In the rush to put courses online, the key role of the online teacher or trainer is sometimes forgotten. This role is gradually evolving from one of ensuring the accurate transmission of known information to one of enabling exploration, and generating new and relevant knowledge for the use of individuals, groups, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations. Because of this shift, and the complexities involved in fulfilling the new role, e-moderator seems the most appropriate designation for it. Challenges to traditional approaches to learning are rife (O'Donaghue, Jentz et al. 2000) but they focus far too much on the role of the technology. We need therefore to be technology's master, not its slave. How do we become Masters? By learning from others who are more experienced than ourselves. We know that new modes of teaching and learning both in Higher Education and at work, together with the need for rapid updating of skills and knowledge, are emerging. (For more about online learning at work see http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/. For more about skills for the future see http://oubs.open.ac.uk/businesscafe, Programme 9.)

Most of us would agree that the advent of fourth generation learning delivery tools (Moore and Kearsley 1996) for use on campus, in the corporation and at a distance, offer the potential for enhancing education. There are increased opportunities for students: Student interaction, student-centeredness, and collaboration. Some argue that this can result in a situation where "the real learning 'space' among students is closer," whether on or off campus (Passerini and Granger 2000 p.4). The critical issue is that students most appreciate learning from others, with the support of a credible facilitator, and this is independent of the technological platform.

Online teaching and learning requires different skills, and changes what we actually do with students. Currently, most online teachers do not have enough training to make the online experience truly successful and productive for learners. Where training is provided it often concentrates on the use of the technology rather than the role of the online teacher. (Explore these ideas on http://oubs.open.ac.uk/gilly. Look under "Reclaiming the Territory for the Natives" and the Australia presentations in May 2000. Also see the paper at: http://kurs.nks.no/eurodl/eurodlen/index.html. Look under Salmon & Giles, 1998).
Managers can add value to online networking in a variety of ways. Firstly, the contributor needs to be acknowledged. Secondly, the contribution should be recorded and available for others to read online so it becomes a form of inventory. The e-moderator's role is to enable it to be retrieved, viewed, and responded to by others. In a collective conference, personal reflections may be responded to in various ways and in different time frames, depending on individual thought processes. It is important that the e-moderator avoids the temptation to discount the experience in any way or to counter it and enter into argument. Instead he or she can draw on the evidence that is presented to try and explore overall conclusions.

Thirdly, the e-moderator should comment, at an appropriate moment, on the sufficiency of the data being presented and the quality of the argument around it. Implementing these practices ensure that the experience, while it is valued, is not necessarily considered complete on its own. It also enables the e-moderator to exemplify ways of exploring and developing arguments. When this is done well, the result is a rich discussion with high levels of participation.

**The Model**

I propose a model with five stages to depict how discussions promote learning and collaboration (for more information go to [http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating/fivestep.htm](http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating/fivestep.htm)). At stage one, individual access and the ability of participants to use online learning tools are essential prerequisites for participation in online learning.

Stage two involves individual participants establishing their online identities and then finding others with whom to interact. At stage three, participants exchange with others information relevant to the course. Up to and including stage three, a form of cooperation occurs, i.e. support for each person's goals. At stage four, course-related group discussions occur and the interaction becomes more collaborative. The communication depends on the establishment of common understanding. At stage five, participants look for more benefits from the system to help them achieve personal goals, explore how to integrate CMC into other forms of learning, and reflect on the learning processes.

Each stage requires participants to master certain technical skills. Each stage calls for different e-moderating skills (the "interactivity bar" running along the right of the flight of steps at the url listed above suggests the intensity of interactivity that you can expect between the participants at each stage). From stage two onwards, it is important to provide online activities that encourage participants to engage in active learning and with each other in meaningful and authentic learning tasks.

Scaffolding suggests a way of structuring this interaction and collaboration, starting with "recruitment" of interest, establishing and maintaining an orientation towards task-relevant goals, highlighting critical features that might be overlooked, demonstrating how to achieve those goals, and helping to control frustration ([Wood and Wood, 1996](http://www.e-moderating.org)). The notion of scaffolding provides an overall framework for training and learning online.

**Recruitment & Training of E-moderators**

E-moderators must be credible as members of the learning community. They do not, however, need a long string of qualifications, nor many years of experience. Nor do they need to be experts or gurus in the subject. As a rough rule of thumb, I suggest they need a qualification at least at the same level and in the same topic as the course which they are e-moderating.

They will need reasonably good keyboard skills and some experience using computers, including online networking. However, given those requirements, you will find that good e-moderators come from many different backgrounds,
with very varied learning and teaching experiences. If they do not have to meet face-to-face with their course participants, you can select them on the basis of their suitability rather than their geographic location!

Most e-moderator recruits come from face-to-face teaching where they may have relied quite heavily on personal charisma to stimulate and hold their students' interest. Switching to an online environment is a very big change. Even those recruits who are used to developing distance learning materials need to explore how online materials can underpin and extend their teaching. If they are used to being considered an expert in their subject, they may find the leveling effect and informality of elearning very challenging to start with.

Any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods or introducing technology into teaching and learning should include effective e-moderator support and training—otherwise its outcomes are likely to be meager and unsuccessful.

Even when technological infrastructure and support are strong—and where worthwhile learning applications are developed—without staff development, nothing is likely to happen beyond pilot schemes. In the interim, the costs of training and support for users can be higher than those associated with provision of the technology. Thus it is worthwhile to consider providing training for e-moderators.

You can further explore the idea of training based on the five-stage model at http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating (see examples of training). To look at an online course based on this model and the e-tivities approach go to http://www.centrinity.com/e-moderating.

↑ References


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