

Perceptions of Effective E-moderation: A Tutors Viewpoint

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines tutor perceptions of effective e-moderation. The study investigates the on-line BA Enterprise programme, part of the E-College Wales initiative initiated by the University of Glamorgan. The course is supported by "Blackboard" software utilising synchronous and asynchronous communication mechanisms. The methodology involved semi-structured interviews with 35 e-moderators from the University and partner colleges. Analysis of the results revealed that effective e-moderators required specific qualities, characteristics and organisational skills. Effective communication and responsive feedback were judged to be the most critical activities. This research can be utilised by e-learning providers to identify effective and efficient e-moderator practices.

Keywords

Tutors, E-moderation, effectiveness, characteristics, ineffective, perceptions

INTRODUCTION

E-learning programmes are proliferating at a phenomenal rate within academia and the private sector. The online tutor or e-moderator faces a diversity of new challenges including instructional design, module management, direct instruction and facilitating discourse. This study contrasts the views of online tutors (or e-moderators) regarding what factors constitute effective e-moderating and e-learning. Prior research has identified the lack of tutor feedback and dissatisfaction with the learning experience as contributing factors to student withdrawal (Jones et al, 2003). To develop effective e-learning programmes it is essential that the online tutor understands their role and appreciates the demands of the online environment. As a result, the providers of these courses face challenges in terms of recognition of effective teaching practice and student support (Packham et al, 2001). The on-line tutor or e-moderator requires new skills in contrast to the traditional teacher, including instructional design and organisation, facilitating discourse and directing instruction (Anderson & Garrison, 1999). Therefore, it is apparent that the e-moderator requires a different portfolio of skills and characteristics from that of the traditional tutor. This paper examines tutor perceptions of effective e-moderation and contrasts them against the existing literature.

E-COLLEGE WALES

E-College Wales (ECW) is a project designed by the University of Glamorgan aimed at creating and improving entrepreneurial and managerial capacity in the European Union Objective One areas of Wales, where such activity has been deficient. This distance learning (with local partner Further Education colleges located throughout the objective One areas) platform has been created with the aim of aiding individuals and communities to generate their own economic development solutions, through the tools of entrepreneurship and promotion. A key component in this provision is the BA Enterprise programme, which was initiated in September 2001. The course is available either as a part time or full time degree in three component qualifications of certificate, degree and full honours degree. Each award comprises 6 modules, which the students study via the virtual learning environment (VLE).

THE VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The online platform comprises 2 main aspects namely the Blackboard environment and a specifically designed learning area containing the course materials and module assessment. The systems allow complete interaction between the two areas via hyperlinks. The Blackboard environment predominantly acts as the host area and the prime mechanism for student communication via virtual classrooms, chat rooms and discussion boards. Furthermore, students have access to electronic database journals and library catalogues within the Blackboard

environment and learning area. The learning area allows the students to access course materials via individual modules, which is broken down into a series of topic areas containing text, case studies and interactive exercises to encourage student activity. Associated with the learning materials area are tasks and the module assessment. The tasks are designed to provoke discussion and interaction of the subject area whereby the student and peers interact with e-moderators to build and share knowledge and experiences.

DEFINING THE ROLE OF THE E-MODERATOR

Previous research has identified that the e-moderator undertakes three roles within the VLE. These are technical adviser, facilitator and manager (Paulsen, 1995; Berge, 1995; Collins & Berge, 1996). E-learning requires e-moderators to possess a range of practical technical skills such as the use of e-mail, discussion forums, chat facilities, video conferencing tools and a general awareness of website development tools such as HTML. E-mail was identified as a vital component of the online learning process and is utilised for a variety of tasks including communicating on either a one-to-one or one-to-many basis with students. E-mail can also be utilised to answer queries, posing questions and submitting assessments. Discussion forums are often cited as a core component of an effective online course. Asynchronous mechanisms allow students to respond to tasks and interact with fellow students whereas synchronous chat facilities allow real time communication. Synchronous mechanisms however, require a high degree of e-moderator skill in managing the conversation and can be time consuming. Facilitation skills are the methods used to enhance interpersonal communication within the online learning environment (Kemshal-Bell, 2001). Anderson et al (2001) state that facilitation is critical to the success of an e-learning course as it fosters and maintains the interest and motivation of students. The facilitator role includes engaging the learner in the learning process, questioning and listening skills, providing direction and support, managing online discussions, building online groups and developing online relationships. Students also require some socialisation so that they can communicate effectively with their peers and tutors. These processes are often undertaken during a face-to-face induction but it is imperative that e-moderators also develop these skills within the online learning environment (Anderson et al, 2001). Facilitation also involves the provision of insightful, timely and objective feedback that enables students to develop learning skills (Shepard, 2000). Lack of feedback can lead to disillusionment with the learning programme and eventually withdrawal (Jones et al, 2003). Similarly, the e-moderator must demonstrate competence in providing this feedback (Kemshal-Bell, 2001). Thus, it is important that discussions are effectively managed in order to encourage knowledge sharing and interactivity. This process assists the development of teamwork, a shared sense of purpose and community. Research has also contended that establishing and maintaining course guidelines and planning, monitoring and reviewing content delivery are key facets of e-learning success (Kemshal-Bell, 2001). Salmon (2000) also recognises that e-moderators have to be effective managers. These management skills include time management skills, a capacity to monitor the learning process, an ability to evaluate the process of teaching and learning process the skill to adapt and change teaching and courses to accommodate the specific needs of e-learners. It is therefore evident that the e-moderator has a different role to undertake when compared to the traditional lecturer. In fact, roles such as technical knowledge, facilitation and management skills have a pivotal role to play in the development of VLE which can engage, encourage and motivate the diverse needs of online learners. Furthermore, it is commonly acknowledged that the role of the e-moderator has changed from that associated with the traditional lecturer to that of a learning guide (Collins & Berge, 1996). In this sense it is argued that the e-moderator has to enable and guide the learning experience by managing the learning environment. This role requires a high degree of interaction and appreciation of individual student needs. The question however, remains as to whether the perceptions of e-moderators are consistent in how effective moderation can be achieved.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology involved interviews with individual e-moderators utilising a semi-structured questionnaire. The aim of this research instrument was to ask the respondents to identify examples of effective and ineffective practice, characteristics of the e-moderator and provide examples of best practice. Thirty-five e-moderators from the University of Glamorgan and partner colleges returned completed questionnaires. The research instrument included 7 questions related to views on e-moderation. Respondents were asked to identify factors that constituted effective e-moderation and rank these factors in order of significance. Thereafter the respondents were asked to identify the factors that constituted ineffective e-moderation and rank their significance. To illustrate these issues e-moderators were asked to provide examples of both effective and ineffective e-moderation and how they impacted on their effectiveness within the role. Finally the respondents

were asked to describe the characteristics of an e-moderator in five key words. The completed questionnaires were evaluated and contrasted to identify key trends and issues.

FINDINGS

This section will appraise the results of the survey to identify what factors constitute effective e-moderation and to rank these in order of significance. Thereafter ineffective e-moderation is appraised and again ranked in order of importance. Examples of both practices are provided from reflection on e-moderator experience. This section concludes by identifying the key characteristics of an e-moderator.

Effective e-moderation

Survey respondents were asked to consider what factors constitute effective e-moderation. Our findings indicated that the effective e-moderator is multifaceted requiring several qualities and characteristics namely motivational, online personality, communication, time management, feedback, organisational, subject knowledge and technological expertise.

Motivational

The ability to motivate students was identified by 12 (34%) respondents. This involved the e-moderator being able to encourage students to participate regularly in the course. Comments included: -

“Students need to be motivated to participate regularly. The e-moderator must provide constant and individual words of encouragement and support”.

“Students need to be motivated, re-motivated and motivated again. In this way we can encourage them to develop open and ongoing dialogue with the e-moderator and fellow students”.

“Motivation of students online can be a lonely experience and the e-moderator has a critical role to play in the motivation of students”.

Online Personality

The ability to portray or create an online personality was identified by 19 (54%) respondents. This included the ability to be open and honest and display empathy and understanding for the student circumstances. It was important to demonstrate a sense of humour although this had to be avoid sarcasm. The students liked to see the e-moderators make a commitment to them in terms of time spent communicating with them. If an e-moderator effectively portrays an online personality this seems to encourage student participation.

“I find to be successful you must create an online persona which students want to engage in dialogue with. You need to create a rapport. I try to be open, honest and friendly without becoming over familiar”.

“Students need to be comfortable with their e-moderators. The online environment is a hostile one and students need the reassurance of a friendly and responsive e-moderator. I think you have to give a bit of information about yourself and your life for the student to share his or her experiences.

“In the beginning I would go as far as to describe it as mothering. The students initially are totally reliant on you so it is essential that they trust and believe in you”

Communication Skills

The possession of effective communication skills was identified as a key facet for an e-moderator with 9 (26%) respondents. Effective written communication skills were required to communicate through the various media (e-mail, discussion boards and virtual classrooms). Furthermore the ability to inform and provide responsive feedback were recognised as essential skills. Comments included: -

“The ability to communicate within the forums, via e-mail and virtual classroom the aims of the module and assessment”.

“Communication online is a different issue to face-to-face communication. Thoughts, opinions and responses should be carefully considered otherwise messages can be misinterpreted”.

Time Management Skills

One of the critical skills identified (22 responses, 63%) that an e-moderator must possess was identified as effective time management skills. This factor encompassed the e-moderators ability to communicate with students on a regular basis. Therefore this element involves the e-moderator managing their time effectively to allow them to allow sufficient time responding to discussion threads, e-mails and potentially participating in

virtual classrooms. Several e-moderators identified that time had to be allowed for reading course materials and student messages. Another factor to consider here is when and how often the e-moderator would be online – would they access the VLE on a daily basis in the evening and also the weekend. These decisions might be influenced by other employment responsibilities such as administration and or traditional teaching. A key term to describe this process is “flexibility” as identified by several respondents whereby the e-moderator is prepared to meet the needs of the student by quick response and contact during off work and weekend hours. One e-moderator suggested a 36-hour maximum time scale in which time a student could expect a response from a communication within the VLE.

“Regularity of feedback (on a daily basis) - student time is precious, they can become despondent if waiting for a long time”

“Regular & frequent monitoring of activity - The student feels more appreciated when replies are quick and are therefore more likely to maintain a high level of participation”.

Feedback

Strongly related to the above point is the provision of effective feedback by the e-moderator. This was identified by 12 (34%) e-moderators as providing rapid, detailed and positive feedback on any course related communication and coursework. E-moderators identified that students reacted well to positive replies whereby good practice was identified and praised.

Organisational Skills

Nineteen (54%) respondents identified the need for a variety of organisational skills. These included the e-moderator demonstrating the appropriate awareness, authority, direction and control whilst directing the student’s learning within a module. These might include specific activities such as monitoring, directing and responding to students communications, summarising discussions and controlling the rate of progression through learning activities. Other activities might include organising and running face-to-face sessions in a blended learning programme to supplement and enhance the online learning experience. Several e-moderators identified that students appreciated rapid turnaround of assignments and comprehensive feedback as good practice. Furthermore, working with a VLE requires competency in electronic administration in filing and maintaining the online environment effectively.

“Unlike traditional learning we have almost total control of the student’s interaction and discussion of a topic matter with fellow students. We must organise timeframes to complete individual activities and to organise students”.

Subject Knowledge

Within the e-college Wales VLE, e-moderators do not produce the learning materials they simply guide the students through the learning environment. The module author might have a dual role as an e-moderator although this is not typical practice. E-moderators are selected for a particular module due to it being within their area of expertise. However, e-moderators must still familiarise themselves with the material, the learning process and the module assessment which can be a time intensive process. Nineteen (54%) e-moderators identified the need to develop subject knowledge to ensure effectiveness within their role.

“Its vital that we understand how the module works; what is its content, what is the learning experience and how it will be assessed if we are to demonstrate our expertise as e-moderators”

Technological expertise

Eight respondents (23%) identified they required the technical skills within the VLE to be effective e-moderators. These skills included competency in navigation around the VLE and proficiency in typing. Proficiency in the various communication mediums (e.g. e-mail, discussion boards and virtual classrooms) was essential. Further influences on the proficiency of e-moderators technical skills included the ease of navigation around the VLE and its general reliability and robustness.

“I feel my technical skills in terms of using the VLE have developed with experience. Initially it was a difficult process to remember where to go and how things worked”.

“I think the e-moderators have played a significant role in developing and improving the VLE since its initial release”

Effective E-moderation by order of Significance

E-moderators were asked to rank the factors identified in question one in order of significance. Of the generic identified factors in question 1 the most frequently top ranked were online personality with 7 first rankings. Communication skills and Time Management were equally 2nd ranked with six top rankings. When the rankings are analysed by average ranking, communication skills (1.91), motivational (2.00) and time management (2.14) were identified as the top 3 factors for effective e-moderation. Interestingly subject knowledge (1 top rankings & 3.58 average), technological (1 & 2.88) and organisational skills (5 & 3.00) were apportioned less significance.

Examples of effective e-moderation

To support questions 1 and 2 the students were asked to provide examples of good e-moderation.

“A standard approach to e-moderation has emerged from discussion of good practice amongst the course team. These include providing rapid and comprehensive feedback on an individual basis to all students on any contributions within the VLE. Secondly, informing the student group on a weekly basis of tasks via e-mail and postings in the discussion board. Thirdly, managing and encouraging the development of learning on individual tasks. Finally, summarising the knowledge and contributions”.

“We have identified the need for a blended learning model due to the specific learning needs of our students. They are typically non-traditional learners who initially struggle to cope with the demands of a Higher Education degree. As a result it is vital that they are properly prepared for the course via an intensive face to face induction and ongoing workshops. These sessions include basic IT training and familiarisation with the VLE. These activities support and enhance the online learning experience and ensure students are fully prepared”.

“Through my online experience and conversation with my peers, I have started to acknowledge student’s views and provide encouragement through building on their views and getting them to take it one step further in the development of their knowledge. It is about getting them to think in an academic way, to evaluate and critique and consider a variety of information sources”.

Ineffective E-moderation

E-moderators were asked to identify behaviour that constituted ineffective tutor practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly e-moderators were more reluctant to identify ineffective e-moderation as it could be perceived as a form of self-criticism. Four main categories are identified namely limited feedback and ineffective communication, ineffective online personality, ineffective organisation and management and limited understanding of the subject matter which reflect the opposite behaviour of the effective e-moderation categories.

Limited feedback and Ineffective Communication

Limited and ineffective communication was identified as a key example of ineffective e-moderation. This behaviour was identified by 31 (89%) respondents and could encompass a number of bad practices. Limited communication with students – this behaviour includes delayed or no response to student communications. Producing brief ineffective feedback, which does not provide any benefit to the student. Other examples included late feedback after students had moved onto later activities and irregular e-moderators access to the VLE to communicate with the students. Another bad practice is relying on the student to post first rather than take the initiative. Students have different learning styles and the e-moderator needs to use their perceptions in identifying the level of correspondence on an individual basis.

“Not giving feedback to students on a regular basis e.g. waiting for a group to post before responding. Others may never post and keen ones lose interest, also student expectations are high and they expect instant feedback & regular moderating”

Ineffective Online Personality

An ineffective online personality identified by 18 (51%) respondents can involve several behaviour patterns including e-moderator motivation, attitude, behaviour and language. Specifically where the e-moderator might lack motivation and is unwilling to adopt the requisite flexibility to be an effective e-moderator. If the online personality is perceived of being pompous, patronising or exclusive then this behaviour discourages student contributions. Overuse of humour especially sarcasm can be misinterpreted online as criticism or ridicule. Uses of inappropriate language or academic speak that students might not understand were also identified. Finally

being too forceful in one's online manner and giving the students the answer was also judged as unacceptable behaviour.

"Jumping in with answers to student's questions and problems rather than facilitating their learning by offering methods which they can use to develop their skills and knowledge. It about being a sage with a mouse"

Ineffective Organisation & Management

Nineteen (54%) respondents recognised this category, which identifies a plurality of factors including poor time management, not undertaking key activities, displaying indecision, poor administration and organisation skills. E-moderators identified inefficiencies in organising their time and spending sufficient time interacting with students. The non completion of key activities, such as notifying students of activities on a regular basis, the management of student learning via the cessation and continuation of learning activities were also identified. Emoderators identified that the alteration of schedules, running orders or submission dates caused uncertainty and confusion with the student community. Poor administration and organisational skills in the form of slow turnaround of assignment feedback and inefficiencies in maintaining the student cohort was also identified as causing frustrations.

"Poor time management - this means that e-moderators may not be able to get students to complete tasks/assignments in adequate time"

Limited Understanding of Subject Matter

Six (17%) respondents identified that a limited understanding of the subject matter can cause significant problems for the e-moderator. This factor is usually caused by a lack of time on the moderators parts to familiarise themselves with the learning material due to various circumstances such as other teaching commitments. This can lead to inappropriate and even incorrect advice been given to the students.

Ineffective E-moderation by order of Significance

Survey respondents were asked to rank the factors of ineffective e-moderation. The limited feedback and ineffective communicator factor was clearly identified as the critical cause of ineffective e-moderation with 22 top rankings and the lowest average (1.15). Thereafter ineffective organisation and management (4 & 2.06), ineffective online personality (0 & 2.18) and limited understanding of subject matter (1 & 2.83) were the next ranked factors.

Examples of ineffective E-moderation

The following examples of ineffective e-moderation were provided by respondents: -

"Lack of e-moderator activity meant the discussion board virtually closed down. Some students stopped posting and left the course. Others did not interact simply working towards their assignments. Once this occurs it is difficult to change their behaviour patterns unless they experience real benefit"

"Lack of participation from both tutor and students can be off putting because there fails to be commitment from both parties".

"Students at a partner college complained that their tutor did not enter the forum to respond to their postings and gave no advice"

Characteristics of the e-moderator in 5 key words

The emoderators were asked to describe the characteristics of the role of the e-moderator in 5 key words. Nine main characteristics were identified (see Table 1) with the respondents giving most significance to being encouraging and motivating (22 responses), understanding, supportive and approachability (21 responses). Thereafter the need for patience & commitment (13 responses) and subject knowledge (10 responses) were deemed as essential characteristics of the effective e-moderator.

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Encouraging & Motivating	22	63
Understanding, Supportive, Empathetic & approachable	21	60
Patient, Commitment, dedicated	13	37
Knowledgeable & Informed	10	29
Organised, Disciplined & Competent	9	26
Assessor, mentor & teacher	7	20
Communicators	7	20
Flexible & adoptable	7	20
IT Competent	2	6

CONCLUSIONS

Our research has indicated that the effective e-moderator is multifaceted requiring several personal qualities, characteristics and organisational and specific skills. Figure 1 presents a framework to represent this analysis.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Effective E-moderation

Effective E-moderator =	Effective Personality characteristics	+ Role Skills
	Online Personality Motivational	Time Management Organisational skills Subject Knowledge Online communication Effective feedback Technological expertise

Figure 1 largely supports the findings of Paulsen (1995) and Berge (1995) in recognising the roles of the e-moderator as one of advisor, facilitator and manager. However, our framework recognises that the e-moderator requires specific personality characteristics in terms of ability to create an online personality and motivate students plus possess specific role skills to undertake their duties effectively. These role skills include the ability to undertake and develop online communication, demonstrate technological competence, subject knowledge, time management, effective feedback and organisational skills. The survey respondents identified these as vital components of the role with the highest significance given to time management, organisational skills and online personality. These comply with the findings of Kemshal-Bell, (2001), Salmon (2000) and Anderson et al (2001) who posited that facilitation is essential for effective e-moderation. The e-learning provider must therefore consider how to develop and identify the existence of these specific role skills within the potential emoderator.

However, the role of technical advisor, as identified by Paulsen (1995) is given much less significance by the respondents within this study. Perhaps this reflects on the advancements that have occurred in VLE technology in the last decade whereby they are now more robust and reliable and students generally have higher levels of IT literacy. The ECW project is supported by a customer service team whose purpose is to deal with any technical queries that arise from students, which obviously reduces the significance of this factor. Therefore it can be seen that the role of the e-moderator is dependant on the VLE that it supports. However, the ECW model requires less dependence on the e-moderator as a technical advisor. This poses a number of interesting issues in terms of the recruitment of staff for online courses. Existing practice is to simply utilize existing traditional staff as e-moderators regardless of what personal qualities they might bring to the role. Anecdotal evidence suggests that traditional lecturers are becoming increasingly more comfortable in their use of technology in the preparation of their lecture materials and delivery of lectures utilising multi media facilities.

Examples of effective e-moderation practice were identified as providing rapid and individual feedback to students, secondly informing students on a weekly basis of tasks via e-mail and postings in the discussion

board. Thirdly, managing and encouraging the development of learning on individual tasks and finally summarising the knowledge and contributions of students in discussion boards. Furthermore it was recognised on an undergraduate programme with non-traditional learners that students had to be thoroughly prepared for the programme via an intensive face-to-face induction which familiarised them with the VLE and the requirements of the course. Thereafter it was recognised that there was a need for ongoing face-to-face sessions to support different learning styles in the student group. Another significant influence that must be considered when evaluating the role of the emoderator is the pedagogical model (pure e-learning or blended model). This will influence the nature of effectiveness of the on line tutor. Furthermore is it essential that the VLE is a user friendly, robust and reliable platform that can equally support the need of learners and emoderators alike. The administrative and managerial roles of the emoderators will differ with the VLE and elearning provider. However the critical factors are consistency and efficiency.

The examples of ineffective e-moderation practice revealed in order of significance were limited feedback and communication, ineffective organisation and management, ineffective online personality and limited understanding of the subject matter. These directly mirror the positive e-moderation factors. The e-learning provider must consider how to diminish the influence of these negative factors possibly by selection of appropriate personalities to undertake emoderation and effective and ongoing training. Finally, our e-moderators characterised the effective e-moderator as one that is encouraging and can motivate, is understanding and supportive, is patient and committed and knowledgeable and organised. These support the research of Collins and Berge (1996) that the role is one of essentially a learning guide but the tutor must demonstrate these generic qualities to achieve effectiveness. In conclusion our findings largely support existing research but further identify that the role of the e-moderator is heavily influenced by personal characteristics and the nature of the VLE that it supports.

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