

## Challenges of Using Chat Room Technology for Learning and Networking in Rural Canada

What role do Internet-based modes of communication play in the changing lives of rural Canadians? What types of communication are most frequently being used by rural Canadians? What differences are there between leading and lagging communities in using Internet-based communications?

Internet-based communications are increasingly being used by rural Canadians as an inexpensive and efficient form of communication. The Internet allows Canadians in remote areas to easily remain in contact with one another and to share information. Communication technology facilitates learning through constant communication with other communities or via distance education. Taking advantage of new technologies allows communities to develop their learning networks and contacts.

The New Rural Economy (NRE) project tested some of these assumptions in a Technology Mediated Learning Project. The

project was designed to link rural community leaders through a facilitated chat room discussion, for the purpose of learning and networking with one another. Potential participants from each participating community were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in a "chat". Nine different groups were identified for participation, including:



tourism representatives, chief administrative officers, newspaper editors and staff, volunteer group representatives, and other community leaders. The information for the research findings below came from on-line surveys completed by the participants and from the "chat" transcripts themselves.

Prior to the project, the participants identified telephone conferencing

as the most common form of communication technology they had used (65%). Less than half (48%) indicated they had experience with a chat room, and roughly a quarter (27%) had previously used discussion boards.

After their first participation in a facilitated chat room discussion, participants reported that the chat room technology was useful (mean score of 3.3 out of 5). However, more participants from lagging communities and from communities with high capability felt that the chat room technology was useful.

When asked if they felt that chat room technology would be useful for them in their work place or with their organization, most respondents were unable to give a definitive answer. Overall, 65% said "maybe", and only a quarter (27%) said "yes". Participants from low capability communities were most confident about the potential usefulness of chat room technology in their workplace or organization, with half of

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the respondents saying they were interested in continuing to use this technology.

Despite there being some reservations about the usefulness of the chat room technology, the participants overwhelmingly stated they would be willing to participate in another session (89%). However, a number of potential barriers to initial and further participation and use were discovered: conflict with other commitments or prior engagements; lack of interest; scheduling conflicts; and lack of "impact" on their learning and networking.

The necessary commitment to participate on a regular basis and to build an on-line learning community with others may have been stronger if participants had to function in a face to face setting at the outset. A true on-line community had yet to be established

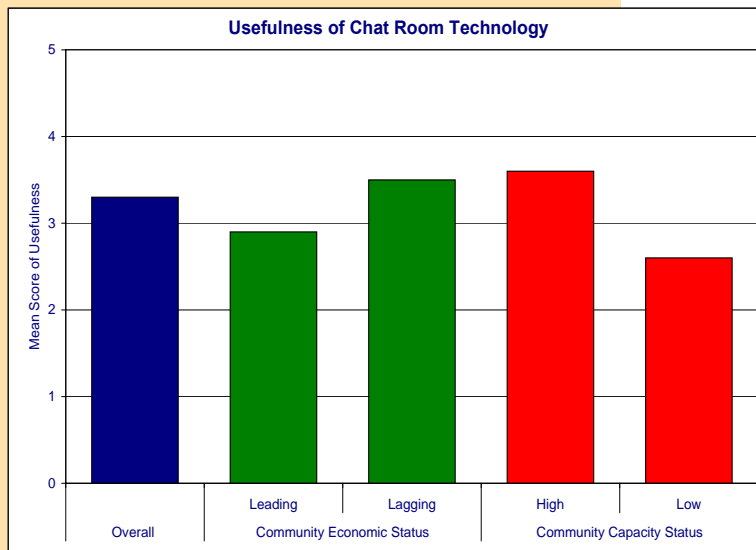
or built, making it easier for participants to forgo their on-line commitment.

In order for chat room technology to take root and for an on-line community to develop, there needs to be a consistent, steady, participation in order to maintain discussion and build a network. The individual chat topics must progress in a series

as a result of initial participation.

Programs could be developed in rural Canada to build awareness about the power and potential of Internet-based technologies and communications for learning and networking. High speed Internet is becoming more available through Broadband

deployment and other measures, creating the necessary backbone for the technology to be used productively for lifelong learning. This has the potential to allow rural Canadians to remain in touch despite the vast distances separating them and provide an accessible and cost-effective forum for information exchange.



of related topics in order to build continuity and a sense of learning and progression. While the findings suggest that chat rooms and other Internet-based communications have the ability to build 'weak ties' among users in an informal network, there is little evidence that this has happened

cost-effective forum for information exchange.

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