Online Moderator Guidelines and Community-Building Tips

By Gail Ann Williams, Director of Conferencing, The WELL

What's So Special About Online Conversation?

It's a very human activity, that's for sure. The words can have an incandescent feeling, brighter and larger than life. The interactions can have heightened emotional or creative charges, despite the fact that we may never see one another face to face. Taking part in a conversation in text, distributed to its participants by means of networked computers, is a relatively new group experience. It's just familiar enough to feel like there's nothing to it, and just foreign enough to feel like the birthplace of a new kind of human community.

Like actors on a bare stage, members of a discussion create the illusion of a place, a scene you can watch or join, by their words and perhaps simple graphical gestures. As the interactions become more complex, and the participants become known to one another, several roles become available for the sustainers of the group conversation. Often these roles are filled intuitively; small understandings are smoothed out, new ideas introduced, visitors welcomed and progress summarized and restated simply because it feels right. These tasks may be swapped effortlessly. Perhaps this instinctive collaboration will go forward with relatively few missed cues, and never be formalized. However, in most online environments, a conversation convener becomes the initial facilitator, moderator, wizard or referee of the conversation. On my home site, we call these people Hosts, and we honor them when they can make a wonderful scene without calling much attention to their special powers.

What is Hosting at The WELL?

The WELL, the conferencing service strongly associated with the emergence of full-blown online community, is widely regarded as one of the world's most influential and cherished virtual gathering places. WELL users log in regularly, in some cases several times a day, in order to discuss, debate, banter, inform... and most importantly to connect to friends they've made on the service. Based in Sausalito, California, The WELL was launched in 1985 by the iconoclastic, opinionated founders of The Whole Earth Review. Rather than starting with a purpose, it started with a loose network of people with some shared values. The purpose eventually became to connect with one another.

People on The WELL interact in asynchronous conversation areas called conferences, communicating at each individual's convenience. Each conference is tended by one or more users. These moderators with some special system privileges were originally called "Fair Witnesses" at the WELL, but the community and staff came to adopt the more welcoming term "Host."

While in many ways conferencing software is optimum for community building, group processes in WELL conferences pose the same range of online community dilemmas which challenge convenors of bulletin boards, news groups, MUDs or mailing lists involving ongoing participants. Beyond the distinctive culture of the WELL community, many of the lessons learned in this colorful petri dish of virtual group dynamics and living, breathing relationships may be applied to any online conversational setting, from the most corporate to the most anarchic.

The original WELL-specific version of this manual is one of the resources The WELL has developed in conjunction with conference hosts to advance the art of online community building, and let better conversations bloom. The document you are reading was adapted from that manual, and from some of my postings and speaker's notes about moderator's stategies.

What Makes a Sustainable Scene?

What makes a good subject matter, purpose or theme for a really great ongoing virtual gathering place? Viable conferences, meeting places or worlds come from that mysterious realm of creativity which is generally recognized after the fact, but completely unheralded before it happens. Further, the success of a virtual gathering place can depend as much upon the energy, creativity and approach of its host or hosts as it does upon the proposed subject matter or theme. In a virtual environment, the founders and original participants are the initial destination. A good party depends a significant amount on who's there when each guest arrives, so you will want to steadily build the sensation of having interesting people "already there" from the moment you open, usually starting with your own scintellating participation as the reason to visit.

Still, if you have an idea for a new gathering place, there are a few questions you might ask yourself to help you decide on the feasibility of your idea, purpose or theme:

1. Is it a theme or subject matter of which you are personally likely to tire? Nothing worse than building a castle and getting tired of the entire premise of royalty, or starting a Solitaire Players Support Group and realizing you are wearing thin on both fascination

and compassion within a few weeks. If you have a limited interest in your own idea, challenge yourself to find a better one, or set up your gathering with a predetermined closing date (or perhaps a hand-off date) so it won't just wither away.

2. Is the theme broad enough to support a multitude of interactions and conversations? A conference which relies too heavily on a single issue or topic of discussion can get tiring quickly, like a one-issue candidate or a one-joke movie.

3. Do you think there would be enough interest in, and knowledge of, the subject area to promote lively participation? Do you have enough lawyers around to discuss Immigration Law, or would Law in general be pushing it? This applies to fanciful topics, too. Developing traffic - and participants with knowlege and energy - is the major challenge of creating a new virtual gathering place.

Some ideas for discussions or role playing themes don't click, others become successful online communities, giving their members a chance to build rich connections with one another. Experimentation is the best approach.

So once you have your idea, you're ready to set up your conference, world or list. But first, take a moment to define your own role as founding host. If you are not planning to convene the new gathering place personally, you will need to look for someone who can take on that role.

What Exactly Does a Host Do?

Hosting generally will provide you with some extra privileges, conveyed by the software itself. You may be able to create or modify items your guests cannot change, or even to exclude or censor your visitors. Remember that the rules written into the software are part of the law of your place. That's why they call it code: technical details do indeed have social implications. So if you get a chance to select, evaluate the restrictions and powers of the software in terms of your specific vision.

While you will probably be taking care of some of the technical aspects of your gathering place, the most important aspects of hosting have to do with stimulating participation and dealing with people.

What is your primary goal as a host? No matter what the medium or the theme, a good host wants his or her gathering place to be worth a return visit and committed interaction.

Whether that can best be achieved by active participation in the conversation or by simply staying out of the way is a decision only the host can make. In most cases, shifting between active participation, and backing off to let the guests run with a conversation or provide support to one another, is the best ongoing strategy. It's not **about** you, the whole point is to find a way to help the participants share the spotlight.

WELL hosts vary greatly in their approaches. Some hosts do considerable research and present thought-provoking materials on a regular basis for participants to discuss. (Keeping good reference books handy is a simple technique for finding material, and current events can help as well.) Other hosts let the conference milieu generate discussion material for itself. Some of the most successful low-key hosts keep lists of topic ideas in case their conference goes for a week or so with no new subject matter or ideas. Recycling can be helpful over the long haul. Many topics are timeless, and can be discussed again and again by newcomers who'd like to have a chance to describe their experiences. Others are seasonal, and come back around for you to reinvent every year. The nature of a conference will determine the duties of its host. Some conferences are fairly self-sustaining while others need regular infusions of hostly enthusiasm, expertise or control.

Bear in mind that it's not merely interest in a particular subject or the opportunity to interact that draws people to a conference, but the quality of that interaction, the scope and setting of it, what kinds of topics are available, how they are introduced, and the tone which is set for the conference by its host.

The final broad category concerned with hosting is dealing with people, from the shy to the contentious. Over the years, a number of general rules of thumb have been noted which hosts may wish to consider when dealing with the marvelous, and sometimes troublesome, human species online. We'll take a look at some of them now.

Welcoming New Participants

Many hosts like to help people feel more at home in their conferences by welcoming them after their first arrival, either in email, a private real- time "send" or "whisper" or in a discussion thread or topic area set aside just for people to introduce themselves. On the other hand, some hosts feel that a welcome in email is too intrusive unless the visitor has actually posted something. Some software may not support the option of identifying these timid "lurkers" before they wade into the fray. And a preannounced Introductions thread is not appropriate for every gathering place.

One thing a host can be fairly sure of, however, is that nobody likes to go into a new place for the first time, compose a response, then have it sit there without ever being acknowledged.

At the very least, as host, you will want to keep an eye out for responses by folks who have never responded in your conference before, and acknowledge their participation. Even a simple "Hello! I'd love to hear more about your experiences with..." or "Nice to see you here!" can mean the difference between someone feeling snubbed, and feeling like a welcomed participant in the conference. If a newcomer posts, "Hi, I'm a published expert on Foo Arrangement," he or she may be waiting to be invited to open a new topic about Arranging Foo, or about how to publish a book, feeling it is presumptuous to barge in. New users are frequently shy, or polite, and may be waiting for suggestions and cues on how to best participate in your conference.

Over time, you will begin to build a group of regulars who have a rapport with one another. If you can inspire this group to take on some of the hostly spirit, and greet newcomers, recap and summarize what's gone before, and start new topics or suggest new events, you'll have the seeds of a self-sustaining and durable gathering place.

Creating Special Rules

Some game or conference designs proceed upon special rules of one sort or another as part of their initial concept. If you have such rules in mind for your gathering place, think them through very carefully. Then think them through again!

Whatever rule you make, someone will eventually question it -- even if it is "no rules at all". The most casual glance at human history shows that humans love making, and arguing over, rules. Such argumentation can quickly get to the point where the main subject matter of a conference or topic is completely obscured in favor of heated arguments over rules, and it can be very destructive to the spirit of a conference. If the rules of a gathering are in dispute, the best places to discuss them are in email, in a special place for Hosts on your system, or in a special conversation area devoted to discussing your conference's guidelines.

There are, however, ways to avoid some of the more common rule-pitfalls. If you feel your place needs a special rule, take care to consider its fairness before implementing it and try to imagine how it might be circumvented. Words are a malleable medium, and they can be made to say things by inference, innuendo, and ambiguity which are very hard to pinpoint. Suppose you set up a conference in which you wanted everyone to be nice to each other, and you made a rule saying just that. You might have a difficult time enforcing it because language can be made to imply something unkind even while saying something ostensibly respectful. Excessive niceness, through hyperbole, can even convey an insult. Rather than creating a rule, you may want to depend on the direct yet respectful approach, calmly asking people to clarify whether an insult was actually meant, and always making it easy to save face. This is often a useful way to communicate with guests who are testing the rules, or making you wish you'd made some.

By the same token, knock-down-drag-out arguments, especially those involving personal insults, are non-productive and can easily get to the point of dominating the interaction in discussions which might otherwise be, though controversial, potentially fruitful. Hosts can do a lot to keep the tone in their gathering places positive by making general ground rules which encourage courteous argumentation, and with reminders, when necessary, to "attack the idea, not the person" and to "take personal disputes to email, please."

If a rule is inherent in, or indispensable to, the basic design or operation of your forum, be consistent in enforcing it. Avoid, like the plague, situations in which a rule applies to one person or group, and not to another. If your conference has a hard and fast rule, apply it always, not just when you feel like it. And most of all, abide by the rule yourself.

Handling Problems

If someone violates your rules or guidelines, there are several options at your disposal. It's important to give a sense of due process by starting with the lightest sanction you feel comfortable with, and if necessary, to escalate methodically. Here are some approaches, as used on The WELL in a conferencing environment, in increasing order of severity. Note that this process is not required in a "moderated" environment where hosts must affirmatively approve all material before it is posted.

1. Post a two paragraph response after the comment in question indicating that you would prefer folks to avoid that type of posting, then use the second short paragraph to lead the topic gently back in the right direction with some substantive comment on the subject matter.

2. Notify the person privately via email and explain how the response is not within the conference guidelines, and request that further responses of that nature not be entered.

3. Use hostly software powers to temporarily "hide" the response in question, and send email informing the poster that it has been hidden and why it was hidden. Hidden responses on The WELL can be unhidden by the host or by the poster, and may be read by others, but only by explicitly looking to see them. You may have equivalent options in other software environments.

4. Permanently remove the response in question. This is a serious matter. If the poster has not kept a copy, you may be destroying his or her only copy of the words in question. Mailing the words back, with your reason why they were removed, can be a firm but

respectful solution to this dilemma. Even if the poster understands your action, you may be the subject of an ensuing debate on censorship and freedom of expression. On the other hand, clearly hurtful material, such as stolen passwords or credit card numbers, for example, may be scribbled without any concern about causing an uproar. (The WELL's member agreement clearly states that such blatantly illegal uses are not appropriate. Your system might designate other material which is forbidden. It's good to find out up front.)

5. If a user is a chronic problem and you cannot reach an understanding in email, you may be able to exercise the power to ban the user from posting in your conference, or from visiting altogether. Banning, or being locked out, is a last resort, and it should be very clear to the user that he or she is behaving unacceptably and has been formally informed of the terms of continued participation before a banning. Since the guest may feel censored and stifled, the host should be certain that the banning is not undertaken simply to silence dissent with popular views. However, not every argument belongs in every venue, and you may ask that certain subject matter or behavior is taken to a more appropriate area.

Whatever steps you are able to take on your system, remember to give clear warnings, to allow for honest mistakes, and to escalate appropriately.

Now that you are pondering all the horrible things you can do to the troublesome individual who would disrupt your gathering place, it's worth mentioning that such instances are rare.

Remember, the people in your conference are guests, and a variety of personalities and opinions enriches the scene you are creating. Treat them with courtesy, make them feel welcome, and by and large they will respond in kind.

How Much Time Does it Take?

Some gathering places, by nature, need nearly constant supervision or stimulation, while others can sail along for days at a time without need of any hostly attention. Conferences which lend themselves to heated argumentation take much more time to host than relatively placid, happy hang-outs. In addition, your style as host has a big effect on the time needed.

Software is an issue as well. One great advantage of conferencing over chat environments is that you neither need to keep appointments nor to be online all the time to be sure your participants are feeling "heard." Real-time environments such as MUDs and chats can be a bottomless pit of opportunity.

If you feel that you are overcommitted online, one good strategy is to find a co-host to share your duties. If you work out what you can each do independently and just when you need to touch base with one another, a good team can be a genuine collaborative pleasure.

Moderating Tips

The first set of tips are excerpted from the Kerr Report, a report on Moderating Online Conferences produced by Elaine B. Kerr of the Computerized Conferencing and Communications Center at New Jersey Institute of Technology in February 1984, a year before the WELL was launched, and way before the commercialization of the Internet. While what we do is fairly new, there is comfort in learning from the pioneers among us, and building on the shared knowledge of hosting.

> Begin with a minimal amount of structure and allow the group process to evolve over time. Sanctioning people for entering items in the wrong conference or for introducing topics that do not conform to the structure does not help them become comfortable communicating in this medium.
>
> Encourage the members to talk to each other rather than just to you as the leader, and not to lecture to a vague audience. React to the comments of others and encourage them to do the same.
>
> Use private messages (email, whispers, sends, etc.) as reminders, perhaps pointing to specific items about which you would like feedback, and for positive reinforcement, especially of early entries. Messages should be a regular supplement to the more public comments.
>
> Reinforce participation by thank you notes, to both individuals and the group. Compliment and praise.

Over the years, WELL hosts and staff members have come up with many additional nuggets of insight, such as these:

> The currency is human attention. Work with it. Discourage abuse of it. - John Coate
>
> Don’t be too easily hurt or offended. Take a deep breath. Count to ten. Log off and make a cup of tea, or a POT of tea. Don’t answer until an hour from now, or tomorrow. - Tina Loney

Community is a complex network of human relationships over time. - Cliff Figallo

Hosting is heart work. It is not virtual. Like anything having to do with the heart, it's earthbound. It is messy. It is mixed. And it is incredibly rewarding. - Evelyn Pine

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Further Resources

The WELL Conferencing Team Pages and Host Manuals

Gail Ann Williams on Community Building, Online Innkeeping, and more