INFORMATION SCIENCE PUBLISHING
E. Chocolate Avenue, Suite 200, Hershey PA 17033, USA
Tel: 717/533-8845; Fax 717/533-8661; URL-http://www.idea-group.com
ITB9702

Chapter III

E-Moderating in Higher Education

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Abstract

There are few published reports of structured approaches to developing lecturers for new online roles. However, both campus and distance learning institutions can offer some experiences in developing lecturing staff to moderate and teach with low cost text-based online conferencing. This role is known as e-moderating. Staff development is often asserted as a key issue in the success of everything from a project, a course or a whole institution to an online environment. The current climate asserts the importance both for university and college lecturers of adopting a good practice and an understanding of teaching in addition to academic competence. This chapter considers and explores the knowledge and skills that the best e-moderators have and how they can be recruited, trained and developed.

This chapter appears in the book, Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Educational Paradigms for Online Learning, edited by Caroline Howard, Karen Schenk, and Richard Discenza.

Introduction and Rationale

The challenge of developing new kinds of online teaching and learning processes, while remaining true to educational or training missions, is at the forefront of the implementation of information and communication technologies in the early 21st century. Alexander, McKenzie et al. (1988) show that staff development is one of the main factors in determining the success of institutional attempts to make the transition to online delivery.

The term moderator has grown up with the use of online text-based discussion and group work, in teaching and learning contexts. In 2000, I first used the term "e-moderating" to capture the wide variety of roles and skills that the online teacher, lecturer or trainer needs to acquire. Supporting learning online through synchronous and asynchronous conferencing (bulletin boards, forums) requires e-moderators to have a wider range of expertise compared to working with face-to-face learning groups. Hence, the role of the lecturer or teacher in higher education needs to change to include e-moderating to match the development and potential of new online environments.

Successful and productive e-moderating is a key feature of positive, scalable and affordable e-learning projects and processes. Regardless of the sophistication of the technology, online learners do *not* wish to do without their human supporters. How many people, for example, have been heard to say, "I'm great at art because of my inspirational computer"? Not any that I've met, on or off-line! Instead, learners talk of challenge and support by their teachers or of contact with the thoughts and the work of others. Most people also mention the fun and companionship of working and learning together. Such benefits do not have to be abandoned if developing online learning results in a cohort of trained e-moderators to support the online learners.

Many words have been written about new technologies and their potential, but not much about what the human supporters of the learning actually *do* online. The greatest impact of all on the quality of the students' learning resides in the way a technology is used and not in the characteristics of the medium itself (Inglis, Ling et al., 2000). Although increasing numbers of learners are working online, few lecturers have themselves learned this way. Therefore, e-moderating is not a set of skills most lecturers have acquired vicariously through observing teachers while they themselves were learning. Many lecturers naturally believe that learning to e-moderate mostly has to do with learning new software or computing skills. This is not the case. In text-based asynchronous environments, a critically important role for the e-moderator is promoting the surfacing and sharing of understanding and knowledge through online writing and dialogue (Barker, 2002). Furthermore, successful e-moderating cannot be