

Chapter 6

Standing on the Shoulders of a Giant: Reconsidering Humanistic Perspectives on the Functions of an E-Moderator in Virtual Learning Contexts

Panos Vlachopoulos
Macquarie University, Australia

John Cowan
Edinburgh Napier University, UK

ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in fully online courses because of their learning flexibility. One of the success factors in such courses can be the carefully designed interactions between learners and learners, and of learners with tutors. Although there is a great body of literature that deals with the role of the online tutor or e-moderator in formal learning contexts, little has been published about the principles on which the development and exercise of the e-moderator's facilitative skills in nurturing the development of higher level abilities should be founded. This chapter will review seminal past and current literature relating to the practice of facilitation and e-moderation. Its overall aim is to reconceptualise some of the key facilitative skills derived from the humanistic principles of human relationships set out five decades ago by Carl Rogers (1961, 1969), and their use and evaluation subsequently within educational practice. In so doing, the authors are conscious of presenting a controversial view, and of advocating practice contentiously at variance with some present developments in this field.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities across the globe are increasingly concentrating on the role that technology can play as a predominant enabler in meeting the challenges of widening access, an increasingly diverse student population in need of flexible provision, and the development of lifelong learning skills and generic abilities. To this end, significant investment has been committed in most institutions to what is now widely called ‘online learning’ or ‘e-learning’, and to the training of tutors and students to handle the demands made of them in this nominally student-centred learning mode. Within the emerging higher education (HE) context, the facilitation by tutors or e-moderators of the development of higher level cognitive and interpersonal abilities has been seen by at least some as a critical priority in bringing about effective online development. Within the current trends in e-learning, where the focus is on encouraging a cognitive style involving short exchanges, and constantly shifting and partial attention of the mind (Rose, 2013), there is a move towards acceleration and automatising of learning. How different is what the authors advocate in this chapter. Here is presented what some may regard as a step backwards to a totally different approach to self-direction, where students are individually co-creators of content and partners in the learning processes, rather than mere consumers of online learning content, readymade for them by producers.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE CHAPTER

The literature of online tutoring or e-moderation over the last twenty years has provided a number of frameworks and models (particularly Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Salmon, 2000 and more recently Seoane et al., 2007). These aim partly to support tutors in developing their facilitation skills, and partly to provide a basis for analytical and evalu-

ative studies of practice. In such frameworks, the term and concept of ‘e-moderation’ (or online facilitation) has been used in different ways and contexts and with different meanings; but all involve someone (usually a teaching person) interacting online with students. Most of that literature lacks a significantly humanistic basis or an overt engagement with principles of human potential, personhood or fulfilment, as in explicit person-centred theories. Furthermore studies of some moderated online interactions which have been less than effective for learning and development suggest that problems arise when facilitation is not wholly confined within the ring-fence which should contain learner-directed activity (Vlachopoulos & Cowan, 2010b).

The notion of the ‘ring-fenced’ e-moderation activity was coined by the authors of this chapter after a careful analysis of four e-moderated online learning university contexts. These were found to be less than effective in creating a climate for truly learner-directed learning, wherein most of the decisions about learning should be the sole responsibility of the learner and not of the teacher or the e-moderator (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). The metaphorical ring-fence distinguishes between the various factors that can impact on the online tutoring and the consequent learning that occurs through these factors. In the outer annulus beyond the “ring fence” (see Figure 1) are located various managerial activities undertaken by those responsible for the provision of teaching and assessment, who may be members of a programme team, or the module leader. These include:

- Amplification of programme aims into specified intended learning outcomes, or a statement of the expectations which the outcomes of flexible learning should fulfill.
- Planning of the tasks which should promote student-centred learning in accordance with these principles, aims and outcomes as well as with the course style.

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