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# 80:20 FOR E-MODERATORS

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## Introduction

Around the Millennium, I published my book, *E-moderating* (Salmon, 2000). Soon after, with a colleague, David Shepherd, we started to offer online courses for any teacher, tutor, facilitator or group leader who wished to experience and explore the skills needed in the virtual environment for him or herself (see [www.atimod.com](http://www.atimod.com)). Then I wrote about designing for online groupwork (Salmon, 2002), aimed at a similar audience, and we began a short online 'E-tivities course'. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *E-moderating* (Salmon, 2004) was then updated, as e-moderators everywhere tried out the ideas and let me know how it was going.

To my astonishment, by 2006 more than one thousand people had taken part in online e-moderating courses and more than 20,000 have bought and apparently read and used the books. Many people used the medium itself to give feedback and comments to David and me on how they've adapted and applied the ideas on designing for participation and intervening for learning in low cost, online and asynchronous group environment and their special contexts. At every eLearning conference, I found commentary and exploration reported.

On review and reflection from all the feedback, I realised that the *80:20* rule applies to e-moderating. The 80:20 principle suggests that there may be an inherent imbalance between cause and effect, effort and reward, inputs and outputs and that imbalance tends to the ratio of 80:20. The 80:20 principle is a very simple approximation of the *value* of work, but it seems to hold true pretty often for us. So, I began to ask my correspondents and visitors: "do you know which 20% of our e-moderating work produces 80% of the results?" What follows is a summary of many ideas based on those years of feedback.

## 1. About Theory to Practice in E-Moderating

We try and place our work in theoretical approaches and produce conceptual models for testing and sharing. However, although high flying theories of learning or knowledge help us to understand what happens in our eLearning processes, they are not much direct help in saving our time and promoting motivation and achievement in our learners. Instead, we need to be able to interpret and apply them through simple and effective online tasks.

Take the debate about *constructivism* for example. Our practice falls within the constructivist approaches to knowledge and learning. The ideas around constructivism in teaching have arisen in the 21st Century, partly in response to the potential for more active, student-led learning in online environments and away from passive teacher-led instruction. Constructivism explains knowledge as created by individuals through their own experiences and with the support of their cognitive framework. It sees learning is an active process in which learners engage with and build new ideas or concepts based upon their current or past knowledge. Such knowledge may include past experience, formal teaching, reading, sharing with peers and their own creative endeavours. The learner selects transforms, integrates and makes choices informed by their own mental models in developing their understandings.

There are various versions of these theoretical underpinnings. One is an introspective view of knowledge as personally constructed and built on an individual's earlier internal mental models in the light of his or her new experiences (Stahl 2005). Another view is of knowledge as rather more external and the group learning and teaching experience helps the students to internalise it. Taking part in a group of learners with sympathetic and supportive facilitation, e-moderation is critically important to the construction of the knowledge. In practical terms, constructivism implies the need to promote discovery, dialogue, interaction, contextualisation and reflection, rather than delivery of content and information (Cooner 2005).

As e-moderators we approve of the ideas, of course! For example, such an approach should enable individuals to "go beyond the information given" and work with others. So, what do we do to make this virtually real?

The task of the e-moderator here is to:

- gauge the students' readiness to learn (get them posting messages in response to a stimulus);
- ask the students to explore their own way forward and get them engaged with each other (through simple e-tivities that depend on collaboration);
- fill in any gaps (weave and comment on their postings);
- help to organise the knowledge so that it can be readily grasped by simplifying, generating new propositions and increasing the manipulation of information (summarise and structure).

## 2. An E-moderating 80:20 Plan

Here is the 'state of the art' for the absolute essentials for successful e-moderating, based on the minimum intervention.

Stage	Objective	Design	E-moderator action	Typical problems	Solutions
<b>Stage 1: Access and Motivation</b>	Access to the system for all participants within a short period of time	*Simple log on *Clear intuitive navigation *Clear instructions for help in case of difficulty	*Welcome, *Congratulate, *Encourage, *Reassure, *Direct to online or telephone help	*Participants' inability to diagnose source of access problems *Emotional responses to IT failures	*Provide human support *Acknowledge feelings Provide really good joining instructions *System thoroughly checked and independently tested before going live - 'right the first time!'

Stage	Objective	Design	E-moderator action	Typical problems	Solutions
	Motivate each participant to contribute (post a message rather than just read)	*Provide an easy e-tivity to ensure an early posting *Avoid requesting lots of personal information & photos	*Acknowledge all successes *Encourage participants to respond to each other	*Worries about security, *Reluctance to contribute to strangers	*Reassure *Scaffold all contributions so trust builds gradually and effectively
	Motivate to visit and contribute frequently	*Make benefits of each task 100% clear *Keep tasks simple and achievable at one log in *Keep to only 2 or 3 tasks	*Ensure all participants have posted in first few days and each has had responses to their contributions *Follow up 'no shows'	Participants believe taking part is too time consuming	*Avoid lots of reading in first couple of weeks *Insert tips on how to manage time and use the software effectively *Chase non-contributors through e mail or telephone
<b>Stage 2 Socialisation</b>	Build effective groups	Set up e-tivities that demonstrate the value of working together	*Weave *Summarise *Feedback *Admire, but not too often *Avoid overwhelming by constant interventions	Domination of the conference by one or two individuals	Encourage all participants to post and respond to others
	Set the stage for the learning	Ensure each e-tivity has a clear purpose and one straightforward task	Model supportive group processes	Lurking due to feelings of having less to contribute than others	Encourage each person to write from his or her own experience
<b>Stage 3 Information exchange</b>	Set up practice in online co-operation	Provide e-tivities that need small groups of around 6 persons to complete	*Encourage participants to do their own weaving & summarising but be alert & willing to 'teach' and comment where appropriate *Monitor group activity	*Difficulties in organising teams and working together such as unequal group size or late starts	*Provide models of structured ways of working together *Pay attention to the group formation stage *Allow plenty of time but provide deadlines for paced completion of activities

Stage	Objective	Design	E-moderator action	Typical problems	Solutions
	Set up use of information for learning	Use small 'sparks' of interesting content that promote dialogue between the group	Provide direction through the material if asked but avoid constant interventions	Participants become overwhelmed by the delivery of 'content' and/or constant e-moderator interventions and requests	Design each e-tivity so it uses content but leads to exploration of the topic
<b>Stage 4 Knowledge Construction</b>	Enable collaborative working	*Provide structure with flexibility *Encourage groups to work to realistic deadlines and paced outcomes	Provide information and support where and when necessary	*Intermittent log-ons *Some groups falter	*Encourage the group to self manage, by provide pacing and deadlines *Use tracking in the software to see who is logging on when
	Enable knowledge construction	Use more demanding e-tivities that encourage creative, practical and critical thinking	Hand over weaving and summarising process but also provide timely feedback on outcomes	Passivity or lurking	Encourage participants to become 'authors' and contributors rather than receivers of information and encourage questioning by all participants
	Enable groups to work more independently	*Provide very good sparks *Ask for collaborative outcomes	Show that e-moderator is available to support and help and visits often but avoid the temptation to intervene	*Time management *Uneven contributions from individuals	Provide practice earlier in process to build confidence and remote team working and models of exchanging information
<b>Stage 5 Development</b>	Promote self and group reflection	*Set up e-tivities that invite reflection on whole process *Encourage individuals to consider personal development	Offer personal feedback if requested and appropriate	Ensuring a suitable ending	Provide clear e-tivities that indicate the ending of the group with an opportunity to 'sign-off' and say goodbye

Stage	Objective	Design	E-moderator action	Typical problems	Solutions
	Promote critical thinking	Provide e-tivities that give structure to review process and outcomes	Be willing to comment/offer constructive criticism	'Surface' (as opposed to deep) responses	Encourage all participants to post their intentions for actions with commitments to action plans to apply the learning & to engage in further collaboration with other participants, where appropriate
	Enable application of learning	Provide e-tivities that offer opportunities for indication of application, use and development of learning	Provide feedback	Usual feelings of 'missing the group'	Encourage to apply individual learning & to post what s/he will do next

*Figure 1: E-moderating essentials.*

### 3. And another thing (or two)...

#### 3.1 *Keeping the pace.*

Experienced e-moderators know that there is no simple cause-effect result in leading online groups. There are, however, some patterns of typical behaviours of online participants that can be managed better.

In asynchronous group eLearning, participants will log online at times to suit them, often fitting in their online time around other events taking place in their lives. Some typical patterns are:

- Weekend only
- Weekdays only
- Only on certain days
- Some will miss logging for a whole week.
- Some log in three times a day.
- No discernable pattern.

Some participants will be quick at getting involved and postings, others slower, often reading before contributing.

Whatever pattern of logging in is exhibited, this can be disrupted by holidays, national holidays and local festivals and personal 'events' in their lives, which take them away from their normal activities.

One woman gave birth and carried on the next day. Another person's car broke down and it impacted her life so much that she failed to log on.

As an e-moderator, even if you make every effort to start and finish cohorts on the same day, and move them on together as a group, you can expect the spread of work by participants to be over a number of e-tivities. This results in your having to scan several online activities to ensure that you are keeping pace with each participant and with the group dynamics.

Techniques for supporting all participants are:

1. Summarising more frequently, enabling faster catch up by participants whenever they log on.
2. Encouraging slower and faster participants, by private email, to reflect on the consequences for them of being a faster or slower participant.
3. Encourage faster participants to look back on threads they have completed and provide responses for the slower participants.
4. Encourage revisiting e-tivities after several days for further reflection.

### **3.2 *Avoiding E-Moderating barriers***

Sometimes what we do gets in the way of responding appropriately to participants' needs. Here are some examples of e-moderating behaviours reported that 'gets in the way'.

1. Gushing praise with little content.
2. Not posting any messages for 3 days without informing anyone or arranging for a stand-in.
3. Responding to every message.
4. Responding with no learning points over a period.
5. Ignoring some participants.
6. Only responding at a surface level.
7. Only responding at a deep level.
8. Being manipulative.

An online message that is cold, far too long, closes off discussion, excludes or demotes participants or ideas, or that ignores significant parts of the messages of others communicates more than just the words on the screen. An e-moderator who constantly says "yes well done" (perhaps through lack of time or options) is soon spotted. Similarly, online, an e-moderator who lurks but does not comment can be viewed with suspicion.

Instead it's best to focus on weaving and summarising.

### **3.3 *Weaving and summarising: the absolute key E-moderating job***

With well designed e-tivities, the e-moderator has a rich source of participants' responses with which to work. This means that weaving, archiving and summarising are key tasks for e-moderators and add much value. (A great deal more than ringing your hands about non-participation.)

The purpose of *Summarising* is:

- To acknowledge the variety of ideas and contributions.

- To refocus discussion and activity when postings are too numerous. Summarise after each 20 messages, at a pre-agreed time or at regular intervals, e.g. every 3 days. In a large or busy e-tivity, this can be done daily.
- To refocus discussion and activity when postings have strayed from the topic.
- To refocus discussion and promote activity when e-tivities are going well.
- To refocus discussion and revive activity when postings are flagging.
- To signal closure of the e-tivity.
- To take the outcomes of an e-tivity to present or work offline.
- To provide fresh starting points for broadening and deepening discussion.
- To remind students of the journey they have travelled.
- To reinforce and ‘imprint’ new information and knowledge.
- To provide a ‘spark’ for a new e-tivity.
- To provide a ‘footprint’ as a spark for a new group.

How to summarise:

1. Collect all the relevant messages into one document.
2. Thank and praise the participants who contributed.
3. Look for 3-4 key themes from the contributions and precis them in a sentence or three (maximum).
4. If you wish, highlight individual participant’s contributions that add fresh ideas or look at the topic in an interesting way.
5. Add your teaching comments or critique, point out omissions, other perspectives or applications, and make reference to further literature or ideas.
6. Add a short, further example of your own if necessary.
7. Shorten the sentences, delete all unnecessary material.
8. End with congratulations, praise or a positive note of some kind.
9. Add a question or reflection for further consideration, if appropriate.
10. Add further reading or follow up if appropriate (preferably electronically sourced).
11. Post message on the message forum with a really good, short title, on the day you said you would.

The Purpose of *Weaving* is to:

- Emphasise and extend a point from a participant’s message - to show wider or more generic application.

- Collect 3 or 4 snippets from different messages together and represent in a new light.
- Highlight an issue or topic from one discussion that links with others.
- Agree or disagree with reasons to refocus the discussion.
- Highlight key issues to encourage two or three final contributions before summarising.

(adapted from Jaques and Salmon, in press)

### 3.4 *Shifting the work*

E-moderating large groups can be time consuming and participants benefit from becoming self-managing (Salmon and Lawless, 2005). The more effort you can put into designing your e-tivities and the better structured the interaction between participants is, the more time you will have for giving feedback and offering weaving and summaries. Make time and create independent learners by sitting on your hands, if necessary, and not responding to every message yourself. Instead, let the participants know when you will read their messages and give feedback, meanwhile encouraging them all to self-manage.

A basic framework to assist with self management is:

- Invite larger groups into smaller student teams. Give them adequate time to complete an e-tivity and then report back to the larger group. They may need some e-facilitating skills within their number.
- Offer clarification about the task, the timescale and the form of presentation, if necessary.
- Leave them to get on with the task, only intervening if they fail to post their contribution to the plenary on time.
- Start a discussion on the results of the plenary contributions, but do not dominate it. Summarise the discussion or ask an experienced participant to do this.

There are some special characteristics that will help groups to self-manage online:

1. Ask individuals to confirm when they have joined in. A simple joining activity in the thread will leave a trace to indicate that participants arrived. A cross check against a list of participants will reveal who is late. Designate a participant from each work team to follow up less visible contributors.
2. State the purpose of the task. The task will motivate the participants. Offer clarification, if necessary, but allow opportunities for flexible interpretations.
3. Describe how groups will be formed. An element of self selection helps to maintain interest, but ensure that the method is simply described and incapable of being misunderstood.
4. Set up a thread for each group and let the group know where to locate the thread.
5. Encourage them to post in the right places and keep focused.
6. Describe the form and type of content that the group should produce and where and when they should post it. Aim to be prescriptive without being too restrictive. Indicate the main issues that must be addressed.
7. Set out the plenary process in the plenary thread. This can be part of your welcoming message.

8. Ask the participants to review both content (their main focus) and the process. Include setting up the group, the degree to which they found the task motivating, how they collaborated, their approach to feeding back as part of the learning points – so it becomes ‘natural and normal’ to reflect not just their outputs but how they worked together.

#### **4. The 80: 20 e-Moderator**

So I hope you will try out these guidelines and achieve more with less in your e-moderating practice. They are the beginning, not the end of the story, so please share your discoveries of more ideas and good luck! Online can yet be a most happy and productive place for learning and teaching.

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