

E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online

Gilly Salmon

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Understanding the most effective ways to help others acquire and use knowledge has always been the most important attribute of the teacher. Salmon's book provides a useful and comprehensive description of how the educator's task translates itself into a networked world.

The book starts with a chapter titled "What is e-moderating?" I confess to being stuck, right in the first chapter, trying to understand what differentiates e-moderators from e-teachers, e-tutors, or e-anything-related-to-education. I later discovered that Salmon's "Resource for Practitioners #22" provides a delightful list and a paragraph for each of 21 descriptions of educationally related, online positions. These range from "Online conductor" to "Faceless Facilitator" to "E-Police!" and my favorite, "On-line Priest."

Not to make too much of the issue of definition, but understanding the system in which virtual education providers are developing is essential to understanding if you need "e-moderators" in your distance education system. Good books like this help define roles, and the best (and some-times worst) recommendations can appear in contract language. The e-learning business is defining itself as it develops and morphs traditional education professions into e-learning jobs. Salmon's lucid description of time and task of the e-moderator are a timely contribution to this evolution. Salmon's descriptions of the e-moderator function are closest to those of a skilled learning facilitator, trained to maximize learning in a highly mediated context.

Does this "guide on the side" need to have some or any subject matter expertise? Salmon recommends that they "need a qualification at least at the same level and in the same topic as the course for which they are moderating" (p. 41). E-moderating is not teaching if you consider having significant subject matter expertise a prerequisite for your conception of a teacher. Thus an e-moderator is not a sage—either on the stage or on the side. However, there are many ways to organize learning. In many distance education systems the only way to gain economy of scale and to meet large lifelong learning needs is to dissociate the direct link between learning-teaching and content expertise. E-moderators operate as "middlepersons," taking well-designed and crafted learning materials and facilitating a variety of interactive and collaborative learning activities.

Traditional academics will regard e-moderators through a competitive lens and see them as second-rate academics. Administrators will view them as a vast, largely untapped source of labor with which to meet the growing needs of lifelong learners. Students will view them through a pragmatic lens, based on how much assistance the e-moderator provides in the learning process. It is only through good research and experience that we will learn which lens is most effective in facilitating that fundamental goal of helping others to learn most effectively.

E-Moderating is a useful, practical book with just enough theoretical and empirical base to satisfy a wide range of educators. Salmon is a teacher-researcher in the Faculty of Business at the venerable British Open University. Her book reflects a practical orientation, answering questions like “How do I train e-moderators?” or “What does the work life really feel like?” and even provides a form for evaluating the performance of e-moderators. Anyone looking for useful advice related to the design or operation of an online student support or teaching system will find the tips and lists of resources of exceptional value.

I was immediately drawn to the “Model of teaching and learning online through CMC” presented early in Chapter 2. This is the “big picture” on which the recommendations, learning strategies, and case studies are keyed. A GIF illustration of the model is available from the book web site at <http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating>.

The model works in Maslowian hierarchical style with basic needs such as “access and motivation” being a necessary building block for the pyramid of four higher levels of learning. These extend from “online socialization” to “information exchange,” to “knowledge construction” and “development.” I liked the model all the way to the top of the pyramid, only to find “development.” Development of what? I would have liked to see “learning application” or at least “integration” with some aspects of the real world. Labeling aside, it is a good model and it works. Salmon provides descriptions of the skills and behaviors needed by e-moderators to support and enhance learning at every stage. I had a number of quibbles with the bar graph stating the “amount of interactivity” that takes place at each stage and my usual aversion to all things hierarchical, but I liked it. The model serves to tie the next 5 chapters together through a mind map that provides a good visual representation of the e-moderator’s function.

I appreciated the three pages devoted to a description of the methodology that underpins the model and the recommendations. By relating her background and current workplace and detailing how she gathered and analyzed her qualitative data, we get a sense of the validity of the content. Too many “advice books” these days are written by good writers with no direct experience or interest in quality research.

Each chapter is augmented with short case studies, transcripts of conferences, diaries, and e-mails. The book ends with 70 pages of resources for practitioners: mostly checklists and recommendations. Most valuable to me personally of the 22 resources was Table 21 “CMC (Computer Mediated Communications) structures.” Each of these learning activities is categorized under headings such as purpose, student numbers, time, and e-moderator actions. I had trouble with some of the descriptions, for example, what is a “CMC lobby”? Overall, the tables will be useful for designers, e-moderators, or classroom teachers who are interested in creating and building innovative ways to use online tools for teaching and learning.

The book Web site gives a good overview of the content of the book— of course, from

the author's perspective. It also provides a number of experts from the text including three of the 22 "resources for practitioners." And, yes, that great list of alternative names for e-everything-educational that I mentioned above is available at <http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating/resources2.htm>.

Perusing this attractive and functional web site made me realize how the task of book reviewer changes in a networked world. The usual description of "what to expect" is available online for those who want more detail. The Web site also lets us know a bit more about Salmon and points us to some of her presentations, papers, and PowerPoint slide shows. Of course, there are also links to both Amazon and the publisher Kogan Page, so have your VISA card ready!

Even if you don't buy the book, I'm pretty sure that a thoughtful on-line gaze at the 5-step model will prove of value to any distance educator (make that e-educator).

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