

BOOK REVIEW

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FACILITATING ONLINE LEARNING: EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR MODERATORS ***by George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, and Robert Tinker***

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Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators by George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, and Robert Tinker. (Madison, WI: Atwood, 2000, 216 pages, \$24.95)

INTRODUCTION

Recent publications (Berge, 1995; Berge & Collins, 2000; Lowell & Persichitte, 2000; Owen, 2000; Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995) have emphasized the importance of online moderation, a necessity that has often been ignored in online instruction. This book, *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Mod-*

erators, addresses current requirements for fostering active online learning environments. The goal of this book emphasizes: “Knowledgeable use of such strategies can enrich and deepen the dialogue and foster learning in this emerging venue (xv).” It serves those who have never tried facilitating online dialogue and who seek to gather information about the process from experienced practitioners. Additionally, it serves seasoned online course facilitators who wish to confirm their own understanding of online moderation, reflect on their own practices, and, perhaps, expand their repertoire of strategies for effective online training or teaching. The main target audience includes college professors, corporate manag-

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ers and trainers, secondary school teachers, and others will discover strategies in these pages to enrich their skills at online facilitation and discussion moderation.

This book contains 261 pages, an introduction, eight chapters, an epilogue, glossary, and references. Additionally, it provides a site for online discussion of this book, located at <http://www.concord.org/books/fo1>. However, at the time this review was written, the discussion board was still under construction.

The chapter topics are respectively: Chapter 1: Principles that support effective moderating, Chapter 2: Negotiation space, Chapter 3: Key facilitator roles, Chapter 4: Healthy online communities, Chapter 5: Voices, Chapter 6: Tone, Chapter 7: Critical thinking strategies, and Chapter 8: Roadblocks. There is no index in the book.

In Chapter 1, three principles that support effective moderating were discussed: Moderating takes advantage of professional and social strategies; The style of “guide on the side” is most appropriate for leading a virtual learning community; and Online moderation is a craft that has general principles and strategies which can be learned. These three principles sustain the authors’ points of view throughout the book; “Guides on the sides” was emphasized frequently.

In Chapter 2, based on a few theoretical works in critical thinking (Drucker, 1988; Lippman, 1991; Matthies, 1996; Paul, 1990; Peters & Waterman, 1988), three dialogue forms are categorized: social dialogue, argumentative dialogue, and pragmatic dialogue. The authors feel that pragmatic dialogue is the ultimate goal for learning online to generate critical thinking. Social dialogue should be fostered as well. However, argumentative dialogue should be discouraged in online communication.

In Chapter 3, the authors suggest that the facilitator should assume multiple roles to facilitate critical thinking. The recommended roles are: “Guide on the Side;” Instructor or project leader, and Group process facilitator. The moderating skills expressed by different

roles are clarified and discussed. They are: to ensure that participants feel welcome, and safe; and to model the use of the virtual medium to minimize miscommunication.

Five characteristics of healthy online communities are extensively deliberated in Chapter 4. They are:

- a. Participants post regularly,
- b. The online community meets its members’ needs, and participants express honest opinions,
- c. Participant-to-participant collaboration and teaching are evident, and spontaneous moderating occurs among the participants,
- d. Reasonable venting about technology, content and even the facilitator is acceptable and evident; and
- e. Participants show concern and support for the community.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, the authors discuss three major moderating strategies; voices, tones, and critical thinking, based upon their experiences and observations with moderators at their work, recent literature, and critical thinking frameworks. These strategies include six voices (Generative guide, Conceptual facilitator, Reflective guides, Personal muse, Mediator, and Role play), eight tones (Nurturing, Humorous, Imaginative, Neutral, Curious, Analytical, Informal, and Whimsical) and two critical thinking strategies (sharpen the focus of the dialogue, and help participants dig deeper into the dialogue). Their strategies are not an exhaustive list of strategies, or step-by-step guidelines. It is recommended that they should be crafted like “palette.”

In Chapter 8, the authors identify two major errors that most of online moderators commit that may potentially impede dialogue: “Hijacking the dialogue” and “Whoosh, it went right by.” Several remedies to these errors are recommended. These strategies are based on their work at the Concord Consortium.

Overall, this book has tendered a theoretical framework and a practical guide to assist those who wish to initiate and sustain quality dia-

logue in online learning. They do not feel that the framework presented for online moderating strategies is a final, complete, or comprehensive list of the modes of interaction and composition. It is their wish that an effective guide is provided to assist online moderators and others to develop new capacities leading to greater depths of online dialogue and enhanced learning among the participants.

DEVELOPMENT

In this book, online moderation had been covered adequately and all aspects of online moderation are presented in an appropriate, balanced fashion. It is well suited for the intended audiences. The four authors have impressive professional backgrounds and online instruction experiences. The basis of this book is their experiences with online courses offered at the Concord Consortium. It is clear that the authors favor asynchronous communication over synchronous communications reflecting their asynchronous online course experiences. The disadvantages of asynchronous communication were not discussed.

Critical thinking emerges as the most important basic skill and strategy that online moderators and participants should nurture to enhance their online learning. The discussions are based on the authors' actual experiences, observations, amassed facts, and their opinions rather than on theory, although theoretical foundations and literature are discussed. The genesis of this book is made clear by the authors; therefore, it is more like a case study than a comprehensive thesis. The strategies discussed appear useful and practical although the book is based on the experiences of the authors. The contents on moderation are mostly cognitive, social, or cultural in nature and effectively support the thesis of the book. A more valuable approach would be to present those strategies with solid and well-framed theoretical constructs to ensure effective online learning.

Online social functions are remarked upon but not discussed extensively. The authors point out that online social functions are different from those encountered in the face-to-face (FTF) communication environment. One cannot replicate FTF for online communication. For example, building trust is discussed as an important and critical relationship for online communication. However, the discussions that address "how to" build trusting relationships between online participants are very limited.

Clearly, this book is not a cookbook; however, it can be used as a "How-to" book although it is not the author's intention. Certainly, there is no step-by-step instruction on how to moderate; but, it requires that one should have a good understanding about online learning communities. Rather, it should be seen as an art that enables one to craft ideal online moderation. The authors suggest that the contents of their work should be viewed as a "palette." Online communication is a dynamic social interaction process. Therefore, moderators must analyze each individual communication process and style, synthesize the various strategies discussed in this book, and apply it to online communication.

The authors favor asynchronous communication because the time delay permits the development of communications that are thoughtfully constructed and convey a deeper meaning. The authors' experiences are based on asynchronous communications, leaving no doubt that they value asynchronous over synchronous communication. Current online communications occur in two formats, synchronous and asynchronous. In fact, both formats are well adapted in various online learning environments. Both formats should be applied in appropriate circumstances and would allow the presentation of a more complete idea of online moderation.

Social dialogue is mentioned but not comprehensively addressed. The authors notice differences between online communication and FTF encounters in terms of social functions. Most social cues cannot be delivered via text-based computer-mediated communica-

tion. Therefore, the strategies to compensate for the absence of social cues are discussed to make users feel welcome, safer, and more comfortable in an online “community.” However, these strategies are not as comprehensive as “pragmatic dialogue” that generates the more valuable critical thinking described by the authors. Issues involved in building online social relationships, trust, and understanding of online participants’ characteristics is not addressed. The issues omitted in this thesis are fundamental to the process of building an “online learning community,” a major theme of the publication.

This book describes appropriate and useful techniques for a moderator playing a single role in online communications. Most online instructors commonly play multiple roles in online communications. The discussions on this situation appear obscure. There is not a clear description of how an instructor performs the roles of content expert, instructional designer, discussion moderator, and how the instructor should facilitate online communications. In fact, students perceive different roles and social relationships between students and instructors, moderators, and teaching assistants (Tu & McIsaac, in press).

Chapter Eight presents a useful checklist to examine and diagnose whether a particular form of online moderation is healthy or not. Several common moderating errors are identified. Two major categories are identified, “Hijacking the dialogue” and “Whoosh, it went right by.” These moderating errors are easy to commit. For example, moderators may establish themselves as mediators for the participants. It is called “Standing in the middle.” It is very natural for one to apply their experiences to the participants. The participants may verbalize acceptance because of the instructor’s authority.

One of the errors that the author identifies is “If I do nothing, they will inquire,” that may deserve more discussion. The thesis describes:

...in the form of praise-without depth or reason and made by either you or participant can also cause disengagement from

the dialogue: “I really liked the article.” “I’ll take these ideas and use them for sure.” “Others will find the ideas beneficial.” These expressions are the equivalent of head nods, smiles, or eye contact in face-to-face meetings, and they give no indication of whether participants are engaging with the ideas being presented. Thus you may, and perhaps should, ask, and answer, using the voice of a Personal Muse: “Why?” “What is the source of its appeal?” “What, in particular, is there of value that you seek to use with your students?”

This concept deserves more in-depth discussion since the examples given here may generate more interactive and positive social relationships. It appears that the authors exhibit reservations on delivering praise. In fact, “appropriate” praise may motivate students to more interactive discussions. Certainly, suggestive conversations are appropriate in some situations. This points out that how one balances social dialogue and critical thinking dialogue.

Online flaming was not included in this thesis. Online “flaming” is a critical issue in online communication (Bellamy & Hanewicz, 1999; Cavanagh, 1999, Thompsen & Foulger 1996). Flaming refers to computer-mediated communication behaviors that are interpreted to be inappropriately hostile (Thompsen, 1993) that have occurred frequently in online communications. Because of the absence of social and non-verbal cues, miscommunication and misunderstanding can be generated very easily in the online environment. How moderators should deal with the online flaming situation is a very important issue that deserves discussion.

CONCLUSIONS

This book, *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*, has provided an appropriate structure and a practical guide to help overcome the challenge of starting and sustaining quality dialogue in asynchronous online learning. Moderation should

be seen as an art rather than a mechanical process; therefore, it may take time to conduct/craft appropriate moderation work to foster more interactive online learning and deeper critical thinking. The strategies of online moderation in this book, as the author say, are not “intended as a final and complete list of the modes of interaction and composition” readers’ online moderations. However, it can be an effective guide that will help moderators to develop a healthy learning community committed to more social functions and more focus on deeper thinking and learning.

This book provides a three-principle moderation model while another book, *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (Salmon, 2000), utilizes a five-stage moderation model (Access and motivation; Online socialization; Information exchange; Knowledge construction; and Development) to help train and prepare teachers for online work. Both models originated in their practices of online moderation. It is necessary that both models be grounded with further research to project a sound theoretical framework.

This book challenges readers intellectually, enhances understanding the art of online moderation, increases knowledge of online moderation, and raises critical questions for future discussions although there are several issues that need to be further pondered.

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