

From Face-to-Face to Hybrid Communities

International Institute of Informatics and Systemics (IIS)
www.iis.org

The [International Institute of Informatics and Systemics \(IIS, www.iis.org\)](http://www.iis.org) has been trying to foster and support the formation of Intellectual Communities¹ oriented toward its founding motives and purposes. Having been born in the context of the Systems Movement, a main purpose of the IIS is to think and act in the context of what relates, integrates, and, consequently, systemizes. **Intellectual integration and relating thinking and acting** are at the heart of the IIS motivation and orientation.

Consequently, among the main objectives of the IIS are the following:

- *Integration* of Academic Activities: Research, Education, and Consulting/Real life Problem solving
- *Integration* among Academy, Industry, and Society.
- *Integration* among disciplines: **Inter-Disciplinary** Research, Education, and Communication.

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One way in which the IIS have been trying to achieve its objectives, during 17 years, is through the organization of 1) **multi-disciplinary** conferences as support for both **intra-** and **inter-disciplinary** communication, and 2) specific events on different ways for integrating knowledge and academic activities: research, education, and consulting or real life problem solving. Through these conferences, a community spirit started forming. Some groups are attending each year the same conference on the same topic. One of the groups, from Japan, has been attending the conference since 2002. Some scholars have been attending the conferences since the first ones.

With the objective to foster and support the continuous formation of these intellectual groups, and to improve the effectiveness of the conferences, the IIS has been implementing, since 2006, virtual environments that provide access to the respective conference's attendees to virtual means of communication and interaction. This kind of virtual environments support the transformation of the face-to-face yearly meeting groups into **hybrid groups** which members have access to **face-to-face and virtual** communication and interaction. The steps that have been done in potentiating this transformation are the following:

1. Since 2006, the IIS implemented a **virtual session** for each face-to-face session included in the respective conference program. Virtual sessions provided access to comment and interact with the authors of all papers presented at the respective conference by means of asynchronous communication via forums associated to the papers that were presented. In this way, **synchronous** face-to-face presentations were complemented by **asynchronous** virtual communication in order get the benefit of both kinds of communication. Let us provide a short

¹ We are using the term "community" in its general meaning of "group of people sharing information, opinions, and/or knowledge by means of interactions; having common interests and values; and oriented by similar or common purposes."

explanation related to the sought complementarities (and potential synergy) between synchronous and asynchronous communications.

Straub and Karahanna² found that those who shared information before a meeting reported a higher level communication effectiveness during the meeting. This fact has been known for a long time, even before any kind of Computer Mediated Communication has existed. Jay for example, in 1976, affirmed that among the fundamental guidelines for running an effective meeting is an adequate preparation which necessarily includes the identification of the participants and the distribution of the appropriate document beforehand.³ So, there was little doubt at the IIS that a virtual session through which the papers (to be presented at the respective F2F session) would be distributed beforehand, as well as information about their respective authors, would *increase the effectiveness* of the respective face-to-face session. This is basically why virtual sessions are usually ready about one week before the first day of the face-to-face conference.

Virtual sessions were also accessible by the conference participants during the face-to-face sessions were held as well as 1-2 months after the respective conference was over. Figure 1 presents a visual schematization in which fundamental complementarities between face-to-face and virtual session were briefly presented for each of the time periods we just referred to.

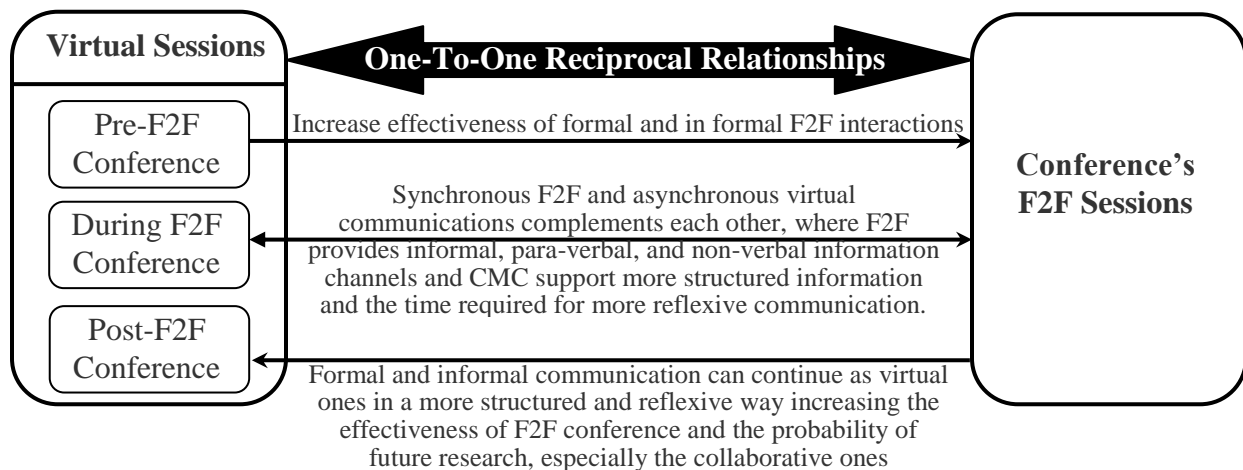


Figure 1

- Because of the Global Recession, and the respective budget cuts in universities, research centers and corporations generated problems to usual attendees of IIS' conferences for finding the required financial support for travelling, the IIS implemented ways for allowing *virtual participation* by means of asynchronous communication via PDF documents, PowerPoint presentations, videos and the respective associated electronic forums.

² D. W. Straub and E. Karahanna, 1990, The changing role of telecommunications technologies in the workplace: E-mail, voice-mail & fax. Working Paper Series, MISRC-WP-90- 10, Management Information Systems Research Center, University of Minnesota; cited by Warkentin, et. al., op. cit., p. 977

³ A. Jay, A., 1976, How to **run** a meeting, *Harvard Business Review*, 54(2), 43-57; cited in Warkentin, et. al., op. cit. p. 988

3. Because of the continuing Global Recession, and with additional objective of improving the effectiveness the published electronic proceedings the IIS implemented the idea of **Group Blogs** in which each post included an abstract of a paper presented at the conference and a link to the PDF document of the full paper published in the respective proceedings. Examples of this group blogs can be found at <http://www.iis.org/iisblogs.asp>. Relating a group blog to the respective electronic proceedings provided more flexibility and *openness* than the post-conference virtual sessions. In this way, scholars/researchers who did not participate in the respective conference could not just read the free electronic proceedings but also comment the papers and provide constructive feedback for the potential improvement of the paper. This might help both the article's authors and readers, and might generate virtual interactions between readers and authors that would certainly increase the effectiveness of scientific/professional communication.

More objectives were sought with the implementation of group blogs linked to the electronic proceedings. Among these objectives are the following (which briefly include what has been described in the last paragraph)

- To allow further communications among the conference attendees, via CMC.
 - To allow virtual communication for those participants who attended some F2F sessions but could not attend others and/or those who attended a conference and could not attend others.
 - To provide a platform for *post-publication* comments, constructive feedback and (in a next step (evaluation) that might be made by all conference attendees and non-attendees as a way of improving future version of the respective article and/or providing input for future research or inquiry and possibly new research or reflection papers, and or supporting decisions related to publishing some additional articles in the Journal of Systemics, Cybernetics, and Informatics.
 - To open the possibility for the formation of **virtual or hybrid research groups**, and (in a possibly following stage) potential academic/professional communities with a common research interest. This, in turn, might provide adequate conditions for collaborative research, which might be inter-disciplinary and/or inter-national.
4. A consequence of the way in which the IIS implemented the group blogs, as associated to the *electronic proceedings*, is that the posts, and their potential respective comments are associated to a specific paper, not to a specific topic or issue. This is adequate if the objective is to support interaction oriented to improving the paper, or to expanding the understanding of its authors and reader, but it excludes interactions related to the topic of the paper. Consequently, in order to complement group blogs, the IIS is implementing group blogs associated to conference topics. An example can be found on the topic "[Case Studies and Methodologies](http://casemethodologies.wordpress.com)" (<http://casemethodologies.wordpress.com>)

In order to address the issue of fostering and supporting *virtual or hybrid academic and/or professional groups, and even virtual communities*, the IIS is trying to provide Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) support for participants of different conferences, i.e. an environment, or a platform for virtual communication among participants in different conferences regarding similar topics, i.e. *inter-conferences virtual communication*.

Consequently, asynchronous CMC have been, and are being implemented, in order to support virtual communication among participants of different conferences. In this way, conference participants who engaged in formal and informal face-to-face (F2F) interaction might have virtual communication with both 1) those with whom they had the opportunity to have F2F communications, and 2) those with whom they did not have the opportunity to interact F2F with because they were participants in other conference, but with whom they might have a common research interest in the same or similar topic. This would increase the probability of communicating with more people with similar academic or professional interest and this, in turn, may increase the probability of the formation of *hybrid groups* and even of *hybrid communities*, where both F2F and virtual communications are included and might reinforce each other in cybernetic (co-regulative and co-amplificative) loops. Figure 2 schematizes visually what the IIS is trying to achieve, regarding inter-conferences synchronous CMC which combined with intra-conference hybrid (F2F/CMC) communication might produce hybrid international and Interdisciplinary groups and, potentially, hybrid communities, having F2F communication at traditional conferences and virtual intra- and inter-conferences communication. This schema might support and get supported by the formation of International Interdisciplinary Integration Groups which the IIS is going to foster, promote and foster (IIIG). A brief description of the IIIG can be found in Appendix A

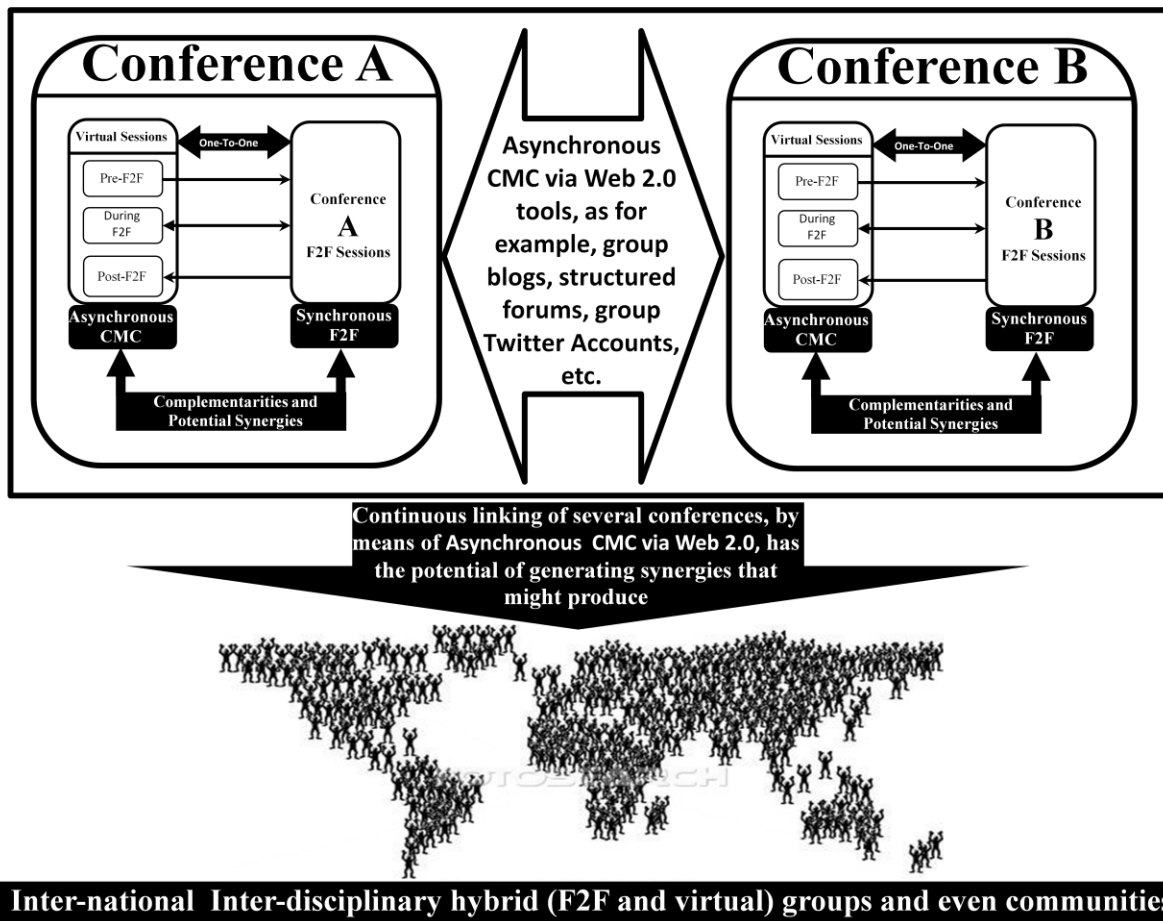


Figure 2

Toward Hybrid Groups and/or Communities

The group blogs linked to the electronic proceedings might support the formation of virtual or hybrid groups or communities, but this support might not be enough and it may even hinder the formation of this kind of groups or communities. Blogs are considered as supporting basically *one-to-many* communication, while groups and communities require *many-to-many* kind of communication. A personal blog is definitely a one-to-many communication support tools, but when comments are allowed blogs might be considered to also be many-to-many communication tool though the comments that might generate a given post in the personal blog. But, as it has been noticed these comments are not frequent and when they are made are perceived as accessorial and with lower importance than the posted text. Furthermore, the comments are usually related to the content of the post, so in personal blogs agenda is set by one person. A collaborative blog might have different people posting different contents, but still those who are making the comments do not feel that they can influence the blog agenda and, consequently, they might tend to avoid making comment that otherwise they might have made.

If we accept that personal blogs support basically one-to-many communication, a group blog that contains the abstracts of a conference as posts linking to the respective PDF document in the electronic proceedings would support “many one-to-many” restricted to the content of the respective papers, and not many-to-many CMC, which is a desirable feature (and probably a necessary one) for the formation of virtual groups and/or communities. Consequently, the IIS is inquiring about the financially feasible means to provide a platform for effective many-to-many CMC, which might be forums linked to the group blogs mentioned above and/or linked to the papers presented at a conference, and/or to the virtual sessions of a conference.