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Reflecting On Models For Online Learning In Theory & Practice^{*}

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Abstract

This paper investigates the application of several well-known pedagogical models to the design and delivery of a series of blended workshops on online learning. The models were the five-stage e-moderating model for teaching and learning online, e-tivities, the e-learning ladder and communities of practice.

The workshop series was aimed at academics and teaching librarians in a campus-based university. Its objective was to introduce them to some of the pedagogies and technologies in blended learning. Some of the participants were interested in delivering library and information skills classes online while others wanted to learn how to enhance the online elements of their existing courses.

The tutor/moderator designed the workshops using the five-stage model for e-moderating as a framework. The model was presented to the participants as they progressed through the stages. Issues raised by the workshops included socialisation, technology, the role of the moderator, face-to-face classes, pace of progress through the stages and transfer to teaching practice. The class compared the five-stage model to the e-learning ladder and communities of practice to see how they addressed these issues.

The paper looks back at the workshop and the practical and theoretical issues that it raised. It concludes with some issues for future research.

Keywords: Salmon's five-stage model, e-moderating, online learning, discussion board, discussion forum, e-tivity, e-learning ladder, communities of practice, online community.

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1. Background

The author designed, presented and moderated two blended workshops on teaching online with discussion boards and virtual classrooms. The workshops took place over six one-hour sessions – of these, three were classroom-based and three remote. One was a synchronous online class and the other two were asynchronous. The workshops were limited to eight participants each to encourage interaction between members of the class.

Of the participants, who completed the workshop series, eight were academic librarians and five were academics. All were regular users of Blackboard¹, the virtual learning environment in the university. With one exception, they had little experience of teaching with the Blackboard communication tools, that is, the discussion forum and virtual classroom. The librarians were interested in delivering library and information skills classes online while the academics wanted to learn how to enhance the online elements of courses that they were teaching.

The author is an educational technologist. A guest moderator, an educational technologist from a North American university, supported him in some online classes. An academic with extensive teaching experience using Blackboard discussion boards and the university Blackboard administrator also participated in some classroom sessions.

The aim of the workshops was to help participants to make effective use of the Blackboard communication tools in their teaching. The workshop design was based on the five-stage e-moderating model for teaching and learning online (Salmon 2000; Salmon 2004) with e-tivities (Salmon 2002). As the workshops progressed, the e-learning ladder (Moule 2007) and communities of practice (Wenger 1998) were introduced. The participants were encouraged to reflect if, and how, these models corresponded to practice in the workshops.

2. Case Study & Findings

In many online and indeed classroom groups, a small number of participants dominate while others 'lurk', making little or no contribution (Moule 2007). Online learning is not inherently social and works best with groups that already know each other (Glogoff 2005; Jones & Peachey 2005). Discussion boards and virtual classrooms do not necessarily lead to collaboration. Most academics have little experience of online teaching and learning and are unsure how to make best use of these online tools. Putting the lecturers in the role of students helps them appreciate the potential of online learning (Lisewski & Joyce 2003). This workshop series was designed to give academics that experience. It was broadly based on Salmon's (2000; 2004) five-stage model for online teaching and learning. This model has been widely adopted by higher education where it is used to teach academics to become 'e-moderators' (Lisewski & Joyce 2003; Jones & Peachey 2005). An e-moderator can be described as a "guide on the side", a facilitator of online learning rather than a lecturer (Anderson 2000). The e-moderators' role is to encourage participation when appropriate. Too frequent interventions can stifle discussion but lack of feedback will cause students to lose interest (Moule 2007).

1 <http://www.blackboard.com/>

Salmon (2000; 2004) developed the five-stage model to provide a framework to help experienced face-to-face tutors become e-moderators on Open University online courses. The role of the e-moderators was to support student engagement and learning in an entirely online course.

The five-stage model is based on constructivist pedagogic principles (Salmon 2007) and is grounded in Salmon's own action research in the Open University Business School (Chowcat 2005), where the students varied considerably in their expectations and experiences of both technology and of the education system.

Some of the technical terms used in the model are specific to First Class² (the virtual learning environment used by the Open University at the time) e.g. 'Conferencing' which cannot be directly applied to the Blackboard communication tools.

The five-stage model (Figure 1) describes a series of steps to enable students to develop from novices to independent online learners. It focuses on the role of the e-moderator in facilitating the students and on the technical issues involved.

- Stage 1: Access and Motivation. The e-moderator makes sure that students can access the system and provides basic activities to help novices build their technical skills. This helps increase their confidence in the new (both educational and technical) environment.
- Stage 2: Online Socialisation: The e-moderator encourages the students to get to know each other online by exchanging messages and by performing simple tasks together. This increases their confidence and forms the basis for collaborative work.
- Stage 3: Information Exchange: The e-moderator helps the students to discover new knowledge and exchange information about it.
- Stage 4: Knowledge Construction: The e-moderator encourages the students to evaluate resources and create their own content. The greatest amount of interactivity occurs at this stage.
- Stage 5: Development: The e-moderator encourages the students to reflect on and evaluate their own learning. The aim is for them to become self-directed, independent learners.

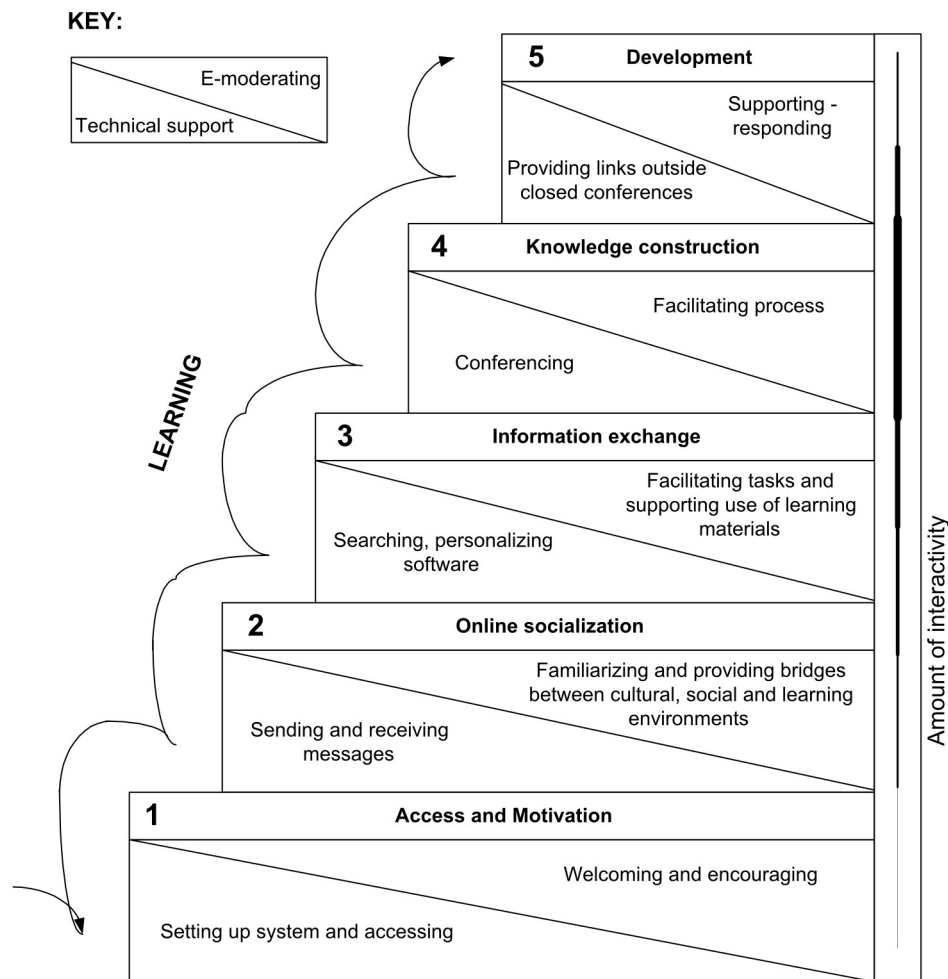


Figure 1: The Five-stage e-Moderating Model for Teaching & Learning Online from Salmon (2000), as reproduced in Jones and Peachey (2005)

Jones and Peachey (2005) analysed a training course for e-moderators in the University of Glamorgan based on the five-stage model. They started with a face-to-face workshop which they found to be an effective way of solving access and technical issues. Importantly, it gave the participants an opportunity to socialise which prepared them for collaborative work later in the course. They found that the participants wished to move quickly through stages one and two of the model and concentrate on the later stages. The tutor/moderator adapted the delivery pace and location of the workshop series based on Jones and Peachey's (2005) findings on the five-stage model.

Week	Activity	Location/Type	Stage
1	Introductions	Classroom	2
	Discussion Forum	Face-to-face	1
	Theory – 5 Stage Model		
	Writing welcome post		2
	Writing blog review post		3
2	Read article & write post	Remote asynchronous	4/5
	Reply to other postings	Discussion Forum	4/5
3	Review week 2	Classroom	3
	Theory – e-tivities	Face-to-face	
	Virtual Classroom		1
4	Virtual Classroom discussion	Remote synchronous Virtual Classroom	3
5	Create own thread	Remote asynchronous	4/5
	Reply to others' threads	Discussion Forum	4/5
6	Review to date	Classroom	4/5
	Theory – e-learning ladder	Face-to-face	
	Theory – communities of practice		
	Review workshop series		4/5
	Feedback		

Table 1: Workshop Series Schedule with activities in relation to five-stage model

As in the five-stage model (Figure 1), the workshop series (Table 1) aimed to progress through the stages, beginning with access and motivation. The first workshop was held in a classroom to facilitate socialisation and to ensure all participants could access and use the discussion board. To meet these objectives, the tutor began by giving a quick demonstration of the Blackboard discussion forum. He started a thread on "Introducing Yourself" and wrote a welcome post as an introduction. The class members were then invited to reply to this post by introducing themselves. This ensured that all participants were able to access the system and exchange messages. Thus, the technical aspects of the first two stages of the five-stage

model were met. Not all participants knew each other and so this first activity also helped with socialisation and prepared the participants for collaborative tasks. Group members who know each other already are more likely to work together successfully on collaborative tasks (Jones & Peachey 2005; Glogoff 2005). Thus, the e-moderator covered welcoming and encouraging, along with familiarising and providing bridges as in the first two stages of the five-stage model.

Interesting tasks that encourage socialisation will increase the use of a discussion forum (K. J. Downing et al. 2007). For the next activity the participants read a blog posting on technology in education. A new thread was created and each participant posted their views. They were encouraged to reply to each others' posts with comments. The moderator provided advice verbally. This could be described as facilitating and supporting the use of learning materials as in stage three of the five-stage model. At stage three, the e-moderator sets short tasks where the learners discover and share knowledge (Salmon 2004). By the end of the first one-hour workshop, the class had already reached the Information Exchange stage at least in the e-moderating aspects of the five-stage model.

The first workshop ended with the tutor introducing the task for the second workshop in the series, which would be the first online session. The participants had to select a paper on online learning either written by a librarian (Markland 2003) or by a lecturer (Vonderwell 2003). The tutor/moderator had created a new thread in the discussion forum for this activity. The participants' task was to write a post comparing their present working experiences with the situation from six years ago as described in the papers. They had a week to post their responses and a further week to comment on their classmates' posts. In the workshops, the e-moderator's role was to set the task, help if any difficulties arose and to summarise the participants' replies. This corresponds to facilitating and responding in stages four and five of the five-stage model.

For week three, the participants returned to the classroom where they had the opportunity for face-to-face discussion of their online experiences. On previous occasions, this had helped to keep the momentum of the course and to stop online contributions from dropping off. The tutor used the opportunity to discuss netiquette and gave guidelines for managing participants. He also introduced the virtual classroom, which was used remotely in week four for synchronous discussion. As a technology new to the group, technical support activities for the virtual classroom were at stages one and two of the five-stage model. For example, the participants had to download and install a plugin. Their assignment for the virtual classroom in week four was to read Muirhead's (2002) review of Salmon's e-tivities. E-tivities are structured, participative group work online, usually designed and led by an e-moderator (Salmon 2002).

Messages are short and quick in the virtual classroom. The e-moderator needs to have questions prepared that can be answered in a sentence or two and which encourage further discussion. The e-moderating activities in weeks three and four ranged over the first three stages again.

An e-tivity is introduced by a 'spark' – a stimulus or challenge – which 'fires' participants to contribute to a discussion and interact with each other. An inappropriate spark leads to fewer, contributions, loss of interest and demotivated participants (Skinner 2009). In week five, the

moderator asked the participants to create their own threads in the discussion forum, describing a 'spark' to 'ignite' discussion in an e-tivity in their own subject area. For example, a lecturer in environmental science posted this spark which was effective in prompting a strong response:

I'm wondering what relevance Darwin's 200th birthday has to my life... After all he was a 'white-haired old man' with a distinctly British (colonizing) background ... Why is it important to celebrate his birthday?

The participants collaborated by giving opinions and suggestions on each other's sparks. The tutor's aim was to encourage the participants to transfer the skills and knowledge gained in the workshops to their own teaching practice by giving practical examples that would help the participants develop their own moderating and technical skills. The task covered stages four and five of the e-moderating aspects of Salmon's five-stage model with a particular focus on stage five, development.

The final workshop was classroom-based. The class discussed the application of the five stages model and e-tivities to the workshops and if, and how, to apply them to their own teaching. The tutor introduced two new models for discussion – the e-learning ladder and communities of practice:

- **e-Learning Ladder:** While acknowledging the importance of the five-stage model, Moule (2007) developed the e-learning ladder to address perceived weaknesses in that model as applied to blended learning.
- **Community of Practice:** Salmon (2004) intended socialisation in stage two to foster an online community, which would develop in the later stages of the model. The 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998) model describes how members learn by participating in such a community.

The class discussed whether they formed a community of practice or not. One participant who had completed a distance masters degree questioned the value and even the possibility of online socialisation, particularly where no collaborative activities were required. Finally, the participants completed a feedback questionnaire.

3. Review of Models & their application to the workshop

Wide acceptance of the five-stage model has led to its use as a template for many online courses (Lisewski & Joyce 2003; Moule 2007). Yet it has proved difficult to apply to the blended courses prevalent in higher education. For example, Lisewski and Joyce (2003) found it difficult to apply the five-stage model, when evaluating an e-moderating training course for academics, and warn of the dangers of using the model as a template for course design. Chowcat (2005) found the five-stage model ineffective when training mentors, as its structure was too rigid and did not allow for any face-to-face learning. He felt it was not transferable to less formal learning situations. Jones and Peachey (2005) added an introductory face-to-face workshop to make it easier for the participants to socialise and to

solve access and technical issues. To help address these issues, Moule (2007) developed the e-learning ladder based on her action research with healthcare students in higher education.

Moule's model (Figure 2) allows for a diversity of learning activities including both face to face and technology based learning. Activities range from instructivist methods such as information gathering, through the use of interactive CD-ROMs, to constructivist activities such as building communities of practice. Such a blend of activities leads to changing and increasingly complex technical requirements. Thus, access and technical issues are ongoing and new skills may be required at any stage (Moule 2007), for example, introducing the virtual classroom in week three of the workshop series.

In the e-learning ladder, learning activities become increasingly constructivist as one 'climbs' the ladder. The sides of the ladder represent pedagogical and social support on the left with technical issues on the right. Based on the workshop experiences, the discussion board should be higher up the ladder than the virtual classroom as its asynchronous nature led to more knowledge construction.

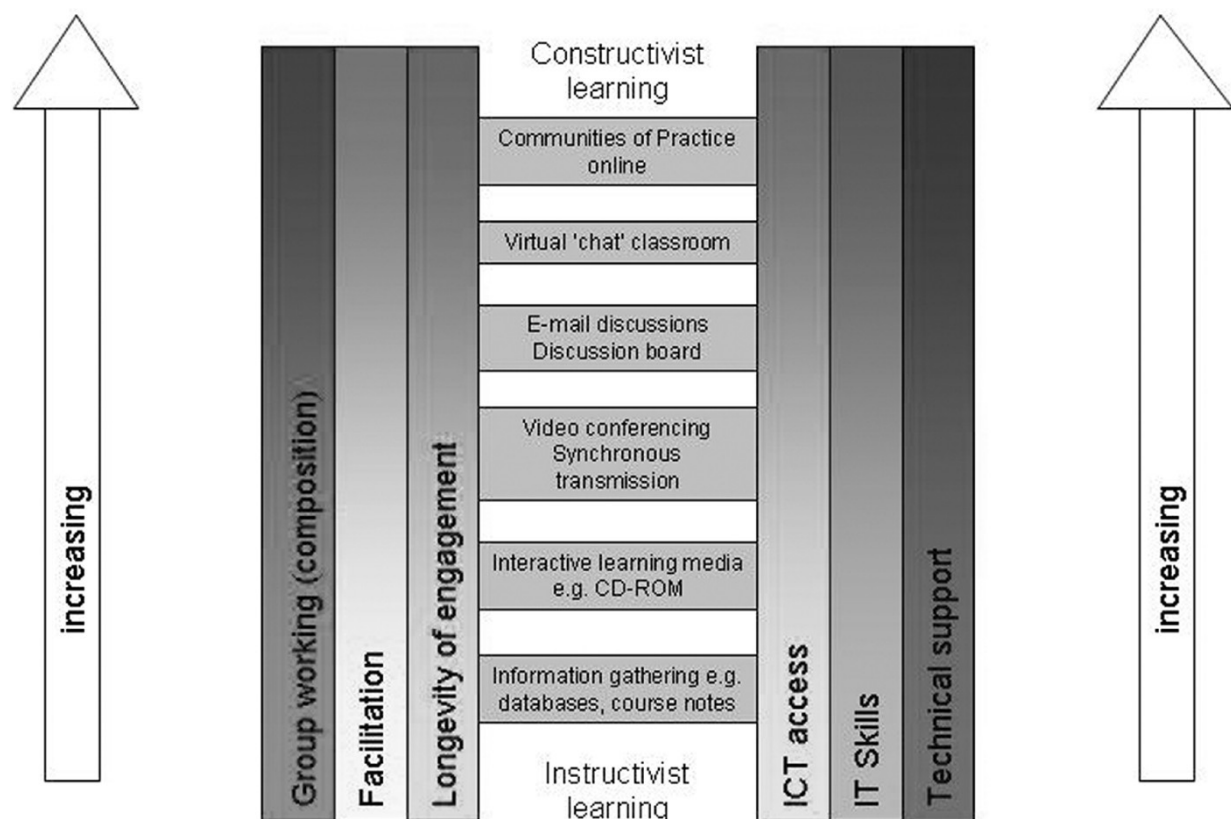


Figure 2: A conceptual model of online learning: the e-learning ladder (from Moule 2007)

Five Stages Model	e-Learning Ladder
Entirely online	Blended
Constructivist	Instructivist & Constructivist
Progression through stages	No progression
Decreasing problems with access & IT Skills	Ongoing problems with access and IT skills

Table 2: A comparison of the five-stage model and e-learning ladder

The visual representation of both models suggests that there is a progression up the rungs or steps and that each rung or step is of equal duration and of equal importance. This is not necessarily the case for either model. The five-stage model describes a progression in e-moderating and support with an implication of growing learner independence as one 'climbs' the steps as in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. There is no hierarchy in the e-learning ladder. The rungs represent a blend of inter-linking pedagogies, which may be used on a particular course (Moule 2007). One workshop participant considered the decreasing size of the steps in the five-stage model to mean that only a minority of participants would reach the top though this was never Salmon's intention.

Anderson (2000) in an early critique of the five-stage model thought it should continue beyond development to 'learning application' or 'integration'. The model ends with the trainee e-moderators becoming independent, reflective learners but does not show how they transfer their newly learnt skills to their own teaching practice

Salmon (2007) warns of the danger of rigidly applying the five-stage model. It should be seen as a framework which can be adapted to different contexts and technologies. It can be blended with communities of practice and has recently been combined with face-to-face group work by Salmon.

Both the e-learning ladder and the five-stage model are frameworks for developing online learning. The e-learning ladder was developed in the University of the West of England, a campus-based institution, while the five-stage model was developed for the Open University, which specialises in distance learning. The models reflect their institution of origin with their respective focus on blended and entirely online learning.

Socialisation at stage two of the five-stage model can lead to the development of an online community characterised by collaboration and group participation (Jones & Peachey 2005). Moule (2007) found that a Community of Practice existed among health care students taking a six week online course. Wenger (1998) sees a rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation, shared approaches to tasks, sustained relationships and a shared discourse as indicators of a community of practice. A community of practice exists where group members feel that they are working together and share a sense of responsibility to each other and

where a shared repertoire of common stories gives meaning to the community (Wenger 1998). Mutual trust and relationships build due to regular interaction over time. It takes time for such relationships to develop and this is unlikely to happen on a short course (Moule 2007).

In a community of practice new members learn from existing members and by absorbing the culture of the community. The tutor/moderators and learners in this workshop all belong to a university 'community' with its own discourse. The workshops are a site for the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation, and shared approaches to tasks as described by Wenger (1998). They probably do not last long enough to build sustained relationships or create their own history to be a true community of practice. However, workshop participants are likely to share attitudes towards learning and technology. These values would motivate the participants to proceed rapidly through the early stages of the five-stage model and engage at the later stages of the model (Jones & Peachey 2005).

4. Limitations

The workshops were designed for university staff. All participation was voluntary. Findings in this paper may not apply to courses taught by the participants to their students or to any other groups with different prior knowledge, goals and values.

5. Conclusions

The five-stage model for e-moderating (Salmon 2000; Salmon 2004) was a useful framework for designing the workshops as it provided a progression from directed, to self-directed and reflective learning. The tutor/moderator used e-tivities (Salmon 2002) appropriate to each stage, to engage the learners and to foster learning. Face-to-face learning and instructivist tasks were added to the workshop design as in the e-learning ladder (Moule 2007). The face-to-face activities helped socialisation among the participants (Jones & Peachey 2005). They also allowed the tutor/moderator to teach the technical skills required, quickly in an instructivist manner. The skills learnt and relationships built in the classroom sessions enabled the participants to function effectively online with little further technical support. Most of the participants completed all six workshops in the series. These short-lived communities illustrated many of the features of a community of practice (Wenger 1998).

The aim of the course was to enhance the participants' teaching skills using the Blackboard communication tools. E-moderating was an instance of this. In the course feedback, the participants expressed satisfaction with the workshops and some intended to remain in contact with each other afterwards. One participant suggested there should be more on assessing discussion board posts; another more on netiquette.

6. Future

Both the five-stage model and the e-learning ladder focus on the e-moderator and the technology. Student learning follows from appropriate interventions by the e-moderator and the successful implementation of technology. It would be interesting to expand on both models showing how learners become independent, critical thinkers, how (if) a community develops beyond the early stages and how learning is transferred from the workshops to teaching practice. As a first step, the tutor/moderator intends to follow up with the participants to see how they have put e-moderating into practice.

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