

THE TEACHING STATISTICS MAILBASE LIST

David Green, Loughborough University, UK
Mike Fuller, University of Kent, UK

The Teaching Statistics Mailbase List was established on behalf of the Teaching Statistics Trust in 1996 by Mike Fuller for those concerned with the teaching of statistics in all phases of education. It relates to the objectives of the international journal Teaching Statistics, and enables discussion of how to make teaching and learning statistics more effective, and was conceived as providing support to subscribers of the journal. Many teachers of statistics colleagues with whom they can discuss pedagogical and technical matters, this list provides a "virtual staffroom" for their benefit. The number of subscribers has grown and by March 1998 stood at 325, from over 30 countries, with messages averaging about 25 per month.

INTRODUCING MAILBASE

Mailbase is a service which runs electronic discussion lists for the UK higher education and research community. A group of people with a common interest all join an electronic discussion list. Someone then sends an e-mail message to the list, and the message is sent to all the list members who may in turn send messages in response - either to the sender alone or to the whole list.

It was because inexperienced users often find that mailing lists are difficult to set up and use that the Mailbase service was set up in 1989, based in the University Computing Service at the University of Newcastle, England. At the end of its first year Mailbase already had 55 discussion lists and 1,700 list members which had grown by March 1998 to 1,888 lists and 134,123 members worldwide.

ADVANTAGES OF MAILBASE

- Mailbase is very simple to use, only requiring elementary knowledge of and access to e-mail.
- Mailbase lists are only created if they are seen to benefit the UK higher education and research community. (In practice, this extends to those interested in teaching in HE, FE and school, provided they have access.)
- Mailbase is not simply a computer system, but is a supported service with a website, a helpline, and a dedicated user group.
- Mailbase list membership allows one to exchange news and views with people world wide.

- It is centrally funded, so there is no subscription fee to pay. It's free!

GETTING INFORMATION ABOUT MAILBASE

You can find out more about Mailbase by using the World Wide Web and looking at: <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/docs/> or by sending an e-mail message to:

mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk with this command in the body of the message:

send mailbase user-guide

stop

INTRODUCING THE TEACHING STATISTICS MAILBASE LIST

This list was established in 1996 by Mike Fuller, at the request of the Editorial Board of the journal *Teaching Statistics* for which journal David Green is the production editor. The list is for those concerned with the initial teaching of statistics in all phases of education. It relates to the objectives of the journal *Teaching Statistics* and the associated *Teaching Statistics Trust*, and enables discussion of how to make teaching and learning statistics more effective. The list provides a place where those concerned with the initial teaching of statistics, or with supporting teachers of statistics, can pool experiences, advice and queries. It provides a forum for posting notices of workshops, conferences and other gatherings related to teaching statistics.

For many people in schools and colleges (and even in university departments) the number of their colleagues involved with teaching statistics is very small. This list can be a "virtual staffroom" of fellow teachers of statistics, connecting the unconnected.

Early on there was some debate in the mailbase list about whether it should provide detailed technical help for educators. The predominant view was that it should if that was needed. So far, the main uses to which it has been put have been: Explanation of statistical tests and other technical matters and approaches to teaching such topics; News about courses; Advice on textbooks and software.

ACCESSING THE TEACHING STATISTICS MAILBASE LIST

Messages for circulation to list members should be e-mailed to:

Teaching-Statistics@mailbase.ac.uk

The archives of the list are most easily accessed using WWW. Point your web browser to: <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk> and look for the relevant information, or more directly point to: <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists-p-t/teaching-statistics/>

Members joining the list are encouraged (but certainly not required) to send an e-mail to the list to let other list members know about their existence and their interests and activities in the field of teaching statistics.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEACHING STATISTICS MAILBASE LIST - MARCH 1998

Number of members: 325
 Subject Category: Maths & Computing (G)
 First posting to list: 5 November 1996
 Last posting to list: 5 March 1998
 Total messages to date: 388 in 16 months (average 24 messages/month)

E-mail Address	Country	Number	E-mail Address	Country	Number
at	austria	1	il	israel	2
au	australia	26	it	italy	3
be	Belgium	2	jp	japan	1
bg	bulgaria	1	mu	mauritius	2
br	brazil	5	mx	mexico	2
ca	canada	7	my	malaysia	2
co	colombia	1	net	(usa based)	7
com	(usa based)	24	nl	netherlands	2
cr	croatia	2	no	norway	1
cu	cuba	1	nz	new zealand	11
de	germany	4	pl	poland	1
dk	denmark	1	sa	south africa	1
edu	(usa based)	44	se	sweden	3
ee	estonia	1	su	soviet union	1
es	spain	3	th	thailand	1
fi	finland	2	uk	uk	139
fr	france	3	us	usa	3
gr	greece	1	uy	uruguay	1
hk	hongkong	2	za	zambia	1
ie	ireland	5			

Amongst the 325 subscribers (actually a few less as some have two addresses!) there are at least 37 countries represented. Predominant is the UK (139), with significant numbers with US based e-mail addresses but who may not be resident there (about 70), and well represented are Australia (26) and New Zealand (11). There are some perhaps surprising absences (e.g. Switzerland, Portugal, Hungary,)

MESSAGE COUNT

Since setting up in October 1996 the message count each month has been quite varied:

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1996											51	21
1997	42	45	14	9	15	30	18	18	31	20	16	20
1998	22	9	(7)									

On the assumption of 325 subscribers and an average of about 20 distinct messages posted per month the total network traffic is currently about 6500 messages per month.

TYPES OF MESSAGE

A breakdown of main categories of transmitted messages is not straightforward, of course, but the following gives a reasonable indication of the uses being made of the list. Most messages have been assigned to a single category but some are counted twice where this seemed appropriate. Of course, many messages could be assigned to several categories, but this temptation has been resisted.

- (1) Discussions of teaching statistical techniques, and technical help 172
 - miscellaneous topics 48
 - statistical tests 57
 - sampling/inference 19
 - diagrams 11
 - probability 9
 - Bayesian approach 9
 - data/censuses 12
 - distributions 7
- (2) News of courses, etc. 68
- (3) Computer software and its use 42
- (4) Text books 40
 - miscellaneous 31
 - history of statistics 9
- (5) Mailbase matters 23

(6)	‘Noise’ (repeated or rejected messages, etc.)	24
(7)	Curriculum (Assessment, Objectives)	16
(8)	Numeracy issues	12
(9)	Examination questions	7
(10)	Miscellaneous	12

As can be seen, the main activity has been the discussion of technical statistical topics and how to teach them, with news of courses etc. and software issues and textbooks well represented. There has been surprisingly little discussion of more general educational issues relating to the curriculum (aims and objectives, syllabuses, etc.) or to examination questions which cause difficulties or are flawed. We have had to suffer only one “chain letter” so far. Perhaps the most bizarre message has been a member from Argentina wishing to sell pre-colombian artefacts from Peru!

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

After a deliberately low-key launch in Autumn 1996, the Teaching Statistics Mailbase list is performing the kind of service which was expected of it. Discussion of teaching approaches to statistics, and advice on statistical methods which are taught are much to the fore. News of courses etc. and discussion of texts and software have also featured significantly. It seems very likely that as school teachers increasingly have access to e-mail facilities we shall see a significant increase in list membership, and perhaps a change in the traffic.