Chapter 4

E-moderating qualities and roles

This chapter considers the knowledge and skills that the best e-moderators probably have, and uses examples to explore and illustrate their roles. I say 'probably' because what makes for good teaching has been the subject of many debates over the centuries, and now fresh consideration continues in relation to online teaching. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, more students articulate their needs for online learning than ever before, as Berge's study found, 'students expect to see expertise from their instructors and the competency to teach online' (2007: 4), and indeed, evaluation of learning is increasingly judged on the 'learners' experience'.

My intention in this chapter is to explore the qualities of e-moderation and to place the e-moderating roles firmly and significantly within the online learning environment. This chapter includes recruiting e-moderators and key aspects of their roles.

You will find throughout this chapter, indeed throughout this, the third edition of the e-moderating story, hundreds of ideas and suggestions. I think the 80:20 rule applies! The 80:20 principle suggests that there may be an inherent imbalance between cause and effect, effort and reward and inputs and outputs. Of course the 80:20 principle is a very simple approximation of the value of work and effort but something that in straightened times we should at least consider! Do you know which 20 per cent of your online work has

the most impact on your students' learning (Salmon, 2006)? My suggestion – try to find out. In the meanwhile, train your e-moderators and change the balance!

E-moderator competencies

In Table 4.1 I have shown the qualities and characteristics of successful e-moderators – the competencies they should acquire through training and experience.

Recruiting e-moderators

The e-moderators you recruit should of course be credible as members of the learning community.

I am going to assume that you will be looking for e-moderators who are able to understand their roles and willing to be trained online. They will need reasonably good keyboard skills, and some experience of using networked computers. 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 need to meet face-to-face with their course participants, you can select them on the basis of their suitability rather than their geographic location.

I suggest that you try to recruit e-moderators with the qualities from columns 1–2 of Table 4.1. If there are few people available with these abilities, I suggest you focus on selecting applicants who show empathy and flexibility in working online, plus willingness to be trained as e-moderators. Before asking them to work online, I train them in the competencies described in columns 3–4 in Table 4.1. I would expect e-moderators to be developing the skills in columns 5–6 by the time they had been working online with their participants for about one year.

Proponents of emotional intelligence promote controversial ideas, but they do suggest that a great deal more is going on in learning processes than what is covered by cognitive capabilities. Emotional intelligence includes aspects such as motivation and intuitiveness (which act as goal drivers) together with resilience and conscientiousness (which curb excesses in the drivers). Especially important for e-moderating are self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity and the ability to influence. There is evidence that people who display higher levels of emotional competence have greater success in relations with others (on and offline) and superior performance. In particular, emotional intelligence is related to leadership competencies, so we always look for some evidence of emotional intelligence when we recruit e-moderators (Dulewicz and Higgs, 2002).

E-moderators do not need to be subject experts as such, but instead have the ability to 'recognize communication styles and learning patterns from other cultures' (Simons, 2002: 126). Knight's summary of the move towards online facilitation is instructive: 'It is ironic that what some take to be dehumanising technology may actually need teachers to be more empathetic and considerate' (Knight, 2002: 122). At the recruitment stage you need to look for people with at least some sympathy with this view!

Choosing e-moderators

You may like to consider the mode of recruiting for e-moderators, if you are able to choose them from scratch or are lucky enough to be able to make choices. Emily, the Human Resources Manager from All Things in Moderation Ltd, a company that offers e-moderating training, writes:

> As the main bulk of work for an e-moderator is carried out online, then it seems illogical to test a candidate's suitability in a traditional face-to-face interview. Online interviews can minimize the discrimination sometimes associated with selecting face-to-face. The cost of travelling to a specific place is saved for both the candidate and the interviewer. The candidate can choose the best time to reply to the questions, reducing their stress levels and therefore providing better answers for the recruiter to assess.
>
> Whatever mode of recruitment is chosen, it is important that a good job description and person specification are sent to the candidate in advance.
>
> I think it is best to undertake online recruiting for e-moderators wherever possible, as it demonstrates straight away if the candidates are confident with the technology and online written communication. Selecting through internet-based means allows us to recruit e-moderators throughout the world. We have found that online interviews identify:
>
> - *Written communication styles* (for example, you can identify their confidence, effectiveness, patience and enthusiasm, which can be different to their verbal communication).
> - *Time management skills* (how will the candidates combine e-moderating duties with their other work/home commitments? Did they provide the answers by the deadline?).
> - *Understanding and answering questions concisely* (do they save time, are they likely to give students a chance? Can they control, engage in and pace a discussion?).
> - *The candidates' comfort in using e-mails and the internet* (essential for running an online course or practical exercises).
> - *Their flexibility* (are they willing to adapt to a new interview context and working environment?).

Table 4.1 E-moderator competencies

	Recruit		*Train*		*Develop*	
Quality/ characteristic	*1. Confident*	*2. Constructive*	*3. Developmental*	*4. Facilitating*	*5. Knowledge sharing*	*6. Creative*
A Understanding of online process	Personal experience as an online learner, flexibility in approaches to teaching and learning. Empathy with the challenges of becoming an online learner	Able to build online trust and purpose for others. Understand the potential of online learning and groups	Ability to develop and enable others, act as catalyst, foster discussion, summarize, restate, challenge, monitor understanding and misunderstanding, take feedback	Know when to control groups, when to let go, how to bring in non-participants, know how to pace discussion and use time online, understand the five-stage scaffolding process and how to use it	Able to explore ideas, develop arguments, promote valuable threads, close off unproductive threads, choose when to archive	Able to use a range of approaches from structured activities (e-tivities) to freewheeling discussions, and to evaluate and judge success of these
B Technical skills	Operational understanding of software in use, reasonable keyboard skills, able to read fairly comfortably on screen, good, regular, mobile access to the internet	Able to appreciate the basic structures of online conferencing, and the web and internet's potential for learning	Know how to use special features of software for e-moderators, e.g. controlling, weaving, archiving. Know how to 'scale up' without consuming inordinate amounts of personal time, by using the software productively	Able to use special features of software to explore learner's use, e.g. message history, summarizing, archiving	Able to create links between other features of learning programmes, introduce online resources without diverting participants from interaction	Able to use software facilities to create and manipulate conferences and e-tivities and to generate an online learning environment; able to use alternative software and platforms

C Online communication skills	Courteous and respectful in online (written) communication, able to pace and use time appropriately	Able to write concise, energizing, personable online messages. Able to create 'presence' and 'visibility' in virtual environments	Able to engage with people online (not the machine or the software), respond to messages appropriately, be appropriately 'visible' online, elicit and manage students' expectations	Able to interact through e-mail and conferencing, and achieve interaction between others, be a role model. Able to gradually increase the number of participants dealt with successfully online, without huge amounts of extra personal time	Able to value diversity with cultural sensitivity; explore differences and meanings	Able to communicate comfortably without visual cues, able to diagnose and solve problems and opportunities online, use humour online, use and work with emotion online, handle conflict constructively
D Content expertise	Knowledge and experience to share, willingness to add own contributions	Able to encourage sound contributions from others, know of useful online resources for their topic	Able to trigger debates by posing intriguing questions. Know when to intervene, when to hold back	Carry authority by awarding marks fairly to students for their participation, contributions and learning outcomes	Know about valuable resources (e.g. on the web) and use them as sparks in e-tivities	Able to enliven conferences through use of multi-media and electronic resources, able to give creative feedback and build on participants' ideas
E Personal characteristics	Determination and motivation to become an e-moderator	Able to establish an online identity as e-moderator	Able to adapt to new teaching contexts, methods, audiences and roles	Show sensitivity to online relationships and communication	Show a positive attitude, commitment and enthusiasm for online learning	Know how to create *and sustain* a useful, relevant online learning community

The issues I have found important are:

a) How many questions do you want to ask and how much information do you want to receive (interviewee and interviewer workload!)?
b) Should they reply on e-mail or as an attachment? (If an attachment, then this shows they are able to use a word processor – is this important?)
c) How long should they have to answer (same day, three days, one week)? This should relate to the requirements of the job – how often will they need to log on?
d) Will they be e-moderating on a course that is entirely online or will there be some face-to-face or verbal contact with students? (If the teaching/training is blended, then it may be necessary to include a traditional face-to-face interview or phone call.)
e) If other interactive technologies are likely to be deployed such as virtual worlds, it's a good idea to meet avatar–avatar.
f) If podcasting is to be deployed, then suggest that they send you a short MP3 voice file describing some aspect of the topic or their proposed role.

Of course, it's possible that someone other than the candidate could answer the questions! However, if you ensure that the online interviews are part of a larger recruitment and selection process, this is unlikely. A well-designed (online) induction and training should follow successful selection for the job. For ongoing development, mentoring online is effective. Emily

Many 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. Others still see online as about delivering materials to students. It is a big change to make! Even those recruits who are used to developing distance learning materials need to explore how online conferencing can underpin and extend their teaching. If they are used to being considered an 'expert' in their subject, they may find the levelling effect and informality of conferencing very challenging to start with. It may be best to encourage such staff to undertake 'question and answer' or information exchange conferences until they become more comfortable with the characteristics of online discussion groups.

Stepping down from the 'spotlight' and into the e-world can be hard. However, lecturers and trainers used to being successful leaders in classroom situations have the basic skills and knowledge to become e-moderators, including introducing topics, engaging participants, and running plenary and feedback discussions.

Similarly, students used to the paradigm of teacher as the instructor may expect a great deal of input from the e-moderator. This can be very time-consuming and unsatisfactory for both. The e-moderator must explain his or her role at the start, to reduce the chances of unreasonable expectations arising, and gradually move to facilitation and enabling of learning.

Key issues for e-moderators

A number of issues come up time and time again for e-moderating. Understanding them may make the difference between a happy and successful e-moderating experience and a miserable one. These issues include the appropriate numbers of participants that make up a successful e-tivity or discussion forum, the use of time online, coming to grips with the asynchronicity and complexity of conference messaging and the development of professional online communities. What follows is a brief exploration of these, which I hope will help those of you soon to encounter these in the real online situation.

Group size

What is the right number of participants in an online discussion for it to be successful (for all)? Is there a critical mass, in the physical sciences sense, so that with too few participants success eludes even the best e-moderator? The right number for any conference depends fundamentally on its purpose. Six participants and an e-moderator, for example, may lead to all contributing and a collaborative outcome for an online activity. Or one thousand participants could pose questions to an online expert, and all read the answers. They might then join in smaller groups – perhaps of 20 each – to put their own views.

As you know, starting off with good welcoming messages helps very much. After that, part of the e-moderator's role is to try to orchestrate appropriate participation for the purpose. It is always necessary to keep track of what is happening to ensure participants do not disappear for avoidable reasons! Most conferencing software systems offer features such as 'message history' to help you track numbers and participation. Good e-moderating always includes weaving, summarizing and feedback. These are difficult to do with more than 20 active participants.

I have found that one of the best ways of building up the right numbers for a conference is to work with the energy that naturally builds up online (for whatever reason). You can certainly expect spurts of increased online activity to be associated with offline purposes, such as assessed assignments, the start of a new section on a course, periods just before face-to-face meetings or the run up to the exam. There may also be unexpected reasons for increased

online activity (e.g., a relevant news event or even a problem such as delayed arrival of course materials) and e-moderators can turn this to their advantage. When a conference or online activity starts to wane, it is best to close it and start something fresh.

Asynchronicity

The nature of asynchronicity makes it harder for e-moderators to create positive group experiences and excitement, rhythm, engagement and focus, compared with face-to-face groups. It is not impossible, though! E-moderators need to acquire the key ability to create clear goals and appropriate challenges, through a vision of the learning outcomes and very short focused steps, good timely feedback and appropriate motivation (Salmon, 2002a).

Experienced e-moderator and trainer of e-moderators David Shepherd wrote to me:

> When training e-moderators to create online activities (which we call e-tivities), we have noticed that they have a tendency to ask a whole series of complex questions in one message. Such a strategy may work well in face-to-face situations, where the facilitator can pick up on any response and manage the discussion by moving on to the questions in turn. But online, all participants could (in theory at least) respond to all questions, asynchronously, in any order.
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> Four questions, for example, will present participants with the decision on whether to respond with one message for all four questions or to provide four separate messages over time – one for each question. In a group of many participants some will decide on one of these strategies and others on another – resulting in a complex mix of messages for the e-moderator to cope with. Summarizing and responding become a real challenge, and many of the participants will lose track of the discussions and 'flow'.
>
> By setting out four e-tivities from the onset (one for each question or task), the e-moderator anticipates the difficulty, provides the participants with clear guidance on where to post each message, and how to respond to others. The participant is given a clear process to follow and the e-moderator can see that it will take some time for the participant to work through the four tasks. Weaving and summarizing are easier to achieve effectively. Result? Happier participants who respond, and are more motivated to contribute. David

In order to learn from online conferences, participants need to be able to select, organize, elaborate and explore new knowledge and understanding in relationship to existing knowledge. Much of this can be supported not only

by appropriate interactive and supportive design of conferences (Salmon, 2002a) but also by appropriate interventions by the e-moderator, including excellent threading, weaving and summarizing and the removal of irrelevant messages (Schwan, Straub and Hesse, 2002). One strategy is to reduce the number of messages; another is to ensure very good reply structures.

Here are some examples from the All Things in Moderation e-convenors:

Ah! So it's that old enemy 'time' again?

Annie writes: I think the concept of time changes in online courses, and we don't realize how long and how much time we need to set aside . . . 'how much time does a student have to invest in a task for us to consider that it is "enough" time?'

Bob writes: I am a very social person and when I started doing my online studies, I was surprised to discover how quickly and deeply one builds up relationships with people online, especially once you start discovering common interests. And it takes up time.

The e-convenor weaves:

Do you find that time does indeed become different online – somehow expanding your commitment such that you habitually spend more time than anticipated (I own up to being guilty)? If so, is this partly perhaps a by-product of what Bob describes – the feeling of being part of a community (if the group has successfully bonded) such that you feel somehow impelled to keep returning – perhaps beyond 'enough' time for the task in hand? If we're on to something here, what might the implications be? (Is Carla's earlier remark that 'students appreciate that the e-tivities start and finish at fixed times' in effect rather wishful thinking?) So what do you think about the real as opposed to the notional demands of time online?

Ken

VLEs and learning diaries! A thought for the day.

Anita writes: As a trainer I don't believe that a virtual environment can completely take the place of face-to-face contact but for many aspects of learning it is an ideal forum for debate and a sharing of information and opinions.

Brian writes: I think a blend of face-to-face and online is the right way to go.

Christa writes: Students often 'demand' online environments use for distributing notes & PowerPoint presentations, perhaps sometimes to the detriment of teaching. Few of my colleagues go beyond document distribution: some use the announcements section to email the class directly, but it's part of my job to broaden the use of online where it can be fruitful for both staff & students.

Derek writes: I haven't really strayed past document distribution and group email. I mentioned in my Arrival's message that I tutor a Maths module via blended learning, last semester being my first. The students told me they found Maths a subject less suitable to this type of learning. I want to improve my skills and hopefully develop ways to help the students better.

The e-convenor's weave:

So . . . everyone, quite a few thoughts there, based on some mixed experience of VLEs as learning tools. A sense that there are real possible advantages, coupled with perhaps potential disadvantages. Obvious advantages for distributing material, but a lurking sense that there is unrealised potential, if only we could unlock it.

Since all the texts are available for any participant (or researcher) to view online, the sequencing of messages, when viewed after a discussion is completed, looks rather more ordered than during the build-up. Yet trying to understand them afterwards is rather like following the moves of a chess or bridge game, after it is over. When participants start using online group conferencing, this apparent confusion causes a wide range of responses. It can elicit quite uncomfortable, confused reactions from participants and severe anxiety in a few. Although many people are now familiar with e-mail, they are not used to the complexity of many-to-many conferencing online, with its huge range of potential posting times and variety of response and counter-response. E-moderators can help, as one noted in his reflections:

This is a very difficult but rewarding area. More effort is needed to keep even paced and also even-tempered at times. A conversation can be spread over several days without all the intervening gestures and interruptions of real conversation. This can lead to great misunderstanding. Thus to be reflective and not 'dash' off replies is important. To seek an even written style would hopefully bring some peace to bear, but the delay in reply which may be the result sometimes, of other commitments, can

be annoying for colleagues. A welcoming and encouraging tone is vital, as being on the end of a computer can be very lonely.

An e-moderator can ensure that all participants are familiar with the best the software has to offer and help them to be comfortable in the online environment to start with. A key e-moderating role is to build a clear structure by breaking responses, if they get too busy, into sub-topics or sub-groups, and by regularly archiving, weaving and summaries.

PB

Time

Nearly every participant, new or experienced, teacher or learner, worries about how much time it takes to be online. You will find the concept of time is emotive and value-laden for both e-moderators and participants (Salmon, 2002a). The key issue is that the advantages of 'any time/any place' learning and teaching mean that time is not bounded and contained as it is when attending an online synchronous seminar or a real classroom session. Although a face-to-face tutorial may last two hours, it has a clear start and finish time and is rarely interrupted by anything else. The participants are either there or they are not, and if they are, they cannot be doing much besides. Online is not like that. It has a reputation for 'eating time'. Genuine fears and concerns do exist, and must be addressed.

'Finding the time' is a continuous theme. Many participants report 'lack of time' as a key reason for non-participation either in a timely fashion or at all. However, something more fundamental is probably happening (Tsui, 2002). 'Time' is a social construct, and not something that can be 'managed' by someone else. We are so used to living our lives in cycles, but working online disrupts our carefully constructed if tentative feeling of control of our lives. This is not a plea for clocks on the home page of the VLE! It is worth structuring your course to provide participants with rhythm, enticement, flow and pace to their online study. The technology should also offer quick and easy ways for e-moderators of completing weaving, summaries, archiving and effective presentation of plenary results. Most VLEs don't do this as well as we would like at present.

Asynchronous internet time is quite different from the cycles and seasons that we are used to in our every day life. Time and place normally provide an 'embedding and situating space for human activity. Human orientation, human interaction and human cognition are all processes deeply and extricably tied in with the time and context in which they take place . . . An understanding comfortable enough to enhance a person's inclination to act and

interact' (Sorensen, 2002: 193). Therefore, interacting with others online and without being in the same place and at the same time requires a change in perspective. Working online involves shifting time about and changing patterns of how you work with colleagues and participants. Ways of e-moderating need rethinking, almost a reinvention, to accommodate remote asynchronous internet time.

> There is no denying how useful clock time can be, but it is clear that it is entangled in our everyday lives . . . with the time of consciousness and memory.
>
> (Lippincott, Eco, Gombrich, et al., 2000: 11–12)

My research on the original OU online courses revealed that the participants' experience of online time is one of the most important factors in determining their rate of participation and completion of internet-based courses. Both learners and e-moderators have difficulty in grasping hold of internet time. Strong feelings can be evoked, and confusion can occur. Without an understanding of internet time, important aspects of personal pacing are quickly lost in asynchronous courses, together with motivation, satisfaction and self-determination. The design and support needed to create feelings of tying time into collaborative activity and of being in a 'shared space' are two of the most important e-moderating tasks. Participants put it this way:

> I need to become capable of thinking 'cyber-clock-wise' – I don't know how to explain this, but learning traditionally is a different kind of mental process, not only as far as your role and motivation are concerned, but as far as 'mental data management' is concerned: realizing you are in an asynchronous environment, your classroom is somewhere out there, people are spread all over the planet, and things are happening simultaneously you're involved in multiple actions . . . It's not something Mr Stone Age Man was born with, but it's fun after you've done a bit of evolution. ;-) FF
>
> Once upon a time . . . before I was an e-moderator . . . my alarm clock had only one setting . . . now it has many! RA

Time takes on a new dimension online. Working asynchronously involves a radical rethink – not only of learning or teaching time but also of other aspects of life. Most people find this very difficult indeed to start with. Failing to get to grips with internet time can result in the feeling of falling into a 'deep well'

(and certainly failure to complete the course, discussion or programme). By providing a clear indication of an expectation of active contribution and by pacing and structuring the online activity, we can help participants to make the adjustments to their lives and dramatically increase completion rates in e-learning.

The first few weeks of being online is a critical period for group forming and confidence building. One e-moderator said:

> Currently I'm e-moderating an online course with 15 participants so I go in twice a day. Once around midday and then again after 8 pm. I know when I need to join in – after around 20 posts (not before!). In other words I based my approach on the participants' postings, not on the clock time. This strategy wouldn't work for everyone but I like to monitor the activity closely in the first three weeks for indicators of technical/social/and psychological well-being. BB

In my experience, online courses, even those that are well structured, tend to result in more time than usual being spent thinking about time itself, and the choices there are to make. Some participants try to control their time from the start, as the first participant below demonstrates:

> Will it take me longer to do more but lightly, or do less but more depth? I've spent 15 minutes thinking about this! AH

> I did not pace myself terribly well, wanted to go everywhere and read everything (can't bear to miss out) and found that rest of my life was in fair disarray by week 4! HS

Participants simply will not all log in on the day and time that the course plan intends! A few will come a little early and may race ahead. Some will come late. At least a week is needed for everyone to be ready for the more productive work.

Participants in online learning are involved in a variety of communities of learning and practice at the same time, and have a myriad of other responsibilities. Some of these may be similar in values, beliefs and norms of behaviour to those of the course groups and some may not. You need to build enticement, inclusiveness and pacing to make your experience stand out.

You may decide to offer a regular time beat, by providing a framework that starts and finishes at predictable times, and actions that occur regularly, such as the e-moderator's summaries. In addition, you can promote interest and motivation through underlying rhythm. Engaging in authentic tasks and working with others can provide this idea of rhythm. 'Overfilling' an e-tivity with many online resources is the enemy of active engagement online. Such pacing needs to appear in the e-tivities because participants will not meet often 'by chance' online to coordinate them for themselves.

Train everyone involved in Netspeak! For example, long messages take time to read and respond to (but may be more worthwhile than short ones). Summarizing, archiving and weaving are the key skills for the e-moderator. They save participants time, and enable participation in new ways. Furthermore, the more successful an e-moderator is, the more likely he or she will be overwhelmed by success in terms of many student messages – our own little Catch-22!

It is important to specify what you expect e-moderators and participants to do and by when, and not to leave this open ended. It is of course also important to design for the numbers involved in a conference, and be realistic about how much an e-moderator can do. Online novice learners and e-moderators will need much longer to do everything than experienced participants. Ensure that you use the most trained – and probably the most expensive – people (e.g. academics, faculty, experienced e-moderators) to do what they do best. Use less trained and experienced people, perhaps cheaper, for other tasks (e.g. use alumni as social hosts or to run helplines shared with other departments or schools). When choosing media and activities, make sure the time online is used for what it's good for rather than to force-fit activities online. At the same time, reduce offline activities for participants by as much as you are providing online activities for them, so that looking after both sets does not overwhelm e-moderators. Be explicit about who is going to do what online, how much time you expect them to devote to it and what their payment rate will be. Ask them to do one or two important online activities in a time-bounded way, with deadlines, until they gain experience. Develop and share a process of working together in e-moderating teams and in providing cover and breaks from online commitments. Develop, and publish for all to see, your 'online office hours' and tell participants how much time e-moderators are being paid for so that there's a reasonable level of expectation about the frequency of online visits.

Networking

Online, as you know, there are three kinds of key players – the participants (students, learners, trainees), the academics (perhaps represented by resource material) and the e-moderators. Researchers, theorists and other experts or

practitioners can be brought in occasionally, too. It is exciting for participants to have access to expert views, though they may 'go quiet' and let the expert dominate, therefore it is best to keep such sessions down to a week or two. Craft knowledge can be passed on through anecdotes and stories without one individual 'holding the floor'. Some younger or less experienced participants may need to be explicitly drawn in and valued.

By learning through well e-moderated conferencing, each participant can construct his or her understanding according to previous experience and may make this explicit and available for others through the conference messages. The new information can be 'encoded' and learnt by other individuals through linking it to their previous knowledge. The emphasis that constructivism places on creating challenging learning environments means that continued efforts are needed to go into training e-moderators and inducting students and to ensure that they understand the importance of online knowledge construction.

With our present understanding of how to develop and disseminate knowledge online, e-moderators need credibility in the field of study. When professional knowledge is shared in face-to-face meetings, it has been easy to recognize others as 'one of us'. The e-moderator should therefore establish his or her credentials as a like-minded and experienced professional – and probably needs to work a little harder at this online than in a face-to-face group. E-moderators need to develop good working relationships with librarians – who have now transformed themselves into ICT resource providers.

E-moderating with synchronous technologies

The most basic kind of synchronous networking is the text-based chat session that anyone can join. Google has a text chat within its suite, MSN Messenging and Skype are popular examples. The software shows each participant who else is online at that time, and messages can be addressed to one, some or all of those 'present'. These messages appear almost instantaneously on the screens of all participants, inviting immediate responses. Sound and vision can also be added offering a learning environment more like that of a telephone conference call, or a videoconferencing session. The newest web-based virtual worlds also work in real-time so are also synchronous. Recent years have bought a range of web-based virtual classrooms such as Wimba, Adobe and Elluminate, and offered us an excellent low-cost way of presentation and discussion synchronously through text and voice whilst viewing slides or other resources.

These technologies allow for real-time communication: participants are online together at the same time and speaking or writing to one another immediately. Synchronous events for learning need planning and an e-moderator is essential

to avert chaos and guide participants towards desired outcomes. They can add a sense of presence and immediacy that is attractive to participants, some of whom find they can engage and get to know others. Many find that being online together is fun, so long as the experience is short, say an hour maximum.

The role of the e-moderator in online synchronous discussion reflects some of the qualities of the asynchronous e-moderator, especially to focus the conference at the beginning, keep it roughly on track and summarize it. Achieving full participation through ensuring everyone 'takes a turn' is also an important e-moderating role. Virtual classroom software offers special rights to the e-moderator, who can use the technology to control turn taking.

If you are involved in this kind of e-moderating, the usual 'rules' apply. You need to be familiar and comfortable with the applications and aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learning tools. Participants soon spot a teacher who is unfamiliar with the equipment. As always, good preparation for the event is essential. You need to allow time to get ready for the online session and for follow up. Critical success factors are good clear structure to the session, the quality of the visual materials, the clarity of the objectives and roles of the participants and ensuring everyone participates. Some virtual classrooms offer easy links out to websites and various interactive tools, which, if appropriately structured, can be very successful. If your participants can see you, you may need to brush up on your presentation skills! You should also plan to follow up the synchronous online event with a record or action plan, perhaps using e-mail, asynchronous conferencing or post.

The use of synchronous conferencing through the internet offers participants the feeling of immediate contact, motivation and some fun, which is especially valuable if they are studying largely alone and at a distance, or where there's a need for them to experience a wide range of learning opportunities.

Terese Bird of the Beyond Distance Research Alliance at the University of Leicester tells us of her experience of her team's co-ordination of an eight-day online academic conference called the Learning Futures Festival *Online* 2010:

E-moderating a global academic conference with a synchronous virtual classroom

The Learning Futures Festival Online

From January 7 to 14 in 2010, the Beyond Distance Research Alliance at University of Leicester held their annual academic conference, the fifth in a series. Unlike its predecessors, which lasted one or two days and took

place in Leicester or as a combination of online and face-to-face meetings, the 2010 Festival lasted eight days and was held entirely online. The topic was the future for learning and was discussed from a wide variety of perspectives. Three technologies were utilizsed: a 3D virtual world (Second Life), a VLE for asynchronous discussions and resource provision, and a virtual classroom and conferencing facility called Elluminate *Live!*®.

The synchronous schedule took place using the web classroom software Elluminate *Live!* and ran throughout the day and into the evening (GMT). Daily sessions included an opening address, a keynote speaker, three selected 'paper' presenters, and lots of workshops.

There were 231 delegates registered for the online Futures Festival, with an average of 30 taking part in each of the synchronous web sessions. Some sessions exceeded 50 active delegates. Delegates took part from 22 countries and from every continent except Antarctica. Due to extremely heavy snow in Leicester, many snowbound local university people logged in from home. We had a 'control centre' from our 'Media Zoo' research lab in Leicester, and some of our colleagues emerged as outstanding 'anchor' men and women – but there were rarely more than six people physically present together at any one time. Presenters participated from a total of 33 different locations.

Elluminate *Live!* provided an easy-to-use and stable environment for the conference. One or more presenters could speak, be seen, and display presentation slides, websites, or other programmes running on their computers or alternatively could type or draw on the 'whiteboard' – the software's shared space for typing, writing, and drawing. Delegates could watch, listen and contribute synchronous text or their voices for questions and debate. It often became very busy. . .

Elluminate *Live!* deploys a browser with Java, and requires the delegate to run a setup in advance. Delegates needed headphones or speakers to listen and a microphone to speak. We offered practice sessions in advance of the conference, which some delegates took up. In most cases, however, people just asked for and received help at the time they needed it. Only one person was put off by the difficulty in activating Java due to her institution's IT policy.

Each session was assigned an e-moderator who had previously been in contact with the presenter, was familiar with the topic and planned approach and acted as 'master of ceremonies'. The e-moderator welcomed delegates, introduced the speaker, watched the chat box for questions arising from the delegates, noted questions and comments and brought them to the presenter's attention, and led at question times.

E-moderators were issued with a 'Learning Futures Moderator Guide' which outlined the principles of synchronous moderating and practice. They rehearsed and practised on their colleagues in advance!

E-moderators endeavoured to set a friendly, relaxed, yet professional tone to create an inviting environment for discussion and learning. E-moderators found it important to begin sessions on time and spend a few minutes checking that remote delegates could hear and see ('Click the

smiley face if you can hear') and that they knew what to expect in the session and what tools they might need. Some moderators made use of the 15 minutes prior to start of session to greet early arriving delegates and invite them to try out the software tools and introduce themselves to each other.

Handling questions

We found that it was best to agree in advance with the presenter to speak for no longer than 15–20 minutes before stopping for questions. This helped the presenter stay in touch with the discussion in the chat box, which otherwise could run off on its own tangent, rather independently. Delegates typed questions into the chat box, or clicked on the 'raise hand' icon which indicated to the moderator that the delegates wished to speak into his/her microphone to ask the question, and would thus be personally invited to speak. Having a second e-moderator was helpful, even essential for groups larger than about 20. The second e-moderator could carefully watch the chat box and note questions or issues to address to the presenter, which is difficult to do when many are quickly commenting.

We found that many presenters defaulted to using Elluminate *Live!* in a teacher-centred way, mainly delivering the material and then taking questions. Some presenters, however, creatively employed well-structured collaborative activities, asking questions and inviting delegates to type responses or draw on the whiteboard, and discussing the results. Because (with the exception of the presenter showing himself or herself on webcam) delegates do not see each other, it is hard to pick up cues as to others' comprehension and reaction. Presenters found they could compensate by using the polling feature, asking multiple-choice or yes–no questions and displaying results for discussion on the whiteboard. Delegates used emoticons (smiley face, confused-face, applause icon) to signal their reactions; savvy presenters encouraged this and responded accordingly.

The technical moderation

As with all web-conferencing software, better bandwidth produces better transmission, so we attempted to have all presenters speak from a computer that was hard-wired rather than wirelessly connected to the internet. Having at least one technical supporter on hand for every session was essential. The technical supporter kept headphones on to monitor transmission of the session and deal with problems if they arose. Broadcasting the presenter's image with a webcam is great for creating a shared feeling of 'being there', but it may strain the transmission, so if sound began to break up, the webcam was either turned off or switched to a lower-resolution setting. All delegates who could take the microphone were encouraged to wear headphones, as ordinary speakers usually created feedback.

Feedback

Delegates' feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the synchronous web conference sessions. One person wrote, 'I found it more interactive than a face-to-face conference. There were more questions from the delegates via Elluminate and comments in the chat.' Another was more wary of the chat box: 'This was my first online conference and by the end of it I was really enjoying it . . . I still have mixed feelings about the chat box. It seemed useful for delegates, but at the same time I saw it distracting some speakers. In these instances I felt it was as "naughty" as whispering during a live conference.'

By using email, Twitter and phone, a handful of delegates reported some difficulties enabling Java or getting sound to work; these were quickly remedied by technical supporters. We found that early distribution of clear instructions prior to registration would have solved even those issues. Next time!

The flexibility of web-based conferences is illustrated by the fact that 83 per cent of survey delegates reported that they participated in the festival by fitting it around other commitments. One person summed up the flexibility and resource-saving aspects of this kind of conferencing by writing, 'This has been a very worthwhile experience and you are all to be commended for setting such an environment up during an age of CO2 emissions awareness, global warming and intense pressure on staff at universities to work hard, work long and work productively. I do not think I could, in this time of financial constraint, have attended the conference were it a physical one happening on the Leicester Campus – but I got in to your virtual conference with ease and in between my personal workload peaks. So efficient, effective, and very attractive.'

And next. . .

We are now planning a Futures Festival with a partner university in Australia in 2011 – where we can have 24-hour synchronicity!

New topics online

An e-moderator working with the unfamiliar describes her achievement.

Helen Perkins, Head of School for Early Years and Childhood Studies at Solihull College in the UK, shows us how important careful and appropriate e-moderator intervention is in working with participants unused to online learning.

I have used a variety of functions available on our VLE (MOODLE) in developing students' confidence knowledge and skills in writing a research project.

I have the challenge of teaching research methodology and skills to Level 3 BTEC National Diploma students. The students have successfully completed many other assignments for their programme, however, the research module seems to hold a particular dread for them. The research model challenges them because, unlike other assignments where the title is given to them, in research they have to select their own area of interest. In addition they then have to grapple with unfamiliar terminology and concepts such as literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative data, validity and reliability to name a few that send even the most able into a spin.

Each year I reflect on how to allay fears, avoid melt downs and create confident researchers ready for their next step to university.

The VLE has made a real difference. I use a range of the facilities to develop the skills and confidence over time. We begin with a discussion board on suggested topics. This gets us talking, initially in the classroom and then over the week I see them talking and supporting each other. They find others in the group who share their interest and so the discussion develops into defining and refining a research question. In the past, meeting only once a week, choosing the topic used to take four to five weeks. The VLE allows this debate to go on outside of the classroom; this cohort had the topics agreed in the first week. This means we can move on to what research *is* much more quickly.

One of the big challenges for the group is to understand the research language and terminology. We use MOODLE tools to create quizzes to match and sort terms with definitions; the students can practise this as many times as they need to and have the information available anywhere there is internet access. As a tutor I can monitor their progress and address any repeated errors. One student told me she used her i-phone to complete the quizzes on the bus!

Once we get into the business of reviewing literature, the students upload a draft, I am then able to give feedback before the next session which means that the students can work on the piece and are ready to hand in a completed piece of work and pass first time rather than the demoralizing resubmission and refer cycle I have encountered in life before VLE.

As students get more confident in using the VLE, realizing that the feedback is more expedient, my role becomes that of moderator, valuing their contributions, encouraging them to look deeper. The students take ownership of the forum; they begin to support each other using the discussion forum, directing peers to articles they have read, programmes they have seen, offering support to get questionnaires completed. My role becomes that of e-moderator. I only need interject as an equal pointing them to relevant research or ideas.

In summary, I use a broad range of the functions building the students' knowledge, skills, confidence and competence until they really don't need me at all! Last year, we had 100 per cent pass rate and 95 per cent achieve a distinction – I can't really ask for more . . . but I will!

Celebrate!

We need to mobilize and deploy the brains and commitment of teachers and trainers of all kinds in the service of e-moderating. We also need to raise the profile of e-moderators, and recognize and reward their valuable work. E-moderating is somewhat less visible (sometimes almost invisible if done well) and therefore special efforts need to go into celebrating good practice! I hope the exploration of roles and qualities in this chapter is of use to you and will enable you to recruit and train for very productive online teaching and learning.