

## E-TIVITIES – THE KEY TO ACTIVE ONLINE LEARNING

Gilly Salmon, Kogan Page, London, ISBN:0-7494-3686-7, softback, xv + 223 pages, £19.99 Sterling, 2002.

Online learning now seems to be ‘all the rage’! There has therefore been a substantial increase in research publications and books dealing with this very exciting and challenging topic. Some years ago, Gilly Salmon (2000) produced an interesting and valuable book on ‘*e-moderating*’ in online learning environments - primarily, those that use computer conferencing as a major teaching and learning mechanism. A review of her earlier book appeared in ALT-J Volume 9(1), 106-108. In many ways, this current book acts as a sort of ‘sequel’ to her previous one - carrying on where that left off.

The material in this new book is organised into two parts. The first of these (entitled ‘*Introducing E-tivities*’) provides a basis and framework for describing and discussing the nature and purpose of online, conference-based, electronic teaching and learning activities. The second part of the book (called ‘*Resources for Practitioners*’) introduces a structured list of 35 resources that online tutors and ‘e-moderators’ might find helpful while preparing for and during their online encounters with members of a learning community.

In the first part of the book there are four chapters. The author uses the first of these to present some introductory comments and also to relate some ‘*stories from the e-activities front line*’. These serve to provide both a context for the book and a rationale for its content. In the second chapter the author introduces her ‘*five-stage framework for online learning*’. This model - which was also covered in detail in her previous book (Salmon, 2000) - consists of the following five phases of online activity: *access and motivation; online socialisation; information exchange; knowledge construction; and development*. Each of these phases is described and discussed in detail and each is ‘punctuated’ with numerous illustrative ‘quotations’ (comments made by tutors and learners) taken from a variety of different online (conference-driven) courses. At fifty pages, the third chapter in the book (entitled ‘*E-tivities in Action*’) is the longest of the chapters in Part 1. The author uses this chapter to work through a case study that illustrates the essential features of her ‘methodology’. Within this she employs the five-stage model and a series of e-tivities in order to create an online staff-development programme on the topic of e-moderating. The chapter concludes with two further stories from the ‘*e-tivities front line*’ - each of which relates to the topic of course evaluation. In Chapter 4, the one which I found most interesting, the author discusses the various issues involved in designing and creating e-tivities. The rationale for this chapter is based on the need to create online activities that are ‘*geared towards engaging participants in active online learning that results in their achieving the outcomes that they and you desire*’ (p. 87). Salmon recommends that ‘*as an ideal, aim for participants to contribute positively, constructively and interactively*’. The discussion that is presented in this chapter is closely cross-linked to the various resources that are described in the second part of the book.

The ‘*Resources for Practitioners*’ part of the book contains many ideas for helping to create online activities for the support of conference-based e-learning. The list of 35 resources is structured into eight basic categories. These categories (and the number

of e-tivities in each one) are as follows: *Designing e-tivities* (5), *Developing e-tivities* (7), *Time* (7), *Online communication* (3), *Participants* (4), *E-moderating* (5), *Provision for e-tivities* (3), and *E-tivities background* (1). Essentially, these resources take the form of a wide ranging collection of guidelines, suggestions and recommendations for achieving effective online tutoring and learning.

The five resources that make up the first of the above eight categories provide a useful structural framework for thinking about what is involved in creating an electronic activity for a group of learners. They also offer some ideas and mechanisms to facilitate the design process - for example, the author lists various recommended 'action words' and ideas for 'sparks' ('triggers' for initiating conference activity). The second group of seven resources (labelled 6 through 12) identify a number of ideas for actually developing e-tivities; some of the suggestions that are made here include the use of 'e-mail games', 'metaphors as sparks', 'autotelism' and 'collaborative groups'.

Despite the potential efficiency of online tutoring and learning, in my view (Barker, 2001), these activities can create substantial 'time demands' - both for tutors and for students. Because of the importance of the time dimension, the author provides seven resources (numbers 13 through 19) which can be used to help resolve some of the issues involved with time - and time management. Included within this subset of resources are some guidelines for estimating the time it is likely to take to prepare and run online activities. Some suggestions are also made with respect to anticipating both the e-moderators' time involvement and the participants' time commitment to an e-tivity. In this (time) section of the book the author introduces an interesting taxonomy of users based on the kind of conferencing behaviour that they exhibit. Three examples of the nine classes in her taxonomy are: the *elephant* (described as being 'Steady - visits most days for a short time'), the *rabbit* (who 'Lives online, prolific message writer, responds very rapidly') and the *magpie* (who 'Steals ideas without acknowledging them'). Naturally, appropriate e-moderator responses for each type of conference participant are documented within this resource. [I am not sure if this taxonomy is a serious one or whether the author has just thrown this into the book as a light-hearted gesture to lighten-up the reading!].

The three resources that deal with 'Online communication' (20 through 22) cover the essential topics of learning 'Netspeak', online language and protocol. As one might anticipate, the use of 'smileys' and 'emoticons' figure prominently in this discussion. In the 'Participants' group of resources (23 through 26) there are some useful (but very 'sketchy') suggestions for analysing and assessing conference contributions. There are also sections on handling prejudices and stereotypes, disabilities (such as dyslexia and visual impairment) and a 'not too serious' treatment of addiction to e-tivities!

Resources 27 through 31 deal with e-moderating issues relating to the recruitment of e-moderators and the skills and competencies that they should have. Examples of the required e-moderator attributes listed by the author include: technical skills, online communication skills and content expertise. Of course, an e-moderator's personal characteristics are also important; some of the pre-requisite attributes that potential candidates should show include: determination and motivation; adaptability to new teaching contexts and methods; sensitivity to online situations and a positive attitude. According to the author, in order to become an effective e-moderator, it is necessary

for an online tutor to become adept at 'weaving', 'summarising' and 'archiving' conference contributions (p. 194). Within this section of the book there are also some interesting suggestions on contingent e-moderating, running an e-tivity plenary and handling unexpected outcomes.

The last major group of resources (32 through 34) deal with '*Provision for e-tivities*'. Essentially, these three resources identify a general 'recipe' for success in the creation of e-learning environments; they then go on to discuss the financial aspects of electronic activities and various issues relating to delivery platforms. As might be anticipated, the main (ongoing) costs are those relating to 'people' - who usually need to be paid for their involvement in conference activities. The main sources of cost arise from the need to provide e-moderator support in relation to technical help, social hosts, mentoring, and so on.

Within the final resource (entitled '*E-tivities roots: a bibliography*'), the author attempts to provide something of a 'theoretical' basis for the role of e-tivities within the general framework of electronic learning. Here, she discusses such issues as knowledge circulation, constructivism and situated learning, engagement theory, deep and surface learning, reflection, and so on. The treatments of these topics are all very brief and superficial - nevertheless, they provide useful 'pointers' to those who may wish to take them further.

As an e-learning enthusiast I enjoyed reading this book - as I did her previous one. However, I do have some minor negative comments to make. In Part 1, I thought that there was too much use of 'shaded text' boxes containing quotes from various online dialogues. In my opinion, the real place to read conference contributions is online - not in a conventional book. I think this also raises an important 'publishing' issue. In my view, a book such as this should really have had a Web site to support it - perhaps with active dialogues relating to the book and some of the issues that it raises. Unfortunately, this is missing. A Web address is given (<http://www.e-tivities.com>) but this is more a promotional site for the author and the book - rather than being devoted to the issues that it raises. In Part 2, most of the resources seem to be quite sound and useful. However, some are presented in a very sketchy way without any real explanation of how to use them. Resource 28, for example, is a case in point. Here a table is presented but there is no supporting narrative description relating to how this table should be used. Of course, these are just 'little things'. Overall, I believe this book (like her previous one) makes a very useful contribution to the world of online learning.

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### References

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