Together Alone: What Students Need from an E-moderator

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ABSTRACT

It has often been suggested that education via the Internet, or e-learning, leads to a sense of separation in individual learners; this need not be the case. Teaching is a relationship: a relationship that is built on a connection between teaching and learner, between learner and learner, and between the learners and the content. What then is the role of the instructor in moderating online learning? This paper will explore how that connection might be better made in an online environment and will explore the interpersonal or emotive distinctiveness needed in an e-moderator from the perspective of a group of graduate students engaged in an online master of education degree offered in Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

Il est souvent suggéré que l'éducation par l'intermédiaire de l'Internet, ou l'e-éducation, amène les apprenants individuels à ressentir une séparation ; ceci n'en est pas nécessairement ainsi. L'enseignement est une relation : une relation qui est construite sur un rapport entre l'enseignement et l'apprenant, entre apprenants, et entre apprenants et le contenu. Quel est donc le rôle d'un instructeur en animant l'apprentissage en ligne ? Dans cet article, on examinera comment ce rapport pourrait mieux se faire dans un environnement en ligne. Aussi étudiera-t-on, de la perspective d'un groupe d'étudiants gradués poursuivant au Canada une maîtrise en éducation offerte en ligne, comment un cyber-animateur a besoin de la spécificité interpersonnelle et émotive.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the instructor in moderating online learning and to explore the "interpersonal or emotive" distinctiveness needed by an e-moderator from the perspective of a group of graduate students engaged in an online Master of Education degree offered in Canada.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gabriel, Ostridge, and Doiron (2003), in their study of best practices in online teaching and learning, identified four key elements: structuring learning activities, creating learning groups, facilitating group interactions, and the role of the instructor. In their conclusion they noted that

> the role of the instructor is still emerging, as increasing numbers of university and college faculty offer courses online . . . this role becomes more clearly defined as teachers develop an understanding about instructional design in online environments . . . (p. 7)

Early research by Kanuka, Collett, and Caswell (2002) found it was possible to translate many face-to-face instructional strategies to the online classroom and learn the technical aspects necessary for effective use of asynchronous text-based Internet communication tools. However, most instructors continued to experience a tension between structure, dialogue, and autonomy.

Goldman and Torrisi-Steele (2002) noted that when using constructivism as the learning theory base for course design, the learner, rather than the teacher, becomes the focus of the learning environment. From a constructivist perspective, the focus of instructional design shifts from being goal-orientated, strictly structured, and an ordered knowledge transmission to a process focused on reconceptualization of knowledge acquisition to ensure active exploration by the learner. This refocus from teacher to learner has profound effects: the teacher's role changes to a manager of knowledge production—a facilitator who provides advice in exploration, a guide, a helper, and an assistant (Creanor, 2002; Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) proposed that the teacher plays an important role in online discussions. Although individual learning can occur through independent or self-directed study, it is only through the active intervention of a teacher or moderator that collaborative computer conferencing becomes a useful instructional and learning research tool. Russo and Campbell (2004) noted:

When students do not perceive other individuals as real or as salient in online classes, they are less likely to attend to their ideas, questions or concerns or to seek input or answers from them. . ... Students who thrive on the social aspects of the classroom may be challenged by online learning (Yager, 1998). Frustration from a lack of interaction may lead to physical withdrawal from the course, either by dropping the course or failing to finish it, or psychological withdrawal, in which the student does the minimum to complete the course, but does not engage with either the material or the other participants. (p. 217)

Education via the Internet, or e-learning, has often been suggested as "lead[ing] to a feeling of isolation in individual learners" (Kelly, 2004, p. 53), yet this need not be the case. As Kelly (2004) pointed out, "Interpersonal interaction—communication between the online instructor, and among learners—leads to increased motivation, higher achievement, more positive attitudes toward learning, higher satisfaction with instruction, confidence in learning capabilities, enhanced critical thinking and problem solving skills, and higher cognitive processing of the content" (p. 53). In research conducted by Young (2006), students wrote that effective teachers are visibly and actively involved in the learning, work hard to establish trusting relationships, and provide a structured, yet flexible, classroom environment.

Students who rated their instructors as more verbally immediate expressed a greater positive effect and higher perceived cognition than students taught by less immediate instructors (Baker, 2004, p. 2). Based on his study, Baker (2004) went on to propose that

the instructor significantly influences the learning process, even in the online classroom. Although there are those that stereotype online learning as a high-tech correspondence course with little interaction between instructor and learner, the results of this study can be used to argue that the instructor is important to the effectiveness of the online learning experience. This has value for those instructors teaching online courses since it validates the significance of their role in the online learning process. (p. 10)

The role of guide and facilitator is often argued against as "not teaching." Jonnassen (1991) suggested that the ". . . greatest misinterpretation of constructivism is that it . . . results in academic chaos. If all learners construct their own meaning from information, how can we share enough knowledge to even communicate?" (p. 31). He argued that we do ". . . share enough to communicate, to argue, to hypothesize . . . [therefore] if meaning is negotiated, why shouldn't we also negotiate the goals of learning or use the negotiation process in the form of augmentation, as the evidence of learning?"

(p. 32). This view is completely in keeping with my own experiences as an online teacher/guide/facilitator.

The ability to negotiate learning within a constructivist environment is underrated and, I contend, under supported in many online learning situations. Since the late 1990s, I have been a sessional/adjunct instructor or visiting assistant professor in e-learning at three Canadian universities. All three are traditional face-to-face institutions that have moved all or some components of their graduate programs to either hybrid or fully online delivery. This experience has uncovered the following:

- online communications can be prone to complexity
- non-verbal cues offer a relied-upon source of meaning
- exchanges can quickly get out of proportion
- messages left open to interpretation can cause difficulties
- individuals in online groups are often more uninhibited
- status plays less of a role in the online environment
- interaction tends to be more evenly distributed among group members
- online consensus and decision-making takes longer
- and the role of the moderator is often KEY to the success of online learning

METHODOLOGY

In 2002, I began to teach two online graduate courses in a Masters of Instructional Technology, which is a partnership between two major universities in Eastern Canada. In all, I have worked with approximately 300 students in eight sections over the last four years. In 2005, I conducted a qualitative case study, using ethnographic observation and group "interview" techniques, with approximately 40 of these students over two 13-week terms (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000; Wolcott, 1992). Toward the end of the term, after experiencing working in groups to create a collaborative, web-based project, these students were asked to brainstorm the ideal online moderator. They were asked

- What characteristics would you want to see? Why?
- What would you need to know? How would you get this information?
- What would frustrate you?

Using a WebCT learning management system with class postings, the 200+ postings pertinent to these questions were analyzed for content and key themes (Campos, 2004; Garrison et al., 2000; Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 1998;

Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes were then combined if it was clear that the students were focused on the same or similar components.

The majority of the students in the study were Canadian-based/trained K-12 teachers with face-to-face classroom experience, ranging from recent graduation to over 20 years in the traditional classroom. While about half to two-thirds of them were mid-program or close to graduation in a wholly online masters program, the remaining students were new to online learning when they began the courses I taught. In addition, the majority had no experience teaching in a fully online environment, although many were familiar with using technology in the classroom.

The research in this study is ethnographic due to its small sample size and lack of statistical testing. It was designed to examine the experiences and "feelings" of graduate students toward their e-moderators and to elicit the "interpersonal or emotive" distinctiveness needed by an e-moderator. The research was conducted to allow me to become familiar with one of the most popular quantitative-content analysis models used by Garrison and his colleagues (Garrison et al., 2000; Corich, Kinshuk, & Hunt, 2004).

The transcripts for the discussion forum were compiled into a single document, which was then surveyed in an attempt to identify what to use for a unit of analysis. Having established how the majority of postings were structured and following the advice of Campos (2004), I decided to use the sentence as the human cognitive unit of analysis. The compiled document was then split into sentences, which I then hand-coded against Garrison's model of content analysis.

As Smith (2004) noted, "Much of the literature suggests that students are well-placed to evaluate the teaching that they experience and that these evaluation data are both valid and reliable when goals and purposes of the evaluation match the tools and methods used" (p. 29). Ramsden (1992) adds that "the experiences of students' own past schooling render them 'uniquely qualified' to judge the way in which they are being taught and easily able to 'differentiate the empty performer from the 'good teacher'" (p. 90).

Spradley (1980) described participant observation as a way to investigate the practical aspect of an activity. It was adopted in this study in order to find out how the students in the course perceived their needs with respect to e-moderating. It is acknowledged that observation is limited in its subjective interpretations of situations due to its dependence on researchers' personal perceptions (Alder & Alder, 1994). Given these limitations, the remainder of this paper is a discussion of the comments by the students in the course.

THE RESULTS

In analyzing the postings of the students, I used Miles and Huberman's *Interactive Model of Data Analysis* (1994, p. 12), where data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusions (drawing and verifying) all form an interactive, cyclical process. As I worked through the model and the data gathered, it became apparent that the ideas gathered by the students' postings could be reduced to two general categories, which I chose to designate as "interpersonal or emotive" and "administrative or design" issues. In doing this, I concluded that the first category is an area over which the e-moderator might have some control. The latter category, "administrative or design" issues, may and can impact on the e-moderator, but these issues are often set before the e-moderator enters the teaching environment, if they have not already been set by the course designer. Although many previous papers (Hamid, 2002; Huang, 2002; Rovai, 2004; Schweizer, 1999; Wiley & Schooler, 2001; Young, 2004) have documented the administrative or design issues that make up an e-learning environment, I chose to have this paper focus on the interpersonal or emotive theme. For me, teaching is a relationship: a relationship that is built on a connection between teaching and learner, between learner and learner, and between the learners and the content. This paper explores how that relationship, from the students' perspective, might be better made in an online environment.

Emotional Issues

Within this category, the students identified 11 words or concepts that they felt epitomized their "ideal" e-moderator. Several have been identified in past literature on the subject (Arbaugh, 2001; Carmody & Berge, 2005; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Fahy, Crawford, & Ally, 2001; Finlay, Desmet, & Evans, 2004; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006; Murphy & Coleman, 2004; Oren, Mioduser, & Nachmias, 2002; Power & Guan, 2000; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Russo & Campbell, 2004; Williams, 2004), but a number, such as "graciousness," appear to be unique in expression.

Approachable

> The ideal moderator must be "amicable, thus making students feel more comfortable." (Student A)

This theme also included *friendly*—

> "Friendliness goes a long way with 99% of the people in this world. It smoothes over the rough spots of starting when someone is 'just not

getting it' . . . Students need to feel as though they can ask questions and/or advice" (Student Q).

Knowledgeable

The ideal moderator "must be knowledgeable not only of the content but also confident with the technology being used." (Student M)

"A teacher online or otherwise does not have to be a know-it-all but [should be] professional enough to be always upgrading—this will be beneficial to your students." (Student F)

"I agree—up to date and knowledgeable: the content area and way the moderator teaches must be current with the way students learn." (Student B)

Organized

"Nothing is more frustrating to me personally than an unorganized course. The course should have clear, concise, unambiguous instructions and expectations" (Student E).

This theme also included *predictable*—

"Students need to know that the professor is not going to change [his/her] mind about expectations or greatly change assignments after the students have started them. Continuity is important or frustration and animosity will be the result and get in the way of positive learning."(Student G)

and *informative*—

"The moderator needs to make sure students understand what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated. Both the content and the course website need to be well organized. If the course lacks organization then it is easy for the students to become confused and the learning experience to be lessened." (Student X)

This category crosses over with the administrative and design issues grouping but is specific to personal organization.

Frequent Presence

"Being able to be in contact with the moderator and receiving immediate and constructive feedback is essential" (Student J).

This theme also included *available*—

"There should be regular contact with students and responses to students' email should be within a reasonable amount of time. This shows me that the moderator is reading the responses in the forum and keeping students informed. It also means that if I am having difficulties or need a question answered before I proceed then I won't fall behind in the course." (Student T)

". . . that is not to say I want to be buddies with him/her but that s/he ought to be very accessible [via email] . . . otherwise, I feel very 'alone' and without guidance; . . . [A] major source of frustration for me, as a student, would be being left at any time with feelings of isolation, abandonment or unknowing." (Student F)

Punctual

"If moderators insist on deadlines for assignments and such then the onus of returning prompt feedback is just as important." (Student A)

"Being on time with returning assignments or email replies to questions is a mark of courtesy and respect that people owe to each other. This is another essential quality that is important in an online teacher. Students need answers in a timely manner to move on with knowledge building." (Student N)

Helpful

"This is a personable [sic] thing with me. As a teacher, whether you are classified as a professor or if you have a doctorate it makes no difference—first you are a teacher. It helps no one to be told to 'pull yourself up' by [your] own bootstraps. First a teacher has to have the desire to help students to understand or why bother to be online or in class for that matter." (Student E)

Gracious

"A mark of a confident human is that they understand the struggle they had with some concepts and have empathy for fellow learners who haven't 'arrived yet.' This has been evident in half of the online courses I have been in where instructors would bend some if you had the courtesy to indicate that you were in need of a break." (Student D)

A Facilitator

"The moderator needs to allow the students to carry the discussion because if the moderator intervenes then generally the discussion will stop because students will feel as though the 'right answer' has been given. S/he must facilitate learning . . . to 'give' the answers is too much like giving us a book and saying, 'learn this.'" (Student K)

This theme included defining facilitation of the asynchronous discussion forum via organization of topics, variety, some interjection, guidance, accessibility, direction, etc.

Anticipation

"I really like this quality in a moderator. [My current instructor] has anticipated most issues and organized the course accordingly. Particularly, though I didn't need to use it, I liked the fact that she added the 'How To' section to the course site . . . her anticipation of issues like how to use [software] etc., eliminated the problems associated with moderation and direct interaction. That is, while it is important to be accessible, it would truly drive a moderator crazy to have to respond to thirty emails about how to create bios or something of that sort." (Student F)

Flexibility, *Understanding*, **and** *Patience*

"With anything involving technology you must be prepared for breakdowns or other unforeseen circumstances. Technology is great when it works. However, when things go wrong it can be a very stressful time. Your computer and online access is your link to your classroom. If anything happens to any of these systems such as crashes and viruses it can put a lot of stress on the student and moderator. In addition, many people do not have equal access to the most modern technology. Therefore, a moderator must realize that one person may have a top of the line computer with high speed internet while other students might have the bare minimum requirements with a dial up connection. In addition, many people have different activities happening outside the online classroom. I feel online classes allow enough flexibility to allow people who are able to complete their work ahead of time to do so as well as allow people who finish later to catch up and still participate in the class discussion." (Student P)

Enthusiastic

"An indication of enthusiasm should come across in postings. If you were in a classroom with this person you would quickly get a sense of their personality and I would like to also get this from an online moderator. I would expect to feel that I got to 'know' the moderator a little." (Student O)

Other Issues

In addition to the specific themes that arose from the data, the students also had some more general comments to make that encompass the characteristics they felt make up the ideal e-moderator. These comments included ideas of mentorship, confidence, comfort level with content, and style of teaching, as well as the frustration that can happen if an e-moderator is not "present." I will let the students "speak for themselves":

"I have taken well over a dozen structured online courses at the university level and many more in other forms of study. The best thing that any of the moderators did for me was let me go . . . Read this and tell me what you think. Discuss this and see what your classmates think . . . What a wonderful way to research and then gain deep insight on any topic. So the characteristics I want to see include the ability to mentor more so than the ability to instruct. I also want and need honesty and directness. I like good marks and I need a moderator to tell me when I am off and why. These characteristics however apply to any teaching format or domain." (Student A)

"Constructivist learning should involve struggle (dare I say, a little 'floundering'?) but this struggle ought not to come from uncertainty of the course requirements . . . it should come from an attempt to interrogate the course content . . . to LEARN . . . not as a result of trying to figure out what to learn or where to find it or whether or not one is learning the intended material." (Student D)

"The ideal On Line Moderator would first and foremost have to establish in those who are using the on line method of learning a sense of confidence in what they are doing. The concept of on line delivery still has the power to instill in some the feeling that the material is over and above me as an individual, simply because it is a new and innovative approach to the learning, or at least a departure from the traditional methods of the past. A thorough introduction, a carefully and methodically designed course procedure, and an instilled knowledge and confidence in approachability are key factors in making these things happen for the moderator and those affected." (Student T)

"Recently I was involved in a course where the moderation was, well, less than adequate in this area. The forum was blocked with discussions, but mostly irate commentary and threads of malcontent. The forum was used as a place of frustration rather than of learning. This is not only problematic for learning but it also becomes both annoying and boring after a while. In the last month of the course, I probably posted five or six times at the most ... and those postings were in direct response to something someone else had said (an attempt to 'solve' a problem, as it were)." (Student M)

"I think that we used to think that being a facilitator would be significantly easier than standing at the front of the room teaching. How wrong we were. When we were the 'sage on the stage' we controlled where things were going and what the students would want or ask of us at almost any given time. As 'guides from the side' we can be pulled in so many directions that we are not sure which way we are going. The more that students are allowed to construct their own learning, the more that the teacher has to jot down or keep notes on so that we can remember where each student is going with their learning. Sometimes at the end of classes like that I can't remember who is doing what or who wants what. However, we do get to work more closely with our students. However, is it an easier way to teach? No. It is just different!" (Student V)

"Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, it could be argued that an online moderator would have to be more comfortable with the assigned material than the typical classroom teacher. If a constructivist approach is taken so that students are completing a great deal of work on their own, there is much more room for students to think and ask questions about their reality of the topic. This is in contrast to the teacher-centered delivery where there is an inherent teacher bias. It's not that students don't think when they are lectured to, but the presentation of the material is from the perspective of only one person. An online moderator would truly have to give up much control of the learning and adopt the role of facilitator." (Student N)

CONCLUSION

Each of us teaches within our own personality and our own philosophy of teaching, as well as within the constraints of our discipline and our academy. Having said that, there are things a new (or even experienced) e-moderator can do to assist in the success of the course, both for the learner and the teacher. Given that learning is a relationship between the instructor and the

students, and that online learning can be isolating for the student, it becomes even more important to ensure the "presence" of a strong and empathetic e-moderator who is also centred in their discipline. Many of the characteristics noted as "interpersonal or emotive" in this study can be attributed to traditional face-to-face instructors, but they are vital in the online "classroom." Students rely on the e-moderator presence to connect to all of the relationship keys that are visual and tactile and available in the traditional classroom. Students, as found by this study, are in a unique position to give e-moderators advice in how to engage their online classroom.

It is appropriate to end a paper on what students see as desirable instructor/facilitator characteristics with a student comment:

> "I must say that generally, the sense of isolation within these courses has been minimal because of the peer interaction which takes place. This, of course, has to be facilitated by the moderator. Ideally, a sense of participation in a learning community needs to be present . . . generally, I find that it is. Actually, learning like this involves more peer interaction than a live-classroom experience. In a physical class, there is no time to consider what others have said and very little opportunity to offer intelligent responses/comments. Here, we can work 'together alone.'"
> (Student G)

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BIOGRAPHY

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