

REVIEW OF *E-MODERATING - THE KEY TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE*

E-Moderating - The Key to Teaching and Learning Online

Open and Distance Learning Series

Gilly Salmon

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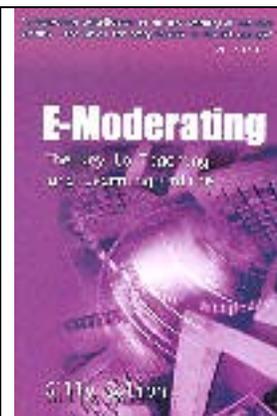
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E-Moderators are "the new generation of teachers and trainers who work with learners online" (p. viii) using Computer-Mediated Conferencing (CMC) as a learning tool, regardless of the subject they are teaching. They are the focus of *E-Moderating*, a recent book which provides both a theoretical framework for developing online learning using CMC (part one), and a wealth of practical advice (part two). The book is supported by a [Web site](#). The author, Gilly Salmon, a distance education specialist with the Open University Business School in the UK, provides a five-step model of effective online education, along with copious examples of how the model relates to real-life online learning contexts. Salmon proposes that, by basing learning on a constructivist model, it is e-moderators that can make the difference in online education as they convene, direct, summarize, and archive synchronous and asynchronous discussions.

Chapter 1 outlines the scope of the book, and explains why CMC has become crucial to the world of online education. Salmon's main contribution to understanding and improving CMC is the [five-step model of effective e-moderation](#), described in chapter 2. The model attempts to conceptualize the way that successful e-moderating progresses. Each of the five steps highlights the role of the e-moderator and the nature of the technology involved, while considering the implications for online learning and interaction.

Step 1 of the model ("access and motivation") focuses on the basics of using the technology involved in CMC, and sets the social and pedagogical ground rules for learning with CMC. During Step 2, "online socialization," the e-moderator sets the tone for online interactions and may intervene in discussions on an individual or group level to engender good behavior. The self-explanatory "information exchange" (Step 3) requires e-moderators to encourage the online sharing of information for pedagogical purposes, and may require them to teach the necessary technical steps. This prepares participants for Step 4: "knowledge construction" which is the crucial stage in the model because it is where most learning is hypothesized to take place. Through online discussion, "many (but not all) participants engage in some very active learning, especially through widening their own viewpoints and appreciating differing perspectives" (p. 32). The role of the e-moderator in steps 4 and 5 is to encourage critical thinking and self-evaluation, as well as discussion of subject area knowledge and participants' experiences and opinions. The ultimate aim of the 5-step model is to develop participants into critical thinkers through a constructivist approach to learning.

Most educators will recognize similarities between the 5-step model for online education and effective higher education in face-to-face contexts. One difference between these two environments, however, appears to be that "electronic discussion may create opportunities for more equal participation" (Warschauer, 1996). Salmon claims that the online environment promotes more egalitarian discussion, negating prejudices such as those based on race, gender, and age. Referring to the unequal relationships that exist in many current educational contexts, she asserts that "Existing hierarchies and relationships can change and even fade" (p. 19) through the use of online education.

Using a large number of case studies, chapter 3 proposes the recruitment of *confident* and *constructive* teachers to train them in *developmental* and *facilitating* skills so that they can be *knowledge sharing* and *creative* e-moderators. These qualities of e-moderators are then discussed, using a comprehensive chart, in relation to the five-step model. Chapter 4 discusses the application of the five-step model to the online training of e-moderators, in a "Loop Input" style (Woodward, 1991). Of the 95 pages in part one that describe Salmon's approach to e-moderating, about 27 pages are devoted to examples, and almost half of chapter 4 is devoted to quotes, cases, and examples from colleagues and correspondents. I found this proportion of examples to discussion to be too high, but I expect that some readers will appreciate these accounts of practical applications. Salmon's work does include some references to other research, but these near-anecdotal quotes, comments from other e-moderators and extracts from CMC sessions and case studies provide the primary support for her arguments, suggesting a lack of empirical support for many of the claims made.

Chapter 5 offers examples and practical guidance on remaining issues related to e-moderation, such as gender, disabilities, "lurking" or "browsing" (reading more than participating), and corporate training. Chapter 6 attempts to chart the future of e-moderating, and, following the theme of the subtitle, predicts a pivotal role for e-moderating in establishing effective online learning.

The second half of the book is a list of "Resources for Practitioners." These resources range from the seemingly trite ("A Future Scenario"), the vague ("CMC Users with Disabilities") and the confusing ("Are You Ready to Work Online?") to the comprehensive and thorough ("Choosing a Software System for CMC") and the immediately practical ("E-Moderation Principles for Productive Conferencing"). The final category is the largest and there is a great deal of experience distilled into the useful checklists and advice. The final resource provokes debate on what e-moderators should call themselves. This is not a trivial issue. If a large number of educators are to earn their living online, then surely it is vital that the name fits.

One resource that is better online than on the printed page is the [list of useful websites, journals, virtual campuses, software, and databases for CMC](#). In general, though the *E-Moderating Web site* promotes the book and Salmon's work, with links to excerpts, the five-step model, reviews, and training courses for e-moderators, as well as information about the author, case study contributors, and online purchasing. The Web site could do more to help practitioners develop their e-moderating skills, but at least there are pointers as to where to start.

E-Moderating makes claims for IT in teaching and learning that require closer examination. For example, it claims that CMC challenges traditional hierarchies and accepted roles. While IT can be utilized for new modes and tools for learning, I see no evidence for suggesting that technology alone enables social change. If technology challenges roles, then it is because social changes have allowed those roles to be challenged. Technology is, in fact, often employed to reinforce traditional roles. For instance, the computerization of the banking system has done nothing to redistribute the world's wealth. (In fact, it may now be more difficult to steal from the wealthiest!) *E-Moderating* also claims that IT reduces prejudice while increasing access to education for minorities. Ironically, the increasing bandwidth and the attendant developments in voice- and video-based technologies predicted in chapter 6 are likely to bring back any prejudices reduced by the impersonality of the keyboard.

Another issue for consideration is the assumption, used to support the five-step model, that constructivist learning is effective, desirable, and real, and that it can best take place through participation (online or face-to-face). As appealing as this notion is, constructivism remains largely an ideological or philosophical position rather than an empirically-supported approach. Constructivism "is perhaps as much a guiding myth as a testable psychological theory, a general view rather than a single clearly stated set of claims" (Fox, 2001, p. 23). In the current volume participation is presented neutrally as effective for learning. Participation in higher education, especially for L2 speakers, however, is a cultural and political issue (Holliday, 1997), and there is little evidence to suggest that effective education depends on it.

Salmon tacitly recognizes the limitations of constructivism with novices when she accepts that "Newcomers might treat, with equal deference, bizarre as well as sane contributions and true tendencies in addition to well-evidenced pieces of information" (p. 91). In the end, though, it is the e-moderator that will finally sanction what is "sane" and what is not, and so individuals' contributions are still evaluated by a more powerful participant. Salmon concedes that traditional power relationships are sustained by conservative testing systems that have failed to develop as quickly as the progress made in Computer-Assisted Learning. While we (must) still act as gatekeepers of certain standards, ESL/EFL teachers are in danger of setting false expectations by promising that students are at liberty to construct their own knowledge, especially when failure to conform to linguistic norms results in lack of comprehension.

E-Moderating is not directed at online language learning, although Salmon mentions issues related to second language participants of CMC. Salmon works with MBA students, and her experiences may not reflect those of language teachers; many of our students are the "newcomers" that Salmon is concerned about, so one key issue for L2 teachers will be to apply and adapt Salmon's model in order to evaluate its effectiveness for L2 keyboarders. Within our field we must also look further into the qualitative (e.g., Collot & Belmore, 1996) and quantitative (e.g., Yates, 1996) differences in the language that constitutes CMC, and decide whether this model of language is one that merits our attention, or whether it is a transient form soon to be overtaken by language carried by greater bandwidth.

In general, Salmon avoids unashamed praise of technology or exaggerated claims, but in chapter 6 all previous reserve is forgotten. Using quotes from other papers, Salmon does not resist the temptation to take a few shots in the dark of the technological future. Most of the claims are made from a European / North American viewpoint, and make assumptions about levels of income, access to technology, and the motivations of learners in the future that may not apply to people in large parts of the world, or even to many people within the more affluent areas. With that in mind, though, if the role of technology progresses to even half of what Salmon suggests, her central claim remains valid: E-moderators will play a significant role in ensuring the success of online learning.

The advice offered in the book is obviously borne of the hard-earned experience of the author and other contributors working in distance learning, especially at the U.K.'s Open University. *E-Moderating*, however, is far more than a collection of anecdotes. It provides a framework for new and practicing e-moderators and their trainers to use the technological tools to their best effect. *E-Moderating* strikes the right balance between analysis and advice and so comes highly recommended to anyone that aims to advance their learners' online learning through computer-mediated conferencing.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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