

Educational Multimedia Taskforce



SCHEMA

Community Portraits

Interim Report

Elizabeth Timms

**More information about the Schema project can be found under
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Executive Summary

This report refers to the initial development and trial run of the *Community Portraits* module within SCHEMA. The period covered is Autumn 1998 to Summer 1999. The report is prepared by the module tutor, Liz Timms, whose involvement derived from experience of collaborative learning about communities in face-to-face situations and an awareness of the potential of information and communications technology for development in her field. It is important to note that she brought interest, but little expertise, in the technology on which the module would be based.

The report contains in the appendices an example portrait produced by one of the groups and the instructions on the use of the TELSIpro environment issued to all the students taking the course. The booklet was provided as part of an introductory pack.

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1. Introduction

The rationale for the *Community Portraits* module has been detailed in a recent article (Timms, 1999, pp 11-17) on which this report has drawn. It is based on the three main aspects of the module which are:

The community as a context for welfare practice

Collaboration as a method for working and learning and

The Internet as an enabler of collaboration/collaborative learning

The community as a context for welfare practice

It is argued that since the bulk of practical and personal support and help for people takes the form of mutual help between relatives, friends and neighbours, i.e. community networks, professional services would be more effective if they were based on thorough understanding of the community context of service delivery. At the same time it is recognised that the emphasis of welfare practice currently attends to the needs of individuals and families and responds to those needs in terms of professional understanding applied within agency policy. The outcome is predictably parallel welfare systems—informal caring and formal services—which may at best incur waste by duplication and at worst pathologise the recipients of services and deskill those who care for others as part of their daily social life. Referring to indications of the contribution that local communities can and do offer to individual welfare, as well as the power they have to undermine unwelcome professional intervention, it was concluded that “The implication is that social workers [and other welfare practitioners] ignore the dynamics of the community at their peril” (Timms, 1999, p. 12)

The prime thrust of *Community Portraits* is to encourage participants to explore the communities in which they practice with a view to developing an appreciative understanding of the people, their relationships, their norms and their perspectives on social life and the world about them. The purpose is to enable the welfare practitioner better to dovetail welfare services with existing helping exchanges in the community and to offer support to that community provision in ways that are recognisable by, and acceptable to, the community.

Collaboration as a method for working and learning

The second strand of the rationale for *Community Portraits* incorporates collaboration as a method for working and learning. At the heart of SCHEMA is a research question exploring collaborative learning, but this question is extended in *Community Portraits* to encompass collaborative working. Collaborative learning, which Hartley (1999) seems to indicate is at an early stage of development, is potentially much more effective than individual learning, providing, as it does, opportunity to benefit from the questions, ideas, challenges and solutions of others rather than being restricted to the limitations of one's own perspectives. Collaboration has long been a part of social work education where there has been an

emphasis on working in groups and learning from one another including, rather than relying on, the tutor. The Enquiry-Action-Learning method set out by Burgess (1992) formalises and structures the substantial demands on students to contribute to, as well as to learn from, their peers.

The importance of effective collaboration in welfare practice has been re-iterated over the past thirty years, regrettably most often following enquiries into disasters in the welfare system. Recently, however, with the development of welfare policies, such as care in the community, which depend crucially on good collaborative practice across agency and professional boundaries, the call has been more positive. Structures and procedures, such as case conferences and practice guidelines, have been established to support collaboration but these do not necessarily recognise the core ingredients of effective collaboration.

“ Essentially professional collaboration is an interpersonal process involving relationships with colleagues within and between professions and/or agencies. It is about people working purposefully with people, across boundaries of various kinds and regardless of personal congruity. It is not easy” (Timms, 1999 p 12)

Collaboration, whether for learning or for working, may not frequently be a spontaneous choice. It risks exposure of one's own weaknesses and presents one with the tiresome demands of working with others whom one might prefer to avoid. It requires the development of relationships which would not otherwise be chosen, in which the purpose of the collaboration may be all that drives the relationship building.

In many collaborative *learning* situations it may be possible for the unwilling individual to conform minimally to the demand for collaboration in order to meet the requirements for individual assessment. For collaborative *working*, on the other hand, the end measurement is the quality of the outcome of the task on which the group is collaborating and this outcome will be affected for good or ill by the quantity and quality of the contributions of all participants to the collaborative process. That it often has vital significance for the lives and welfare of others adds even greater significance. Insofar as any student now may be involved in collaborative practice in the future, the importance of testing and strengthening capacity for collaboration cannot be overestimated.

At the core of *Community Portraits* is a task to be completed collaboratively, within which participants will not only develop their learning about the communities but will also increase their awareness of themselves in a collaborative process and some of their strengths and difficulties in collaborative working.

The Internet as an enabler of collaboration/collaborative learning

The final strand of the rationale for *Community Portraits* is based on recognition of the potential that computer mediated communication via the Internet may have for collaborative practice and collaborative learning in the field of health and welfare.

The change of language used to describe education for adults from “adult education” in the 1930's through “continuing education” to the current “lifelong learning” is significant:

“The change of language appropriately reflects a genuine shift from basic learning to read, write and count, to a sense of excitement about learning and its potential not only for life management and job-seeking but also for personal development.” (Timms, 1999, p 13)

The recent confluence of lifelong learning, the development of the World Wide Web and the rapid increase in personal ownership of computers has created exciting opportunities for educational development and involvement. The realisation of this potential, however, depends on the political will to ensure access for all. Though much use of information and communication technology (ICT) has been directed at overcoming the barrier of distance, there are many other susceptible barriers:

“ difficulties with mobility, restrictions on timing, social exclusion, shame or fear in interpersonal encounters, difficulties with unbalanced status or power in relationships. The flexibility and anonymity of the Internet can encourage and support access for everyone to information, learning, networking and socialising on a phenomenal scale where quantity and selection can be controlled entirely by the participant. There is huge potential for empowerment of people here. People can learn what they want, when they want, where they want: the locus of control shifts from the teacher to the learner.” (Timms, 1999, p.13)

The *Community Portraits* focus on collaboration for both practice and learning requires attention to the processes that help and hinder successful outcomes and the impact that the technology has on those processes. This module, and others within the SCHEMA framework, will hopefully yield evidence of the feasibility, effectiveness and best practice in developing collaborative learning and practice on-line.

2. The Module

History

Community Portraits was developed from a module delivered in on-campus social work education in which students, working in small groups, were required to explore and report on communities. The planners of this face-to-face module made explicit their aim:

“to promote a pattern of social work practice and social work service that applies law and procedures as required, and theory as informative, within an active appreciation of the context of people's everyday lives and patterns of culture.” (Timms & Macmillan, 1997, p.2)

The collaborative process of this social work module lent itself well to SCHEMA's remit to develop opportunities for continuing professional development for health and welfare professionals using collaborative learning. At the same time SCHEMA's additional remit to test the effectiveness of the Internet as a platform for collaborative learning offered a vastly extended arena for dissemination of a commitment to embedding welfare practice securely in the context of the community. There was a good match of technological promise with educational objectives.

Delivery

Community Portraits is presented entirely via the Internet making use of a learning environment developed at the University of Oulu (TELSIpro). The module requires participants to work collaboratively in small groups to produce comparative 'portraits' of the communities in which they work. Groups of three participants, each from a different country, work together to produce a comparative portrait of their three communities. Participants are expected to use their cultural and individual differences of perspective to sharpen each other's awareness of their own work community. This collaborative process is also expected to enhance the participants' awareness of their own, as well as each other's, perceptual frameworks and should encourage them to recognise the advantages of collaboration for extending ways of gathering and interpreting information, deepening understandings and developing ideas and innovations. The extent to which these aims are achieved will be evaluated within the SCHEMA research framework.

Supervision and support for participants in *Community Portraits* is supplied via the Internet. The expertise of the SCHEMA developers and the technical teams throughout the Project is available to the tutor and to participants to assist their collaboration and to enable them to optimise their use of the technology available in the course of their work and in the production and presentation of their portraits of the communities on the Internet. While participants are encouraged to make demands on the technology, efforts are made to ensure that any demand the technology makes on the participants is minimal. They should be able to plug in, switch on and go: two finger typing and the ability to follow simple instructions should be the level of technical competence required.

The course material

Prior to the start of the *Community Portraits* module participants each received an acknowledgement of their willingness to participate, a hard copy booklet of instructions for the use of the TELSIpro learning environment and information about password allocation and initial logging in.

Once they had logged in to *Community Portraits* participants could access, at will, documents introducing the purpose and process of the module; setting out the programme summary and details; presenting final assessment task requirements and guidelines and indicating week-by-week collaborative tasks together with the tasks to be completed by individuals in preparation for that weekly joint work.

The programme

The planned first four weeks of the *Community Portraits* module is introductory. In the first week, the module information having been put on-line, participants introduce themselves to one another using a suggested, but not mandatory structure, including who they are and their interest in *Community Portraits*. In the second week, working in their small task groups they share individual responses to a task on their personal experiences and expectations of communities, developing this exchange into a group notion of the concept of community. The third week task requires small groups to discuss their impending collaboration in relation to the task ahead, to identify relevant strengths and weaknesses within the group and to consider how these may best be managed for successful completion of the task. In the final week of the introductory section of the module group members introduce the communities on which their comparative community portrait will be based, each contributing basic information to give the others some sense of the community on which he/she will focus.

The substantive section of the module that follows occupies weeks five to twelve (eight weeks). During this time groups work independently, monitored by the tutor, to, prepare and complete a comparative portrait of their communities. Initially they consider how they choose to interpret the task requirements, plan how they will work together to complete the task, including any staged deadlines, and then they are expected to get on with the work as agreed within the group. In Week 9 groups are expected to review their progress and provide a brief interim report providing a basis for formal tutor comment and advice.

The final four weeks of the module consist of presentations of the community portraits on-line in Week 13; mutual assessment of the portraits and debriefing on the module experience and learning achieved in Week 14 and, in Week 16, submission of individually prepared reflective studies on collaboration based on participants' experience during the module.

Assessment

The assessment of *Community Portraits* is substantially weighted towards the group task of completing a comparative portrait of group members' communities which takes up the bulk of the module time and makes extensive demands on collaborative performance. Seventy-five percent of the final mark is devoted to this on-line

presentation. The remaining twenty-five percent is allocated to a reflective study on collaboration prepared by each participant individually and based on the experience of collaboration during the *Community Portraits* module.

Each Portrait presentation is assessed by tutor and participants individually according to a set template and out of a possible 75%. For each presentation marks are averaged across all markers, multiplied by the number in the presenting group then returned to the group for it to decide the appropriate apportionment of this score to its members individually.

The individual, reflective study of collaboration is marked out of a possible 25% by the module tutor.

3. The Trial Run

The participants

Community Portraits is offered within SCHEMA to professional workers in health and welfare practice as a contribution to their continuing professional development. For the first trial run of the module, however, only one such candidate expressed interest, though the nine who were enrolled had closely related interests. Three were doctoral candidates in sociology, one of whom is a university lecturer in Social Policy and Social Work. One was a postgraduate and one an undergraduate student in social work. Two were university lecturers: one in Nursing Studies and one in Youth Work. One was a practitioner in a youth strategy programme and one a retired team leader of a community based social work team. Three participants were from three sites in Scotland, two from one site in Germany and two from each of two sites in Finland. One of the nine never 'appeared' and one joined fully in the eighth week having had technical difficulties getting access. One person participated with two colleagues to support her by helping with the community-based tasks and being ready to stand in on the Internet link if and when needed.

The participating group consisted of three men and five women distributed across five sites and three countries. Three small groups were formed before the enrolment, each group made up of participants from different countries where possible, or at least from different sites. The collaborative work of the small groups must therefore, of necessity, take place via the Internet

The eventual small groups were as follows:

- Group 1: A man from the Scottish Highlands
A woman from Germany
A woman from Northern Finland
- Group 2: A man from Germany
A woman from Mid Finland
- Group 3: A woman from Mid Finland
A woman from Northern Finland
A man from Central Scotland

The action

As indicated above, prior to first Log-in in February, participants were sent a hard copy of information about the TELSIpro learning environment which is also available on line. The *Community Portraits* material was entered in TELSIpro with a start page, as shown, welcoming participants to the module.

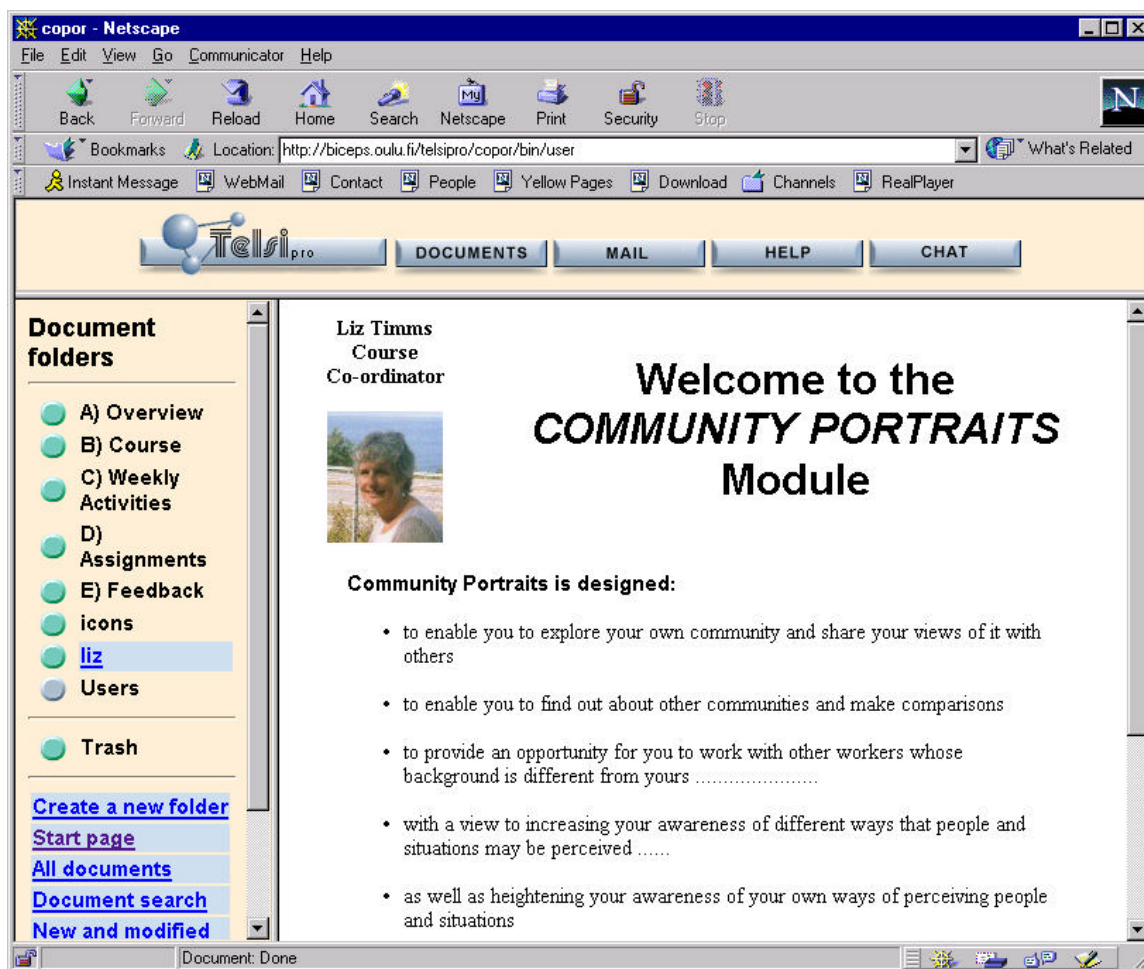


Figure 1: Welcome to *Community Portraits*

Participants were then e-mailed their user name, password and the Web address for accessing *Community Portraits*. They were advised that when they logged in they should browse the online course material. They were also asked to enter an introductory statement about themselves and, if possible, a photo. Those not equipped to send photos electronically sent them by snail mail for SCHEMA staff to enter them. The first photo arrived electronically within an hour of the start-up mailing.

The *Community Portraits* trial run settled down to one group of three and one of two which then integrated a late starter. Group two (with its two extras in one community) ceased communication after six weeks. This was particularly regrettable since the arrangement for local face-to-face collaboration was an interesting added factor that we had hoped might enable us to make informative comparison with exclusively online collaboration.

The pattern of activity varied from group to group. Two groups made regular use of the Chat facility to negotiate and complete staged tasks and used documents to present their ideas to one another. Group Three recorded its Chat sessions which enabled the tutor to monitor the content of the Chatlog later and make helpful comment if appropriate. By not recording its Chat sessions, not only was Group One's chat not monitored but concern was created that they might be inactive. This difference was discovered in later face-to-face discussion, indicating a need for guidance on this in future delivery of the module. Participation by Group Two in the early stage without using Chat but presenting individual documents and exchanging

mail messages indicate that useful contributions can be made to the work of the small group but that such restricted exchanges are slow to produce collaborative results.

4. Collaboration

“[Collaboration] is about people working purposefully with people, across boundaries of various kinds and regardless of personal congruity. It is not easy.” (Timms 1999, p.12)

Starting the collaborative process

Despite awareness of the received wisdom that relationships start with the very first signals of communication and that the messages sent and received at that point, whether through content or process, may determine the future of the relationship, the start of *Community Portraits* was seriously flawed. The course was launched with a mass of information and too little guidance to participants about how to begin to engage with it. Not enough time had been allowed for people to join in and familiarise themselves with the system. Neglecting the significance of informal interchanges in the development of collaborative relationships, it was short-sightedly decided to use a substantive course exercise as a vehicle for people to begin their interpersonal exchanges.

We know that faulty starts must be redressed. So it was with this trial of *Community Portraits*: the demands of the relationship building prevailed. The week-by-week planned programme of collaborative activity fell behind as the more realistic response of the participants required the tutor to adjust, revise and slow down. This was a vital contribution of participants to the life of the trial run but the burden of that responsibility was not fairly theirs.

Since *Community Portraits* is a structured programme of collaboration towards the completion of one major task, with a long deadline (twelve weeks) this adjustment seemed appropriate at the time. It did however set a precedent for elasticity which, along with illness and thesis completion, explains the extended delay in completion of the core task of presenting the Community Portraits online. These are now expected at the end of August rather than, as originally set, the middle of June. Furthermore the completion of the final individual reflective study on collaboration is at risk. There is clear indication that major revisions of introductory guidance is required as well as review of the quantity and character of material put online.

Developing collaboration: time as a factor

In the delivery of *Community Portraits* the development of collaborative relationships has been slow: slower than might be expected in equivalent face-to-face relationships and slower than is necessary for satisfactory accomplishment of both the set task and the learning goals. A response might be to curtail ambitions in relation to tasks and learning goals and thereby to limit the collaborative activity demanded in the module to a more manageable quantity. The risk is that the task become so limited that it loses its purpose and its interest. There is also the problem that the development of effective collaborative relationships—whether face-to-face or remotely—essentially depends on repeated engagement of the collaborators with one another over time: reducing collaborative activity is likely to be counter-productive.

The experience of *Community Portraits* so far indicates that the time-span for effective online collaborative task completion needs to be much greater than for equivalent face-to-face work.

Developing collaboration: technological issues

Erratic behaviour of the technology may explain some hesitations in the collaborative process. In particular Chat buttons sometimes disappeared from all participants' screens, and sometimes disappeared unpredictably on individual machines. For some participants no Chat button was ever available. Though some of these problems were resolved by SCHEMA technical experts, it was suggested that 'firewalls' set in place by Internet Service Providers are likely causes of the non-existent Chat button and this is a problem that affected participants have been advised to take up with their ISP's. Though given clear instructions for undertaking this negotiation, it runs counter to SCHEMA's ethos of accessibility for this responsibility to fall on users.

Such technical problems also test collaborative skill. When queries about technical problems have been raised in the 'everybody' mail tray a "me too" response, rather than a separate statement of the problem, represented a collaborative approach to the engagement. This may seem a small point, but it has significance for understanding what helps or hinders the development of effective computer mediated collaboration.

Responses from participants indicate that ease of use of the technology is highly significant for the development of collaboration and that the reliability of the technology is crucial. Given the importance of small talk in the development of successful collaborative relations the unreliability of Chat buttons is serious.

Developing collaboration: is polite behaviour helpful?

The core task of *Community Portraits* requires participants to make comparisons within a collaborative process. The main comparisons are of communities but important subsidiary comparisons relating to self and others are also expected. All these expectations are indicated in introductory material for the module. Activities in the first four weeks of the module are structured to set material from different group members side by side for identification of similarities and differences.

Observing early online exchanges between people of different gender, nationality and culture about communities in different countries, it was striking to note the disproportionate effort being put into identifying similarities rather than differences. It appeared as though similarity might be pursued to ease the development of harmonious collaborative communication. Were cultural patterns of polite behaviour being observed with a view to establishing the collaborative relationship? The place of politeness in the collaborative process was perhaps an issue. Polite behaviour here refers to behaviour governed by rules of social engagement determined culturally and applied generally without attention to the legitimacy of negotiation between parties to specific social relationships. Since time had already been identified as a factor in online collaboration, behaviour in the relationships needed to contribute positively to the furtherance of good communication. Even neutral interchanges would hinder collaboration insofar as they took up time without pushing the relationship forward.

In this instance it was easy to suggest that attention to differences rather than similarities between communities might yield more interesting discussion. More sensitive, in a general sense, is the need for recognition of interpersonal differences and for participants in collaboration to respond to these differences. Responding to one another as similar beings is to encourage relationships that are based only on the features of the other that I recognise in myself: in effect a denial of their individual identity which they may find demoralising or challenging, but rarely constructive. Rigid adherence to the external rules of social engagement (politeness) has a similar impact. Where collaborative tasks are involved, the risk of missing the range of contributions that differences could offer to the best outcome is high and wasteful. The importance of differences lies not simply in the fact of their existence, but in the opportunities they create for personal authenticity in interpersonal relationships, maximising individual initiative, multiplying ideas and offering a richer platform for further development of the interpersonal/collaborative relationship. Recognition of this will be built into revision of *Community Portraits*.

Developing collaboration: the significance of trivia

Reflecting on the difficulties encountered in fostering collaborative working relationships in *Community Portraits*, insight from comparison with face-to-face experience may be useful. Participants in *Community Portraits* have made much of their problems with Chat buttons and I have noted above the link between this and the importance of trivia in the development of effective collaborative relationships. To be more accurate, if we are to know how best to promote effective collaborative relationships we may need to switch attention from issues of principle such as shared purpose and task definition to the more humble contextual aspects of good social relationships: irrelevant exchanges, humour, eating and drinking together, etc. etc. Some of these are not so easy to provide online and some (such as humour and irrelevance) may seem to usurp task time online. Legitimising such interchanges may be an important role for the tutor once cost issues have been tackled. The development of icebreaking exercises, commonly used in social work education to start up collaborative learning, would also be a very useful contribution to collaborative learning and working online.

Developing collaboration: face-to-face and online

There is still much to be learned about the processes and dynamics of collaboration whether online or face-to-face. The visibility of collaborative relationships developing in online learning may yield significant insight into this process and indicate training needs for collaborators across all media of communication. There is a possibility that the experience of a slow establishment of collaborative relationships in *Community Portraits* is an indication that online relationship building may reflect its face-to-face counterpart but in slow motion. My previous experiences in face-to-face exercises simulating collaborative working have persistently resulted in evidence that collaborative relationships take time to develop and that the process benefits from being steered. Provision for this time would need to be built into any collaborative learning programme according to the time factors associated with the medium of communication. Development of strategies for steering the process will be dependent on increased understanding of the minutiae of collaborative

relationships distinguishing what helps and what hinders.

5. The Participants' Views

The sources

The views of participants in *Community Portraits*, alongside analysis of interchanges and various other statistical information, will form part of the research analysis of the module in SCHEMA Deliverable 6.4. However this tutor's report would be incomplete without some consideration of participant response. Participant comment here has been derived from three sources. The two participants from Lapland were questioned by their supporting tutor—Pirjo Helppikangas—who was an active monitor of *the Community Portraits* module. Below is an unedited copy of her material. The same two participants together with a Scottish participant contributed to a SCHEMA face-to-face review of *Community Portraits* that took place in Stirling in June 1999 and was led by Liz Timms, the module tutor. One further participant sent individual comments in response to a preliminary review of the module presented at a conference and made available to participants as a document in TELSIpro.

Participant comment collected by Pirjo Helppikangas

“Working in English seems suitable for Finnish students because generally they learn it at primary school from the age of 9. Finnish students are also quite familiar with computers: that is why it doesn't take so long for them to use the learning environment in Internet.

The different educational backgrounds of the students seems to be a richness and effect in a positive way.

The participants in *Community Portraits* have learned to broaden their perspective of their own community, understanding has deepened, there has even been some new ideas and information. Besides this they have learned communicative skills, to give freely comments and to take initiative, to use more English and the learning environment and some other equipment, too. The students found several positive matters concerning the learning on line. They found it good that other students and a teacher comment on their work.

They found that supervising is up-dated, they got more or less feeling of internationalization. They found that compared with class room teaching this way gives space to the silent students, too. Because they have to give their comments, too. Of course this is depending on the group size, too. They have to think before they give the comments, when in a class room they do it more spontaneously. This way is flexible and free concerning the timing with the exceptions of chat meetings which are difficult to organise. Furthermore distances do not count and the teaching is really individual. This also needs more self-control than class room situation.

Characteristic to this kind of teaching is that it is more independent, needs an ability to make initiatives, needs supervising at least in the beginning, needs problem solving and thinking. Some students are not motivated enough to work. For example in Lapland they were motivated because they will get some credits. Group effects the timing of one's own work. The division of work isn't so easy in a group.”

They have got a sense of a common group and support from others.

The students experienced some problems, too. If technology does not work everything stops. Planning of a group work can be stuck. (Pirjo Helppikangas adds her own observation that: "It seems to me that the most important factors in order to succeed are a technology that works, motivation of students and supporting them with the division of work in a group.")

Some clarification of roles and responsibilities of staff is also needed, particularly as role allocation affects permissions for access to and action within the various parts of the TELSIpro learning environment and was significant in Lapland where the two participants were officially supported by a tutor.

Individual comment

The individual comment refers to the density of information at the beginning of the module, commenting that though there were very precise guidelines on what to do there was probably too much to read. She suggested that her group might have got started more quickly if they had been given 'strict orders' rather being left to decide amongst themselves how to proceed. Also it might also have been helpful, she said, to have identified and resolved the technical problems confronting participants before launching into the substance of the module. Her comment on Chat was that it was difficult and time consuming (her group had technical problems with Chat almost all the time she said) but she added that it was fun. She would have appreciated more interaction across groups.

In relation to the technology she commented that, even though she uses email and the Internet in her work, the online work for *Community Portraits* felt strange, but she did not explain this further. She regretted the constraints on her time that prevented her concentrating on *Community Portraits*.

The Stirling discussion

The *Community Portraits* face-to-face review discussion in Stirling took place in the context of future planning for further deliveries of the module. Unlike the Lapland and individual comments, the discussion was more practical and dominated by suggestions for revision based on the experience of the trial run. There were therefore few references to positive experiences and learning gained but there was considerable enthusiasm for contributing to this educational initiative. Significant themes emerging from the discussion were the need for course material, instructions and guidelines to be thinned, simplified and clarified and for the early activity to be slowed down.

It was thought that an introductory description of *Community Portraits* would be helpful and that the *process* of the course should be described at the outset. In particular, the reason for delaying the definition of community should be explained. It was suggested that the booklet mailed out in advance, which is currently devoted to an introduction to TELSIpro, should be expanded into a broader introduction to *Community Portraits*, set within the context of SCHEMA and other courses offered within SCHEMA. Statements within this introductory booklet should also encourage participants to report any technical problems they have encountered *even when they*

have found solutions for themselves. It would be helpful if guidelines for working within TELSIpro also included instructions for using the private, group and everybody mail lists within *Community Portraits* and a reminder to record Chat session for the benefit of group members not present and for keeping a record for reference.

Participants suggested that less course material should be put online at the beginning and that the title of documents should more clearly indicate their contents. A simpler presentation of Assessment Task 1—the Community Portrait—would be appreciated at this stage. The range of methods, sources and situations/events that should be covered in each participants' exploration of their community needs to feature more prominently than at present. Provision of a detailed rather than a summary programme for the module had been appreciated and should be retained. For other material it was suggested that pathways be indicated for accessing available material that must be read, providing alternative pathways to material that might be selected on the basis of individual preference (eg offering “if you would like more information on ... Click here”). Responding to an alternative suggestion, participants thought that details of the complete week-by-week activities should available online at the outset, but could be grouped in bigger stages than weeks, leaving groups to decide their own details of timing within broader deadlines. Advice to delay reading the instructions for particular tasks/activities until ready to undertake them would be better than the tutor releasing the instructions in stages. (*This also leaves participants in greater control. LT*)

As expected it was suggested that the activities be slowed down: a week becoming two weeks for introductory activities. Interpersonal introductions were discussed specifically. A clear recommendation was made that participants should have time to meet one another online before starting on any activity concerned with community. Suggested strategies for getting to know one another online included appropriate icebreaking activity if this exists or could be developed; appropriate multi-user games; the notion of people identifying themselves as colours (developing into a *Community Portraits* Colour profile for each cohort). It was thought that participants could get to know the TELSI learning environment at the same time as getting to know one another.

Discussing the problems of skill difference in managing the single language base of the module, there was recognition of the disadvantaging effect this can have and a strong recommendation that participants of all linguistic ability be given encouragement by staff and other participants. Language problems should be owned by groups affected and by module participants as a whole rather than being attached to individuals. Similarly, in considering the hindrances to progressing collaborative tasks, participants suggested that individuals may need encouragement to take the lead. Groups might need to recognise and own this responsibility too but with tutor support

Although it had been intended to establish collaboration both within and between groups in *Community Portraits* and the programme had made clear provision for this, the trial run collaboration operated essentially at intra group level. It was interesting, therefore that participants suggested more inter-group exchanges.

It was noted that any contractual arrangements relating to participation *in Community Portraits* between participants and their university, agency or other organisation should be notified to SCHEMA and agreement be reached prior to the

module start regarding information about the participant that might legitimately be required, shared or restricted, including associated procedures.

6. The Teaching-Learning Shift For The Tutor

Preparing the programme

A significant lesson learned confirms the experience and perceived wisdom of online educators: that the demands of preparing for computer mediated learning are different from those associated with face-to-face courses. For anyone newly shifting from the real to the virtual classroom this requires some acrobatics in perception and thinking. However, prior attention to the plentiful advice does not necessarily prepare the novice for the impact that this shift may have on their perception of their skills as an educator. In the case of *Community Portraits* the collaborative thread in its antecedent indicated some continuity and I came to this new situation with experience of innovative teaching and distance education. Nevertheless initially I found the preparation of *Community Portraits* to be a seriously de-skilling experience affecting my whole professional confidence—face-to-face as well as online. Good advice on the educational shift, reliable and user-friendly technical help, the importance of not letting others down and the occasional successful event were all vital contributions to sustaining my motivation. Significantly my novice technical status was far less concern to me at this time than the professional challenge I was facing in revising the presentation of my material.

The practical details that required attention in order to have *Community Portraits* ready and workable for students were tedious, extremely time consuming and constantly demanded rethinking the teaching-learning process. There needed to be a deep-seated cushion of enthusiasm and good support to sustain motivation. At each step of construction it was necessary to reflect on how every detail of the material—the tasks or the timing or whatever—would be experienced by the students. Unlike face-to-face teaching, there would be no opportunity for on-the-spot modification in response to puzzlement or worse in a student's reaction. In recent years I have consciously striven for an interactive, responsive engagement between myself and social work students with whom I work. I was concerned that this goal seemed to be under threat.

These are personal responses to the teaching-learning shift that may not be shared by others. The likelihood is, however, that they indicate equivalent ranges of response in people who are seeking to make similar teaching-learning shifts or are being encouraged to do so. To promote this change will require that there be support for those undertaking it that acknowledges the particular range of responses being experienced by each person and provides support specific to the individual that encourages him/her to sustain motivation to change or develop.

In my case the practical difficulties of planning and managing the presentation of detailed guidance and instruction were guided by experts within the SCHEMA team and major confusion was eventually resolved with advice to tabulate the course information. This proved a breakthrough: tabular presentation of course aims and activities against the sequence of weeks showed clearly where multiple demands were being made on the same time space: it enabled good ordering of the educational process. Nevertheless it is still difficult to see how to retrieve some of the flexibility for ongoing negotiation with students, reflecting and modelling a partnership approach to learning and practice.

Engaging with the technology

As indicated at the beginning of this report I embarked on preparation for *Community Portraits* within the SCHEMA framework with an awareness of the exciting potential of collaborative teaching and learning via the Internet that was far from matched by my technical expertise. To add further complication I was a Mac user! I was reliant on the support, encouragement and tolerance and patience of SCHEMA technical experts which has not been found wanting.

It seems that a feature of technologically driven projects is that excitement about the potential of imminent technological developments breeds creative notions amongst the technophiles (e.g. SCHEMA leaders) about applications. So it was that, presented with the opportunity for transnational, collaborative project work on communities using computer mediated communication, I naively accepted the practical possibility that the course could be conducted via desk-top video-conferences. Students would be able to see and talk with one another, so minimising the estrangement of remote links without speech or vision. This opportunity to see and hear each other would be a significant support for the major part of their work which would be in some form of electronic print. A clear aim was that technology should not be a barrier. It must be easy to use, even with no training. With the use of Network Computers™ the familiar problems of software incompatibility and of Apple Macs not understanding, and not being understood by, anyone else, would be overcome at a stroke. Participants would put their Smart Cards into their NC's, and enter a system which had on it all the software and Internet connection facilities that they would need and which rendered all their contributions compatible. As indicated earlier, this "plug in and go" system, would require only two finger typing and the capacity to follow simple instructions.

Unfortunately development problems meant that NC's are not available and prohibitive pricing has effectively ruled out standard use of desk-top video-conferencing. One result of this was a need to scrutinise more carefully the options for learning environments within which *Community Portraits* would operate. Two frameworks were on offer from SCHEMA partners at the University of Oulu, both of which were designed specifically for collaborative learning. While one of these frameworks better suited plans for shifting between small groups and plenary discussions, the alternative (TELSIpro) was chosen because it made few technical demands on participants. In this situation my technical poverty placed me well to judge the appropriateness of the learning environment, at least in terms of its accessibility.

SCHEMA still affirms the importance of 'plug in and go' technology and their technical experts are therefore still seeking a substitute for NC's that is equally user friendly. When successful a wider choice of learning environment could be restored.

Conclusion

A broad conclusion at the end of *Community Portraits* is that the educational potential of computer mediated collaborative learning via the Internet is considerable, particularly in terms of its extensive power to include. The caution is that accessing and sustaining learning is likely to be seriously impeded by technological

obstructions, such as unreliability and user unfriendliness, and material obstruction such as poverty.

With the current state of the technology (including the cost of access) it is likely that participants in teaching/learning initiatives based on ICT, including any technically weak teachers as well as a range of students, will face obstructions to their learning deriving from problems in the technology. Indeed, an important part of the role of these participants is to identify technological problems for the attention of the developers so that the technology for secure support of educational goals can be developed as quickly as possible.

It is important in this process that sponsors and innovators alike are sensitive to the impact that their experimental initiatives may have on the participant 'guinea pigs' and to have in place appropriate supports. It is vital that developers assume responsibility for technical problems and their solution. It is a common feature of computer novices that they assume that every problem is the result of their action. As a result they often stall or give up entirely because the machine assaults their self-esteem. They assume that they must learn to conquer the technology rather than understanding, as I now recognise technical experts know, that the problem lies, more often than not, in the obscurity of the technology. Hitting the computer may not be an effective solution but at least the anger is appropriately directed.

It is also important that, at the outset of any initiative, the developers are honest rather than optimistic with educational planners about the features of the technical system available for the educational provision being developed. It is equally important that recruits to the experimental teaching/learning initiatives are informed clearly about the uncertainties inherent in learning within the relatively uncharted waters of new technology: they may not learn as quickly, nor as much, as they want or need if the technology does not come up to their expectations. Their properly informed consent should be a prerequisite of their involvement and more conventional alternatives should be available for those who prefer not to take the risks involved.

There are many changes to *Community Portraits*, learned from our initial experience, that we hope to build into future deliveries. Sadly, in getting the simplification and clarification justifiably called for, we will probably have to be less ambitious than we were about learning goals. It is likely that we will need to prioritise some learning goals and perhaps even drop some and this may involve some negotiation. Is learning about collaboration more important than learning about community? Whose goals will prevail?

Modifying the booklet mailed out before the module start to make it more generally informative and useful should present few problems. Ensuring the reliability of the Chat button for all participants is a high priority demand on SCHEMA's technical experts. Other changes are more entangled with the demands of the interaction between the technology and the educational goals and are therefore more complex. We will need to slow down the introductory stage and revise, in quantity and presentation, the reading material made available online. If we can get a more effective start we should then be able to be more rigorous about later deadlines. This is vital for participants who might be slotting the *Community Portraits* module into a wider educational programme or employment constraints.

Having confronted the excitement, the routines and some of the trauma of this teaching-learning shift, I am now more sanguine about the developmental work

ahead. I can still recognise the potential of the technology for continuing professional development and other lifelong learning, but there are limitations to what can be done now. I am more wise than I was about the distinction between what may be possible in the future (near or far) and what is available now. I am therefore in a better position to plan my educational initiatives realistically and thus have more confidence in their feasibility. I have learned that, unlike some of my colleagues in SCHEMA, I am not an innovator who gets excited by testing the extremes of feasibility. On the other hand I value those who do.

The core work unit of SCHEMA at Stirling is a group of three staff who have been working together in a succession of information technology projects related to teaching and learning over the past few years. It seems that they have woven their different skills and resources together in a way that enables them to spin creative ideas off one another to varying levels of the feasible, the possible or the ridiculous. Their funding allows and requires them to do so. It is clear that in their desire to work at the cutting edge of technology and education they assume that success is never guaranteed and possible failure, which has to be contemplated, is to be enjoyed as a challenge and with a sense of humour. The team sets an example of fruitful skill mix in which all value the opportunities of online collaborative learning, but not everyone who works with them is expected to be technically smart. Their support for me has been reliably available and very accessible in the sense that no query was too stupid to be taken seriously. The result has been that in protecting my self-esteem they have facilitated a substantial increase in my confidence in confronting new technology.

Experience as a newcomer in SCHEMA has demonstrated the value of technical specialists being committed to tolerant encouragement of the technically illiterate educator and technophobic learners. Where, as in SCHEMA, the technical experts accept full responsibility for easing access and acceptance, I have found that user motivation is sustained and learning takes place. This, as much as technical development, will be vital to the widest dissemination of computer literacy.

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Appendix A: Introduction to TELSIpro for *Community Portraits*

TELSIpro is the Web-based environment that will be used for the Community Portraits module designed and run by Liz Timms. Community Portraits is part of the Schema EU funded project. Further details on Schema can be found at:

<http://www.stir.ac.uk/schema/>

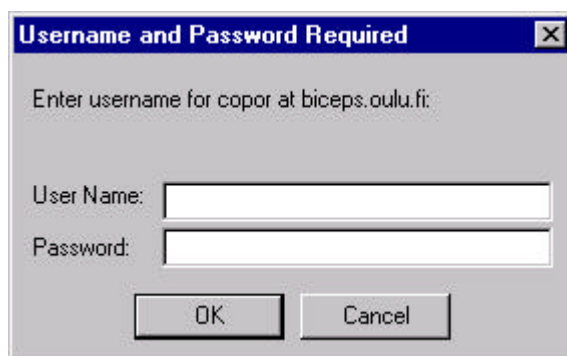
TELSIpro (called TELSI hereafter) is designed to support collaborative working usually based on a “simulation” script that defines a MicroWorld. TELSI is usually used in language simulations. For Community Portraits, we will not be using a script but exploiting TELSI’s excellent tools to facilitate collaborative working on documents.

This document is a quick introduction to using TELSI for *Community Portraits*. Before you can start working in TELSI you must have a username and password for the TELSI system. Once you have this you can easily get into TELSI.

To access the Community Portraits environment, go to the Web address

<http://biceps oulu.fi/telsipro/copor/bin/user>

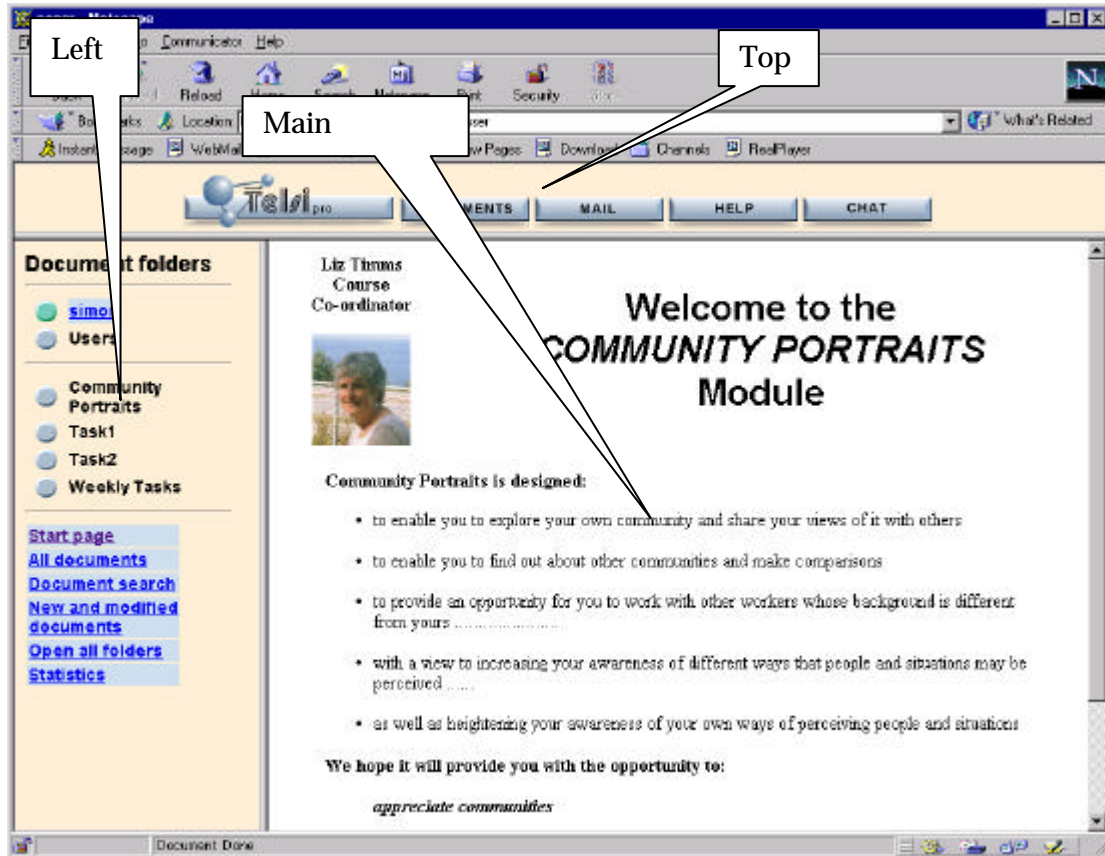
Now type your “*Community Portraits*” User name and Password into the appropriate box. Having entered both click the “OK” button.



It will be well-worth book marking the TELSI page in your browser to save typing in the long Web address given above. TELSI is designed to work best with the latest version of either Netscape (4) or Internet Explorer (4). To use the chat facility and the Java Editor your browser must have Java support.

The TELSIpro environment

Having entered your username and password successfully the main TELSI screen for Community Portraits will appear:

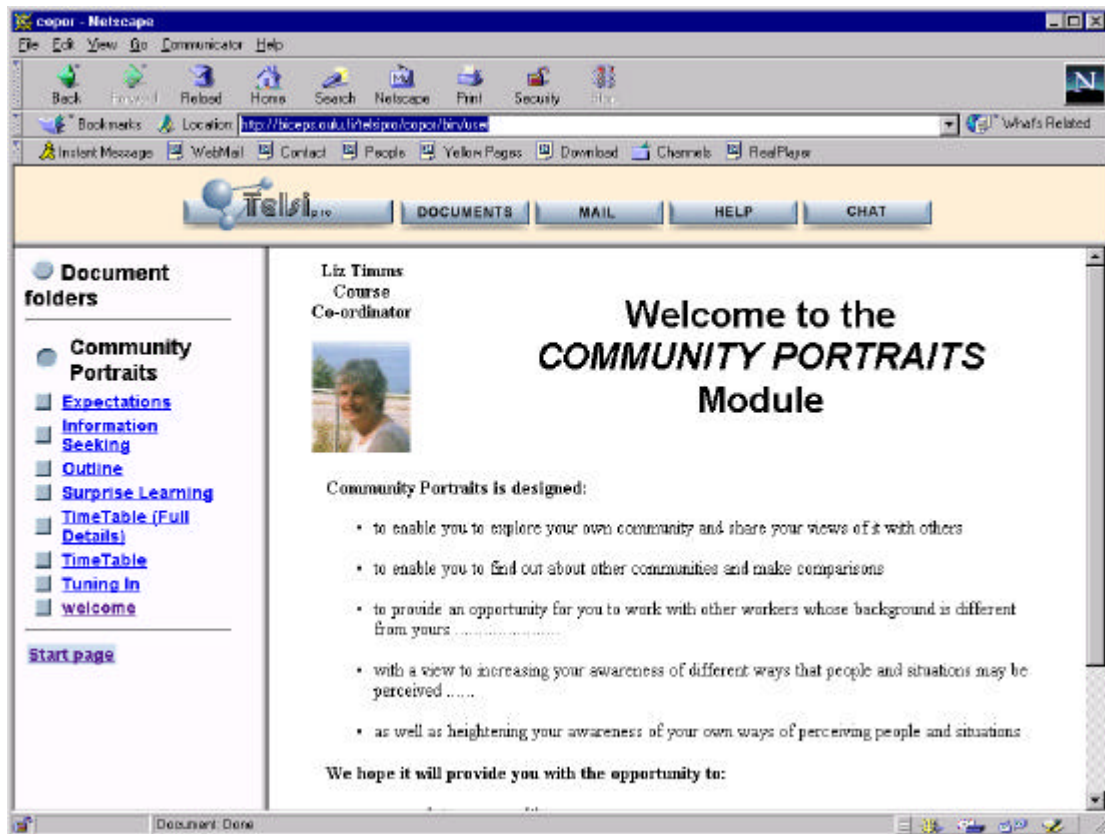


The screen is divided into three areas (or frames). These are called the Top, Left and Main. The Top frame contains the main functions of TELSI: documents, mail, help and chat. Each of these functions is accessed via the buttons. The contents of the Left frame change depending on the function chosen. TELSI starts in the document function.

The Left frame in the document functions shows the folders that you can access. The first folder listed is your personal folder and has your username written next to it (the user in the example is called "simon"). The next folder (Users) is all the other participants in this TELSI environment. To see your documents click on the button next your username.



To see all the other users folders, click the button next to "Users". The buttons next to "Community Portraits", "Task1" and "Task2" open up these folders to show the documents stored within them. For instance, clicking the "Community Portraits" button will show the contents of this folder:

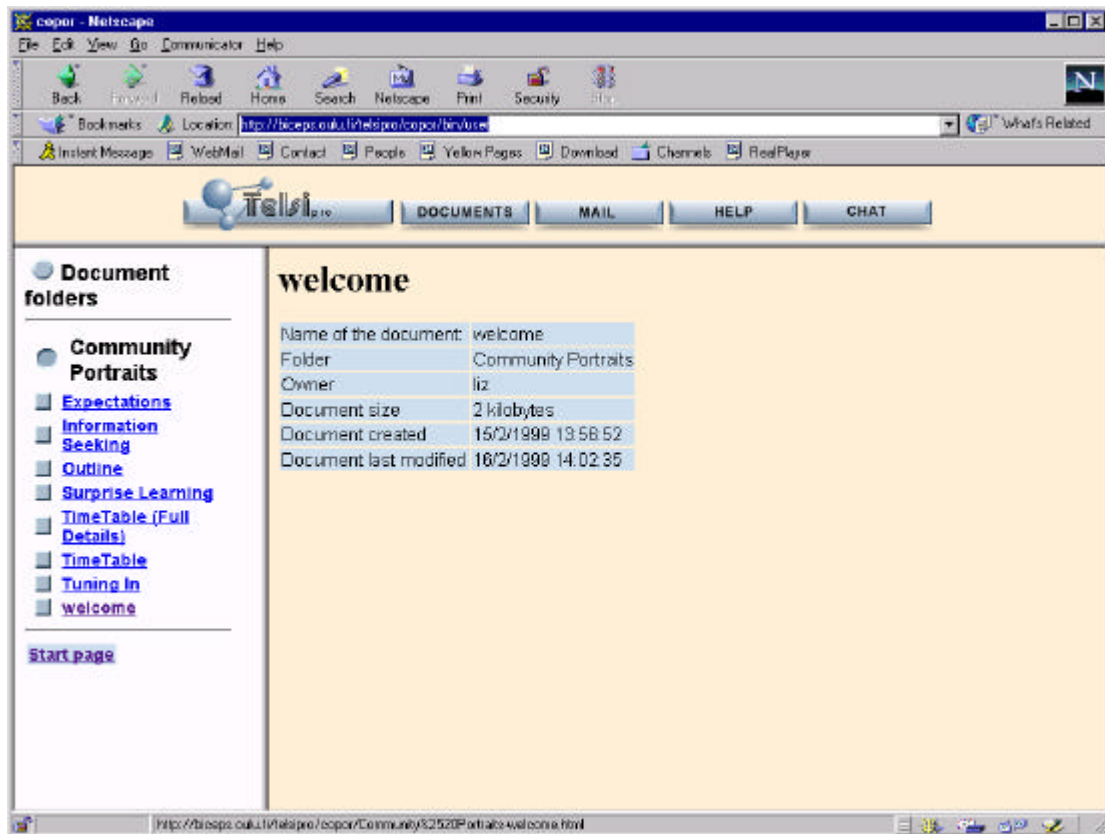


These are all the documents in the “*Community Portraits*” folder. (The picture above shows the *Community Portraits* environment during its development. It will almost certainly appear slightly different when you are using the live environment.)

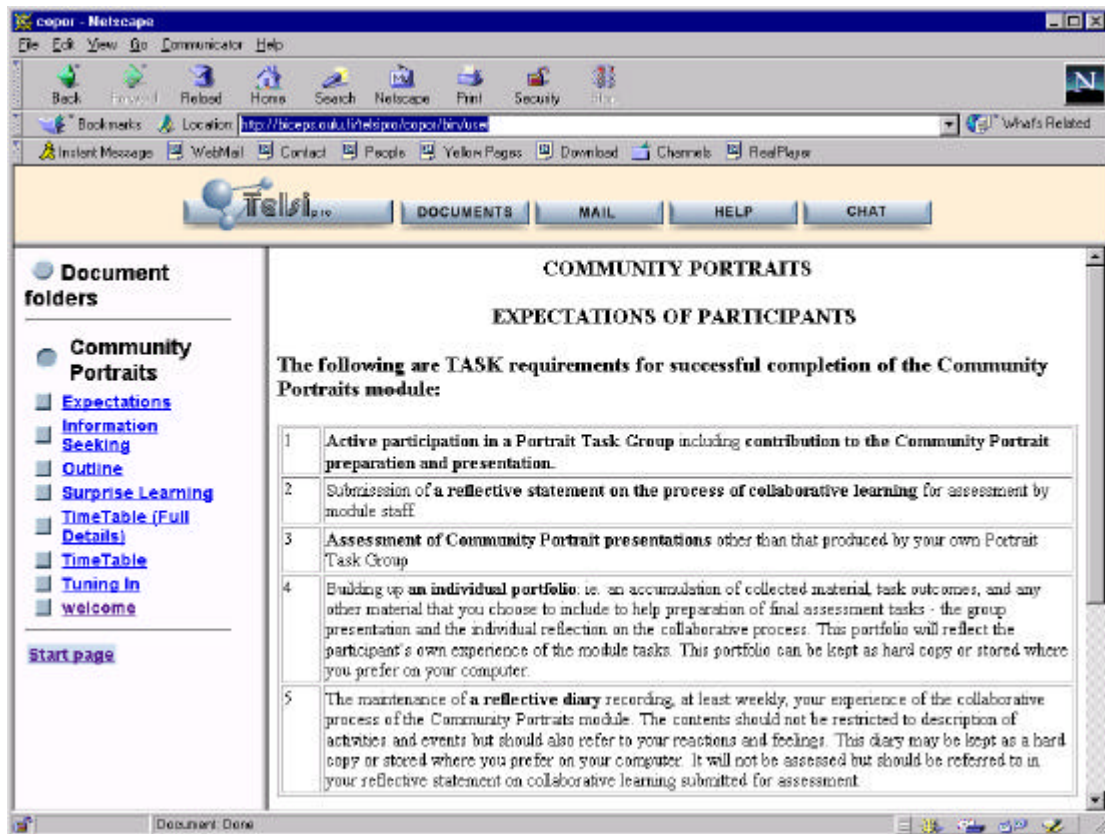
You can tell that these are documents and not folders because of the different button next to the items:



Clicking on the button will reveal the details of the document itself.

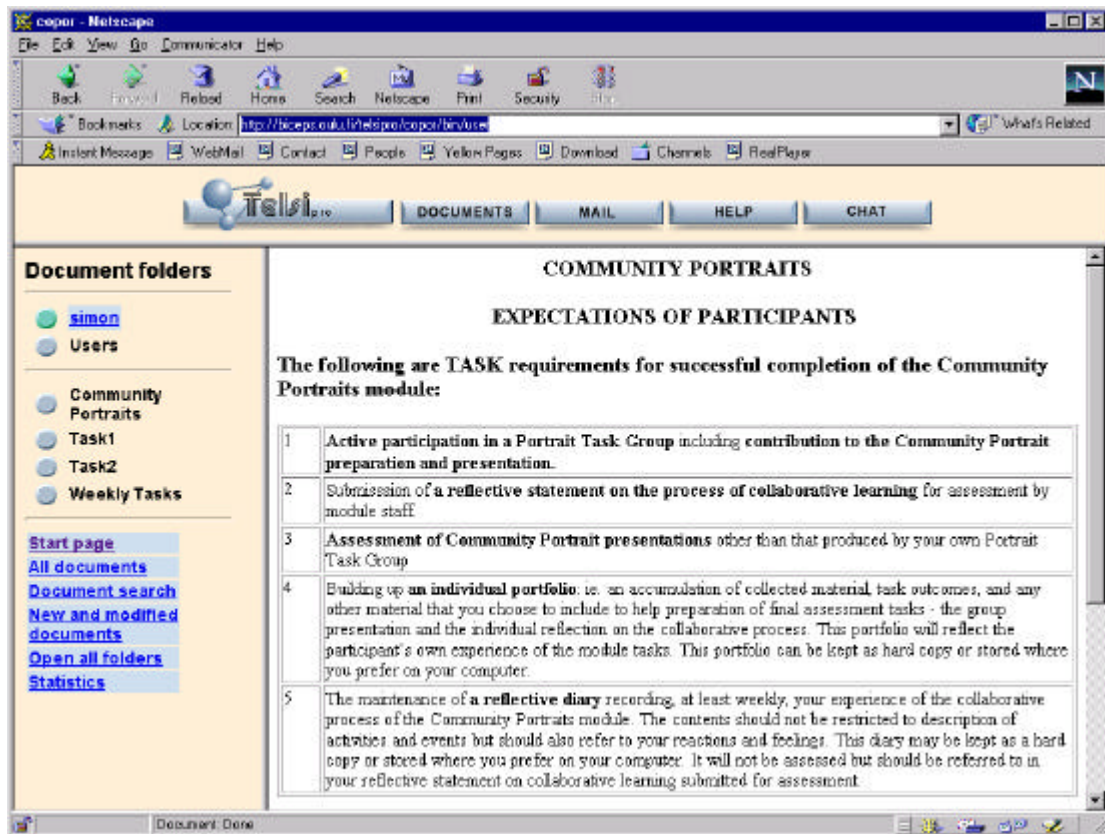


To view a document, click on the link (the blue or purple underlined text). The purple underlined text in the above picture indicates that these documents have already been viewed. Clicking on “Expectations” reveals that document in the Main frame:

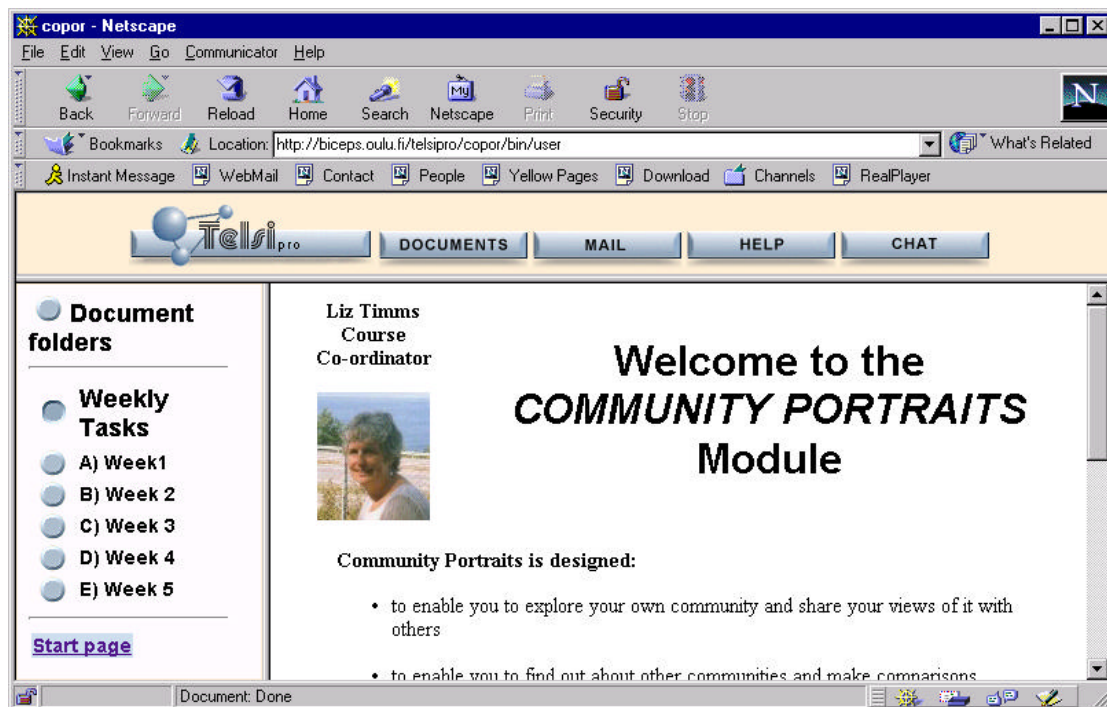


Clicking on a different document (link) will replace whatever is in the Main frame with the new document. (The “Start page” link at the bottom will return the main frame to the original—Welcome to Community Portraits—document).

When we are looking at the *Community Portraits* folder we have effectively moved one-level down in the folder structure (hierarchy). To return to the top level we click the button next to “Document folders”. We can then see the whole of the top-level again (note that the main frame stays on the same document).



That's how easy navigation in TELSI is. You move into folders by clicking the appropriate button and view the documents in the folder by clicking on the link. Some folders contain further folders: "Weekly Tasks" is an example. The tasks for each week are contained within their own folder.



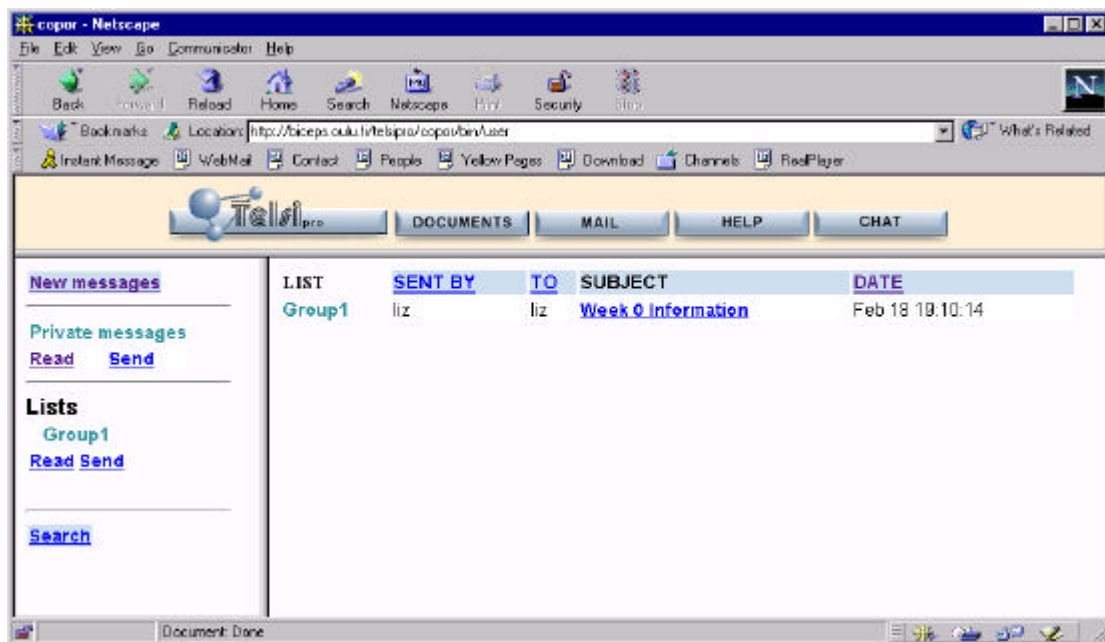
To access the documents simply click on the button for the appropriate week.

The TELSI mail system.

TELSI has an easy-to-use internal email system. This system can only be used to email to and from other TELSI users on the *Community Portraits* module. This (or chat) will be the main method of communication within the *Community Portraits* module. To use the mail system, click on the MAIL button:

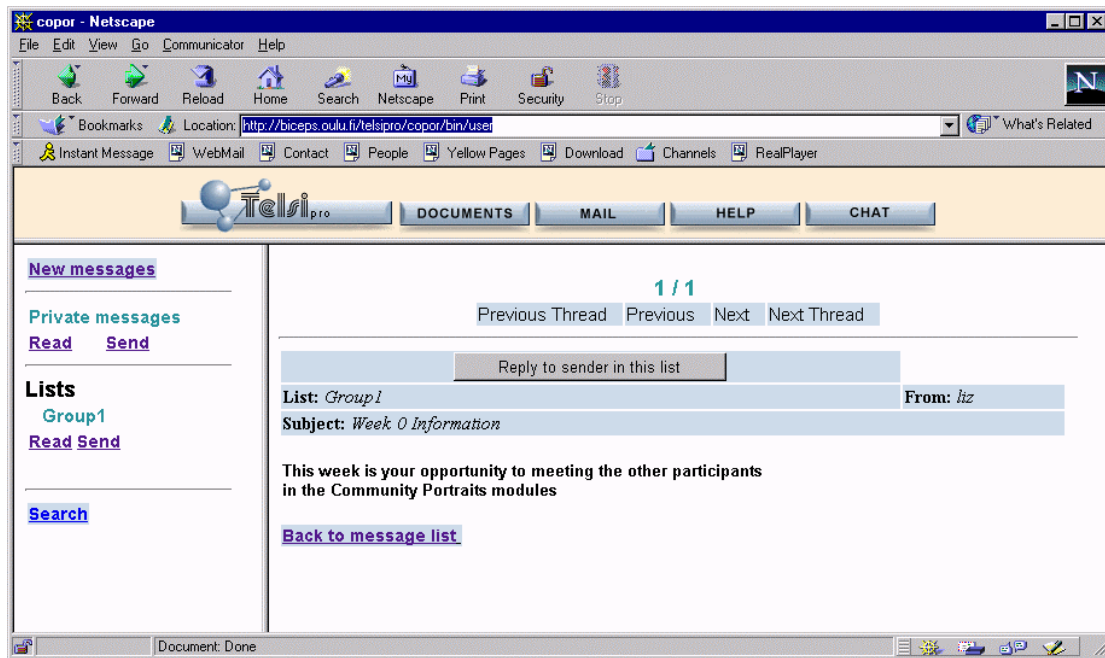


Both the Left and Main frame now change:



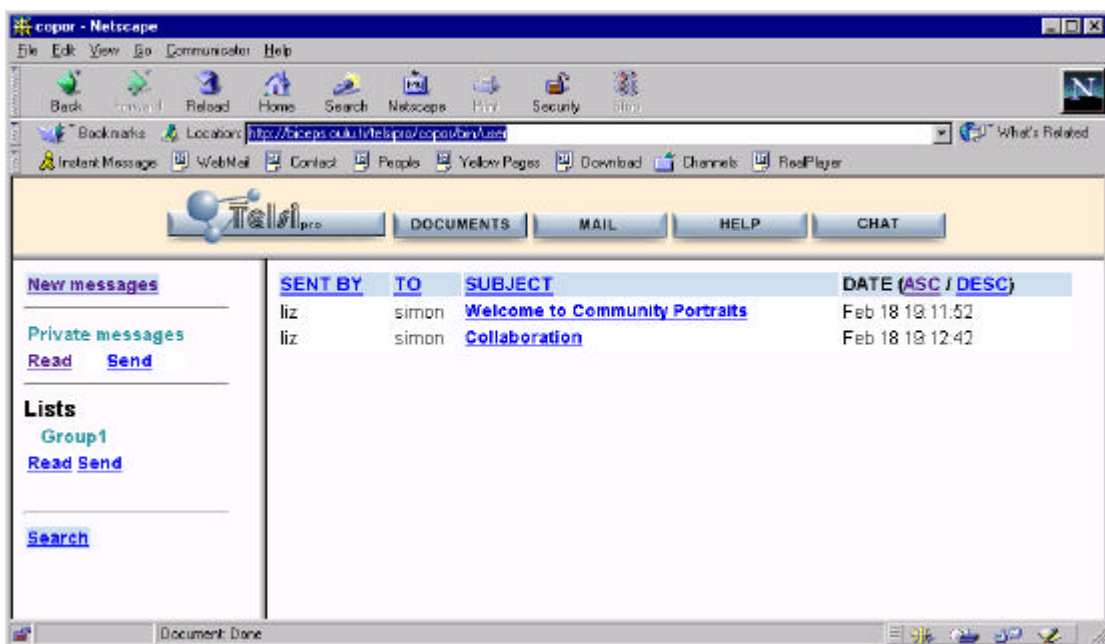
The Left frame contains the links to both read and send messages and the Main frame shows us the new messages we have (in the example shown above there is only a single message). The Left frame has several links: New messages, Read & Send (Private messages), Read & Send (Lists) and Search. The link “New messages” when clicked shows all unread email messages (this is where the mail system starts). “Private messages” is for email to you from other participants. Click “Read” to examine these messages or “Send” to send a private email to another participant. The Lists section shows all the email lists that you are a member of (the user above is a member of a single list called “Group 1”). The “Read” and “Send” work exactly the same as for private messages except that any messages sent are sent to all members of the group. Finally “Search” allows us to search our email in many useful ways—this is most useful when we have to find information from within many email messages.

To read the message shown above, click on the link (Week 0 Information):



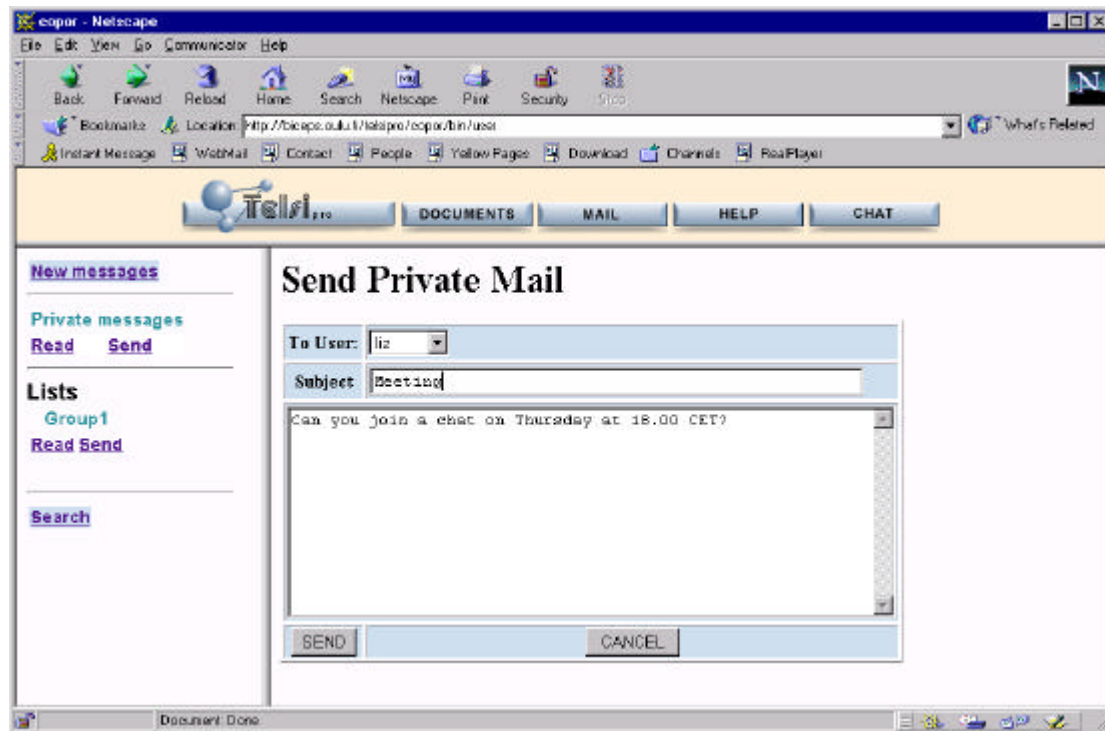
Note the button provided to reply directly to the sender.

To see all our private messages click on “Read” in the appropriate area:

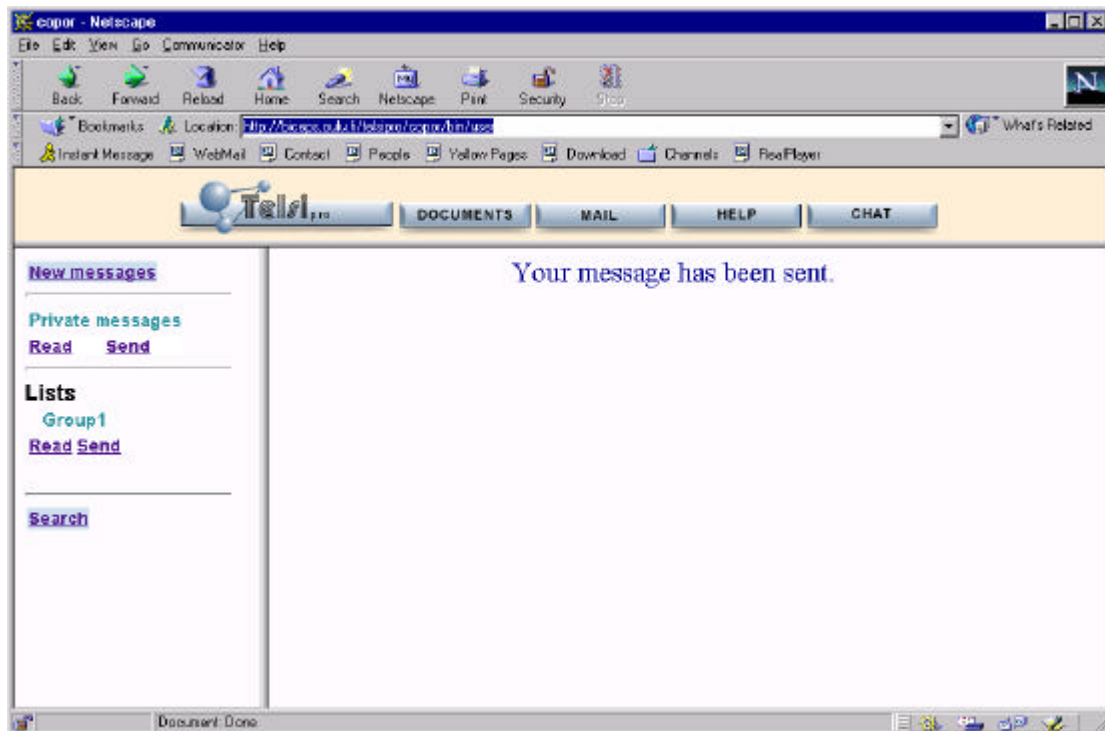


Once a message is read in “New messages” it is automatically moved to the appropriate place: “Private messages” or which ever list it is associated with.

Sending a message is straightforward. Click on send (in the appropriate area depending on whether the message is private or to a group). The example below is a “Private message”:



And then choose the user from the list box (“To User”. The message above is to liz. Next fill in the subject and enter the text in the box below the subject box. Both a subject and text must be entered or TELSI will reject the message. When you are happy with the message click “Send”.



Final Remarks

This document has covered navigating around TELSI and the use of the internal email system. Note that there is a “Help” button provided and this has links to host of help information—written in both English and Finnish. If you have the time, you will almost certainly find the information here of great help when using TELSI.

The final button in the Top frame is “Chat” and this is used to chat interactively with other members of the Community Portraits group—you must both be on-line at the same time to do this! The use of chat is dealt with in the help information.

To fully participate in the module you will need to know how to share files with other Community Portraits participants. This is fairly simple and again is dealt with in the help system.

Enjoy the course. We think it’s a unique way to use the Web, TELSI and technology in general and hope you find the experience rewarding.

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Appendix B: A Portrait**GALACTIC VIRTUAL TOURS**

Galactic Virtual Tours are proud to offer the most recent addition to their portfolio of holidays in far away places. Those participating in this great adventure will visit the third planet of a minor star toward the edge of our galaxy. The planet, known to the locals as Earth, is a beautiful, blue, water planet with five major inhabited continents divided into nation states. The planetary poles are ice covered but life is abundant almost everywhere. On this trip you will visit one continent in the northern hemisphere, Europe, and, travelling through one such nation state, observe a community in that country.

The era of mass tourism is now in the history books of Earth. Despite drastic global population control measures the world population continued to grow at an alarming rate. Colonies and holidays on the moon and Mars had eased the pressure on tourist resorts on earth for a while but increasing leisure time created a total gridlock on freedom of movement over the whole planet. Fortunately for the sanity of the people, technology brought a new type of stay-at-home holiday to the masses, the Holographic Tour. There is a continuous programme of customer satisfaction assessment and all tourists are invited to participate in video conference de-briefing sessions.

Tourists from three separate tours of the Copor Holo Tours Company have been invited to join a debriefing of their holidays.

SYSOP Who would like to start?

INSH We will go first if you like. Our tour was in Scotland, the northern part of an island off the north west coast of Europe. We were travelling by public transport so had to start at the nearest railway station, Kingussie, on Tuesday as that is the one day in the week that the bus goes to our destination, the small settlement of Insh. Unfortunately, CHT were late as usual, we missed the bus - and had to walk the five miles to Insh.

However, this was a very pleasant stroll of about two hours along a minor country road. There was very little traffic and the road went through some beautifully green countryside. The area is really a river valley with high mountains on either side. The locals call such a valley a glen. We passed a two-hundred year old military barracks, the remains of a military occupation by the neighbouring country, England, which covers the southern part of the island. It is now a preserved monument and popular with holo tourists but we had other things on our minds. Further on we passed a bird reserve and then a whisky distillery. We later learned that the whole area is famous for the production of whisky known as Speyside Malt Whisky. We were feeling somewhat thirsty but decided not to stop there but wait until we reached Insh. The approach to the village is through open woodland, mainly birch trees, which hides the houses from view until you are nearly there. A sign on the roadside told us we had arrived in Insh.



On the advice of CHT, the males in our party determined to blend in with the natives by wearing their traditional costume, the kilt, but in the event they made themselves more conspicuous because none of the locals were wearing them. In fact there were few people to be seen as we walked along the main street. We were looking for the village centre when we saw another Insh sign at the roadside. We had walked through the village and were on our way out again without realising it!!

A rethink of our plans was called for so we decided to find our accommodation. Good old CHT. Once again a holo snafu as there was no accommodation to be found - no hotel, no pub, no restaurant, no café, no public toilet, no B&B, no nothing for tourists - so we terminated the programme for the night and went to bed

The next day the weather was warm and sunny so we started at the telephone box which we decided was at the centre of the village.

Raymond's
House



There was little else around there; a couple of untidy sheds and several houses most of which appeared to be unoccupied. Some children appeared on the road and upon enquiry told us they were waiting for the school bus to take them the five miles to Kingussie. The bus came, there was a flurry of five cars leaving the place then quiet again for a while. An occasional vehicle passed through but we did not see anyone else to speak to until a large yellow vehicle stopped on an open space near the telephone kiosk. This was the day the travelling library visited so here was our chance to engage the locals in conversation. The library visits every two weeks and is a highlight of village life.

People suddenly appeared on the road with books under their arms but it soon became obvious that this was not a quiet contemplative library but a social gathering place with a great deal of chat and laughter and noise. Here were people we could talk to.



WAIB - This is all very nice but it does not sound very exciting. Our tour was in the Central European country of Germany. We met in the main railway station in Stuttgart, a town in southern Germany, and planned to buy tickets for the fast train to our destination, the town of Waiblingen. This is a short journey of only 15 minutes and is a preferred mode of transport during rush hour when roads are extremely busy. But guess what? Our credit cards were not accepted so we had to take a taxi as the driver agreed to take cash from us. We will claim a refund from CHT for this shambles!

From this you will guess that Waiblingen is a large community and is a dormitory town for Stuttgart. In fact we soon learned that many young families had moved out from Stuttgart to Waiblingen because it is easier to find accommodation.

The area is also the home of many refugees and once was known as "the settlement of refugees" because of the numbers that arrived there from all over Europe at the end of the war. There are also many foreign guest workers from more recent times, followed by movement of people after reunification of Germany. This great influx of foreigners has caused animosity with some local people who feel overwhelmed.

SYVA - That is a very different situation to our tour. We started in Rovaniemi which is on the Arctic Circle in the Northern European country of Finland. We travelled north by road from there into Lapland and to our destination of Syvajarvi, one of a

group of twelve villages in the Jarvikyla (lake) area. We had hoped to see lots of reindeer on the way but the programmers seem to have left them out. Could you do something about that? There are only 250 people in eighty households living in the village although it is one of the larger villages. When we arrived it was also very quiet but we very quickly found the café for a welcome cup of best holo-tea.

SYSOP – Did you learn anything of the history of the communities on your tour?

INSH - We most certainly did. We have already mentioned the proximity of the old barracks. Insh is actually on the line of an old military road connecting to other barracks in the eighteenth century. The village dates only from 1799 when the laird or landowner, Ballindalloch, devised the original plans for a new settlement to provide housing for his workers and other tenants of his land as the Highland Clearances effected the area. He was generous for his time and gave each house a strip of two acres of land known as a croft on which they could grow food and keep livestock. These lands are still called 'The Acres' but have long ceased to be productive. Each house was sturdily built of stone with slate roofs and good windows and chimneys, important features if somewhat expensive for the tenants. Window Tax and Chimney Tax were still levied. He hoped that the community would continue to develop but growth was very slow and by 1891, according to the Census for that year, there were fifty-eight houses inhabited and ten uninhabited. Today there are forty-seven houses of which twenty-six are holiday homes. Twenty-three of the houses have been built within the last twenty years.

It was difficult to reach the village before 1931 when the present road was built with new bridges over several burns or streams. This isolation can be illustrated by the fact that in 1891, the date of the last available census (a hundred years must have elapsed before the content of a census can be made public), the whole population of two hundred and twenty three people spoke the native language of Gaelic whereas in Kingussie, just five miles away, most people spoke only English. Today none of the population of sixty six people speak Gaelic.

There was a normal school for village children plus a girls sewing school which had boarders. Neither exists today as a school and the children go to Kingussie for both primary and secondary education

The land was also of poor quality for food production and did not attract settlers. There was no prospect of increased employment despite land improvement and improved livestock breeds and seeds.

SYSOP - How has that history influenced the lives of the present day residents?

INSH - The present day population does not appear to be very concerned or aware of the village history. There are no long family memories and only three people living there today were living there in 1975. The major influence on life today is from the major works on the land such as extensive drainage operations and tree planting, both of which have shaped the present settlement.

There is much evidence all around of nineteenth century life such as the ruined outline of houses and old lime kilns, all made of stone. The old military road is a well used pathway and there are many old tracks to the water meadows where the hay was cut in olden times. This land reclaimed from the marshes is now a bird reserve.

So to describe how the past is having a direct effect on the lives of people today is difficult. Without a collective verbal history, the folk tales, the ancestral memories, there is no connection with yesterday. There is a small Church of Scotland chapel in the village but none of the congregation comes from Insh.

SYSOP - Could you give us some idea of the lifestyle of the people today?

INSH - The mobile library gave us our first insight into the lives of the residents and we would have told you about it if WAIB hadn't interrupted us earlier! The library is the central news exchange for the village, there being no shop, post office or other public building. Some of the people only see each other on this two-weekly visit so news is saved up. The young mothers do meet more often as they take turns in looking after each others children while they play but all the working people leave each day for their jobs, some travelling 40 or 50 miles each way, and they rarely meet especially in the winter. A recent development has been the growing number of connections to the internet in the village. There are now seven, and the novelty of this to us antiquated system has created very regular chat between neighbours. Some see this as a bad sign as far as the development of social life in the village is concerned.

We learned that although the population is made up of individualists there is also a rich vein of social life that satisfies them all, namely the 'ceilidh'. There appear to be a number of occasions throughout the year when they hold almost secret parties that everyone, including the very young children, attend to the exclusion of outside visitors. Everyone takes food and drink and there is much feasting throughout the night. They all enjoy a good crack, dancing, anything and everything. If someone wishes to recite poetry they might try but are unlikely to get beyond verse one as poetry is a touch outside the frame: a song or a tune or a story would go down very well. None of them understand how all this came about but is perhaps an emerging culture for this disparate group of people. They all seem very happy with this situation and it sounds like great fun. Unfortunately, we were not allowed access to this frivolity and were restricted to a tot of Virtual Malt whisky. It did not do too much for us lacking as it did the subtleties of the real thing.

There is a well developed but informal system of mutual help, people sharing labour, tools, and knowledge. Baby sitters are not in short supply.

SYSOP - What did you learn of the downside of life for them?



A Tourist View and Raymond's House Among the Trees

INSH - The scenery may be beautiful and refreshing for the soul and tourists alike but all is not perfect for the residents. Until very recent times a healthy diet was not easy to maintain. Fresh fruit and vegetables were hard to find and indeed scurvy was not uncommon as recently as twenty years ago. The nearest shops to Insh are five miles away in Kingussie but the nearest small supermarket is ten miles away in Aviemore. The once-weekly bus goes only to Kingussie so those without a car are somewhat disadvantaged. Those who do have a car pay much higher prices for fuel and have to drive more miles than average. The nearest filling station is eight miles away.

The climate and weather don't help either. It may not be the coldest part of Europe but it is part of the coldest area of the British Isles. It is also very wet so at least there is never a water shortage! This does make the winter a miserable time for some people, especially those who have decided to retire to the area based on summer visits when the weather can be perfect., if one ignores the biting insects of summer.

The number of retired people seeking homes and the demand for holiday homes has created a market that has put local young people at a distinct disadvantage in house-buying because of the generally low incomes in the area combined with the lack of employment opportunities.

SYSOP - How do they see the future for themselves and for their children?

INSH - We noted interviews by a local resident, Raymond, with two families about their views of the life in the village. One family, the Andersons, had been there a long time and the other, the Ellis family, were very recent arrivals. We include here the section of those interviews concerning their views about the future:-

‘ Q. What do you see in the future of Insh?’

A. Ellis. We have moved here because we love this place and want to stay here.

We do also recognise that our children may not be able to remain here in their adult lives because of the lack of employment locally. Much depends upon the future of the tourist trade for their employment or upon their educational achievements leading to university away from here. We have not thought beyond this.

A. Anderson. There are several areas that cause us concern. The sterile growth in the size of the village, and by this we mean the growth in second homes, will eventually lead to a situation where there are no affordable houses for our young people. Even job creation would not help in this matter because the jobs would inevitably be low paid. There are no plans for social housing in the village. I expect that our children, and all of the others currently here, will move away in pursuit of their careers as yours have done. There is little here for anyone with initiative. The result of that will be that the life cycle of the village will turn again to leave an ageing population unable to care for itself, just like you. (Naturally I objected to this slander - Raymond) There will then be a whole new population and the people that were here when you came will be forgotten. This is so sad and sounds awfully depressing. The one ray of hope that we see is the growing interest in our project. (he is referring to the Crofting Project - Raymond). People, including some of the children, are becoming quite animated about it and although probably there as many agendas as people, at least we are all working for a common objective at present. It is really exciting and vitally important that folk want to see this idea work and take ownership of it.’

The Crofting Project referred to above is a scheme being developed by five residents to acquire and develop an area of ‘The Acres’ referred to earlier. The land became derelict but the Project aims to make it productive again for the benefit of the whole village. It will supply timber and firewood, lamb and beef, and vegetables as well as common space for community activity. Much of the area has already been bought as housing plots for holiday homes but the Project has acquired key areas with considerable support from villagers and funding bodies. Whisky can be thanked for this idea as the five had had too much at a party and were about to save the world with deep thoughts. However, the idea grew in size, scope and ambition and despite much indifference and some hostility the five persisted, gradually pulling in many other people. A crazy idea has become a very important symbol and focus for the future of the community.



The Crofting Project Area

Raymond's House

SYSOP - I would like to hear of any other issues that you wish to raise.

INSH - This is a very small community with few resources provided by statutory agencies. The road, water and sewerage, refuse collection, street lighting and the library are all.

A weekly bus and a mobile fish van also bring excitement to the village when they park by the telephone and post box.

There are other less tangible resources all provided by the villagers themselves. These are all in the areas of mutual help. The Crofting Project has begun to focus such help as there is no central meeting place for the daily interactions of living. There is no great concern about social services at this time but one or two people with snowy white hair are becoming a little concerned about this. When all the young people leave, who will be left to look after those who need help? Will any of the present population still be there in another twenty five years time? The relative newness of the population does not indicate stability and continuity. The continuing growth of the holiday home phenomenon could eventually lead to the position once again of no permanent residents in Insh. The current residents do not wish to have any more growth in village size and resist housing development which may in the end hasten that possibility by making it even harder for the young to stay. Nevertheless, they do seem to have a determination and an optimism that we hope will succeed.

We left Insh vertically so that we could have a last panoramic view. We would have liked to explore further but our time allocation ran out because of incompetence at the CHTC booking office and we demand a refund. We would like to return there to see if our feelings of optimism about the future are justified.



Leaving Insh looking west and showing the marshes with eighteenth century drainage