a great deal of experience, but no access to technology:

I am concerned that the BCTF and the Ministry are relying on ON-LINE sources to talk about technology in schools. We need to hear the opinions of all participants in the education field and not just those who are already technologically "comfortable." .... Is the Ministry taking steps to involve teachers who are not "on-line"?

Nobody from the Ministry replied to Kirsten's question, but her commentary was later corroborated by others, including the Ministry officer I interviewed about his own methodology in dealing with public consultation material. "I think that there are gross differences in access in terms of hardware and software, and in terms of awareness and techno-literacy. These differences can potentially affect people's ability to be involved in the process, which is a big concern for me" (Andrew, email correspondence, 15 May 2001). I encountered a real instance of this problem when I attended the BCTF's policy seminar in January 2000. Here, I heard from a teacher who worked (and works) in the Interior of BC. She had not even had email - let alone web access - for six months, since the district server had gone down. There was no chance that she could have contributed to the forum, even with its extended life.

Valerie, however, countered with the argument that participation in policy development is a matter of personal choice, and does not depend on technical skill alone:

There are many educators out there who have the equipment and the connectivity and who choose not to use it. Therefore, it is like any other democratic decision making process. Those who choose to have a voice exercise it. (4 Dec)

She also commented that teachers simply “do not have the information regarding funding for various educational initiatives.” Pateman (1970) corroborates this view, observing that if employees are to participate properly, they require “considerably more information than is usually the case at present” (p. 69). They also need to be furnished with relevant information in a timely manner. In other words, the question of access has less to do with technology (or even education) and much more to do with the willingness of various parties to share their information. If the government is unwilling to share information about funding structures, teachers cannot take part actively in the decision making process because they lack the information necessary to take a convincing position on it.

Joe, who is employed in a leadership position at the BCTF, stepped in at that point with a mediating message. He took steps to restore the group’s faith in the medium we had chosen (5 Dec):

You are certainly correct in pointing out a dilemma--inevitably, when you use the technology as the means of participation that many will be excluded. Some because of lack of access; others by choice. However, I don’t think that invalidates this kind of online discussion-- as long as we find ways to bring the views of others to the table. In addition to this discussion process, another process will be taking place in the new year. A policy seminar in January will be used to develop some proposed policies to take to the 2000 BCTF Annual General Meeting. These will be in the reports and resolutions booklet, and will get discussed in many locals as part of the process for preparing delegates for the AGM.

Joe was instrumental in seeing that the PKPF ran at all, so his generosity toward the endeavour was to be expected. Also, and like the messages posted by Mark, Catherine and Deirdre, it reveals Joe’s sense of belonging to the policy debate. The discussion (whether real or virtual) is a place to which the author has access and in which he has a measure of influence. This message also resulted in Kirsten’s invitation to attend that very seminar, a positive outcome for this contributor.

Back in the Public Forums (Visions & Principles), the conversation also took a turn. Perhaps technology skills were not the only obstacle to greater participation? And maybe we do need to think about why teachers are not “choosing a voice,” to use Valerie’s phrase. In this conversation, the PKPF was being used to generate an inquiry into the nature of the forum and its limitations. Brent offered more psychological reasons as to why the population was smaller than we had hoped:

We tried to use an online forum medium to generate questions and stimulate discussion around the IT curriculum prior to the face to face IT 11/12 forum we held last April in Burnaby. Although participation was encouraged and as a moderator I made every effort to raise topics that I thought would stimulate erudite and meaningful discourse, the results were disappointing. Few people participated and I think [Bruce] was one of them!

Is it that the idea should work in theory but we don't take into account that people do not feel empowered to speak and to comment. The discourse has been taken out of our lives by "experts," rhetorical artists and the passivity required of watching TV. (13 Dec)

For him, the decision to participate came from a personal sense of efficacy, the conviction that each individual's contribution is essential to the growth and development of the group. The technology alone cannot be empowering. Adam supported Brent's observations three days later:

We do tend to let experts speak for us. Maybe we do not feel empowered to speak for ourselves. Maybe we are too passive.... I think we as teachers do need to speak up especially now around issues of ICT, but knowing the reasons why many teachers are not speaking up is very important if we are going to find a way to change it. (15 Dec)

These authors both echoed a concern articulated by Barber (1984), who positively demanded that public debate be just that: "Left to the media, the bureaucrats, the professors and the managers, language quickly degenerates into one more weapon in the armoury of élite rule. The professoriate and the literary establishment are all too willing to capture the public with catchphrases and portentous titles" (p. 197). This sense of "catching the public" certainly grabbed the attention of the PKPF's more outspoken contributors. There was more sustained debate, and a greater sense of collective concern on this topic, than on the contents of the Ministry publications themselves. I will return to this point in the following chapter.

With Bruce's permission, I cross-posted his message from *Visions & Principles to Educator Training & Support* (4 Dec), in the hope that I might further the discussion. Underneath the title "Are we merely catering to élites?" I received two responses within the month, but neither of them actually dealt with the matter Bruce had raised. Both talked instead about the value of "just-in-time" learning and the responsiveness of teacher inservice to genuine technology needs. This commentary on just-in-time learning was supported by Dan, who joined Educator Training & Support on February 4. He also argued - based on his Masters research - that "teachers will learn and implement when they are ready, not just

when a workshop is offered.” Neither Anna nor Alan (who had made these points back in December) were still present to support him or take the conversation any further.

*Student Needs & Expectations* included the only completely anonymous message on the site. The author did not even use a pseudonym like “CMESS girl” announcing him or herself only as “\_\_\_\_\_-----” The anonymous author argued with vigour, telling the initial author in this thread in no uncertain terms that students are the ones being short-changed by the system’s shortcomings, *not* teachers. S/he argued that “school computers should be used as learning tools and not as toys (as hard as that is for me to say).” His/her self-awareness was touching, but it gave way to oratory on the subject of educational assessment and equity:

If the computer courses in schools are not taught well it is leaving the students in the dark, and this is unfair to us. Slamming a door in our faces before even giving us a chance because the teachers or the ministry of education doesn’t think that we are smart enough.

The author went on to say that, “On top of all that we have the whiny government breathing down our backs and blaming us for not being educated enough,”<sup>4</sup> and painted a picture of bureaucratic buck-passing which leaves students stranded without a well-organised (or well-taught) curriculum. S/he finished with an abrupt demand: “In closing to the government, teach us what you want us to learn.” This is, without question, one of the most impassioned political contributions on the site.

The only direct response to this message was a laconic “I agree with you” from Helen, another instance of what two interviewees later regarded as “me too” statements. It is not surprising that the anonymous author got this response. S/he has argued a point clearly and Helen wanted to express her support. While later readers might dismiss Helen’s brief text as superfluous to the discussion or lacking in educational, political or rhetorical substance, her social motivation is clear: solidarity. Such solidarity among dispersed but like-minded individuals may be construed as a key benefit of sites like the PKPF, so it is interesting that its expression - evidence of a courtesy we would normally extend with a nod or smile in daily conversation - is understood to be redundant in this context by some participants. I will continue this line of thinking later in this chapter and in Chapter VI.

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<sup>4</sup> This author’s comments have been edited for typographical errors.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Teachers... might feel, "it's going to happen no matter what. I don't have any voice...."

(Emma, 25 March)

As I left the school of a Burnaby teacher one day, he asked me, "Will your work make a difference?" I answered that I intended to present my findings to the officers of the Ministry and that, having completed my thesis, I also hoped to publish some of this material.<sup>1</sup> Having spent several months reflecting on the ways in which information was produced, circulated, used and acted upon within the BC education system, I sincerely hoped that my answer was adequate.

While I spent a good deal of time in the forum and have maintained contact with the Ministry about our research findings, the participants themselves are, most likely, in a better position than a researcher to answer this teacher's question.<sup>2</sup> After all, it will be the teachers themselves who receive invitations for feedback in the future, and they who will make the decision based on current priorities as to whether or not they will contribute. The PKPF will have been one instance in which they have been able to offer feedback, but it will likely be one of many in the course of any teacher's entire career. In other words, the real "difference" made by the PKPF will be at a personal level, to the extent that it has persuaded or dissuaded individual teachers that being heard on their professional concerns is a very real possibility. As a result, what follows is largely a report on what participants said about the forum after it had closed.

In draft form, this chapter has been called "Impact of Forum." As I write I realise that I have not, in fact, been writing about the extent of the PKPF's impact. In reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, I have instead been making my way towards an understanding of what I actually *mean* by this vague word, "impact." Catherine (Ministry of Education) was candid in her description of the gap between her expectations and the reality of the PKPF discussions. She described them as "disappointing." It brings to mind Kling's (1996) analysis of social change in the context of technological development: that a new

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<sup>1</sup> "Educational researchers should attempt to report their findings to all relevant stakeholders, and should refrain from keeping secret or selectively communicating their findings." Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association. AERA, 1992, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Since completing my research, I have also sought feedback from these same individuals on my own ICT policy contributions at UBC.

technology's entrance into the human world is not like a meteor hitting planet earth. It is instead an organic process in which, if you like, the very germination of new technologies and new ideas causes a stir, raises questions and eyebrows and may create a feeling of minor consternation. There are no meteor craters, then, but there has, perhaps, been a ripple on a small pond. My purpose in writing this chapter has been to show what those ripples look like and what we can realistically expect of the pebble (not meteor) which caused them.

While my main preoccupation with the PKPF had been the forum discussions themselves, the interviews I conducted after the event afforded me some additional insights into the participants' experience of it. As mentioned before, there was a division in the literature between research methods which focused exclusively on the texts produced by users of the online medium (Herring, 1996; Wilhelm, 2000), and those which also considered the broader psychological, emotional and cultural implications for these individuals. (Markham, 1998; Baym, 1996) There is a growing trend towards ethnographic research methods in online environments, even though discussions have persisted about whether or not the groups of individuals who gather online merit the descriptor of "community" or "culture" (Kling, 1996; Jones, 1996). A similar tension also persists within this work. At all times I have felt myself stretched between an examination of the text as a detached artifact, away from the political context of its inception, and an investigation of the political context itself. Ultimately, I have tried to tread a path between these two extremes, in which I have described the dimensions of user engagement on the PKPF while also paying attention to the experiences and political orientations of users.

In the case of the PKPF, it has been extremely helpful to hear how the participants themselves felt about the forum both as a potential agent of political change, and as a virtual space for educational deliberations. These interviews have revealed some limitations of conducting research in the online medium alone by enabling me to explore "the experience of those who are at the receiving end of the technology" (Franklin, 1990, p. 40). Had these interviews not been conducted, the story which unravelled here would have been based entirely on the impressions of a researcher. However valuable one's own analysis of online discourse may be, it can only offer an incomplete story when the narratives of the users themselves are omitted. In other words, it offers a narrative which excludes and ignores "the

institutions and events of our daily lives” to which this technology has been added. (Apple, 1999, p. 10)

The interviews were also an opportunity to develop in more detail some of the conversations about educational policy consultation begun on the site, as well as to consider the effectiveness of my methodology in meeting the goals of an academic program, the interests of the BCTF in experimenting with new media for political action and the Ministry’s expectations of a way to access “lots of useful information [about the new policy].”

Between November 1999 and March 2000 I had been immersed in the forum’s daily activities as the moderator, not as a participant contributing my own, private time. On March 1, my role changed when I began the research work in earnest. The interview transcripts were a much easier data set to interpret and summarise than the forum contributions. This was largely owing to the fact that – unlike the forum – I retained the conversational initiative (Stubbs, 1983) and could determine what the agenda was and how it would be approached. The question of “what counts?” was up to me. Our interactions, many of which were indeed joint compositions in real time, were shaped and guided by questions I had established during the course of study. The transcripts offered some surprises in terms of the answers I got and the directions in which the conversation flowed, but the dialogue itself followed an easily comprehensible format largely based around the IRF - initiation, response, feedback - model of interaction. The population involved was constant and the roles filled by the (two or three) speakers also did not change: I was there to find answers to my questions, derived from the project goals and our recent experience with the PKPF, and the interviewees were there to respond.

I interviewed PKPF participants in a variety of ways about both their experience with the Forum and their experience of policy-making in the past. We talked face-to-face, over the telephone and via email. Interviewing over the telephone presented various unexpected challenges. I found that one participant who spoke to me over the phone from work lowered his voice to the point where he was almost inaudible on the tape. I had a Sony phone microphone taped to the receiver, and although its pickup was generally quite good, there is a loud buzzing on the recording because I had to turn the volume up so high. This led me to think that face-to-face interviews are just as well when discussing topics which could be

sensitive or even uncomfortable. If the interviewer is able to see what and to whom the respondent is reacting, it could make the conversation much easier. Additionally, the interview could take place at work but in a cafeteria, away from eavesdroppers and interruptions. I transcribed the telephone and face-to-face interviews as soon as the last of them had been conducted in June 2000.

Interviewing a participant over the telephone or in person allows a researcher to share a period of time with the respondents: time to reflect on answers, repeat questions and return to earlier topics for clarification when needed. In addition to the questions asked, cues such as tone of voice, accent, mode of address and facial expression can allow for more detailed answers as well as help to create a more comfortable research setting.

I did not have the chance to speak to some of the respondents in person; several simply emailed back my research questions with answers dotted throughout in a different colour. This method gave me instant feedback, and was not subject to the usual intrusions of home and office telephones ringing, meetings being called, guests arriving, babies crying or pets throwing up, all of which occurred on at least one occasion. However, I had no opportunity to settle into a conversation or to respond to local colour in my questioning. Furthermore, these respondents had both a chance to edit their comments and to ignore the questions which they did not feel like answering. Once a set of responses have been mailed back to you and you have taken several weeks to read and reflect upon them, it is difficult to rekindle the interviewees' interest in the topic. A debriefing interview carries a sense of closure to it, so unless one has prepared the ground (even in one's own schedule) for two or three conversations with these people, there is a great deal of pressure on the one-time interview. There are other reasons for preferring face-to-face interviews. One is the potential for interviewees to dodge questions they don't like. In person it is much more difficult, although some respondents can be remarkably adept at this. The dodges are, of course, data in themselves, since they are evidence of the boundaries between comfortable and uncomfortable topics, the borders between the various information territories. These boundaries are hard to challenge when communicating asynchronously, by email.

My sample of interviewees is small, but my aim here is not to paint a full landscape of BC teachers' feelings towards the facility of online forums for participation in policy development. Rather, I intend to illustrate how much of this experience - entering the forum

with good faith and optimism, taking part in an experimental environment and subsequently mulling over the discussions they had - is fragmented, convoluted and complex. The dimensions of user engagement explored in interview revealed a range of perceptions and preoccupations about the site's educational and political content. In understanding the experiences of the users who did visit and were subsequently interviewed, we might anticipate future kinds of site usage by a growing population of technology- and policy-literate education professionals. The dimensions of user engagement explored in this chapter are therefore those which were expressed after the event. They reveal a range of common perceptions and preoccupations of the participants around their confidence in the medium and their sense of its value, both in educational and political terms. As discussed earlier, these dimensions also include commentaries on both the human stuff of "being there" (in the PKPF), the topics of the discussions themselves and the manner in which "what counts" was expressed.

#### Perceptions of the Forum

So had the PKPF helped to alter how teachers perceived their contributions to policy processes? Had we allowed "existing lines of power and information" (Hodas, 1996) to remain intact, or had we challenged and diverted them? I began reviewing the interview data with Adam's words uppermost in my mind:

Teachers are very busy and they often don't want to have a long philosophical chat, especially within the school situation during the day. They're busy. They'd rather be planning and doing something specifically for a kid today, as opposed to thinking philosophically to make some change that *might* help kids down the road. They'll always take the five minutes and do something for a kid that's right in front of [them].  
(9 March)

My expectation was that the forum's impact had been greatly limited by the working context of our target population. In interviewing the PKPF participants, however, I began to see that its outcomes could not be reduced to a set of binary opposites: "took part and therefore gained from the experience" or, just as baldly, "did not take part and gained nothing." Most importantly, I found that we needed to think about the site as a facility which could (should) be reshaped or redesigned in the future, based on the feedback we received as members of a site development team. I asked Anna whether the forum had made a difference to the process of policy development in BC:

My immediate response is no, but I think in more subtle ways yes. Using new tech is an excellent way to inform and discuss, but it has limitations... I think that maybe forums could become less formal if they lasted long enough for regular participants to get to know one another better. (26 March)

It is clear from Anna's comment that, over time, the character of a forum would not be constant. It would change and grow beyond its short-term limitations, allowing participants to develop a comfortable interaction style. This changing interaction style might itself facilitate more candid, in-depth dialogue. Robert (Ministry of Education) had watched the progress of another online consultation exercise and agreed that this would be the case. "The experience level, the access level, the comfort level of contributors has changed enormously over the last twelve months" (14 March). This element of access is of vital importance to site developers, given the number and gender imbalance of PKPF participants. In reflecting on this change over time, though, Robert went on to say that "what it's shown to me is that the potential is there, to use... online fora as a more formal part of policy development." In the context of a conversation which dealt largely with the PKPF's shortcomings, his train of thought was encouraging. It showed that, while our first efforts to adapt our communication structures and technologies may have been faltering, these efforts certainly bear repetition. "I guess it's early stages," said Catherine. "We are gradually learning as we go along" (14 March).

Leah agreed that the long view was the appropriate one. She argued that technological change needs to be accompanied by growth and learning in human beings:

While I don't feel that this forum will necessarily make any big differences in how the Ministry develops its draft plan, I think it is the start to forums which WILL make a difference. When more people start accessing this kind of site, and more people feel confident about sharing their views about technology, then we will have more influence with the governmental plans. (26 March)

In other words, systemic change begins with the learning of each individual. According to Leah, familiarity with the technology will determine the individual's comfort with the consultation process, which, in greater numbers, will change how policy is determined on a grand scale. I asked Leah to describe her own experiences of visiting the forum on several occasions. She described her first steps as being tentative, but added that "Each time I become a little more experienced in technology, I become a little braver [at voicing] my views." With this account of her own learning, Leah reminded me that newcomers to policy consultation might also be novices with the technology we had required them to use. The

combination created a procedure which, according to one participant would have seemed “time consuming” and “intimidating” for many potential contributors (Emma, 25 March).

Leah’s commentary on the learning of individuals was instrumental in showing me that the invisible elements of an online forum can be the most profoundly affecting. In other words, the actions of people who do not actually type, but simply sit and read:

Dialogue via the Internet gives everyone the chance to “hear” other viewpoints. Even if you are not ready to contribute your own views, you are able to see how others respond to various topics and broaden your horizons.... Many of us are not confident enough to participate yet.

But how do we really know that a teacher’s silent participation is personally or professionally significant? Because Leah “spent several days (weeks?) working on Section C (Curriculum) for a university course project in which [she] interviewed five teachers regarding the eleven recommendations and then wrote a report on their interpretations.” In addition, she spent “several hours” reading *Conditions for Success* and the *Plan for 2000+*, and was still working her way through the materials in the PKP database - “a wonderful set of resources” - at the time of our interview. Adam also spent many hours reading the resources, “every word” of the Ministry documents and other people’s messages. He told me that his “understanding of the situation has increased... probably ten to hundred-fold in where we are as a society and as a society of teachers” (9 March). For both of them, the investment of time paid off, as is evident through the length, energy and sincerity of their responses. In contrast, Anna, who told me that she had “never consulted” the Ministry documents or the resource section, also told me that she “didn’t really learn anything [she] didn’t already know. [She] didn’t hear anything new” and “didn’t learn from others” (26 March).

Another key feature of Leah’s experience with the PKPF was in forging professional connections. She came away with new contacts for her research project and, given that she was, as she put it, working among “techno-shy” teachers, she enjoyed an opportunity to see her own concerns being aired by others. Despite the shortcomings of the site, and despite her use of quotation marks (suggesting that *meeting, listening, speaking, hearing* and *talking* were not meant literally but virtually), Leah genuinely felt herself to be “part of a community.”

My conversation with Matthew was also something of a turning point. When asked about the value of the forum, he responded with an optimistic “I would always hope that the

BCTF... would have a forum like this” (20 March). Given that the PKPF had been developed at a specific juncture in policy development, I then asked him if he thought that the forum should remain open continuously. To this he replied that temporary forums could be used to resolve time-specific issues, but that some online discussion facility needed to be available year-round. Matthew’s hopeful reply echoed the words of Burbules and Rice (1991), who argue that “there must be some forums in which such dialogue across difference is valued, and in which it is pursued by participants in good faith, even in the face of difficulty and initial misunderstanding” (p. 407).

At this point I began to see how questions about the efficacy of the forum were leading towards comments on the overall, long-term shape of virtual policy consultation in BC. I found that participants were not simply telling me about “how well” the PKPF had worked but were actually adding colour to Barber’s nine stages of strong democracy. For the purposes of this discussion, the most pertinent of these stages are:

- Articulation of interests, bargaining and exchange
  - Persuasion
  - Agenda setting
  - Exploring mutuality
  - Witness and self-expression
  - Community building
- (Barber, 1984)

In other words, the participants were drawing my attention away from the specifics of our own project and, more significantly, towards the challenge of *when* to open a PKPF-style forum for business, at what point in the policy process to do so and *how* the agenda should be set and *by whom*. When I asked Emma about the limitations of the PKPF, she told me that:

It suffers from the same problem that any kind of public consultation suffers from.... If you are reacting to a document, or a policy statement... then you are always reacting after the fact. Whereas that kind of a forum also has use in generating the document. Maybe teachers would be more engaged if they were actually generating the document... they might feel *oh yeah, it’s going to happen no matter what. I don’t have any voice.* (25 March)

Let’s return to Anna’s commentary for a moment. Apart from drawing my attention to the difference between its short and long term effects, it described for me the conversational character of the forum. Furthermore, she helped me to see how different actors within the same system attach entirely different meanings to the same events. Anna found the PKPF dialogue to be rather formal and judged this to be a “bad” thing. Her judgment was

contradicted by one of the Ministry interviewees who told me, somewhat ambiguously, that “the Public Knowledge Forum provided an opportunity for individuals to make contributions.... It has affected some of the things we’ve done but it wasn’t intended to be a formal submission of feedback to the plan” (14 March). She went on, “there were some postings that... supported stuff we already knew, we were getting input from other sources, you know - more formal responses and so on.” These “formal” types of feedback would have included the regular email or letter correspondence solicited for the January 14, 2000 deadline. There is therefore a difference of opinion between the meanings attached to the term “formal” as used by the Ministry and by other forum participants.

Apart from the meaning of the terms, “formal” and “informal,” it has also become clear that the value judgment placed on these terms differs across the various parties. Whereas informality is construed by the teacher as a “good” thing, as something which would oil the conversational wheels and promote collegiality, it carries a different meaning for the Ministry, whose needs as readers are extremely specific, and possibly, contradictory.

#### Audience

The theme of audience arose through repeated readings of the interviews. The theme was discerned through their comments about the social quality of the forum, their awareness of their professional standing in relations to peers and the Ministry, and in the time taken to compose messages. Interviewees were divided in their expectations of their audience. While Adam spoke positively about the discussions he had had:

To me it can be used to help me with my teaching, but right now I’ve used it more ...to keep my philosophical thinking grounded and I toss my ideas around, see what other people think, which keeps me more motivated to continue... using the web site was a way to ask if there’s anyone else who is thinking this way, is this reasonable? Am I missing some easy point? (9 March)

For Adam, the site’s advantage was as a place to read, learn and find affirmation that his own challenges and concerns were shared by more experienced teachers. He spoke warmly about the possibilities for mentoring, saying that “where I got most out of it was in listening to people talk... it seemed to be a very positive thing... there were some really good points.” Like Emma, another relatively new teacher, Adam found himself reading far more than writing. Although Emma didn’t feel that she had used the site “to its full potential,” her visits brought her in touch with ideas “[she’d] never really thought of... it expanded my thinking” (25 March).

Not all of the participants shared Adam's experience, however. While Adam told me that all of his contributions were replies to other posters, another occasionally felt that he'd spent "too much time reading others' postings" (Gregg, 26 March). Instead of making contacts among other teachers, Gregg was instead "looking forward to an open dialogue with the Ministry, not necessarily [his] professional colleagues elsewhere in the province." When asked if his perspective on his contribution to policy had changed as a result of the forum, he replied "Not really, because I have not seen any reaction or comments from policy makers as a response to our postings." For this participant, the site was an overall disappointment because the conversations had not, to his mind, taken place among the right people. The professional roles of site participants had determined its communications structure. In conversation, the Ministry staff I interviewed confirmed that their role on the site had been as "interested observers. It wouldn't be something that we would be .... necessarily having any direct involvement in" (9 March). When the forum opened in November 1999, I expected that Ministry personnel would contribute regularly to the discussions. Once it opened, I learned by email that their participation would largely be through reading, since they did not want to affect the discussions which took place.

I should add, though, that the above participant was one of only two who was in direct contact with Education Technology Branch staff. In interview at the Ministry, I learned that he had been invited to the Ministry's Provincial Technology Forum at Silver Star on the strength of his contributions to the PKPF. While this invitation was certainly welcome (I met Gregg at the event), it is important to recognise that it took place "off-stage," away from the public performance of online dialogue. I do not mean to diminish the significance of this teacher's presence at Silver Star, only to point out that our intention had been to develop a stimulating online environment which was educationally and politically relevant as well as being *public*. Clearly, the correspondence between the teacher and the Ministry prior to this heavily over-subscribed event was not public. Whatever meaning we ascribe to the quality of this correspondence, it reveals where a border has still been drawn around information (and specifically deliberation) which, while being politically and personally significant, remain in the private sphere.

Leah agreed that the PKPF had some missing links. She argued that, "first of all, the Ministry has to have someone READ the forum entries. Next, that person needs to someone

with POWER to make changes.” For her, it was not enough that Ministry staff might listen to or read her comments: they had to be the *right* staff member, namely the person who could make visible changes based on what they had learned. At this point, the discussions would be wrenched out of the realm of abstraction and into the real world of political action. Anna’s concerns echo Leah’s. While she knew that her words would be read, she was skeptical about their potential to set significant changes in motion:

I don’t think the Ministry would take any notice of what was said on the forum. Individual people in the ministry would take note of what was said, but government policy and funding issues would not translate that interest into action. (26 March)

In conversation with Education Technology Branch officers, I learned that, while messages from the forum had indeed been circulated within that office, they had gone no further. “It just never came up” (14 March). Their circulation and therefore their impact - in terms of reaching decision-makers outside that particular office - was limited at this stage. Like Anna’s point of 26 March (above), this points to a challenge for public deliberation quite apart from the technological context in which the PKPF had been established. As a medium for publishing, circulating and even discussing new information, it can be highly effective, but the connections between information gathering and publication, discussion, and action (whether among policy makers or the teachers themselves) are extremely tenuous at present.

One participant was unusually outspoken in his criticism of policy consultations procedures, but for him, it was not merely a matter of finding the right people for the job. He agreed that “the opinions ventured should certainly be considered,” but went on to say that “all curriculum is politically determined... I don’t think that educational considerations or educators’ opinions are the foremost determining factors in Ministry policy” (Alan, 26 March). From this perspective, the impact of a forum such as the PKPF was limited before it started because there was little hope of influencing those with the power to make changes. Nonetheless, this teacher took the trouble to visit the forum and contribute to the discussion. I can only suppose that such an action was more symbolic than practical: even if his advice or comments were not heeded, there were other reasons for taking the time. Following Alan’s train of thought, teachers and other concerned members of the public are having the “wrong” conversation even if they are having it with the “right” people. Discussing the contents of a new policy isn’t the thing. Discussing the limitations of the development process is. If this is

indeed the case, the PKPF was running into trouble at Barber's third stage of participatory dialogue: setting the agenda.

According to the teacher quoted above, there was little agreement between teachers and the government on what the agenda was. The PKPF had set the agenda, as we thought, in line with *Conditions for Success*, and therefore in line with teachers' key concerns (since the document had been written with the help of many practising teachers). As we have seen, though, the content of the document received little attention during the discussions on the PKPF. Instead, the debate circled around the value conflicts and ideological choices which dog our efforts to teach effectively, engagingly and ethically with ICT. It was an instance of what Cherryholmes (1988) describes as follows: "When discursive practices and speech communities bump into each other, as it were, meanings and rules for proceeding must be negotiated and established" (p. 87). The agenda, rather than being a ministry publication, had imperceptibly become the values which are knowingly and unknowingly enacted through policy decision making. This preoccupation with the symbolic importance of policy documents (rather than their literal content) was, perhaps, a step toward the conversation Alan might have wished for, but it fell short of the mark with the (virtual) absence of the Ministry staff.

Even though they were mostly silent, the Ministry of Education were indeed participating. The Education Technology Branch was ultimately the destination for the feedback and advice offered by speaking contributors so they were interested in seeing how the discussions progressed. During an interview with Ministry personnel, I was lucky to gain access to the impressions of non-posting visitors, a population who are typically impossible to locate or build research relationships with. I had access to teachers who had chosen to post via the email addresses they had submitted. I also heard from teachers who had declined to post, but had read the contributions of others. These latter comments were mostly off the record but were nonetheless extremely valuable in shaping my understanding of the site's audience. While teachers may have a good idea why other teachers might have been reticent about speaking up, nobody could speak for the Ministry of Education except for its own staff. I was glad of the chance to review the PKPF with them and saw our conversation as an opportunity to learn what had been gained by the experience, through their eyes.

Robert and Catherine described the attention they had given to the PKPF individually. Robert made “four extended visits” from home. He told me that, “Every so often [he’d] sit down for half an hour,” adding apologetically that he had been too busy to give it more of his attention (14 March). Like the contributors themselves (Adam, 9 March; Emma, 25 March; Cole, 11 March; Kevin, 2 April), his many other commitments had crowded in on the time he might have spent with the PKPF. As Kevin put it, “you’re dealing with exams, social issues in classrooms, the usual stuff, absenteeism, filling in this form, filling in that form...” (2 April). The factor of time - and whether or not teachers had enough of it to contribute to the PKPF - is not a complex one, nor does it relate to the policy or technology interests at the heart of the project. However, it clearly played a role in determining the number and type of messages it received. This role was in something of a balancing act against that nagging question, “Will it make a difference?”

Catherine’s position at the Education Technology branch includes an element of research. She told me that the PKPF “was kind of on my to-do list every day” (14 March). She would sometimes visit twice daily, “particularly if there had been a posting in the morning, then I thought, *Hm, I wonder if anybody has followed up on that.* I might have checked several times a day.” The Ministry’s call for feedback to its publications closed on January 14<sup>th</sup>. We had originally intended to close the PKPF at the end of January, since its efficacy might be limited after that point. On the contrary, however, Catherine told me that “after [January 14] [she] still kept tapping in to see what people were saying.” This curiosity was encouraging, even if the Ministry staff’s lack of overt participation was a disappointment to some participants.

Our conversation was largely concerned with how the participants had used (or rather, not used) the site. In trying to understand what the impact of the forum had been, I found that the number of participants - rather than, for example, the number of new recommendations - was understood by ministry staff and teachers alike to signify “degree of success.” Catherine told me that she was “fairly disappointed” in the site discussions, adding that they “didn’t get a lot of informative stuff” (14 March). She was surprised because she “thought that this was a pretty high profile kind of topic within the province” (Leah’s earlier comments shed some light on the actual profile of the forum and, perhaps, the policy). The conversation continued in this vein as they wondered about the reasons for these low participation rates. We stayed

for a while with the question of how more participants could be secured in future, to increase the “success” of the facility.

For example, Robert suggested that warm-up activities might engage readers’ interest in the debate. Feedback mechanisms such as polls or short questionnaires might work as an incentive, or hook, to join the conversation. Polls can deliver visual results such as pie charts or graphs within seconds, so participants would be able to see almost immediately how their own views sat with those of the majority. The commitment of time and thought demanded by such mechanisms would be much less than that required by a complex, long-term dialogue with numerous other contributors. Of course, this avenue presents a significant problem: it would alter the site’s purpose altogether, offering no possibility of discussion or deliberation. The agenda would be heavily mediated by extremely specific questions, a shortcoming Andrew had struggled with as he analysed other policy consultation data. These specific questions would leave no room for participants to negotiate “what counts” by imposing an even narrower agenda than the one established through *Conditions for Success*. This suggestion points, again, to the different needs of the various participants - both authors and readers - of a policy forum attended by members of the public, practising teachers and the Ministry staff themselves. Put simply, they had quite different reasons for being there. Some visitors were on fact-finding missions. Others were hoping to forge professional connections. Others still were hoping to provide the impetus for political change.

As I mentioned above, the Education Technology Branch found that forum postings took something of a supporting role in the process of policy consultation. The leading role was taken by other, “formal” feedback mechanisms. For them, the forum dialogue offered only limited data, but they were not the site’s sole audience. Thus, “something that wouldn’t be news to us and didn’t seem valuable might very well have been *really* useful to some of the other people who were out there reading” (14 March). This was acknowledgement of the diverse needs and expectations of the site’s different user groups.

Apart from the low number of participants, it is clear from the interview transcripts that the forum’s progress with ministry staff was seen to be hindered by its unstructured, fluid and public nature. The Ministry officers thus spent much of the interview addressing the question of how a more structured dialogue might have affected the conversation, or whether holding

it among a group of invited individuals would have offered more in the way of constructive feedback. They also discussed the effects of time on forum participation, suggesting,

It might be interesting for you to take a look at people who began posting later on in the process... What happened for them? Did they hear about it through word of mouth, did they finally get an opportunity - like they had your message right from the beginning but they just hadn't had a chance, or nothing had happened that they wanted to respond to. I think their motivation might be interesting.

Or maybe did their comfort level go up?

This issue of comfort was significant, since, as I shall show later, participants were mostly uncertain about who they were talking to. Trust between participants and site hosts is essential if sincere, fruitful discussions are to be had. In the case of the PKPF, the site's short-term use appears to have prevented this trust (described in terms of "formality" by Anna, March 26) from developing.

Overall, Robert and Catherine found the postings to be "varied" in quality. As stated above, much of the information they read was familiar to them, and therefore of limited value. Catherine found the dialogue about OSCAR (online, distance education) courses to be "quite interesting" because "we saw more than one side of that picture," but her enthusiasm was certainly guarded.

Apart from Ministry staff, only two of the forum participants reported sharing the material we had published with their colleagues. "There are a few teachers that I showed the site to... I really believe that they didn't like the anonymity of it" (Adam, 9 March). For these teachers, "anonymity" clearly described a situation more complex than one in which a companion's name is unknown. On the PKPF, only one participant gave no name at all, so in this instance, I take "anonymity" to refer to the fact that the forum was held online at all, thus preventing eye contact. Despite the lukewarm if not faintly hostile reaction of his colleagues, he persisted, bringing the policy literature from the PKPF "to a staff meeting and we discussed... we actually spent quite a bit of time [on it] and developed a policy in our school. To me the site helped a lot because I was able to articulate the plan a lot better, as well as the importance of having a plan."

Nonetheless, all of the participants I interviewed shared the opinion that the forum was, in principle, a "good" thing. They also agreed that the more participants we could attract, the better. A variety of reasons were given for this. Apart from the principle that it was simply necessary to understand the sentiments of the majority, participants added that greater

numbers implied a more diverse population; the more diverse the population, the more exhaustive our research findings would be. From the Ministry's perspective, a larger participant group meant a greater representation of the different groups who are concerned with educational technology in BC.

The impact on participants' practice, according to their testimonials, led in two directions. These directions were, firstly, toward their own learning and as a consequence, their own teaching methods. Second, there were repercussions on their public life within the school system, in realms where they held leadership positions among their peers. These positions allowed them to contribute to district and school technology plans, as well as to the professional development of colleagues and to attend provincial and Federation meetings on the development of the new policy. The richest account of a teacher's engagement with the site came from a BC educator who had read every single contribution and research document; had posted as well as read messages (although all of his messages were, he said, replies to others); had raised issues which he had learned about on the site with his colleagues; and finally, had introduced some of these ideas into his own planning. Another contributor had encouraged his students to take part in the discussions and, having contacted me privately, shared the readings we had discussed with the technology planning committee in his district. I sent a list of readings to a group of about ten of his colleagues; he subsequently wrote to thank me saying that this material had had a significant impact on the way in which they were now thinking and working.

When asked about the value of the various messages they had read, at least two participants (including those at the Ministry) told me that reiterations of the same perspective were not helpful, hence the need for a larger, more diverse participant population. These reiterations interrupted the flow of discussion, they said, diminishing its value rather than providing "new" information. As I have mentioned before, the motive of such reiterations may also be understood as social (offering support, validation) as well as political. There was therefore a divergence in understanding of these gestures between the original author, through the validating respondent to the third reader, who finds it redundant instead of courteous.

Other participants, however, took the opposing view, explaining that reiterations of the same position were of great *political* importance. These interviewees held the belief that

many voices saying the same thing in unison would have more persuasive power than a large number of isolated individuals offering single points of view. While the data would make for more varied reading for decision-makers, the political impetus, as they saw it, would be weak. In other words, a document that is a boring read could yet be a powerful political instrument. Securing the ear of a decision-maker, they felt, required a crowd who were prepared to speak at a certain volume and with some determination. This last perspective was actually corroborated by the Ministry officer responsible for conducting other, public consultations:

The patterns of themes that develop are affected to some degree by frequency of occurrence. Unfortunately, a theme that might occur once in a short note can occur (or be countered) hundreds of times in a thesis. In effect, the more resources that you or your organisation have to produce a response, the more that input can influence the themes or patterns that develop. As with other media, a well-organised lobby can be heard well above and beyond individuals. (Andrew, email correspondence, 15 May 2001)

When asked about their reading and writing practices online, participants were divided, falling on both sides of Burbules and Rice' (1991) observation that, "there are benefits to be derived from conversations with those like us, but there are benefits also to be gained from persisting in discussions with those who are not like us" (p. 412). Some authors sought kinship and enjoyed reading the perspectives of others who held the same values and beliefs, regardless of whether or not they added their comments. Others told me that the greatest value of the site was the opportunity to encounter opinions different from their own. In other words, the social element was less important to them than the challenge of reconfiguring their understanding of their profession around this new information.

While some participants described themselves either as keen readers and listeners who paid close attention to what others had written, other authors described the experience of posting as "[letting] it fall wherever it would" (Kevin, 2 April). The first group may be construed as authors who stayed close to their texts after publication, keeping an eye open for their intellectual descendants. The latter group had hoped to contribute to the debate, but were content with the flying visit. They felt no need to pursue a continued engagement. These occasional contributors told me that they had not learned much from their visits, in contrast with the regular readers who had described, in more detail, the intellectual and professional advances they had made as a result of their visits.

Participants' expectations of the assembly were also divided. As expected, I heard from teachers who had been delighted with the opportunity to interact with their peers across the province. As I heard at Silver Star and in interview, occasions on which they may discuss the principles behind their applications of school technology were rare ("There are few routes to the Ministry..." Cole, 11 March). They appreciated the efforts the PKPF had made to bring them into closer contact with other professional educators, but this did not describe everyone I interviewed. Other respondents were, on the contrary, disgruntled because they had hoped - with good reason - for a conversation with their employers. They had wanted to engage the Ministry staff in sustained dialogue about the issues presented in *Conditions for Success* and the *Plan for 2000 and Beyond*. Among them were teachers who had written detailed responses to these documents and had also taken the trouble to post them on the PKPF. The minimal contact with the Ministry on our site was a disappointment to them.

When discussing the forum with participants, I repeatedly heard the rueful phrase "the usual suspects" used to describe our regular contributors. This phrase reflected the belief that "most of the debates about the...curriculum...are really arguments within groups who already have considerable power." (Apple, 1999, p. 11) Or, in Gruber's (1995) terms, these online were discussions between the students who are also the most vocal in class. In the PKPF, these "students" would have been the people who mostly had experience in contributing to policy development and who would have arrived on time, expecting a seat to be waiting for them. These would not be authors who feared being misunderstood, who worried about being seen as "too contentious" or the process of posting as "intimidating." For contributors who expressed their reticence as anxiety, the stakes were high. There was a risk associated with posting a public message testifying to one's convictions.

Other authors expressed the opposite perspective to me, namely that there was little point in posting because the stakes were actually too low. Who was listening, anyway? If one knew that one's words might have some effect and spur a government to action, one would offer frank advice with the expectation that it would be heeded, or at least acknowledged. For these contributors, public contributions to policy development were of little value.

#### Reaching the "Public"

I had originally thought of the "data" as the discussions which arose online, but found that there were many other data sets, texts and contexts on the periphery. These were sometimes

convoluted, political and human. They described a situation in which, while technology had both opened up avenues for “making public decisions, negotiating differences and arriving at hard-fought compromises” (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 86) and exposed its limitations, in which participants’ attitudes towards political engagement sometimes dwarfed the discussions about technology, education or the policy itself. In recognising this, I was reminded that one cannot conduct truly political research if one fails to recognise the human context in which debates have been generated. In other words, the non-use of technology can sometimes be a most powerful commentary.

It also became clear that existing channels of communication were not sufficient for attracting committed participants to the site, which has encouraged me to review the project goals and the needs of our various audiences. If teachers were not coming, perhaps our site had missed the mark? If it were not understood to be an essential feature in the teachers’ calendar, what was missing?

Over time, I realised that these questions painted too simple a picture of teachers’ needs, intentions and actions. For example, we know that every school in BC received a fax about the Forum, but we do not know what happened after that fax had rolled off the machine. Was it handed to a person who was interested and had time to act upon it? Did they pass it on? Even if members of a school staff believed wholeheartedly in the Forum’s intentions, they might never have learned about it.

Assuming that the staff had the requisite computer skills to take part but had no time to do so, they would likely have needed access to a computer at home. Simply having a computer in one’s home does not, of course, guarantee access. There might be report cards to write, taxes to file, a business to run and homework to print off. If a teacher was interested but needed new skills to reach the site, he or she would have to sit down with a colleague, friend or family member who might offer assistance. That, of course, accounts for only one visit on one occasion. It discounts all of the time which might be swallowed up reading *Conditions for Success*, the other contributors’ messages, material from the resource section, or even working out how the bulletin board functioned. My concerns for reaching the teaching population were confirmed by Leah:

Of the 49 schools I visited..... only TWO people indicated that they were aware of, or interested in, the PKP forum. To say that this is a new method of communication

among teachers doesn't even begin to emphasize how far organizers of forums like this will have to go before they reach "the common teacher."

She went on:

We still do not have enough time to cope with the expectations of our regular work, so announcements regarding forums have to be VERY VERY RELEVANT if a teacher is going to steal the time to try to figure out "how" to access it! (26 March)

### Comments on the Debate

The interview data described a number of common concerns about the Internet as a communicative space. These commonly included observations about its character as a virtual space in which to think, learn and debate. Is the Internet really a virtual brain? Do we really think of it as the place for many minds to make light of policy work?

Participants were keen to talk about its communicative qualities, a feature closely allied to the number of participants who came. A variety of metaphors were used to describe the forum based on physical, spatial terms ("a wilderness"; "a big plain"), social terms ("lonely voices") or musical ("staccato") and culinary ("it was like stirring the pot") terms. In interview, they also talked at length about the value of the forum as a feedback mechanism; their preoccupation with the challenge of equitable access was consistent with the comments made on the site and their answers were often delivered before a backdrop of the professional and political concerns. One participant told me, via email that:

Teachers will only take the time to speak up on issues when they feel there is a willingness to be heard. It is incumbent on the BCTF and the Ministry to both create climates that are responsive. If a teacher's voice is not acknowledged, they will stop speaking out. (Alice, correspondence, 13 January 2000)

Another told me in interview that:

If you have the outlet there, I'd like to believe that people will use it. But there are two things. If it's hard to access, if they don't understand it, that will end it. And if they ever get the feeling that they're not being listened to, that will end it. (Adam, 9 March)

Having derived the set of themes, in the participants' own words, I returned to the forum itself, in search of corroboration for their political and educational concerns.

The Forum was a temporary assembly, and being virtual, the limitations to social engagement were many. Mine was the only photograph on the site and, as it showed nothing more than my face and shoulders, gave no indication of my location other than "Photo Booth,

Anywhere.” The Phorum software did not permit the attachment of graphics, so until I met some of the participants by happenstance, I had no idea what they looked like.

According to Mathew, the site was ultimately inhabited by a few “dedicated, sincere” authors (20 March). The space we provided was a vast, if not infinite, public arena in which all were permitted access, whether to lurk unseen or post and thus conjure themselves into existence. Among those who did choose to take part, two described their experience with spatial metaphors of emptiness. As Luke put it, the gathering felt like “a lot of lonely people on a big plain.” These were also Kevin’s “voices in the wilderness,” whose engagement Adam described as “staccato.” It was tempting, Luke said, to criticise another’s comments purely to fill the vacuum, all the while realising that this was far from being the most generous or constructive form of contribution. Two contributors responded ruefully to my question about moderators with the observation that at least they knew *someone* had read their messages. Emma laughed as she told me that “It was a nice touch...when you acknowledged that someone had joined... especially if it’s someone who wonders if there’s anyone out there” (25 March).

As a text, the discussion boards are certainly fragmented and frequently confusing to read. During the process of analysis, I have variously read the messages sent to me by the Phorum software and stored in my email InBox. I have read the messages as they appear in the bulletin board itself and have scanned the many screens of threads. Reading on these several levels has been essential to garner a sense of the individual content of messages, the shape of emergent discussions and the ways in which contributors chose to arrange their virtual chairs.

As is commonly the case with online bulletin boards, contributors entered the debate in the spirit of a face-to-face conversation. They asked each other questions as you would across a conference table. The pace was, however, slow and responses few and far between. It was not uncommon for posts to go unanswered for several days, which is hardly surprising given the tight teaching schedules into which this activity was added. As a conversation, then, it was far from lively, but our disappointment at this conversational torpor may simply demonstrate how flawed our expectations were of both the medium and its political context.

As I mentioned in my previous chapter, the visual cues offered by the forum’s “family tree” structure was frequently contradicted by the content of individual messages. Simply

counting the branches which emerged in each thread was an inadequate method of judging the extent or nature of interaction on the forum. On seeing an initial posting with six responses strung down the left side of the page, one might imagine that these were semantic descendants of the original message, that all of the comments were developing the initial point in more breadth and depth. This was not the case, however. Unless flagged specifically, the main points of the news were often missed and responses posted with only tangential reference to the message they purported to answer: they did not provide answers, clarification or further information on the original question or problem, nor did they build on any observations made. With many individuals effectively starting their own discussions with each posting, protocols of listening were not observed, lending the overall, online document a feeling of absurd discontinuity.

I struggle with this element of discontinuity, however. While disturbed by it, I begin to wonder what we really expected from the text. Is it not foolish to expect an online text to behave like a forum (because that's the metaphor of choice, as well as the product name) and yet, at the same time, to behave like coherent essays, or contributions to a discussion in which protocols of turn-taking are observed? Were we to transcribe a face to face conversation between stakeholders at a policy meeting, would we expect the text to be a comprehensible, linear narrative? Surely not, but at least the turn-taking feature would remain. Like the interviews I conducted, there would be alternating speakers who would observe some basic rules of etiquette, such as (mostly) speaking to the topic set by the previous speaker. Online, though, numerous speakers queued up to make their own points, often with little reference to the comments which preceded them. It is hardly likely that the conversation would be easy to follow and even more, straightforward to comprehend once it is printed out long after the event. Nonetheless, there was some confusion surrounding our expectations of the text in terms of its content, population and genre. Before we create an environment for people to gather in, we might do well to ask ourselves, *what kind of things would we hope people will say?* Soap-box orations (or speaking through layers of glass, or calling out into the wilderness) clearly do not promote a sense of mutual interest or community. One doesn't even know who is out there, if anyone. On the other hand, group efforts like drafting a letter to the Deputy Minister, writing a technology plan for the district with one's colleagues, or an article for publication in a provincial paper just might.

### Private Knowledge: Participants' Impressions of Each Other

In this section my reader will meet some of the individuals who contributed to the discussions. It follows the line of thinking begun in Chapter Three, where I considered the challenge of “knowing the participants” in virtual settings. In essence, I offer textual cameos of the contributors with whom I managed to form real connections. I have actually met eight of the respondents in person, thanks in part to a provincial forum on policy, which took place in April 2000. Many of them I have not met, so, while my accounts may be textually accurate, my mental images (as well as yours) of these people are pure fiction.

When I began to analyse this material, I started with the intention of privileging discourse, examining the kind of environment “it” created, as if it - and not the authors themselves - were driving the debate. I wanted to understand the text that arose from the forums as pure expressions of educators’ political, pedagogical, philosophical and curricular orientations. However, I found this to be impossible, owing to an enduring preoccupation with speaker identity. *Reading* Kevin just wasn’t the same as meeting him - as I quickly realised after my visit to his school. Being able to picture the participant, and building trust and confidence through email correspondence and telephone calls all add weight and credibility to his comments in the researcher’s mind. The subtle additions and nuances in what he told me after he had met me in person were still considerable enough to dent my understanding of his attitudes and beliefs about school use of ICT. This experience reminded me of Mill’s observation that any person’s public expression, on any controversial subject, will only ever be an incomplete representation of all that they believe.

Let’s return to our most regular contributor. According to him, “only the most...political or keenest people” attended our online gathering. He also commented, “I’ve found people online are generally very dedicated, educated people that are serious about their concerns” (20 March). But how does he see himself? “Just a regular guy...just an average teacher” who asks his children for help when he *really* has to know what he’s doing. We must look beyond his modesty, though, because his actions do not describe him as the “average teacher” referred to constantly (and rather abstractly) by other participants. This average guy was the site’s most frequent, visible guest. His posts often challenged other people’s messages, but he also started numerous threads himself, with URLs relating to research articles and newspaper stories. He did not engage as rigorously with the contents of the ministry documents, but his

talent as a “cybrarian” and online personality as a conversation starter showed leadership in establishing a new agenda. Since the site’s closure, I have found him to be a regular contributor to the BCTF’s listservs, particularly on matters of social justice and the relationship between the media and education. He commonly highlights ironies and self-contradictions in public documents, revealing a desire to understand fully their text, subtext and intention.

Next, let me introduce Leah. Leah is an elementary teacher in British Columbia who was working on her Masters in Educational Technology at the time of the PKPF. We corresponded regularly, to the extent that the forum’s home page still features a link to her library of BC-specific education sites. The home page also advertises her research study involving Grade 4 and 5 teachers. While Leah contributed none of her own opinions to the site, her research page offered an avenue for BC teachers to add to the collective knowledge base about teaching and learning with technology. She had ample experience with computers in schools, but freely admitted that she was sometimes baffled by them. Her experience with computers included searching the web for lesson ideas and as a way to share information about classroom animals and pets. She also used a web site as a school resource and newsletter, and communicated with her peers in the Masters program via the internet. She had participated in newsgroups, used email extensively and worked in various online forums and teachers’ workshops.

Leah described a clear division between “early adopters” and the “techno-shy” teachers. This division can be seen as a barrier of faith rather than teaching practices or professional experience. According to Anna, technology use is a matter of principle or belief, not one that can be rationalised or reduced to logical:

From my limited participation, I thought some of the comments were rah-rah technology types who have no time for people who question technology. I doubt whether the forum included any non-tech types because they either wouldn’t have the equipment or would not be “in the loop” to find out about the forum. (Anna)

Another respondent, however, disagreed:

Many other respondents seemed to be technology-wise “early adopters” and may not have been representative of the population. Other respondents seemed to have opposite opinions to the proponents of educational technology so viewpoints often seemed to be polarized. (Derek, 13 April).

My main concern, of course, was that we succeed in answering Cole's concern that "There are few routes to the Ministry for individual teachers and hopefully this is one" (11 March). Although it is clear from these quotes that opinion was divided on who the conference participants actually were, my intention is not to prove one perspective right and the other, wrong. My real intention is to demonstrate that *nobody really knew*. Or as Robert's more detailed observation reveals, contributors "didn't know the breadth of the audience and the professional experience... they may have thought they were talking to people who had a lot more experience [than they did]" (Ministry Interview, 14 March). The contributors' sense of awkwardness is entirely understandable if one considers the forum discussion in light of Wells' argument that "talk is, after all, a social action concerned with the negotiation of meaning and the reciprocal influence of language and context, and this cannot be ignored when studying the means by which communication is achieved" (Sauntson, 1995, p. 41).

Anna's expression of her discomfort in the forum reveals the challenge of negotiating meaning where the element of reciprocity is limited. Without the additional information necessary to make a full interpretation of the texts themselves (Wells, 1991) and without sufficient feedback on her own comments, she remained disconnected, fearing how her words would be interpreted. Had the forum lasted longer, she said, the interaction style might have evolved because contributors could "get to know one another better." It was, perhaps, a setting ripe for guardedness and misunderstanding. Anna did not believe that she had contributed to the learning of others and spoke ruefully about her own experiences of contributing to policy:

I enjoyed [contributing] immensely, but in the end, I thought it produced little in terms of change and results for classrooms. I was naïve, I thought something might come of it. As I see it, our recommendations for money and support were answered by the government with the intention to build more partnerships with business.... I would think carefully about spending the better part of a school year working on something that produces negligible results. On a personal note, however, the committee was superbly informative... (26 March)

Anna's experience is acknowledged by Burbules and Rice (1991) who found that "prior experiences may have created feelings of intimidation, resentment or hurt; an imposition of silence, or the self-imposed habit of silence, may be ingrained" (p. 410). Such a commentary, offered by the participant herself, is a solid reminder that, whatever the positive inclinations of the site developers may be, external political forces may challenge participants to the

extent that the perceived cost of speaking up is more than the cost of remaining silent. The commentary is also poignant for having been delivered by a person who marshalled her resources and actually *did* take part.

Several of the participants I interviewed expressed genuine discomfort at communicating in public, online. These began with Leah, who gave an explanation of the possible opportunity cost of taking part:

I did not feel confident enough to put my ideas in print. I might have been a little 'braver' were I not conducting my own masters thesis research at the time. I did not want to jeopardise participation in my study because of something I might say. (26 March)

She knew precisely what kinds of consequences she hoped to avoid and chose to remain silent. Neither Leah nor the other women who expressed similar views could be described as novices. Their concern over speaking out was not owing to a lack of confidence with technology, then, nor was it a generalised fear of public speaking. They used computers extensively for their curriculum development, teaching and research activities on a daily basis. When asked about her use and enjoyment of the computer, Anna replied, "I love working with computers... I think I know a fair bit about their use and consider myself more [technologically] literate than the average teacher." She also claimed that "In my daily life as a student, researcher and social being, the computer is indispensable" (26 March).

This brings me to wonder whether the concerns described were owing to a lack of confidence in their own opinions. What did each contributor believe they were bringing to the debate? As Luke told me (email, November 21, 1999), "I almost put [a message] in just for fun, to break the monotony of the list, but got scared cause it would be so visible to everyone. Like what I had to say was not important." As mentioned before, Robert (Ministry) acknowledged that some visitors "weren't prepared to risk going public with some of their opinions" (14 March). Leah confirmed this speculation, too, describing herself as "somewhat leery about putting [my] views down for the world to see!" (26 March)

Joe told me more precisely that the medium we had chosen - specifically a bulletin board, not email - had caused him some discomfort. He did not feel that he could "participate on the web. [He] used email for that." Another participant agreed, "I'm still not comfortable with that kind of online forum... it's kind of funny ... I don't know why" (Emma, 25 March). Anna described her fear of judgment and criticism in much the same way that Gruber's

(1995) study revealed participants' suspicion of the medium and fears about the consequences of their postings:

I was hesitant to put my ideas on the web. I thought people might rip my ideas to shreds or important people would read my comments and think I was a bit of a simpleton. I felt it was not a forum where I could be completely open and express my opinions openly and freely. I chose my words carefully, edited my remarks for spelling and content.

She went on:

I wonder if other people, like me, are completely open about their comments. Is there a tendency to try to impress people with submissions? I felt my remarks would be read, and maybe misconstrued.

Another contributor told me in private that she feared her comments would be "too contentious" to post. In other words, the more heartfelt, the more profoundly affecting and personal the material was, the less likely it would be to reach the public sphere.

Anna's expressions of doubt showed the value of having conducted participant interviews as well as analysing what they had said online. The dimensions of user engagement with a discussion site or forum cannot be established from the forum postings alone. Clearly, a significant portion of Anna's engagement took place offstage, in her mind and at a level which did not find expression in text, in a public place. Sometimes the rules can only be excavated from that which is not said. She is described by Burbules and Rice (1991) as a contributor "who may feel unable to speak without explicit or implicit retribution" (p. 397).

For Anna, then, her technical facility and her confidence in her opinions were completely unrelated. Although a confident user of computers in her daily work and creative life - in interview she told me that she "loved" using them - she felt uncomfortably self-conscious when she felt herself surrounded by (imagined) superiors, imagining that they would judge her contributions to be facile or ill-informed. So here we are again, back to Barber and Apple, and back to square one considering "what counts." The work that lies ahead for future contributors, then, is two-fold: there is the work of developing technological skills. Teachers may have no experience in submitting messages to an online forum, nor be familiar with the facilities offered by a site like the PKPF. These include reading and submitting additional resources to the collective database. Second, there is the work of establishing, with teachers, what *does* count as an important contribution to the debate.

While Jackie closes her single contribution with “Thanks for listening,” Anna is more skeptical, reminding us that *listening* still belongs in quotation marks, a comment, perhaps, on our status as beginners in this realm of virtual opinion gathering. Dialogue via the Internet gives everyone the chance to “hear” other viewpoints, but whether or not we take that chance is a matter of personal preference. So, while it is difficult to prompt discussion at all, it is doubly doubtful whether contributors will offer sincere opinions, rather than mere posturing or “performance,” as Anna described it. Anna’s observation is corroborated by that of Herring (1996), who comments that “[online] discourse has a flavour which is ...exhibitionistic at times – it is apparent that many individuals post with an audience in mind, aiming to persuade and impress others with their eloquence and reason” (p. 159).

Like Mark and Bruce - who both described to me their experiences of online discussions dominated by a single contributor (“it’s the nature of the beast” according to Mark)- Anna was also conscious that power and status differentials were preserved online. Those who had “tons of initials after their names” (26 March) were irritating to her because “all [she] would be able to put is ---name--- teacher” (ibid.). This participant clearly wasn’t convinced that her ideas were competing in an equal marketplace, depending on their (rationally determined, measurable) value. Her conviction is evidence of Fiske’s (1989) observation that:

Knowledge is never neutral, it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real. Knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is the social distribution of power. The discursive power to construct a commonsense reality that can be inserted into cultural and political life is central to the social relationship of power....Discursive power involves a struggle both to construct (a sense of) reality and to circulate that reality as widely and smoothly as possible. (p. 149-150)

Whatever one’s best intentions as a host may be, then, not all contributors’ texts are equal, subject as they may are to different qualities of listening. In other words, “presumptions about hierarchical knowledge continually threaten open and critical discourse” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 90). The qualities of listening, the degree to which this critical discourse can proceed depends on the status or perceived status of the speaker, as evidenced by the invitation one participant received to a provincial forum. His first posting had been followed by the initials “Ed.D.” and the Education Technology Branch officers confirmed that they had been “impressed by his background” (14 March).

### Ministry Perceptions

Apart from the conversations on the site about access to technology, another question of access arose as the site became more established. This was the degree to which the Ministry and the PKP had access to the full expression of teachers' and other contributors' beliefs. As Mill (1972) cautions, "the principles which men profess, on any controverted subject, are usually a very incomplete exponent of the opinions they really hold" (p. 176). Furthermore, it is impossible to know whether those views which did find expression were actually sincere. Did Ministry staff feel that they were getting a clear, honest sense of the opinion of the majority? They were certainly conscious of the potential for communication anxiety, acknowledging "I'm sure there was some concern about speaking frankly" (14 March). He did not say whether or not this anxiety was well-founded.

Towards the end of my meeting at the Ministry I asked Robert and Catherine a question designed to learn about their understanding of public communication with the Ministry: "Do you have the impression that people would really like to pick up the phone and say...to the ministry, 'this is what's going on?'" to which Catherine replied, "I think...they don't have an understanding that they actually could do that" (14 March). This comment was, however, followed by, "It's unlikely that anyone thinks they could [simply lift the phone] ... unless they happen to be Robert's friend." In other words, educators *could* pick the phone up, but, as Valerie observed in the forum itself, "Those who choose to have a voice will exercise it" in any event (see Appendix 1, Figure 6). This describes Anna, who told me "I would not hesitate to email someone 'higher-up' if I wanted to tell them something or send some info to them. So accessibility for me is easier and more comfortable with technology" (26 March). It also describes Adam, who emailed Catherine directly after she had posted a message to the PKPF. He knew who she was because I had told him in private conversation.

Even though Catherine went on to acknowledge that most people would not *actually* bother unless they had a personal contact at the ministry, she was more optimistic about online contributions in general, giving an example of an "informal," online response to teacher talk as, "Gee, we loved your idea on...." Her perception of accessing public opinion through the internet is that it's "something easy" (14 March), and that you are simply "[typing] in a few words... and maybe there's somebody out there that will listen" (Ibid.). The problem, as we found, is that the medium of the Internet may be fast, but it's far from "easy," and the investment of teachers willing to contribute to policy discussions is

considerable. It also brings with it an element of risk. As Adam observed, their time is pinched: “When faced with the choice of commenting on issues in education which may help all students down the road or doing something more concrete to help some students today, most teachers will help a student today” (15 Dec, Public Forum/*Visions & Principles*).

A thorough examination of the PKPF and its supporting data has offered a salutary caution against underestimating the amount of intellectual energy, commitment and professional wisdom required of educators who hope to further current debates and build effective policies. One may wonder abstractly about the “opportunity for [an online forum] to provide us with lots of useful information,” but what is *useful*? And is there any agreement between those who speak and those who listen on what *is* actually “useful”? Not yet, it would seem, among participants who are still engaged with the question of “what counts?” Assuming that there was agreement on the answer to this question, to what uses would these nuggets of information put? If they undergo the metamorphosis described by Anna (in which her contributions to policy were personally affecting while their impact on the political and educational landscapes were negligible) we might reasonably expect to invest a good deal more time in future on the educational task of developing a sense of public conviction in the potential of online environments to enable fruitful, long-term discussions. These discussions must also offer realistic political outcomes, by having visibly altered the direction of educational policy debate in British Columbia.

### My Advice

“My Advice” refers to the section of the PKPF created specifically for participants to offer advice to the Ministry. In contrast, the “Public Forum” area was created to foster group discussion. “My Advice” was potentially the most valuable area of the site but it was barely used. Instead, the participants congregated in sections which had already been visited and where the debate had begun. The following section revisits “My Advice” as a way of corroborating the participants’ comments with the site data themselves. It corroborates their impressions of what life was like in the debate and sheds light on the task of interpreting the text that remains, now that the doors are closed.

As described in Chapter Three, “My Advice” was organized along the same headings as the Forum area. Rather than inviting ongoing debate, it suggested that contributors simply post direct advice to the Ministry in response to the recent policy documents. Its contents

exemplify the kinds of exchanges recalled by the contributors in interview. Reading over it after the event, one finds a fragmented, confusing discussion which takes off in numerous different directions and in which no consensus or closure is reached. Only 36 messages were posted in total, the majority of which appeared in three topics: Educator Training and Support (12), Visions and Principles (7) and Decision Making (7).

*Visions and Principles* contains a motley group of comments. Apart from the moderator, five people contributed six messages. These include a message about the author's response to the Ministry's January 14 deadline. Next came an impassioned offering which began:

I am delighted to have this opportunity to provide you with input on the implementation of technology in our schools. Too often decisions appear to be made by "gatekeepers" who are not really up to the task and without real consultation with those affected by the decisions. (My Advice/*Decision Making*, 18 Jan)

The first response to this message was a request for more information about teaching with online labs in schools. Side by side, one can hardly believe they belong in the same conversation. One takes the form of outspoken, urgent and passionate advocacy, characterised by words such as "wastage," "insufficient," "ill-advised" and "outdated." The author signs off "sincerely." The response, by contrast, is written as a polite but tepid request in much the same language one would use in a letter regarding one's furniture order: "I am interested in implementation models such as smaller labs and having more online computers in class rooms. If you have any info or resorses (sic) on this, I would be more than happy if you passed it along."

Our first author, Gordon, responded to the furniture orderer with a restatement of their common position on using computers within classrooms; I had taken Michael's question about "implementation" to refer to teaching; I don't regard teaching as putting a set of implements to use, but clearly neither did Gordon. He therefore offered some technical advice on using Linux servers, but nothing about teaching. He helpfully offered more but if Michael took him up on this, he must have done it by email because no response showed in Phorum.

At this point, Gillian entered the fray. She responded to Gordon's initial comment with a similarly heartfelt download: "This is the first E-mail that I have ever sent in my life! My parents have been on Welfare since I was five years old therefore our home never had, and still does not have, a computer." She wanted to know how students without computers at

home will fare when their peers are emailing assignments back and forth, receiving grades, feedback and reports in this fashion. Gordon did not reply to her, however. I have not been able to validate Gillian's identity; she claimed to be a fourth year geography student at UBC, but the 1999-2000 year has finished and her ID may have been erased from the server.

Sarah contributed some reinforcement in the next message, agreeing that the divide between "haves" and "have-nots" is a major concern. It as a social message, which did not add ammunition of its own to the debate. Its role was as a supporting, validating message, of the kind which were occasionally dismissed as redundant by participants who talked to me after the event.

*Educator Training and Support* was populated by seven visitors other than the moderator. Based on an original posting by Christopher, there appears to be one main discussion with two breakaway threads, then one separate discussion populated by two new authors. Christopher's initial post - based on his own impressions, not on research or news articles - argued that time is the most important element in educator training and support. Secondly, he observed that teachers have two choices: to adopt what he calls "canned content" or to produce their own software products. This, he said, is the real time-guzzler.

Valerie, arriving half an hour later, disagreed that this is the only thing at issue and directed Christopher towards a book called *How Teachers Learn Technology Best*. Bruce joined the discussion, arguing that teachers with home computers are more able to incorporate ICT into their daily practice; he claimed that his perspective is supported by research but doesn't tell us where we can find it. At that point I stepped in to welcome Bruce to the forum and directed him (rather tangentially, it seems now) towards Kirsten's initial post to Decision Making. Fortunately, Dale arrived, ignored my post altogether and stayed on track with a response to Christopher. Dale added to the discussion by wondering aloud whether the College of Teachers could do something to lessen the problem of educator training. On December 6<sup>th</sup>, he observed that "The College of Teachers needs to incorporate a technology component into the certification process and districts need to make proficiency with ICT a requirement in new postings."

The second thread to emerge concerned Christopher's subsidiary point about canned content. Using the terminology he had initiated to show that I was listening carefully, I asked him a question about personnel: whether roving technology consultants could help with in-

services. Kevin responded enthusiastically, "Great idea I am trying to do this on pro-d days in my school of 200 staff -some organised TOC funded time is what we need. There are teachers in every district capable of supplying training needs if time is given for them and the trainees." The conversation came to an end here as Patrick and Deirdre arrived to take up Christopher's initial points once again. Patrick thought that canned content was essential in the early days. Deirdre replied, with a message revealing something of her part in the creation of *Conditions for Success* (this message was quoted in a different context in Chapter Four):

Time was very much a part of the discussions in Conditions For Success. The aim of the committee was to ensure that teachers were provided with time, hardware, and incentive to upgrade their skills. We realize that teachers are expected to do it all and if we want them to become familiar and proficient with technology we need to provide them more than just time but incentive as well.

In restating the goals of TLETAC, it is clear that Deirdre was more than an interested professional; she did not tell us here what her exact role with the committee was - only that she was privy to inside information. The report authors are now "we" rather than "they" but Deirdre's allegiance to practising teachers is evident in "it's difficult to teach technology when most teachers do not even have it readily available for their own daily use." This element of *incentive* is a valuable one, but regrettably not followed through in the rest of the forum.

The Social Impact forum within "My Advice" is populated by a single message about gender equity. The author clearly feels strongly about her topic, arguing that "Most industry software that I have seen in the stores does not appeal to women. I have seen 'Personal Makeover' software that is just insulting." Apart from all the unanswered messages I posted, this was one of the loudest "voices in the wilderness."

In the last two chapters, I have shown that the participants' impressions of a fragmented discussion was supported by close readings after the event. The interviews helpfully corroborated the impressions I had had, that the environment was tense and sparsely populated and that the conversation in it was fragmented, stilted by its asynchronicity and always straining, stretched thinly across new agendas, established with almost every message. I did not moderate the debate in traditional terms by imposing closure or consensus on the discussants, by determining the order of speaking or by outspokenly declaring the topic of the day. As a result, I have been challenged to tell a story which was not a story, a

narrative with no beginning, middle or end and which was non-linear and abstracted from time. Writing these discussion chapters has not been a process of mopping up an analysis which was done in some other, abstract, intellectual space. It has been a process of bringing together a number of dispersed voices: voices in the wilderness, voices speaking on a great plain, speaking through layers of glass.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Success is a partial and provisional human achievement; it is neither guaranteed by the existence of good intentions, nor precluded by the existence of serious differences. (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 406)

Educational researchers' reports to the public should be written straightforwardly to communicate the practical significance for policy, including limits in effectiveness and in generalisability to situations, problems and contexts.  
(Ethical Standards, AERA, 1992)

Having examined the Public Knowledge Policy Forum experience for some months now, I agree with Barber's (1984) assertion that "in designing our political institutions we are sculpting our knowledge. In founding a constitution, we are determining the shape and character of our own political epistemology" (p.170). While it is premature to contemplate a web site such as the one we created an "institution," such a scenario may yet be approaching. Since the Public Knowledge forum closed, the BC Parents' Advisory Council (BCCPAC) has established a similar forum so that distant members can maintain contact on key issues. Teachers in a remote community on Vancouver Island have been working toward creating a similar environment as part of their professional development program. Finally, the BC Teachers' Federation recently developed an online discussion in response to the World Education Market, being held in Vancouver in May, 2001.

This work has first explored the bare content of what participants said when they did choose to speak up. What concerned them and which agenda did they choose to follow? Next, we have explored the types of information they considered pertinent to the policy feedback mechanism, whether - for example - this was professional autobiography, FAQs or curriculum analysis. Taking a step further and considering the forum as a medium of debate and persuasion, we find a diverse set of rhetorical practices used by authors to articulate their positions and convince others of their validity. In all of this, contributors' messages also had a social character in which their emotional states were conveyed and connections with others were forged. Moving on to the vein of policy debate running through the forum, I considered how the content of the new policy was scarcely being addressed in any direct fashion. From the interviews, it was clear that different users differed enormously in their expectations of what the site offered, what their contribution might be and how such a site contributed to the

realm of policy discussion at large. As I have shown, this feature was overwhelmed by concern with the ideological and philosophical assumptions of the policy and by the procedures via which it was established. Finally, through conversations with participants and other educators, I came to see that the act of contributing to policy was also understood as a symbolic gesture, much more than a simple bid to have one's paragraphs cut and pasted into widely circulated documents.

We have now seen the different approaches to reading and writing expressed by the participant group of the PKPF. Close readings of the messages, in the context of the participants' reflections on their experience, have provided insights into the social, rhetorical nature of the forum, and into its significance as an educational, political medium. In other words, we have examined the dimensions of user engagement with the site. These different approaches reveal a diverse set of approaches to the group effort of debate. For some participants, this was a collegial effort, but it was understood by others to be a lonely endeavour, of "letting [my text] fall wherever it would." In future, sites such as the PKPF might be altered to allow for an element agenda setting talk within the medium of discussion itself, in the way that a face-to-face committee would establish its concerns collectively, at the outset. This research has also allowed us to picture a virtual stage set with human actors in education and to envisage what their talents are in this particular respect: sharing professional anecdotes, challenging each other's perspectives or exploring the theory underlying current policy.

Taking part as individuals, these contributors used much of their text to compose persuasive arguments. This meant that people contributed largely as individuals and were not deliberating as a group. Making speeches and offering advice are, however, activities we commonly do as individuals. The language, the interface, the process of feedback and its political context need to be altered if the discussion is to proceed effectively *and* collectively. In future, the participants might be charged with the responsibility of drafting a new document themselves, rather than discussing the contents of one which has already been published. Having a conversation after publication is a little like the proverbial bolting horse and stable door scenario. Site designers need to ask themselves about the extent to which user agency has been enhanced or diminished by the degree to which "what counts" has been determined, whether explicitly or implicitly, through the choice of topic headings and

discussion threads. This increased responsibility in the context of a job which positively requires collaboration might alter these dimensions of user engagement.

The comments about the medium have served as helpful feedback for moderators and designers in future. They tell us, through reference to social vacuums and stilted interactions, that a human presence can be more powerful, more engaging and provocative than a humourless, characterless database which is also empty, waiting to be filled by the site's guests. A sense of floating in space does not lead to productive conversation. Lack of feedback in classrooms is considered deviant and the online environment is no exception.

### Policy Contributions

The Public Knowledge Policy Forum has been an opportunity to ask, "What *is* good?" in a setting devoted to encouraging greater deliberation among professionals over policy initiatives related to their line of work. What is "useful" information? When do we know that our moderation (or teaching, or facilitating) practices are "good"? And what are the different needs of the various authors and readers in such an environment? More than an exercise in gathering opinions or research data, the PKPF has also been a chance to discover what kinds of contributions a site like the PKPF might make to the existing process of policy deliberation.

From the forum postings, it is clear that, rather than joining the policy process by examining Ministry of Education publications in detail, contributors chose to conduct a much broader discussion about the ideological foundations of the policies, the forum itself and teaching and learning with ICT in British Columbia. While this may be an initial cause for dismay for the developers of such a forum, it is a helpful lesson in how new technology is interpreted and applied by its users, especially where those interpretations differ from those we anticipated. It shows that the users themselves play a key role in determining what the technology is, not the other way around.

Staying for a moment to the actual, not desired, use of the forum, it is worth asking some questions about the significance of the postings, taken en masse. With the forum being organised around the Ministry publications, our explicit intention was to draw members of the public into close contact with the processes of policy development. An invitation was thus issued to examine the "curriculum" of *Conditions for Success*; the implicit invitation was to follow the lead of this document both in terms of its content and (what its participants

perceived to be) its unarticulated ideological foundations. As George (1995) cautions, it is “the construction and maintenance of particular value positions in silent and unproblematic ways” which creates a cool climate for populations who do not express themselves in ways which are deemed appropriate, whose concerns are not those of the majority or whose ideological positions must be stated and defended before a convincing debate can be held. In the case of the PKPF, we saw a group of contributors trying to dissect - in order to understand - the ideological foundations of the policy, using whatever readings, personal experience, qualifications and professional wisdom they could to make sense of it. In so doing, they were responding to precisely the challenge laid out by George (1995), who calls for “[making] value positions visible and problematic so that students see the potential for reconstruction on the basis of other value positions” (p. 33). This is difficult work. For those of us concerned with an informal and virtual learning environment, where contribution itself was effectively the assignment, the “students” independently shaped the assignment to be one of ideological reconstruction, an opportunity to examine the value positions on which the policy - which would effect all of their working lives - had been established. In so doing, they offered validation for Fiske’s (1989) claim that “knowledge is never neutral.” They were aware of their own professional standing as contributors within the environment and took a variety of rhetorical measures to lend weight to their arguments and to connect socially with colleagues while compensating for the absence of physical presence, eye contact and more, pertinent information about the other participants.

The participants also responded along what I have termed “educational” and “political” lines, by describing the work of students and teachers with technology, or attending to the institutional impediments and other political features that frame their educational work. While the PKPF was meant to give professionals and members of the public a chance to unite these educational and political concerns, its actual value was in teaching us what it is that teachers really do want to discuss when they are talking about policy. Such efforts demand that they step outside the daily domain of their work and into a virtual, political environment which brought a sense of professional risk and personal responsibility to some participants.

Although the PKPF was a valuable experiment in the field of online debating, we have not yet explored sufficiently the privilege given by the medium to “natural inequalities in individuals’ abilities to speak with clarity, eloquence, logic and rhetoric” (Barber, 1984,

p.175). Being textual and printed, bulletin boards undoubtedly elevate the efforts of those people who are skilled at communicating in this medium. Those who are unused to contributing written responses to policy decisions risk being marginalised, if not excluded entirely. The online debate may be a text, but it also lives within another professional, educational and cultural tradition: that of policy consultation and development. Being such an event, it demands that we pay attention to the ways in which individual speakers find themselves either seated comfortably within the assembly, or perched precariously on the margins. As George observes (1995), "a participant must learn to operate within the discourses at work in the (spoken or written) texts of the field" (p.31). This might be describing the majority of teachers, for whom there is also the inhibiting factor of limited computer access. Taken together, the factor of access to both the appropriate tools of discourse and technology remain a concern for those who would make the most of online policy consultation and development tools.

Barber's (1984) argument centres around his claim that "strong democracy is the only viable form that modern democratic politics can take (Preface, xiv)." I appreciate his urgency, but found that many teachers in British Columbia did not feel it. The need to address philosophical issues is less important to them than the need to resolve a problem facing a student now. "They'll always take the five minutes and do something for this kid that's right in front of [them]" (Adam, 9 March).

The challenge which Barber fails to acknowledge (and with which Smith (1999) is greatly preoccupied), is to create a situation in which people cannot afford to stop talking. The truth is, they *can* afford to remain silent or they simply would not. It all depends on the opportunity cost. UK miners felt that the opportunity cost of speaking up in the early 1980s (pit closure, the loss of thousands of jobs, a massive drop in the standard of living for hundreds of North Eastern UK families) was less than remaining silent. If the cost is only disappointment, frustration and a feeling of being ignored, many people will weigh the pros against the cons and remain silent. Barber does not acknowledge how great this cost might be, how great is the responsibility of the public life. The real challenge for proponents of this strong democracy is to create environments which are safe and yet still permit the contributions of those most affected by the policies under discussion. If we advocate strong democracy and fail to use the communication channels we have developed, we are merely

acquiescing before the processes we had hoped to change. The contributors to such a site must have faith in the medium, its hosts and the process to which it contributes before the discussion can advance uninhibited.

Having witnessed the degree of participation on the PKPF, I would now concur with Pateman's observation (1970) that:

High levels of participation and interest are required from a minority of citizens only and, moreover, the apathy and disinterest of the majority play a valuable role in maintaining the stability of the system as a whole. Thus we arrive at the argument that the amount of participation that actually obtains is just about the amount that is required for a stable system of democracy. (p. 7)

Had I read this before moderating the PKPF, I might have considered her pessimistic or cynical. I now see, however, that we simply cannot expect every visitor to contribute to the same extent; a measure of apathy among some of the populace is to be expected, as are the efforts of proven leaders in the profession. Mark's online commentary on the PKPF supported Pateman's argument. He'd taken part in "several listservs" and found that "most members hardly ever contribute" (p. 1). This makes me think of the social dynamic common to classrooms. Typically there are a few keen speakers, many who will contribute with modest frequency and one or two who will rarely speak. If the medium does indeed favour those with a passion and ability for rhetoric, how are we to make it less alienating, more populous and more conducive to productive policy talk? If we favour direct connections, rapid-fire dialogue and courteous, listening, tolerant and patient replies, we might be inclined to question the nature of the conversational "beast" observed by Mark. We might even be inclined to ask how it might be changed in favour of including non-dominating conversational partners in ways which acknowledge and respect those who participate silently.

It has been challenging to retain my conviction in the possibility of a genuine, free and public forum. In doing work of this kind, one only has to approach two or three colleagues to see one shaking his or her head, wondering aloud if there is a point, wondering if anyone is "really listening." As Florio (1981) has observed, "in a social world that is unequal, you don't get a democratic or open conversation simply by saying that everyone's free to talk" (p. 8). In having my own conviction challenged, I came to realise that communications hierarchies may unwittingly be supported by our early attempts to use communications technologies in new ways, to alter the existing lines of power and information (Hodas, 1996)

described by a provincial education system. I came to see that if the population at large is to use the technology effectively, they must embrace the opportunity to speak up. However, the fact of doing so is dependent on participants' willingness and ability to invest their efforts in a virtual medium. The very development of an online forum was received as a hostile gesture by some teachers with inadequate access to the internet. The medium of choice may therefore be alienating to those people with the greatest wisdom and experience, and the most to contribute to the planning process.

#### Further questions

New questions have arisen in the course of the research, among which are, "How long might an online forum of this kind last and why?" This question has many implications, all of which shape the status afforded to the type of communication. A bulletin board that lasts for several months may allow the contributors to develop a sense of comfort in their communications. They can get to know each other, both publicly and privately, through independent email discussions if they wish. The board might serve as a place where people meet, and where those who enjoy public oratory can indulge their passion. As a continuous, informal gathering (rather than one assembled to write a specific response to a specific set of recommendations), its main outcome in the long term would surely be a growing sense of social cohesion. This may not contribute to a high status or formal documentary record of public opinion, but it may certainly allow time for social (textual) mores to develop independently of the organised efforts of unions and ministries.

A bulletin board which lasts for only a few weeks or months must surely have a different purpose. If its purpose is to act as a place to gather public opinion on a recent policy publication, for example, we cannot hope for or demand a high degree of social interaction because the interactions would likely be much more focused.

Pateman (1970) is clear about the educational role of participation, arguing that it is "educative in the widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures... Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it" (p. 42-3). The result of participation in democratic policy making is not simply the policy itself, according to Pateman, but also "the development of the social and political capacities of each individual" (p. 43). However, as Himmelfarb (1963) reminds, us, sporadic engagement in political activity is rarely practised and therefore easily forgotten.

The educational opportunity is wasted, leaving “his intellect and moral dispositions very much as it found them” (p. 229). Thus, if a forum like the PKPF is only available in short bursts, its capacity for furthering the civic education of the public is necessarily limited. This capacity is further limited by the time needed for non-fluent users of technology to become comfortable, firstly with the hardware, secondly with the content of policy contributions and thirdly with the social-textual mores of participating in writing.

More abstractly, this has been an opportunity to ask some searching questions about the extent to which a truly public domain has been created on servers, and the extent to which BC educators have invested their good faith and their time in it. Through the PKPF contributions, we begin to see the educational task which lies ahead, in terms of assisting potential contributors with technological skills and addressing the imbalance of access to the forum. It will also be important to examine further the psychological dispositions necessary to make this access a valuable experience to more contributors such that the discussion is fruitful, engaging and productive in terms of its contribution to the realm of policy debate. This last point can be tackled from both a human and technical perspective. In other words, we could choose to alter the content of a professional education program, or we could simply tinker with the interface design and navigational elements of the PKPF.

My next question emerged from my thoughts about the policy timeline within which the PKPF sat, namely, “At what point should an online forum be established?” However, I soon realised that there were other, key considerations such as the structure of the school year. In my case, the forum went live at the end of November, in the middle of report cards and immediately before Christmas. It was therefore being publicised at a time when teachers’ (and probably parents’) spare time was scarce and they would likely be unable to spend it on the PKPF. Furthermore, the forum was developed after the technology committee had adjourned and at least one policy document published. The nine headings of *Conditions for Success* informed the design of the PKP site, but they may not have been the themes chosen by the teaching population at large. The dialogue I read on the PKPF bulletin boards took the shape of agenda setting discussions, or perhaps as the conversation in which teachers took ownership of the topics in hand. When writing the opening questions for each section of the discussion board, I initially saw myself as setting the agenda for the debate. The agenda had, however, been set already by *Conditions for Success*. The nine forum headings were

established long before I logged on. More precisely, it happened when the special interest groups were established in TLETAC. These groups' titles later became the nine headings of *Conditions for Success*. I don't know how these sections were established as I was not working for the Committee at the time. Emma, a participant with several years' experience in advocacy, offered a circumspect response:

I think [the PKPF] suffers from the same problem that any kind of public consultation suffers from, though. And that is that - if you are reacting to a document, or a policy statement or whatever, then you are always reacting, even if it's a traditional public hearing. You're reacting after the fact. Whereas that kind of forum has a use also in *generating* the document. (25 March)

At this stage, we cannot claim to know the impact of policy development schedules on teachers' motivation to contribute to policy dialogue. Future research would surely do well to compare the quality of dialogue in a discussion which took place either independently of Ministry deadlines or at least in the early days of policy development.

My next question concerned the population chosen to enter the dialogue. It is about the public quality of the conversation. "Should contributors be invited, or should the doors be thrown open to all comers?" This is a key tension in the research I have conducted and it sits on the borders between that which is considered private communication, and that which is widespread, addressing the public. Privacy was a commonly invoked concept during the discussions about the forum and its purpose, an irony given the project's title. In conversation at the BCTF, the Ministry and in interview, participants drew clear distinctions between communications they perceived to be private and those which were public. A participant who felt confident using computers who also had experience in policy development told me that she felt awkward and anxious contributing to the forum. Nonetheless, she told me that if she had any advice or questions for Ministry personnel, she would not hesitate to send an email. Two other participants on the forum actually corresponded with Ministry personnel during its life. If everyone were invited to a public forum, the professional qualities of the debate would necessarily be altered by the nature of the participant group. However, if the group is select and meets (virtually or physically) behind closed doors, more specific goals might be reached, such as the development of a collaboratively authored document. Such a document would demand a considerable, cooperative effort. Where the members of a group are invited, they can invest time and energy in getting to know one another in a safe space, where they know that nobody is eavesdropping. All participants are named, all are assumed to be

present, even if, on the odd occasion, a committee (for such it would be) member is unable to check the boards one week. But who issues the invitations? In a sense, it is immaterial who comes to the debate since the quality of conversation can be influenced by the conference leadership's decisions. Furthermore, the presence of professionals alone ensures that all contributors bring relevant experience and knowledge to the conversation, allowing it to proceed at a lively and effective pace. Exclusion and privilege were, however, of great concern to PKPF contributors, a concern which has yet to be resolved in the realm of online policy development.

The role of participation is educational and participation in democracy is a skill acquired through experience and opportunity. The more practice one has at this, the more effectively one is able to contribute. Engagement with institutions also shapes and educates us, such that the political systems affect the attitudes and behaviours of those people who live and work within them. The road to change will surely be paved with the participation of individuals who are gradually becoming more and more fluent with the processes of democracy, learning about the authority afforded to the different kinds of texts and their lifecycles within the education system of the province.

I also began to wonder what kind of text the site should generate. Should it be a straightforward dialogue or a policy document? Should a dialogue reach consensus or should we merely hope that a majority would emerge? What is an appropriate number of forums in educational technology?

#### Closing remarks

Barber's words – "Political talk is not talk *about* the world; it is talk that makes and remakes the world" (1984, p. 177) - have stayed with me since I first read them twelve months ago. They lend substance to words which, in conversation, can only hang in the air for a moment. They remind us that the words we choose to describe our social world are as real as the stones on the ground and should be treated with respect because they may soon be the stones in our shoes. Or, as Cherryholmes (1988) observes, "Discourses are material practices, not simply interactions among people at the level of ideas" (p. 91).

So far, the literature has reinforced my impression that we are still at the early stages of measuring the potential of online environments for effecting long-term change on processes of participatory deliberation. Thus, while the experimental PKPF came at a time when

technical facility might have allowed many members of the target community to participate, the social and political context of the forum may have prevented it from being used as widely as its organisers may have hoped.

This research has been an opportunity to explore some possibilities for online debate in the process of educational policy making. It can teach us some initial lessons about how the public in general and educators in particular might be included in these conversations and about the challenges of ensuring that the public engagement occurs at a deep, committed level rather than simply the cursory visit. We have learned about the challenges of reaching the population *at all* and wondered what the role of the discourse might be once it has been created. To what end are people conversing? Who does the dialogue reach and what is it used for?

I have also pondered the appropriate role or roles for conference moderators. Should we moderate? Or should we host, teach, mentor, facilitate or lead? A forum should, it seems be moderated (all of the interview respondents I reached agreed on this), but the role is a delicate, if not uncomfortable, one. And who should take this role? Why? What does the job entail? What have we learned about the meaning of editing and re-posting, of inviting or deleting our participants? Should a peer review process be introduced within the forum setting?

While it may be tempting to focus one's energy on the numbers of participants and declare the site a disappointment, it is vital to bear in mind the testimonies of those who did take part. They describe a situation which was occasionally uncomfortable, professionally risky and personally challenging. Rather than being disappointed by the "few" who did take part, we might be impressed that those who did, persisted in spite of their discomfort.

I have been careful not to argue that the site was a 100% success and that it therefore bears repetition. I might say that it succeeded in less than 100% of our intentions, but I would also add that in matters of the human world, we might consider that less than 100% is still a success. If such an endeavour bears repetition, it may be worth pursuing simply to find out whether or not an increase on that percentage below 100 is possible or even likely. We may find signs and indications that our efforts have been merited or worthwhile, and this alone, aside from any other outcomes, might be understood to validate the enterprise. As Cherryholmes (1988) argues, "Habermas's conditions for critical discourse cannot be

met....But just because [they] cannot be met does not mean that they are not important or useful. If they do nothing else, they point out constraining effects of our institutions and discursive practices” (p. 92). At this stage, we might recall the account of Burbules and Rice (1991), who argue that that “all of the barriers and difficulties cited .... remain, but the wholesale abandonment of the possibility of overcoming them is tantamount to an abandonment of the goal of education itself” (p. 407).

The PKPF represents a very preliminary stage in exploring the potential of online dialogue to contribute to policy-in-the-making, but its value does not lie in its mere existence as a product or artifact. It has been a way to find out how its users have interpreted its significance to them, how they have understood its contribution to the existing educational and political landscape. It has been a barometer for professionals in research, education and policy-making, a way of testing the climate for participatory action and planning for inclement weather in future. It has been an opportunity for examining and describing the human, informational and logistical ways in which online policy dialogue might contribute to the policy climate of the future. These are the conditions, as we might say, for success.

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APPENDIX 1  
SCREEN SHOTS OF THE PKPF

Figure 5. The moderator at work. In the background, Microsoft Word. In front, the Forum and email inbox.

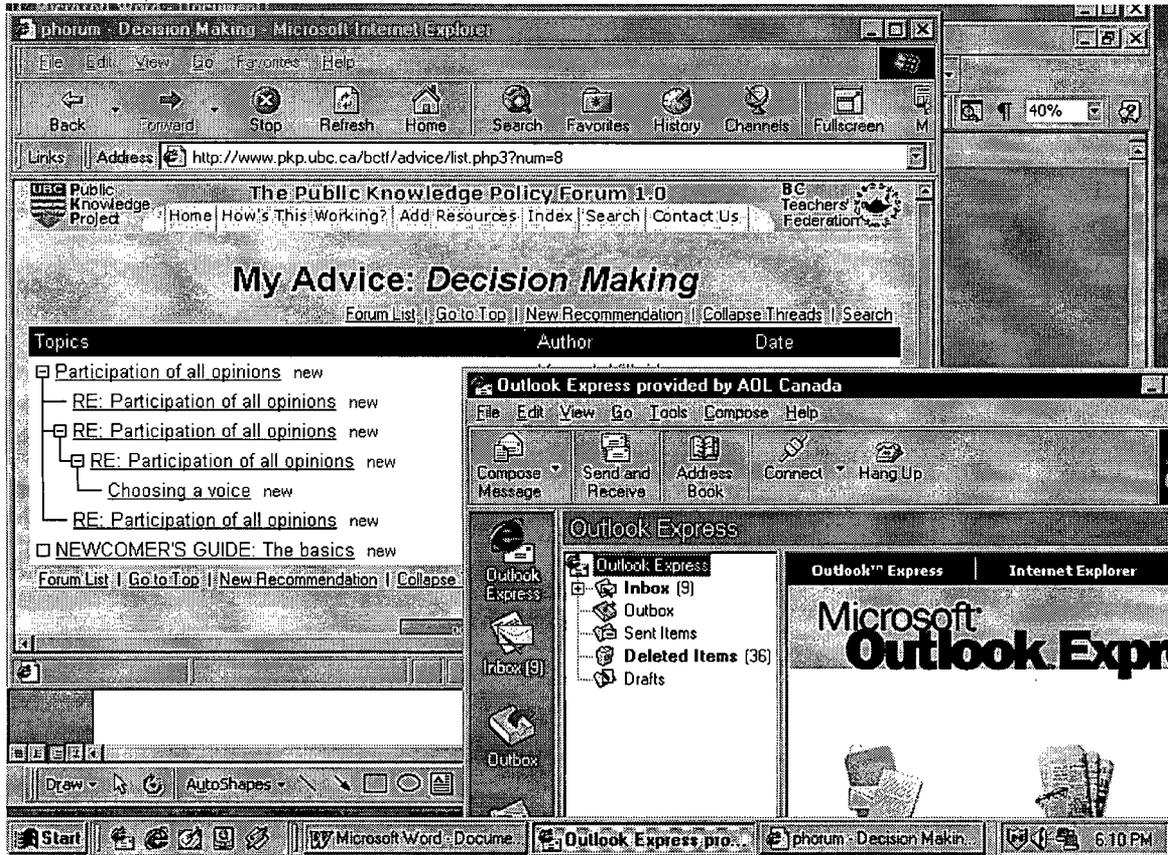
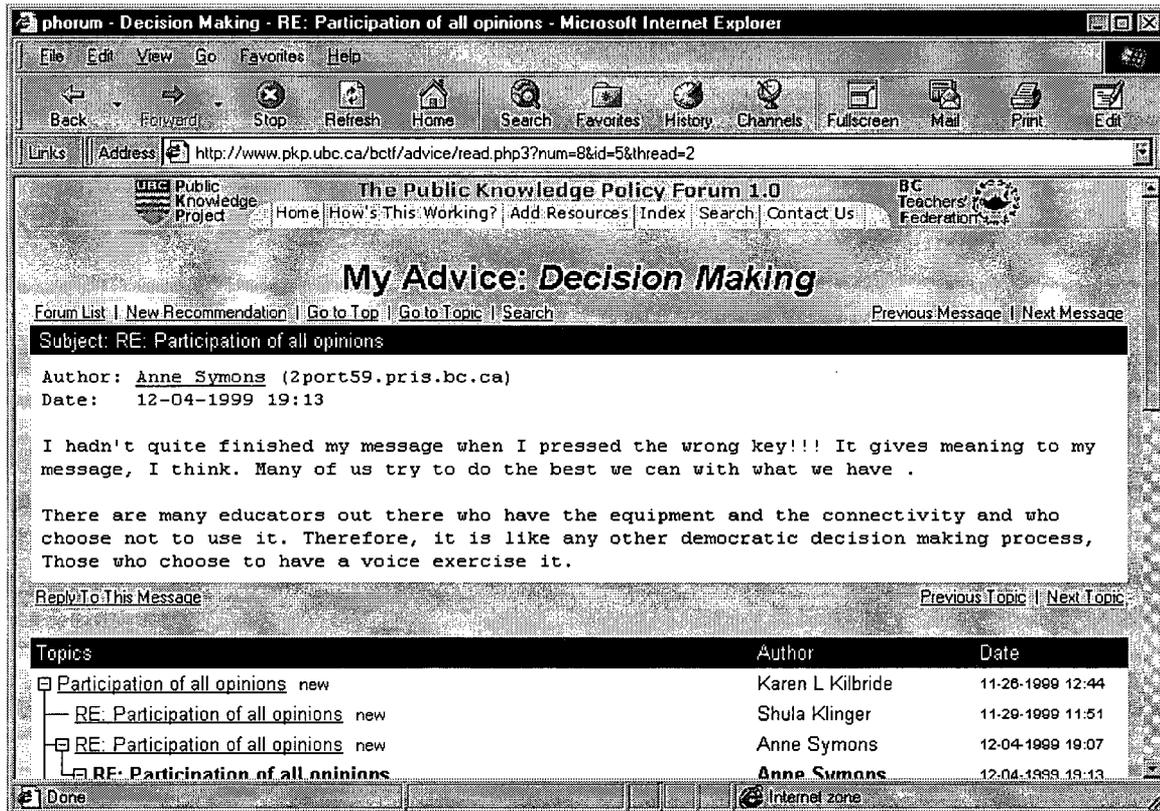


Figure 6. A contributor points to a moment of irony.



Figures 7 & 8. An exchange between contributors to My Advice/Educator Training & Support.

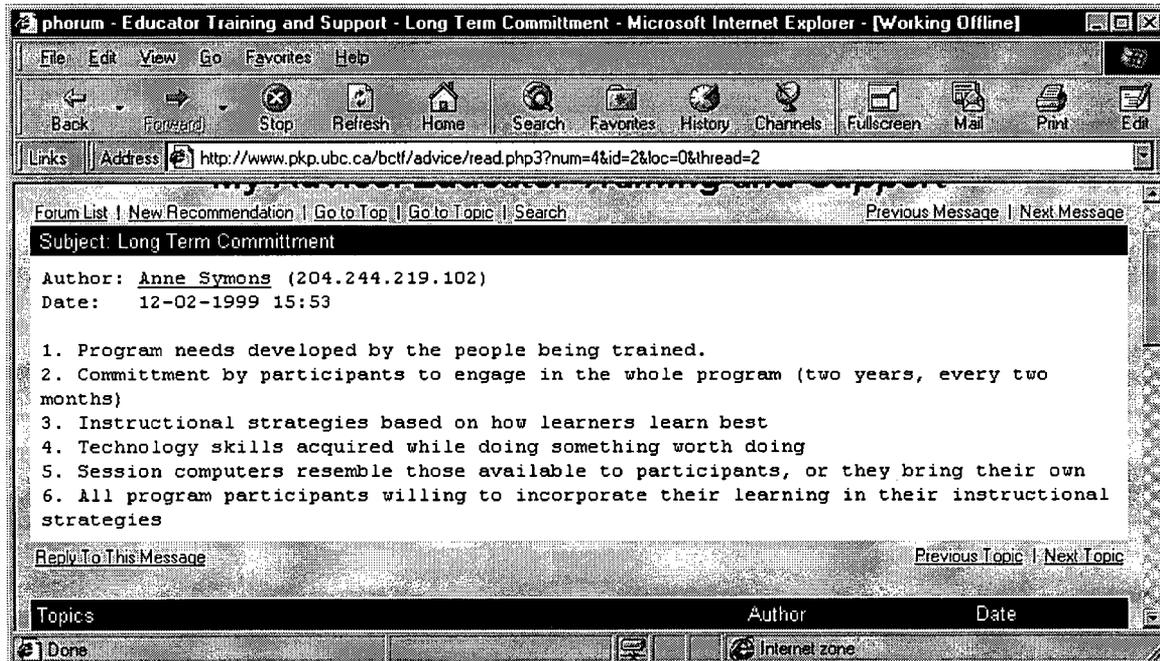
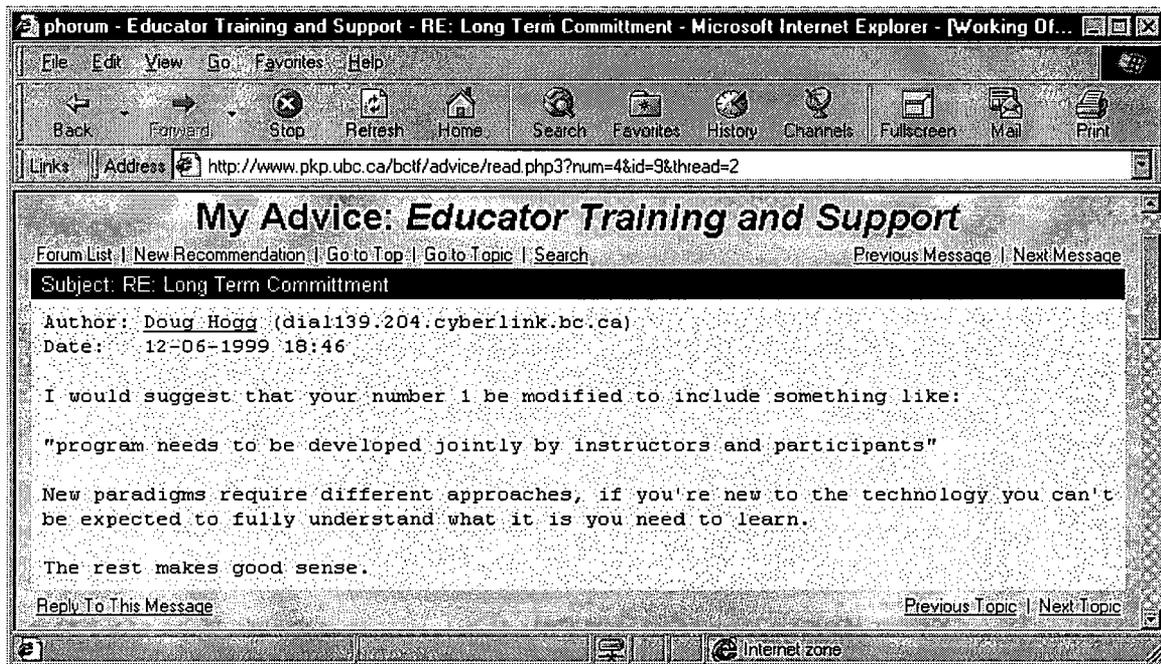


Figure 7. Initiating the discussion with a set of priorities.

Figure 8. Building on the earlier contributor's points.



APPENDIX 2.1  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: TEACHER PARTICIPANT

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**  
**APRIL 2000**  
**Shula Klinger**

*I'd like to start by asking you some background questions...*

Are you a teacher, and if so, what age group/subject do you teach?

Several of our participants are researchers as well as practitioners. Would you describe yourself as a researcher?

What is your current interest in educational technology? You may wish to describe some of your experiences with school technology to date.

On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful are computers to you in your daily work (where 5 infers "essential")?

I'm interested in your use of the Internet... Can you estimate how long you are online each day / week? Do you enjoy this time?

And one general question about your experience with the policy process: Was this the first time you have contributed to a policy in development? If not, I'd like to hear about your experiences at any level - school, district or province.

*Perhaps we could move on to the Public Knowledge Forum now...*

Some of our participants have taken part in forums like this before. Does this apply to you also, and if so, what were they? How would you describe the conversations you had there?

Where did you hear about the PKPF? What made you decide to contribute?

Did you read the terms of participation? Were you aware from the outset that this was a research environment? Did this affect your desire to take part?

I'm interested in your expectations of the site. Do you think this type of forum should contribute to the Ministry's thinking about Policy? Why / Why not?

*Tell me about your experience of the site...*

We'd like to improve the design of the site, if possible... What were your impressions of the design? How easy was it to navigate? Was the information presented clearly? (For example, were the forum headings - derived from "Conditions for Success" appropriate?)

Which was the most valuable aspect of your visits? What was/were the least valuable aspect/s of the site?

How valuable was it to have a moderator present in the "Public Forums" and "My Advice"? Could this aspect be improved?

How much time did you spend reading other people's messages? Did you spend more time composing your own messages?

Did you post anonymously? Or did you provide personal information such as your name, position and location?

Did you get to know the other participants? For example, did you continue your conversations with them later on, by email?

Who were the other participants, in your opinion? Would you consider them a representative sample of the BC population?

I'm interested to hear about the quality of conversation on the site. Do you feel you learned from other participants and that you contributed to their understanding?

How valuable was the "My Advice" section?

Did you consult the Ministry documents, "Conditions for Success" and "Ministry Plan for 2000"? Were these essential parts of the site, in your opinion?

Did you consult the Resource section? Did you have a look at and learn from materials under Research, Practices, Policies, Programs, Reports or Organizations?

*I'm thinking about our project goals and wondering how closely your experience matched our intentions....*

Did you gain access to resources and people you might not otherwise have? Why are these resources or people difficult to access?

Has your participation in the Public Knowledge Policy forum altered your sense of participating in policy development?

---

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions!

Do let me know if you would be interested in seeing the results of this study.

Best wishes

Shula Klinger

APPENDIX 2.2  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: BC MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**  
**MARCH 2000**  
**Shula Klinger**

*Opening questions*

Perhaps we could begin by talking about your present position. What is your interest in educational technology?

How would you describe your current use of the web? Have you used the web for anything like the Public Knowledge Policy Forum before?

Have you ever participated in an online forum before?

If so, could you tell me about these experiences (listervs, bulletin boards, chatrooms, etc). How would you describe the conversations you've had here?

*About the Public Knowledge Policy Forum*

Can you give me your impression of what the site was for? Do you feel that this sort of forum should contribute to the Ministry's thinking about Policy?

Did you read the terms of participation? Were you aware from the outset that this was a research environment? Did this affect your desire to take part?

What were your impressions of the site in general? How easy was it to navigate, how clearly was the information presented?

What did you think of the forum headings (derived from "Conditions for Success")? Were they appropriate to the task?

How valuable was it to have a moderator present in the "Public Forums" and "My Advice"? Could this aspect be improved?

*Your experience on the site*

How much time did you spend reading other people's messages? In contrast, how much time did you spend composing your own messages?

Tell me about the quality of conversation on the site. Do you feel you learned from other participants and that you contributed, in turn, to their understanding?

Did you get to know the other participants? Did you further your contact with any other visitors off the site?

Which was the most valuable aspect of your visits? What was/were the least valuable aspect/s of the site?

How much time did you spend consulting the Ministry documents, "Conditions for Success" and "Ministry Plan for 2000"?

How much time did you spend consulting the Resource section? Did you have a look at and learn from materials under Research, Practices, Policies, Programs, Reports or Organizations?

***Project goals***

Did you gain access to resources and people you might not otherwise have? Why are these resources or people difficult to access?

Has your participation in the Public Knowledge Policy forum altered your sense of participating in policy development? Is the Internet a promising way to increase deliberation and dialogue as part of a participatory democracy?

Was the PKPF discussed in meetings at the Ministry, as far you know? At what level, and which sections of it in particular (resources, forums, advice etc)? Do you have an idea of how it was received.. did the feedback reach you?

***And finally....***

How might we use the web more effectively, if we are to help educators and the public participate in the improvement of education in this province?

Do you have any other comments you'd like to add?

---

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions!

If you would like receive a summary of the analysis, do feel free to ask.

APPENDIX 3  
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with the Ministry officer responsible for summarising public consultation materials.  
Note: This interview was conducted through two rounds of questioning, sent by email.

**1. When we last spoke, you described a recent experience of policy consultation with the public.... could you begin by telling me a little about this? How many contributions did you receive, and what were they like?**

The project sought BC public input to identify: 1) things that were working well with a specific policy program, 2) issues that needed to be addressed, and 3) constructive suggestions for solutions. We received about 400 submissions, ranging in size from hand-written notes on part of one page right up to published documents hundreds of pages long and researched by large organizations.

**2. What can you tell me about the process of selecting and using this material for the purposes of policy development? In what measures would this be a curriculum matter, a policy concern or an editorial task? (Or anything else I have missed).**

In my role, the issues weren't really related to curriculum or editing, but mainly research methodology (and logistics).

**Representativeness**

For this project, I was asked to assist with analysis of the material received. I didn't arrange for how the material was solicited, or for who was invited to respond. One challenge with web-based research or surveys is that it is harder to establish a proper sample frame, or to ensure statistically representative simple random sampling. I expressed concerns about these issues, and emphasized that while we would be able to gather a lot of richly textured detail on the issues, we would not be able to build any profiles or measures of levels of support for any specific topics.

**Volume of material**

In the case of this project, any member of the BC public (including organizations) submitted input on three topic areas. We wanted to consider each and every submission fairly, but logistically it is very difficult (labour and time intensive) to go through large volumes of unstructured text documents.

This is probably why a lot of policy input is based on questionnaires that channel responses into pre-set categories of anticipated responses. An advantage with these questionnaires can be that input is abstracted or summarized quickly into categories so that a general overview or map of public position on issues can be determined. A disadvantage is that provision of crude response categories can entirely miss unanticipated responses, lose nuances that give real understanding or even suggest responses that participants might not have made unprompted.

Unstructured responses give a richness of texture that is entirely missing from most surveys. Unstructured responses can also flesh out a wider range of responses than might have been anticipated. Unfortunately, for these responses to inform the policy process,

people like me have to summarize what might represent about 2,800 pages of submissions into a one-page executive summary and a 5 to 10 page report. On the information superhighway, fixed-response surveys are like public transit: lots of content in few vehicles. Unfortunately, the privately owned vehicles are gridlocked.

### **"Fairness" of representation**

For this last issue, I'm not quite sure what to call it, but this title captures some of the feeling. As I mentioned earlier, the public was asked to submit responses to three questions. In some cases, these responses were short notes that addressed the three questions. In some cases, responses were already-existing theses or publications which pertained to the three questions, but were not really responses to the questions. The problem with fairness of representation here sort of stems from the problem with volume of material.

In order to handle the volume, the texts have to be coded (qualitative research methods) and themes have to be generalized or abstracted from specific text in order to summarize the text into themes (note: to refer to your above "matters, concerns, and tasks", the themes that we look for are influenced by the policy issues we are trying to address). The patterns of themes that develop are affected to some degree by frequency of occurrence. Unfortunately, a theme that might occur once in a short note can occur (or be countered) hundreds of times in a thesis. In effect, the more resources that you or your organization have to produce a response, the more that input can influence the themes or patterns that develop. As with other media, a well-organized lobby can be heard well above and beyond individuals.

In the case of this project, I decided that publications would be redirected to those doing the literature review, and that only responses to the three questions would be analysed qualitatively. This reduced the issue of representation somewhat, but didn't entirely remove it.

Also, families of responses were developed, so that we were able to filter and look at the patterns of responses by specific types of respondents (e.g. individuals or organizations), so that organizations would not be overwhelming patterns of response of individuals. This helped us to look for specific concerns or biases of specific groups.

**3. When I started work with the Public Knowledge Policy Forum, I was aware of the many arguments favouring the internet as a space for public deliberation and education in general. Assuming that those who wished to speak had access to networked computers, the technology would permit instance access to relevant information and to other contributors with whom one might debate issues, negotiate solutions and reach agreement (or disagreement).**

**What are your impressions of the medium so far? What kind of promise could it hold.... or... if you anticipate any challenges, what might these be?**

I think that the medium is still much like the telephone in the middle of the last century, but different. I think that there are gross differences in access in terms of hardware and software, and in terms of awareness and techno-literacy. These differences can potentially affect peoples' ability to be involved in the process, which is a big concern for me. I wouldn't be surprised if the profile of respondents was not very representative of the general or target population. For our project, we encouraged e-mail submissions, but accepted all

formats of response including land mail. This also brings in the issue of standardizing text for analysis. Hand-written letters had to be transcribed into text files for analysis with the e-mail submissions.

Furthermore, things like CATI don't exist (yet) for computers. E-mail addresses are much less standardized than the numeric sequences used for phones, so it is hard for researchers to contact a target audience. The computer doesn't ring and get answered like the phone used to. Phone calls don't carry viruses and get deleted if they are from strangers, as can unsolicited e-mails (and now we can screen calls...). These points come to mind without much reflection, so I could be convinced otherwise with evidence, but I think that we need to be careful before concluding that the internet is going to overcome problems of public access to political processes. I think that like other media, accessibility will be somewhat shaped by socio-economic factors and by the relative strength of individuals and user groups. If we anticipate this, we might be able to ensure that more voices are still heard.

A strength of the medium is that venues for input can probably be operated at lower cost, so that more frequent measures can be taken of public positions on issues. Turnaround time for information might be reduced. Another strength is that this medium can support continued dialogues, and evolving positions and perspectives. It goes beyond a single fixed response, and can operate more like a panel or longitudinal study.