

DOES E-MODERATING AN ACTIVE ONLINE CLASSROOM CREATE?

*Jaishree Odin of the University of Hawaii reviews Gilly Salmon's **E-tivities The Key to Active Online Learning**. London, Kogan Page, Ltd., 2002. Review in press at **On the Horizon**.*

Gilly Salmon's *E-tivities The Key to Active Online Learning* proposes a five-stage model to run an online classroom where course participants are gradually introduced to different aspects of online learning before they actually engage in collaborative learning experiences. The five stages are: access and motivation, online socialization, exchange of information, knowledge construction, and development. In the first stage, the e-moderator ensures that all course participants are able to access the course and are given enough support if any technical or motivational problems are preventing access. In the second stage of online socialization, course participants engage in assigned activities to get to know one another. The first two stages thus ensure that all learners are connected and can access the course and are beginning to initiate interaction with one another to create the social context of learning. The third stage involves the exchange of information where the participants learn to use the materials as they initiate discussion related to the course. The fourth stage then involves the construction of knowledge, which is based on active thinking and knowledge building, in addition to the exploration and interpretation of broader issues. The fifth stage encompasses a more detailed interaction amongst course participants as they work toward achieving personal goals and reflecting on the learning process.

Salmon uses the term "e-tivities" to refer to the program of activities for course participants within the five-stage model and the corresponding moderating strategies for the online instructor or the course leader. The identification of different stages in e-learning experience is valuable, though they could as easily be seen as different aspects of managing an online learning environment. Labeling them as sequentially unfolding stages gives the impression that each stage somehow has the same degree of relevance to the overall learning process for every student since some might be already well prepared in handling the first three stages. If Salmon's model is to be applicable to a broad range of online classrooms, it might be more appropriate to classify the first three stages as the preparatory stage, which could take place in the first week of class to get everybody aboard as the course participants get connected; find out the details about the course through clearly organized overview documents; get to know one another through engaging in some type of social interaction; and engage in preliminary discussion dealing with the content of the course. All experienced online instructors, who emphasize collaborative learning in their classrooms, know that the preparatory stage is absolutely critical to deal with possible technical glitches that some students might encounter in accessing the course or using the conferencing tools. This is also the time to encourage procrastinators through individual messages, if need be, while at the same time inviting the participants to set the social context of learning which is absolutely essential to create a community of learners engaged in active learning.

If we regard Salmon's first three stages as the preparatory stage, then the last two stages really constitute the heart of collaborative learning process. How can we separate personal reflection and development, presented as the fifth stage, from the exploratory collaborative learning that involves the construction of knowledge which is described as the fourth stage?

The exploration and construction of knowledge constantly involve personal reflection as students evaluate what they encounter with what they already know. Some sort of personal reflection at the end of each unit of an online course or at the end of a course of study is understandable, if that is what Salmon means by the fifth stage, but classifying it as a stage perhaps is not warranted.

In addition to providing the framework, Salmon includes many activities that could be used for managing each stage of the model. The focus, however, seems to be on the e-moderating strategies. The author states that e-moderators need not be content experts. This is understandable in the context of the Open University model where the focus is on creating high quality teaching materials and tutors do the actual teaching. In the North American context and in light of the tradition of online learning that is evolving in the majority of institutions of higher education, there is a direct relationship between the professors or content experts and students, except in large classes where teaching assistants assist with some aspects of course delivery. In any case, the reader has to ask if e-moderating activities would suffice to run a course that might have dimensions other than asynchronous conferencing.

Salmon's approach through its exclusive focus on the role of the teacher as a facilitator tends to lead to the misconception that online teaching is merely effective facilitation. Online conferencing, and therefore the instructor's role as a facilitator, however, is only one aspect of creating an integrated teaching-learning environment, which could include other multi-modal teaching and learning activities. Recent studies have shown that the role of the online instructor should not be limited to that of a facilitator. The online instructor also creates a "teaching presence" through appropriate organization of course materials as well as facilitative discourse to guide students toward critical exploration of the content [1]. A direct relationship exists between the quality and frequency of teaching acts and the quality of collaborative learning activities and both in turn seem to impact the nature and quality of desired learning outcomes [2]. The teaching-learning activities thus cannot be isolated in the dynamic virtual space of the online classroom. Switching from the bricks to the clicks classroom does not necessarily mean that we bury all the direct or indirect teaching acts, which could serve as channels for the content expertise of the online instructor. Weekly overviews or lecture notes, discussion questions, and interpretive teaching commentaries help to cultivate the teaching "presence" of the instructor and encourage active learning in students. Multi-modal teaching acts can thus complement acts of facilitation to shape students' learning experience at the cognitive as well as affective level. Through well-crafted teaching and learning activities, the online instructor can promote students' interest in the subject matter and thereby contribute to their self-motivation and self-direction. Without minimizing the importance of training instructors in online facilitation, it needs to be said that online facilitation is only one aspect, though an important aspect, of creating an effective online classroom.

In spite of its limitations, Salmon's model can be effectively used in training aspiring online instructors in e-moderating techniques. Perhaps in that context, the book is quite relevant. The resources section of the book gives a variety of activities that could be adapted to help online instructors become better moderators of asynchronous conferences.

References

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