

Book Review – E-tivities: The key to active online learning

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Book Review

E-tivities: The key to active online learning

Author: Gilly Salmon. (2002). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning*. London: Kogan Page, softcover, 212 pages. ISBN: 0 7494 3686 7

Reviewed by: Mohamed Ally, Associate Professor, Athabasca University – Canada’s Open University

Overall *E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning*, written by Gilly Salmon, is easy to read and can be used by different types of professionals. The author claims that this book, which consists of two sections, is of interest to academics, teachers, course managers, teaching assistants, instructors, trainers, and developers. The first section provides ideas on how to design and use E-tivities. Below are some highlights of the first section.

According to the author, “E-tivities” have the following features (p. 1):

- Motivating, engaging, and purposeful
- Based on interaction between learners/ students/ participants, mainly through written messages contributions
- Designed and led by an e-moderator
- Asynchronous
- Inexpensive and easy to run

Based on the author’s description, E-tivities appear to be designed for asynchronous, low-level interactions that do not take advantage of the capabilities of the Internet to promote synchronous interaction. The author added: “E-tivities are important for the online learning world because they deploy useful, well-rehearsed principles and pedagogies for learning” (p. 3). However, the author failed to describe these principles and pedagogies in detail and provide theoretical support to back up these ideas.

The author claimed that because they use existing resources and the participants’ exchange of knowledge, E-tivities can save money. However, evidence that E-tivities actually save costs was not provided to back up this claim.

The author presented a five-stage framework for E-tivities:

Stage 1: Access and motivation. The instructor provides access to participants, welcoming and encouraging them

Stage 2: Online socialization. Participants connect with each other so that they know who to interact with during the learning process

Stage 3: Information exchange. Participants interact with and support each other to help achieve each other's goal

Stage 4: Knowledge construction. Group discussions develop and interaction becomes more collaborative

Stage 5: Development. Individuals use the interactive system to achieve personal goals and to reflect on the learning process

These five stages are helpful for anyone thinking of designing and using asynchronous communication for instruction. According to the author, the stages in the framework require students to progressively increase their level of interactivity, resulting in higher levels of learning.

For each stage, the author provided examples of interaction based on a course that was delivered asynchronously. The examples were helpful to understand the five stages; however, better transitions between the sections in the "E-tivities in Action" chapter would have made it easier to follow the information. Chapter 4 in the first section provides information and key principles relating to how to design E-tivities for asynchronous delivery.

The first section of the book lacks the theoretical base and references to the research literature to support the ideas presented. Ideally, the first chapter in the book should have provided readers with an overview of learning and interaction theories. The many "screen dumps" of examples of interaction in the main section interfere with the flow of the ideas and made this first section disjointed.

The second section of the book provides practical ideas for use in online interaction; however, most of the ideas are for low-level asynchronous interaction. The major topics in the second section are as follows:

- How to design effective E-tivities by planning, building motivation, using action words, and "spark ideas"
- How to develop E-tivities using email games, creativity, collaboration, online emotions, and intelligent E-tivities
- How to conduct online communication and E-moderation

In conclusion, this book is an easy to read "how-to" book with many ideas and practical examples on how to design asynchronous online learning. However, from an academic perspective, it lacks a theoretical background to reinforce the ideas presented. Additionally, an operational definition of E-tivities would have clarified the nature of E-tivities. Transitions between the different parts of the book were not well developed. As well, overviews throughout the book would have enabled readers to see the big picture before reading the details.