

Book Review – E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online

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Book Review

E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online

Author: Gilly Salmon (2000). *E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page. 180 pages, softcover. ISBN: 0 7494 3110 5

Reviewed by: Dan Eastmond, Director of Learning Resources, Western Governors University

No one doubts that the Internet has permanently changed the face of higher education. One of the institutions to experiment, foster, and promote computer-conferencing from its inception through to current Web-based forms is the Open University of the United Kingdom (OU UK). From 1988, OU UK's few online offerings have grown to over 160 Web-based courses in which over 100,000 students participate. Having been a student-participant in one of these early courses back in 1992, I read with intrigue Salmon's description of this effort. I remember logging on from Syracuse, New York to the text-only online course with four e-moderators and 45 other participants scattered throughout the world – from Israel, Australia, Latin America, the United States, but mainly Great Britain. I recalled the frustration of trying to get connected to the conference at 1:00 a.m. with my 9600 baud modem, relying on a tech-savvy fellow graduate student to figure out the problems. What a thrill it was to upload and download messages to these threaded discussions located on a server hundreds of miles across the ocean, to ruminate throughout the day about the conversations I read there, and to return to the conference the next day to post my thoughts and to find responses to my contributions as our conversations unfolded.

A decade later, not only the OU UK, but also nearly every postsecondary institution in the developed world has launched hybrid courses, if not entirely distance degree programs. These are engaging new learners, usually working adults who can now access a college education from an institution located far away from their home. As a participant, instructor, e-moderator, trainer, and researcher, Salmon has been a major player in this Internet revolution. This superb book distills the lessons learned, particularly for faculty members, trainers, instructors, and facilitators who need to effectively move from traditional face-to-face modes of instruction in a classroom to the online world, an environment characterized by hearty peer interaction, learning communities, and knowledge construction. Salmon understands this world, understands how students and faculty make this transition, and furthermore how to move across that gulf to create and sustain successful online learning environments through e-moderating.

Salmon's field is business, where she has systematically trained over 400 e-moderators in several online courses for the OU UK, but the lessons learned from her action research apply to nearly all subjects within higher education. The first two thirds of the book lay out the most salient aspects of online instruction – from educational characteristics of the virtual environment and the software systems that support it – to issues surrounding training of e-moderators. The book

begins by reviewing the basics of online instruction, such as technical features of the network, the costs of this type of education, and online social and communication dynamics. Salmon adroitly weaves case examples and pertinent research into her presentation, which truly does give the novice a good feel for what this instruction is all about and reminds experienced online educators of the uniqueness of this learning environment.

The heart of the book is found in chapter two where Salmon presents a five-stage model for computer-mediated communication (CMC) in education and training. Based on her research over several years, the model progresses from the early concerns in stages one and two that learners have about technical skills and social relationships to later stages of learning. Early in the course, students are gaining access, becoming comfortable with CMC software features, introducing themselves to other participants, and forming impressions of others through initial interactions. Quickly, the e-moderator guides students to “information exchange” (stage three) about course topics, and then to the next level of learning, “knowledge construction.” At this stage, probably where most of the structured learning conversations occur, the e-moderator helps students engage together with the issues and process the information they encounter and mutually share. At the highest stage called “development,” students become responsible for their own learning, and taking over the direction of these conversations. Salmon asserts that the e-moderator’s role becomes more important as the conference progresses even though e-moderator’s control and domination gradually diminishes as the self-directed learners take over. Salmon admits that this sort of participant give-and-take is best suited to professional preparation for fields of practice where context, decision-making, and models need to be debated, challenged, supported, adapted, and dropped for students to become socialized into a field requiring expert judgment amid ambiguities.

An important table in the chapter outlines e-moderator qualities vis-à-vis various characteristics of the online environment. The major role, she posits, is for e-moderators to enjoin participants’ processing and “meaning making” for knowledge construction – not content transmission. The ability to guide online activities is more important than making polished instructional presentations. E-moderators are often part-time faculty, whose credibility comes from professional practice in their full-time employment (not from advanced research and scholarship about the course content).

From here, the book examines how e-moderators and participants should be trained and prepared to successfully engage online. Since e-moderators are to teach online, their training should be conducted in that same environment. She uses the same five-stage model to move e-moderators through this training; they progress from stage to stage by responding to initial questions, interacting, and concluding with reflective responses. The chapter includes actual conference contributions, distilling the essence of this training to the reader. Salmon writes: “teaching online needs careful planning and preparation, otherwise the stories will continue of e-moderators being overloaded, underpaid, and burnt out by their work,” since untrained e-moderators “take longer and do less well” (p. 56). She also considers the importance of monitoring e-moderator performance through online measures and supporting them through associated conferences while they conduct their first courses.

In describing participants in CMC courses, Salmon argues that all students are individuals, but that e-moderators should bear in mind the needs of certain types of persons: gender differences, those with a range of learning styles, various disabilities, lurkers, and those learning in a corporate training context. E-moderators must accommodate various learning preferences, be patient and respectful to all students – some of whom may have particular needs of which the

instructor is not immediately aware. Likewise, students also need an introduction to online instruction. In this orientation, they work through the five steps of the model online; many of the questions and discussion items adapted from e-moderator training.

While reading Salmon's work I reflected upon my own development as an e-moderator. First came the extensive qualitative research I conducted on distance Bachelor's degree seeking students taking online courses published as Eastmond (1995). Salmon outlines so clearly most of the aspects of effective learning environments that I discovered through phone interviews with students, email exchanges, and transcripts of computer conferences. However, it was not until I was approached by a graduate program to be an online instructor for its fledgling distance program that I formed e-moderating skills through the crucible of practice. Fortunately there were experienced faculty who understood the constructivist principles enjoined in Salmon's book: to allow the off-line textbook and readings be the lecture and to use the online threaded discussions to engage students in examining the implications and applications of those ideas, principles, and skills within the real-life contexts that they faced as professionals. These distance faculty members provided the sounding board on which to air the concerns I faced, working with students, and developing more effective Web-conferences. How helpful is the advice Salmon's book gives in providing this same sort of support to a faculty member who is going it alone in undertaking Internet courses! Perhaps more important is the book's usefulness for those who support faculty and administrators of tertiary institutions implementing online distance education.

Salmon ends the book with some 'star gazing' into the future of education transformed by CMC. Although the educational milieu will expand to a global scale, e-moderation must continue to address individual requirements. The workplace will more directly shape the university as it shifts from a repository of academic information to a supplier of capable employees at all organizational levels. The future workforce will be in continual flux as employees constantly upgrade their capabilities through continuing education. Online learners will need to become more self-directed, cooperative, capable information handlers, critical thinkers, and team players. The distinction between education and work activities will likely diminish as instruction becomes modular, "just in time," and competency-based, thereby fitted to individual needs. Institutions will change their modes of assessment to incorporate online activities, as well as address the "need for the valid assessment of the performance of larger numbers of learners at low cost" (p. 94).

Salmon claims that many traditional colleges and universities that cannot adapt to online modes of instruction will face extinction. Telecommunications will make it possible to build institutions around students rather than the geographic areas in which they are located physically (Susman, 1999 quote in Salmon, p. 90). She sees e-moderating becoming the key competitive advantage for new teaching and learning organizations that make this activity an integral part of their endeavors. Institutions that plan, sustain, and enhance this activity will thrive in the future.

However, as insightful, accurate and stimulating as this book is, I would have liked more information on how to implement new modes of distance learning. How can e-moderators support the modular study of students with different subject-matter requirements? What about students who come into and exit the online course based on individual needs and desires to slow the pace or accelerate their studies? Is the constructivism that Salmon professes always appropriate, particularly when outcomes are predetermined by the sponsoring organization and the participants themselves, as in a corporate training or competency-based educational environment? What about the development and sustenance of a learning community to span an entire degree program through e-moderating, not just the interactions of individual online courses? Salmon

does touch on these areas; however, her practical advice is toward implementing the familiar modes of postsecondary education. One issue she engages head on is the labor-intensive nature of e-moderated learning at course and institutional levels, suggesting practices to make this endeavor more cost-efficient.

The last third of the text contains “Resources for Practitioners,” twenty-two short items that aid in implementing key models and ideas presented in the text (e.g., “Using the five-stage model), to less central yet important activities (e.g., “Understanding Lurkers” or “Choosing a Software System for CMC”). Some of resources contain fascinating nuggets for imagination and reference. For example, Resource 20 contains a humorous, evocative account of a future manager’s day that can be used by e-moderators to collectively contemplate how their own roles might similarly evolve. Resource 21 offers many references about online journals, virtual institutions, online databases, and CMC software.

In conclusion, *E-Moderating* lays out a useful model for leading intellectually engaging, highly interactive, and effective online courses. This model makes sense and is grounded in Salmon’s extensive research and practical experience at the Open University of the UK, an immensely successful distance education enterprise. It clearly moves the novice towards assuming an expert role in leading online instruction. As seen in Part II, Salmon goes beyond the discussion of theory to give practical advice on implementation.

I was pleased to see numerous examples from other universities and training environments to exemplify key points. For example, Salmon shows how longer academic course can be adapted to a one-day asynchronous virtual seminar (pp. 48-49). The book also discusses common challenges; such as how many participants does an ideal conference take? An important contribution, the book moves learning institutions to consider, build, and affirm the role of e-moderator as essential in their evolution within the global information age. Salmon herself notes the dangers of star-gazing the future, but I won’t be surprised if her predictions about e-learning and e-moderating come true!

References

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