Reconsidering the role of online tutors in asynchronous online discussions

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Abstract

A number of publications in the field of e-learning highlight the importance of the "moderator's" approach to developing students' online learning. They identify that the major challenges for online teachers arise from the diversity of roles which moderators are required to undertake. However, little is reported about the roles e-moderators actually adopt in different learning contexts, and how these range between 'teaching' and 'facilitating'. This research focused on the ways in which several different e-moderators in higher education approached the online learning with students. The research involved four case studies of higher education tutors in the role of e-moderators. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse and interpret the data. This generated a comparative insight into diverse moderation practices, and the consequent actions and reactions of e-moderators and students. The study found that there were pre-established relationships between the various actors involved in the discussions, which directly influenced how moderators intervened, and how students reacted. Distinct differences were identified in the ways individual moderators decided when and how to intervene. This resulted in a learner or teacher centred approach with a concentration on process or content. One of the main aspects of the moderation practice was therefore identified as 'the dichotomy of moderation', which is discussed in this paper.

Keywords

Online learning, e-moderation, grounded theory, dichotomy

An overview of previous research

Teaching and learning in an Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN) is one of the main focuses of educational research over the past fifteen years. The primary goal of research in the field of ALN is the process of learning and the pedagogy that supports effective learning (Benbucan-Fich, Hiltz, and Harasim, 2005). The process of learning and the pedagogy in an ALN have been examined by a number of researchers in the field of both computer mediated communication (e.g. Harasim, 1990; Henri, 1992; Newman et al., 1995; Gunawardena et al., 1997) and online tutoring or e-moderation in particular (Mason, 1991; Paulsen, 1992; Berge, 1995; Rowntree, 1995; Salmon, 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The work of these scholars suggested that computer-mediated communication may facilitate deep and meaningful learning and that the online learning experience may be enhanced by effective online tutoring by a moderator.

In CMC literature, the issue of online facilitation, moderation or tutoring appeared from the early 90's, initially as an attempt to describe as opposed to understand the role that educators play online. At that time, Mason (1991) was among the first scholars who characterised the roles that teachers play online. She distinguished online tutor's role in three major categories; these were the organasational role, the social role and the intellectual role. Within each of these roles, the tutor facilitates the learning of the students and the associated elements .Within the organasational role, the duty of an online tutor is to set the agenda for the conference. That involves presenting the objectives (also referred to as outcomes) of the discussion, the timetable, the procedural rules and decision-making norms. Then the social role, where the role of the tutor is the creation of a friendly, social environment for learning; sending welcoming messages at the beginning and encouraging participation throughout are specific examples, but providing lots of feedback on student's inputs, and using a friendly, personal tone are considered equally important. The most important role of the online tutor, according to Mason (1991), is that of the educational

facilitator. As in any kind of teaching, Mason argues that the moderator should focus discussions on crucial points, ask questions and probe responses to encourage students to expand and build on comments.

Paulsen (1992) perceived the moderators' role in educational computer conferencing in the light of their basic theories and philosophies toward education (adult education theories and social learning theories). Paulsen (1992) recommended that online tutors should identify their preferred pedagogical styles, based on their educational orientation. This orientation it then influences their chosen pedagogical style; the adopted style then leads to a chosen moderator role and hence their preferred facilitation techniques.

Berge (1995) added a fourth and transient dimension to the roles of the e-moderators, namely the 'technical' role. The facilitator (or e-moderator), according to Berge, must make participants comfortable with the system and the software that the conference is using. The ultimate technical goal for the moderator is to make the technology transparent. When this is done, Berge suggests that the learner (and moderator) may then concentrate without technological constraint on the academic task at hand.

The value of the above initial attempts to describe the roles that tutors play online has been widely recognised. Many researchers embarked upon the aforementioned characterisations of online tutoring and elaborated further adding more light with their studies to the various aspects of online tutoring -thus the proliferation of conceptual frameworks and models for online tutoring (for example, Salmon, 2000; Anderson et al., 2001; Goodyear et al., 2001), as well as series of guide books which aimed to assist tutors with their online teaching (e.g. Salmon, 2002; Bender, 2003; Ko & Rossen, 2004; MacDonald, 2006).

A substantial part of the literature mentioned above, however, is written by those researching their own innovative educational practice, reporting mainly findings which did not emerge from naturalistic contexts. There have been no studies to date which have reported findings on learning and development through moderation by tutors, who have added pressures to meet the needs of the curriculum and those of the learners, when working on credit-bearing modules. In the literature, there was very little attempt to be specific in the analysis about the purpose of the moderation activity and the particular contexts from which the moderation and tutoring frameworks emerged. That is not true of the study reported in this paper. Indeed it can be well argued that the reported study was almost as much phenomenological, as it was researching own practice. This is further illustrated in the methods part of this paper.

It is argued in this paper that in order to initiate a discussion around the issue of online tutoring and e-moderation one should include analysis of the various interventions by the teaching person (the e-moderation and its impact) within a given context. It is important in such e-moderation analysis to trace the obvious and immediate students' reactions to the various e-moderators' interventions, while, of course, acknowledging the fact that there might be other elusive or delayed reactions. In the following section of this paper, the focus will be on an approach used to analyse the phenomenon of e-moderation in more detailed and contextual way in two existing HE settings. The analysis described is part of a PhD project which was set out to re-conceptualise the way that tutors moderate the online discussions of students in HE contexts.

The study

The research took place in 2004 in two different higher education settings in the UK using the case study approach (Yin, 1994):

Setting one

A Masters course within the School of Education at the University of Manchester was selected as the first setting for this research. Three e-moderators and seventeen students from different countries participated over a period of one academic semester in a blended master's course in 'Communications, Education and Technology' that was delivered using a mix-mode approach (face-to-face tutorials and VLE sessions). The focus of the research was on the fully online sessions involving one tutor-moderator and two guest moderators. This resulted in the generation and in depth analysis of three case studies involving a tutor-

moderator, an expert-moderator and a guest moderator. In one of the case studies the author was an action researcher of his own moderation practice.

Setting Two

An undergraduate course within the School of the Built Environment at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh was selected as the second setting for this research project. One e-moderator and twenty five students participated over a period of one academic term in a blended undergraduate level course that was delivered using both traditional face-to-face tutorials and an asynchronous virtual learning environment (VLE). As in setting one, the analysis reported here is based on the fully online interactions between the tutor and the students. Research setting two offered one case study, which was distinctly different from the other three in terms of the context of the course (level of study, subject of study,)

Methods

Data in this study were collected using a variety of methods:

a. A pre-course student questionnaire used in order to collect demographic information (age and gender of the students) as well as information about the students' attitude towards the on-line learning, and their past experiences in using computers and online discussions
b. Three sets of interviews with the e-moderators (before, during and after the moderation activity); and a focus group interview with students at the end of the moderation period to discuss their views on the usefulness of the moderation offered
c. The online transcripts from the online discussion board
d. A series of recorded verbal protocols from the e-moderators using the 'think aloud' approach (Ericsson & Simon, 1984). The purpose of this activity was to collect information about what the moderators were doing in terms of e-moderation activity, what they were about to do and what they hoped to achieve. A digital recorder was provided for the purposes of the recording of the protocols.

The colleted data were analysed using grounded theory procedures described in Strauss and Corbin (1990) comprising open, theoretical and selective coding. This process was also described by Anderson and Kanuka (2003:176) as 'grounded theory-based content analysis … a more structured way of qualitative content analyses'. The coding process started with an open coding. With this open coding all the data were split into discrete parts using the 'meaningful unit' approach (Chi, 1997). The coding process was assisted by the use of NVivo 2, which is commercially available qualitative analysis software. During the coding process, theory memos were written to record the development of concepts and categories. Those memos included information obtained by the other forms of data, such as the verbal protocols and the interviews, which contained elements of feelings and intentions on the part of the moderators. The coding process ended only when all segments of the transcript were allocated a code.

The open coding process generated a set of categories for the e-moderator's interventions and for the students' contributions. The different codes generated during the open coding process were then conceptualised under two main categories: e-moderation of the process and e-moderation of the content (for the e-moderators) and engagement with the process and engagement with the content (for the students), as shown in Tables 1 & 2. The e-moderation of the process refers to the e-moderator's interventions in the process of doing an online discussion, whereas the e-moderation of the content refers to e-moderator's interventions in the content of the discussed topic during the online sessions. In relation to the students' codes 'process' refers here to the different postings that the students made with the help of a moderator to take forward the online discussion towards the completion of a suggested task, i.e. by providing feedback to each other about how to discuss an issue or instructions on how to make a decision online; while 'content' refers to the development and assembly of ideas, topics, questions that the students discussed. All these categories, which offer a first description of the e-moderation activity, were then triangulated by tracing back what was reported in the other forms of data, like the interviews and the recorded protocols. This allowed the researcher to better understand what happened in the data.

Table 1: Tutors' interventions

Process (Tutors)
Social Comment
Expectations
Agenda-Time
Clarifying roles
Self Presentation
Technology
Monitor Curriculum
Encouragement
Misunderstanding
Direct Instructions
Constructive Instructions
Question about the Process
Feedback on the Process
Content (Tutors)
Direct Content Input
Content Summary
Feedback on the Content
Bringing Resources Online
Providing Examples
Agreement with an opinion
Disagreement with an opinion
Questions about the content

Table 2: Students' contributions

Process (Students)
Social Comment
Setting group rules
Instructions
Expectations
Self-evaluation comment
Time problem
Expressing a feeling
Question about Process
Feedback on Process
Reporting a Technical Problem
Content (Students)
Express an opinion with justification
Express an opinion with no justification
Agreement with an opinion
Disagreement with an opinion
Feedback on the content
Bring Resources Online
Summarising Content Online

Some researchers would argue that it is relatively easy to develop ways to code online messages- thus the proliferation of coding systems. The main concern with the development of any coding scheme for the study of online transcripts is just how it pushes the researcher's understanding forward (Glaser, 1992). Coding of data can have quite a lot in common with illuminative evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). It describes a situation, and leaves the researcher to make their own judgements based on that description. However, it is the analysis which follows the coding that matters.

In this study the use of grounded theory allowed firstly to analyse from facts (what happened) and then helped interpret (by triangulating tutors and students voices). For example, it was first noticed that a moderator chose to comment on certain points of this type of the students' messages, and not on others. Then, but separately, the data were interpreted. For example a moderator has made many comments of this type, on many students' postings; it seems something which is of importance to him or her.

By tracing back what followed the moderators' interventions and triangulating with what the moderators told the researcher about their intentions and how the students commented on a particular moderation style, a number of key issues about the e-moderation practice emerged. These issues formed the themes of a grounded theory of e-moderation. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on one of the themes, that of the 'dichotomy of moderation'.

Results & Interpretation

Drawing on the results which emerged from the coding and the analysis described above, it could be said that in all four case studies students engaged more with the moderator's interventions on the content of the discussion than with those on their processes (when comments thereon were offered). Although this does not suggest that 'content' interventions were more effective in terms of achieving the learning outcomes (in fact there is no evidence either way to suggest that from the present study), they appeared to be effective in terms of motivating the students to engage in a content-rich discussion. The (apparently) most effective content interventions took the form of **'**feedback on the content'; followed by 'questions on the content' and 'direct content inputs'.

In relation to the 'feedback on the content', the experience from all case studies suggests that students appeared to react more to the moderator's feedback on the content, but only did so when the feedback was justified by an explanation as to why it was provided. Unconditional positive feedback, although common, was on most occasions dismissed by the students. The literature of effective tutoring, in addition, suggests that it is important for tutors, before they judge and decide upon their follow-up moves, to consider not only the frequency and the type of their interactions, but also the content of the interactions in relation to the both the task requirements and the students' needs at that particular moment (VanLehn et al., 2003).

As far as 'Questions on the Content' are concerned, most of the questions with which the moderators asked the students to engage concerned a specific content issue, and led to further postings and more questions. This finding did not come as a surprise; as it was clear from the interviews that the students expected the moderators to get actively involved with the content, and to prompt them with appropriate questions to tackle the various tasks. The questions which particularly engaged the students were short, pointed questions which asked the students to either justify a position or an idea, or think and reflect on previous postings and ideas. In case study two, when the moderator felt that the students were diverted from the original question, he tried to re-focus the online discussion by asking in one message a series of questions, such as '*When should we use group work, and for what? And when not, and why? These are questions with which we must engage in discussion*". Questions of the type '*What do you all think?*' or '*Do you have any thoughts on what I have just said?*' were usually disregarded.

Finally, regarding the moderators' content inputs**,** it can be said that in most cases the effort of the moderator to post their own thinking motivated the students to put more effort to elaborate further their own postings. It appeared that the students made use of the moderator's content postings and treated them as a resource which prompted them to think, comment and argue about. In contrast, when the direct content inputs were given in an authoritative way the students did not question them, but instead simply uncritically adopted them in the final submissions of the tasks. For example in case study four, the tutor-moderator made content inputs which did not allow the students some space for discussion or negotiation. The below quote illustrates this approach: "*Thanks for the feedback. Bear in mind, though, the following points.1. The main risk areas with these defects - technical and health risks. 2. The importance of identifying the source of moisture…Good luck with the remaining part of the case study."*

The main process interventions which appeared to engage the students in the online discussion were the (explicit) instructions. These resulted in different students' responses. The constructive instructions appeared to be effective in terms of helping the students to develop an understanding about the process, whereas direct instructions, although they may have been practical injunctions to 'finish the job', did not assist the students to meet the learning requirements.

It was generally noticed that the instructions given by the e-moderators came almost at the end of the tasks, as a response to the various students' questions as to what they should be doing to submit their summaries. In case study one, for example, the moderator posted the following instruction, a day before the deadline "… *you're right I did ask you to post a summary today, however you are still discussing some new issues so please try to get everyone together to post a summary of your discussions over the weekend by tomorrow night".* Tracing back the interactions between students and e-moderators, it was found that none of the direct instructions resulted to an obvious, immediate reply on the part of the students. For the direct instructions were not open for negotiation by the students. In fact what it was

noticeable was that, after the provision of a direct instruction, the students were expected to act accordingly, and to follow the suggested 'instruction' in order to achieve a 'final' submission of the task. This was achieved on all occasions. This behaviour does not suggest, though, that the students enhanced their grasp of the process or their understanding of the content of the online discussion, from the direct instructions.

It was also noticed that the effectiveness of the direct instructions online depended on the ability or rather assumed entitlement of the moderator to exert power and control over the students. In the absence of direct instructions, the students started intervening with their own instructions, aiming to get their groups started. Those who undertook that more 'teacherly' role were the mature students. However very few of even these students' instructions were adopted by the groups, and then only after they had been given a positive confirmation by the tutor-moderator. The issue of the freedom of choice and independency of the learners, which is associated with the role and the effect of the teacher in any learning situation, is thus an important one.

Discussion

In the literature review and in the analysis of the case studies in this project, terms like 'e-moderation' or 'online tutoring' can be and has been used in an extreme range of ways and meanings, which have little more in common than that they involve someone, usually a teaching person but perhaps even a student, in interacting with students in an online environment wherein they are or should be learning or developing. This vague and all-encompassing usage is not helpful, nor is it useful. There is no study to date that has attempted to conceptualise the way that tutors and moderators actually adopt their roles; thus, it is unknown when and how the moderators decide to intervene to take student learning forward. Neither is it clear how 'moderation' and 'facilitation' differs from other teaching responsibilities (Salmon, 2007). A first elaboration on these aspects of e-moderation is offered through the discussion below.

The practice of e-moderation, as observed in analysis of the four case studies, was conceptualised in respect of major dichotomy (Figure 1) involving process development and content mastery.

With the dichotomy between 'process' and 'content', in mind, it could be said that the decision of the moderators to approach their e-moderation from the 'process development' or 'content mastery' standpoint should had been related to the character of the **learning position** which the programme or module designers wanted the students to reach at particular times, or to move to after the moderator's interventions.

For example, drawing on Figure 1 below, an e-moderator may first sign up to a 'Learner -Centred', rather than a more 'Teacher-Centred', set of pedagogical principles, such as the approaches based on Constructivism or Behaviourism. This decision will be expressed in the chosen aims and the tasks of the module, calling a moderator to work with a part of the curriculum which it has been decided in programme design, and it will aim either for 'Process Development' or 'Content Mastery'.

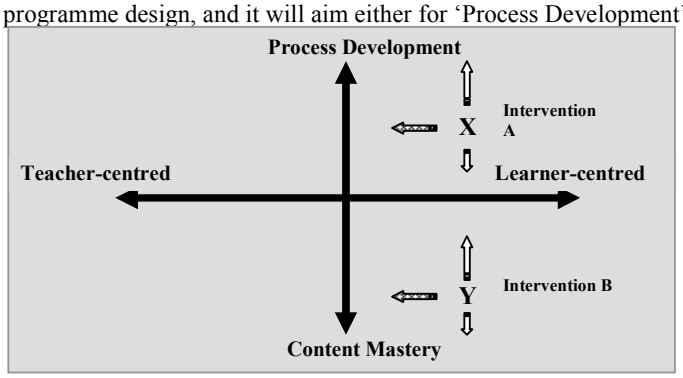

Figure 1: The Dichotomy of E-moderation

ISBN No: 978-1-86220-206-1

At a given point in the ongoing discussion the moderator may decide to make an **intervention A,** as a response prompted by point **X** which was **posted** in the discussion, and which (let's say) dwelt predominantly on 'Process Development' which is the team's priority in this part of the module. In this example, it was thus the process which mattered most to both moderator and student at that particular point in the discussion. Consequently the main drive of the moderator's facilitation will be towards development of process, as indicated by the strong upward arrow, although it may also make reference (small arrow) to the content which was the subject of the process activity. Even if it had been the **posting Y** which attracted the moderator's attention, and which dwelt mainly on matters of content, it is likely that, in a process-focused activity, the moderator's comment in **intervention B** will seek to push the learners to consider the associated process (the stronger arrow), although the comment again might also acknowledge the content from which this all began (the smaller arrow).

A similar diagram, but with the strong and weak arrows interchanged, would of course be drawn were the activity one which aimed to develop content mastery in a given curricular area.

On occasions, moderators in the case studies opted to make what the students might well regard as an input, as represented by the horizontal, shaded arrows on the figure. These could be of two types, depending on the extent to which they moved over into the teacher-centred zone of the figure. Where a student, and especially a group, was floundering, a moderator might offer a specific idea to be explored or a useful source to consult, to "kick-start" their progress. At such times, provided the moderators were not directly tutoring, the intervention was seen to be offered with authority for its soundness, but without an authoritarian expectation that the moderators input would be responded to, as tuition. However, when that latter option could be read into an intervention, the moderator had in fact moved back to a teacher-centred relationship.

Such decisions about the nature and thrust of interventions were not always easily or correctly made. Each decision made in real life apparently arose from a combination of the e-moderator's teaching principles and the desired and immediate learning outcomes, sometimes tempered by expediencies.

Conclusions

This paper suggested that, in any e-moderation situation, there are some more important decisions to be made about student learning than the initial decision of being a 'tutor' 'facilitator', 'tutor-facilitator' or 'a guest moderator' to the students. These decisions about interventions are (or should be) expanded in terms of implications, with the spectrum of the 'process development' and the 'content mastery' of the educational experience in mind. They should be based on the ways in which any e-moderator's intervention may or may not impact on helping students to relocate themselves in, or advance to different, learning positions. The issue of an e-moderator's impact on process development or on content learning and development is yet to find its proper place in the related literature.

It became clear through the study reported here that e-moderators should be aiming at an approach, based first upon the principles with regard to learning and teaching to which they subscribe. This means that, in a given situation, they should reaffirm particular teaching principles for themselves, in relation to the learning outcomes which are their chosen aims on this occasion, and the tasks which they design to promote that learning on the part of their students. These teaching principles and the chosen aim will then define the position of the learning which the moderators want the students to reach at a particular point in the activity. But it is all too easy to be distracted from a sincere purpose and a worthwhile aim by commonly occurring expediencies (predictable and not predictable). It is therefore all the more important that moderators are looking for evidence in their postings and in the postings of their students as to what level these students have reached, in terms of learning and development of process abilities, or mastery of content; and to be prepared to intervene, to help the students to take their learning one stage further.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Ray McAleese and Dr Carole Thomson from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, for their support during my PhD project. I also want to thank my 'critical friend', Professor John Cowan from Napier University, for spending time discussing with me the grounded theory and especially for pushing my thinking forward with his insightful comments.