E–Moderation in Public Discussion Forums

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INTRODUCTION

Very little has been written about the crucial role of the moderator in public discussion forums or discursive communities. Group theory tends to draw upon group experiences from non-moderated groups such as criminal juries or groups convened for the purpose of observation. Therefore group theory is concerned with group members' behaviour that is not affected by intervention by someone with the overall process in mind. Practicing moderators and process designers understand the importance of this role in face-to-face consultation. The translation of these skills into an online environment is the subject of this article.

Unfortunately those who write about e-democracy rarely mention this important function, focusing instead on the technology, even though the moderator role is increasingly employed, for example in online collaboration or decision-making. The role of the e-moderator or e-convenor has attracted some attention, both in public deliberation circles (for example, National Issues Forums in the U.S.) and tertiary education (Salmon, 2002). Understanding e-moderation requires an appreciation of moderation per se. This article draws on input from a network of professional facilitators (in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the UK) who were asked by the author (in November 2004) to describe the qualities of an effective facilitator/moderator in a face-to-face (F2F) environment. Their combined responses, previously unpublished data, are used in this article. This primary data is combined with the author's own critical reflections based on 20 years of experience as a group facilitator and is integrated with the writings of theorists and practitioners.

BACKGROUND

The terms facilitator, moderator, and convenor have been used interchangeably so far. Facilitator is a term favoured in Australia; the U.S. uses moderator to mean the same thing: the person who facilitates or makes easy the work of a group. When using the term moderator, Australians usually mean a person who is engaged in conflict resolution or controlling a heated debate. In the UK, the terms e-moderator and e-convenor are routinely used. In defer-

ence to international differences, the term moderator will be used to describe someone appointed to facilitate group deliberations.

An e-moderator is used in a variety of circumstances, for example the author has experienced e-moderation when groups are: engaged in online learning, developing organizational policies, organizing international conferences, functioning collaboratively as a decision-making body, for example, as the board of a professional association or research group. The role no doubt is used beyond these specific purposes, but this article focuses on discourse communities—in particular, groups convened for the purpose of discussion or deliberation (the latter denoting a movement toward common ground or decision making). This would not include asynchronous or synchronous chat rooms or e-mail discussions. The following commentary focuses on online forums.

It should also be noted that it is possible to engage in public deliberation *without* an e-moderator. This seems to occur when deliberation is emphasising direct democracy or transparent decision making or voting. For example, the 1062.org site offers a method for putting forward propositions that become subject to comment and can be modified by their author, culminating in a vote. The process is deliberative to the extent that an individual proposition becomes the subject of a ping-pong exchange (a "back-and-forth volley" in Isaacs' language (1999, p. 365) with people thinking alone but contributing these thoughts to a pooled propositional/voting process. However, direct democracy of this kind is unlikely to satisfy those who are disgruntled by existing political practices in developed countries (see Coleman & Gotze, 2001), so deliberative democracy is the focus here.

It is possible for an e-moderator's duties to be limited to receiving information or censoring or filtering. However, for the purposes of this article, where public discourse is paramount, the emphasis is on an e-moderator as a manager of discussion or deliberation. The e-moderator is seen as contributing "to the interactivity and openness of discussion" (Edwards, 2002, p. 3). In Edwards' language, the e-moderator can be seen as a "democratic intermediary" (2002, p. 3), at least in government-led discussions, and his research reminds us of the importance of transparency for those assuming the moderator role.

Table 1. Attributes of an effective (face-to-face) moderator

PERSONALITY	
Must like people and be fair.	•
Can handle emotions of others by being non-defensive and non-blaming (is self-differentiated).	•
Is impartial, respectful, enthusiastic, encouraging, reflective, inquiring, patient, sensitive, and compassionate.	•
LISTENING/COMPREHENDING/OBSERVING	
Good listener who is in tune with people—hearing what they say.	•
Hearing what participants are trying to say or not saying.	×
Listens for more than the words and includes those who would otherwise be silenced or marginalized.	•
Has great powers of observation (antennae always up).	×
Can distinguish key issues from key passions.	•
Puts in lots of effort in planning.	•
Appreciates all contributions including those listening well.	×
Needs to be able to spot the unasked questions and unspoken assumptions.	•
Able to draw out connections between ideas (good comprehension skills).	•
Can articulate what is happening by naming common ground and areas of difference.	•
GROUP PROCESS	
Be willing to adapt their own facilitation style to match the group's needs.	×
Has many tools at his/her disposal (which means they can be flexible).	×
Becomes less visible as participants interact with each other.	•
Is flexible and responsive and works with a light touch.	•
Keeps the meeting to time.	×
Understands the particular context.	•
Employs good documentation skills so a record exists.	•
Welcomes difference and seeks to bring people to a position they can all accept.	•
Sums up contributions in such a way that people feel heard.	•
Can firmly interrupt domination and inappropriate power relations (using the group's own code of conduct).	•
Understands the problem/issue/challenge.	•
Makes sure everyone in group understands challenge.	•
Guides/supports/assists group to solve it.	•
Demystifies concepts, processes, and strategies.	•
Helps the group find the resources it needs to ensure everyone can participate fully.	•
Can laugh easily and bring lightness to the discussion; encourages shared humour and a relaxed environment.	×
Introduces people and creates friendly atmosphere to encourage full participation.	•
Inspires confidence and helps a group do its best thinking without imposing his/her own opinions, ideas or biases.	•
Creates the space for synergy and creativity.	•
Can stimulate dialogue that leads to shared learning.	•
Creates a sense of achievement and satisfaction for most participants.	×
Makes it look easy!	•

Code: **• = possible or easy electronically**   **× = not possible or quite challenging (electronically)**

When working F2F, the skills of an effective moderator are obvious. Table 1 is a summary of the attributes that were extracted from professional facilitators in Australia, the U.S., the UK, and Canada. There were many similarities in responses and general agreement that an effective moderator enables a productive conversation to occur because s/he understands how groups operate and can manage the complexities and pitfalls that are usually encountered.

One of the oft-cited descriptors of a poor moderator in this previously-unpublished study was a lack of awareness of one's own biases and opinions and an understanding of how this affects the group. Neutrality was considered an essential attribute. Many skilled moderators listed qualities that they freely admit are beyond the reach of mere mortals—almost "superhuman" or saint-like qualities that these moderators saw as an ideal. However, it is possible to discern attributes that could be acquired through learning and practice and also to detect those that would be quite challenging without the benefit of seeing, hearing or sensing the group members. These challenges are addressed in the next section, paying particular attention to those attributes which are marked × in Table 1. The assignment of adot or cross is quite subjective, based on the author's own experience, and other moderators would (and have) disagreed with some of these choices.

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