

myNetWorks is here - how can you use it?

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Introduction

About a year ago we were conducting a survey among the subscribers of this newsletter, to find out about your needs regarding a new internet environment for exchange and e-learning in ecological engineering.

The return was considerable. We received more than 70 filled out questionnaires from 24 countries. A key finding was that the respondents were looking for quick and easy access to other people's experience, in particular to case studies of successful projects. There appeared to be a need for an environment in the internet that would address these wishes and we got a lot of supportive & encouraging comments from many respondents.

Your answers helped us very much to shape the new web environment www.mynetworks.org. The environment is here now. This article is about how it can be used and under what conditions.

Looking back: A brief history of www.mynetworks.org

Let's have a look back before we start exploring the options of the new web environment a bit more. A key motivation for the "myNetWorks" project was the experience of a vast lack of knowledge concerning Ecological Engineering systems among engineers, project staff and decision makers - in developing as well as in developed countries. As a result of this, the advancement of Ecological Engineering ideas and systems was (and still is) rather sluggish, even though the Ecological Engineering approach can lead to beautiful, multifunctional, reliable and highly sustainable solutions.

Based on this experience, in 1999 Johannes Heeb and myself made a proposal in behalf of IEES to SDC (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), to develop a web environment for communication and exchange, which could also be used by SDC's project staff for their own purposes. In spring 2002 the proposal was finally approved and the project began in May 2002.

We started out with a number of face-to-face focus groups and the electronic survey I already mentioned. The result was quite clear and unbiased: The people that took part expressed a clear need for a working community environment for exchange and e-learning. Based on the answers we got, an extensive activities analysis was carried out, which led to the basic concept of <http://www.mynetworks.org> and its

functionalities. This work was designed and carried out by Marcia Pereira, architect and e-learning specialist, who joined the project team in May 2002, and by myself.

Also, in summer and fall 2002 we established a strategic partnership with The Network University (TNU) in Amsterdam. TNU is a foundation that grew out of the Political Science Department of the University of Amsterdam. They have been offering online courses since the mid 90s, on topics like "Public Private Partnership in the Water Sector" or on "Transforming Civil Conflicts". TNU brought into the partnership a lot of experience with moderating and conducting online courses, namely in the person of Mona Hansen. They brought in a crew of experienced programmers which had been building their own web learning environment. If you look at mynetworks.org today, most of the implementation and programming work was done by Peter van Campen of TNU.

When the team had been formed a first prototype was developed, based on the existing TNU learning environment. A test eWorkshop was carried out in February 2003, with about 20 participants. This workshop was quite successful, for both the participants (see [1]) and us. We were enthused by the spirit that developed among the participants and - quite naturally - discovered a lot of things we could do better. The experiences lead to some reprogramming of the environment. Since Nov. 1, 2003 mynetworks.org is now online again. Two online courses have already taken place.

Some words about the ideas and ethics behind myNetWorks

1. A strong thematical focus

myNetWorks will have a strong focus on sustainable environmental technology and ecological engineering. It is the job of the community managers to ensure that it stays focussed.

2. A lively, self sustaining community of practice as goal

We want to help develop a well working community of practice where you can find answers to specific problems concerning our core field. We see myNetWorks as a tool that helps to connect professionals in a new and unprecedented way. You should be able to find high quality information and (virtually) meet that elder professor you have been reading the book of. But you should also be able to meet your colleagues and friends there. Currently (Dec. 2003), about 250 people have registered as members, 170 of which have joined within the first month after myNetWorks was reopened.

3. Community and courses should nurture each other

In mynetworks.org there are five spaces with very distinct purposes:

- A Resources Space where anybody can find articles documents related to the topic of the environment. Anybody who has registered as a member can also upload material of his / her own

- An Exchange Space with discussion groups and a public chat room. There you will also find a list of community members showing who is online at a given time and a facility to send instant messages to other members
- A Personal Space where every community member can edit the own profile and find direct links to discussion threads s/he has subscribed to and to courses s/he is attending.
- A Courses Space where courses are offered
- An Entrance Space which serves as the gate for all that come to myNetWorks the first time, containing information about the environment.

Community and course activities are woven into each other. The resources, exchange facilities and the Personal Space are open to any registered member and they are free of charge. Courses will focus on specific topics, require separate registration and will not be free of charge in general.

Community activities and courses should nurture each other. Interesting material produced during courses or workshops will be made available to the community after the course. Likewise, interesting discussion groups may be made public after a course. However, only course participants will have access to the discussions and the material of an ongoing course.

New courses can in turn be inspired by and grow out of the Community activities of mynetworks, such as the "Chat of the month" (to be started in December 03), or by the bulletins and threads you may post in the public discussion groups. If you are interested in running a course on mynetworks, please contact the community manager(s) at info@mynetworks.org.

4. Mutual trust is very important

We strongly believe that the most important thing to achieve a well working community of practice is mutual trust. Therefore we ask you to lay open your full name and address and give some information about yourself before you can enter myNetWorks. In the future, you will be asked to add a photo as well, so that you can access anybody's profile and photo from any place in the environment at any time.

We are aware that if we ask you to lay open some of your personal data, we need to respect your privacy as well. We promise that:

- Your email address will be used sparingly, only to send news concerning mynetworks community activities or courses.
- There will be no advertisement via mynetworks.
- We will not sell or give away data associated with your profile to anyone
- The community managers are responsible for checking people's profiles and identifying those who do not comply with the rules

5. We promote an open access philosophy

The tools in the community area are accessible for all members of myNetWorks. In concrete this means:

- You can look at all public discussion groups and subscribe to threads you find interesting

- You can create new threads in the existing discussion groups at you liberty and post messages there
- There is a public chat room (open 24 hours on 7 days per week) that can be used by any community member
- Anyone can see who else is registered and read their profiles
- You can send instant messages to any other person that is online via a 1-to-1 instant messaging tool
- You can download all material stored in the public library and upload your own relevant material (files, photos, movies.....)
- You can administer your own profile

6. Course creation should be easy for people who are not e-learning specialists

The basic course concept is designed for teachers that have none or very little experience with web based teaching:

- You need to know how to handle Word or Powerpoint files and their conversion to HTML ("save as HTML") and PDF (this is a bit more tricky, we'll help you with this)
- With a reasonable amount of preparation (and, if you are a complete novice in online teaching: some support from the myNetWorks team) you will be able to put together and run a course yourself
- You don't need to be a programmer to handle myNetWorks. The management tools can be handled quite easily. Knowing a few basic HTML tags will make your pages look nicer but is no pre-requisite

How you can use myNetWorks

1. Find answers to your questions

The Resources Space and the tools of the Exchange Space are freely available to any registered member. It is up to your phantasy how you want to use them.

2. Make announcements to other myNetWorks members

There will be a monthly myNetWorks newsletter. If you want to make announcements of concern to all other members please contact the community managers (info@mynetworks.org). We will screen the requests and include into the newsletter anything of relevance to the community, except for plain advertisements.

3. Create courses or workshops (e-Learning activities)

You can conduct courses of your own in the Courses Space, ranging from 1 day workshops to courses that stretch over a few weeks. This service is open to anyone who wants to conduct a course fitting within the scope of myNetWorks. Running a course or workshop in myNetWorks is not free, but pricing will be reasonable and negotiations will take your situation into account.

The myNetWorks team also offers a number of optional services in connection with courses:

- Support in the development of the course concept and design of learning activities
- Support in arranging the course documents
- Support in moderating and evaluating your online course

- All myNetWorks courses will be announced to the community members - a highly specific target audience which you will hardly find in one place elsewhere

4. Create groups for informal exchange in a protected space

You can create specific working or research groups of your choice in the Exchange Space. If they are open and relevant to the community, they will be free. But If they are reserved to a specific group, this service will be charged. Although myNetWorks was not specifically developed to be used by closed groups, it is flexible enough to accomodate it.

5. Train users of yourproduct or your employees

Businesses that work in an international context can use myNetWorks to train a selected group of users in how to use their products. Employees can also be trained on the use of new technologies or new strategies. Online workshops or conferences can be easily organised within myNetWorks. In some circumstances this might save a lot of travelling expenses.

6. Provide distant coaching

...for e-learning activities, groups or training activities.

Now, just start using it..

The myNetWorks environment has been online for 6 weeks now and we are also still learning more about it every day. The functionalities of myNetWorks are being further developed. New functionalities will be available in the course of the next few months. We'd like to invite you to embark on this ship and make use of the possibilities this new web environment has to offer.

Reference

[1] *myNetWorks - a summary of the first eWorkshop*, A.D.Cheoolkar, *EcoEng-Newsletter NO.7, 2003*), http://www.iees.ch/EcoEng031/EcoEng031_Anirudha.html