On-line teaching as moderating in a community of learners:  
An essay review of three books

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Facilitating online learning: Effective strategies for moderators (2000), George Collison, Bonnie Erlbaum, Sarah Haavind, & Robert Tinker  
Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing; 1-891859-33-1

Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom (1999), Rena Palloff & Keith Pratt  
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 0-7879-4460-2

E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online (2000), Gilly Salmon  
London: Kogan Page; 0-7494-3110-5

Like most institutions of higher education, the university where I teach and conduct research is offering courses on-line. I am soon to participate in developing and teaching such a course for an entirely on-line Master’s degree. Although my field is technology and education, my specialty is not on-line teaching and learning, so the area is relatively new to me, as I imagine it is to almost everyone who is being asked to prepare and teach on-line courses at colleges and universities across the country. Where do we look for help?

A search at an on-line bookseller brought up several dozen titles about on-line learning. Among them, the three discussed here stand out for their thoughtful and
empirically-based approaches to providing advice and strategies for the on-line teacher. Although the books are quite different in tone and in some details, they are remarkably similar in the fundamental advice they offer, that on-line education can successfully encourage communication and discourse among students as well as with the teacher as a primary means of learning. Each book is written by authors who are researchers as well as teachers with extensive experience in on-line education, primarily in post-secondary education and professional development.

An Overview of the Three Books

Collison, Erlbaum, Haavind, and Tinker are from the Concord Consortium, a non-profit research and development organization “dedicated to revolutionizing education through the use of information technologies.” The authors have long and extensive experience with networked learning, from the National Geographic Kids Network project of the late 1980s to the current burgeoning Virtual High School Project and the International Netcourse Teacher Enhancement Coalition (INTEC).

Salmon has taught on-line at the Open University (OU) and the Open University Business School for many years, conducting research about on-line teaching and learning since the early 1990s. The Open University has a long record of successful distance education, including on-line courses that began in 1988. In 2000, the OU offered 160 courses to 100,000 students on-line.

Palloff and Pratt began studying on-line education as students in an on-line degree program in 1993. They have since designed and offered many on-line classes in several domains, including organizational behavior and educational leadership.
These books address head on the dilemma inherent in offering courses via the Internet, a dilemma created by the very nature of the technology: the Internet is fundamentally a technology for delivering information, moving it from one location to another. Yet we as educators–especially the progressives among us–believe deeply that education is more than merely transmitting information, more than getting knowledge from the expert to the student whether the expert is a teacher, a textbook, or a Web resource. If the Internet is an information-moving technology and if education is more than transmitting information to students, then how are we to use the Internet for on-line learning in a way that does more than provide content to students and let them do with it as they will? Is there a role for teaching on the Internet, and if so, is it limited to individual feedback from teacher to student? Can there be a classroom community on-line in which the teacher is not the center and authority and in which students learn from and with each other? Or is the best we can do to make well-designed content available and then determine how to assess student learning effectively and accurately?

These are questions asked by advocates and supporters of on-line learning, many of whom have extensive credentials as reformers of education. The skeptics ask different questions. What can students possibly learn from or with a disembodied teacher and disembodied classmates? What can students possibly learn from each other? What kinds of subjects? What kinds of knowledge? How much can students construct their own knowledge in an on-line environment, and what kinds of knowledge might they be constructing? What is teacher expertise in on-line learning, and what is its role and value? Each of these books provides important insights into questions such as these.
Why these three books?

These books stand out because they are empirically based, because they work toward developing and using theoretical perspectives, and, most importantly, because they attend to the interactions that constitute on-line teaching and learning. As Salmon (2000, p. 11) points out: “Millions of words have been written about the technology and its potential, but not much about what the teachers and learners actually do online.” These books are exceptional because they actually provide examples and insights about the work of teaching an on-line class, generalized to be applicable across settings and subject matter and based on familiar theories of learning and teaching.

Theories of learning and teaching

All three books capture the underlying assumptions that students learn by making sense of content and that helping students do this sense-making is the work of the teacher. Collison et al. (2000) reconcile the conflict between the Internet as information provider and their strong stance that learning is a social and collaborative activity by providing a detailed map of on-line teaching. In their view, the teacher on-line needs to function as a facilitator of discussion that is primarily student-driven. They argue that text-based, threaded, asynchronous discussion of the sort common on discussion boards all over the Internet is most appropriate because it provides students and facilitator with time to read, think about, and write responses to each other's ideas. In particular, they point out that there are many drawbacks to the one obvious alternative of synchronous discussions in which all participants are on-line at the same time and in the same virtual space. These drawbacks include eliminating the “any time/anywhere” advantage for students who may
be in different time zones, countries, or hemispheres, and reproducing a version of the face-to-face bias toward hearing from and responding to the most talkative individuals (on-line, perhaps the fastest typist with the fastest connection).

Collison et al. (2000) illustrate through examples that, with high quality facilitation, students can and will learn from each other. The role of the facilitator is not to be a subject matter authority, but rather to help keep the discussion focused and to weave together ideas generated by students. They go so far as to suggest that being a content expert is not required: being a competent facilitator is more important (Collison, et al., 2000, p. 44). The facilitator intervenes in these on-line discussions to move students forward in their understanding but not to deliver information.

Salmon (2000) takes a similar position on teaching and learning, consistent with the way the Open University has taught for many years. In OU distance education classes, students have the benefit of a tutor who works with a discussion group of remotely located students. The model is similar to the large lecture/precept concept at many colleges and universities in the United States: an expert delivers content while tutors facilitate discussions. In Salmon's model, students learn by making sense of content, and they do this by working together with the help of an “e-moderator.”

In e-moderating, there is very little teaching in the conventional sense of instruction or “telling.” Online learning offers participants opportunities to explore information rather than asking them to accept what the teacher determines should be learnt. They construct knowledge for themselves through interacting online with peers, under the guidance of their e-moderator. The
e-moderator's main role is to engage the participants so that the knowledge they construct is usable in new and different situations. So you can see the goal of the e-moderator for this kind of learning is to enable “meaning making” rather than content transmission. (Salmon, 2000, p. 39)

Salmon focuses much of her book on the training of e-moderators, whom she argues need to have “content knowledge at least at the same level and in the same topic as the course for which they are e-moderating” (p. 41). Salmon also uses text-based asynchronous discussion as the mode of interaction between e-moderators and students.

Palloff and Pratt (1999, p. 29) focus on community and the need to create a community of learners on-line for successful learning to take place. Although their language is somewhat different, they too believe that learning takes place through interaction with others about subject matter, and they devote much of the book to analysis of how community can be created on-line, what kinds of pitfalls can be expected, and how norms and expectations that support community can be developed. Some of the outcomes they point to as evidence of a successful on-line community include the following:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to student rather than student to instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
• Sharing of resources among students

• Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 32)

Like the authors of the other two books, their platform for creating this community is text-based, asynchronous discussion of course content, facilitated by an on-line instructor.

**The Nature of a Successful On-Line Course**

These three books are in remarkable agreement about the constitution of a successful on-line course. They all look for student participation in text-based discussions, facilitation but not direct instruction by an on-line teacher, and meaning-making by students through the on-line discussion. They all emphasize that this instruction should not be, and for reasons of time probably cannot be, primarily teacher interactions with individual students or teacher-led discussions. They suggest a variety of strategies for creating an on-line environment in which students become the primary source of ideas and thus the primary teachers.

The arguments and evidence in these three books demand our attention. Seven highly experienced on-line teachers have all come to believe that, for their purposes and within their beliefs about teaching and learning, their preferred mode of on-line teaching is asynchronous, text-based, student-driven discussions with the teacher acting as facilitator and community-builder. This conclusion appears to be a way of resolving the tension between the Internet as an information resource and current theories of learning.
that posit learning as a social, sense-making activity, far removed from the view of learning as the transmission of information from expert to learner. With the methods advocated by these three books, one gets the benefits of any time, any place learning (and perhaps other benefits of Internet-delivered content, such as availability of multiple media, multiple representations of concepts, access to primary sources) by using a feature of the Internet—the on-line discussion board—to create what they all argue can be a connected community of learners.

Examples and Insights

Collison et al. (2000) have created a handbook for the facilitator with specific examples and advice. For example, they define three kinds of dialog—social, argumentative, and pragmatic—and explain how the expert facilitator deals with each. They suggest that every class needs a social thread, a “water cooler” area on the discussion board where social activity takes place. The facilitator gently but deliberately moves social talk to the water cooler so that the content threads remain focused on content. They provide examples of how to recognize argumentative dialog when it occurs as “benign advocacy,” as “appeals against progress,” or in passive forms. “Once the dialog is perceived as a place to take positions and defend them, outcomes become limited to what is ‘given,’ and knowledge construction is limited to what participants already understand,” (Collison et al., 2000, p. 28). They aim for pragmatic dialog in which “the goal is not to persuade but rather to inquire” (p. 28).

This book takes the reader through a detailed explanation of facilitator roles, elements of “healthy” and “troubled” on-line communities, the different voices and tones
a facilitator can learn to use, critical thinking strategies for the facilitator, and problems
the facilitator should anticipate. *Facilitating Online Learning* does not discuss the content
provided to students or the actual development and delivery of Internet-based
information. This book focuses strictly on the role of the facilitator, who is not expected
to be the course producer. The authors suggest something like a pyramid of expertise, in
which course creators and content experts provide the materials while expert facilitators
train and work with new facilitators as they learn these techniques. Content experts, they
propose, would be available to the facilitators, and sometimes on-line with students, to
provide disciplinary support as needed.

One point that comes through loudly and clearly is the issue of time. Facilitators
read all the on-line postings and make sense of them, respond to the discussion in ways
that move it forward and keep it on track, but cannot take on the role of responding
individually to students about course content. Collison et al. (2000) give strong warnings
about the downside of becoming the authority and being expected to give the answers and
respond to every comment. Not only is it too time-consuming to be feasible, but also it
tends to destroy community if the facilitator moves to center stage.

Salmon (2000) similarly focuses almost exclusively on the role of the
e-moderator. She offers a five-step model for teaching and learning on-line: access and
motivation, on-line socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction, and,
finally, development. At each stage, Salmon presents specific expectations for what
participants (students) will do and suggestions for the e-moderator (teacher). For
example, in the final stage, the role of the e-moderator is that of “weaving”: 
They pull together the participants' contributions by, for example, collecting up statements and relating them to concepts and theories from the course. They enable development of ideas through discussion and collaboration. They summarize from time to time, span wide-ranging views and provide new topics when discussions go off track. They stimulate fresh strands of thought, introduce new themes, and suggest alternative approaches. (Salmon, 2000, pp. 32-33)

This book provides a matrix of competencies expected of e-moderators as they themselves progress in six stages from novices to experts across five dimensions: understanding the on-line process, technical skills, on-line communication skills, content expertise, and personal characteristics (p. 40). Although intended as a guide to selecting e-moderators, the matrix seems difficult to apply because of the ill-defined nature of the desired characteristics. For example, the second level of expertise (constructive) in the category of “understanding of on-line process” reads: “Able to build on-line trust and purpose; to know who should be on-line and what they should be doing” (p. 40). It is not clear how one would evaluate these abilities in an e-moderator, and they certainly would not be easy to evaluate.

The first part of Salmon's book is primarily about training e-moderators and, for the most part, is addressed to the teachers of e-moderators. The second part of the book, “Resources for Practitioners,” is a checklist of things for e-moderators to think about and do. For example, it offers a 21-item checklist for “online participant induction” that includes items such as:

9. Offer the chance to conference in very small groups (up to 10) during the induction....
13. Focus induction activities on building confidence and socializing in the online environment. (p. 110)

Another chapter has specific advice for each of the five stages in what she calls technical, learning, and e-moderating domains. This section of the book would be particularly useful once an on-line class is underway, using the lists to anticipate and resolve problems and to help individual students progress.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) add other dimensions to the discussion, including subject matter content and delivery. After presenting their theories of community and knowledge building, they go into details about time, technology, course content, and evaluation, as well as the role of the teacher. Their book provides examples of course syllabi, excerpts from on-line discussions, and suggestions for assessment techniques. They, too, point to the issue of time: on-line teachers need to manage time carefully or risk being swamped. They recommend classes no larger than 25 students to make the e-moderator’s workload manageable.

One difference in this book involves the authors’ advocacy for on-line learning. They argue for its value and importance, sometimes even taking the position that on-line education is better than face-to-face education. At times, these arguments distract from the otherwise useful advice and information in the book. The arguments are familiar, but it is clear not only that we do not have data to compare these two modes of education, but also that no one has suggested a reasonable and productive way to make such a comparison.
Points of Agreement

Time is a big issue for on-line teaching. Even with the rather strict guidelines provided by Collison et al. (2000) for staying out of the discussion, facilitators find that it takes a lot of time to teach this way, especially when they are new at it. Reading student postings, determining appropriate responses, and dealing with other issues that arise (“lurkers,” interpersonal conflicts, etc.) take considerable time without even getting to the issue of assessment. Collison and colleagues provide quite specific suggestions for controlling the amount of time the facilitator spends moderating the course, including not responding to every posting, not using e-mail for side discussions, and making the roles of all participants clear at the start. Palloff and Pratt (1999), who place far fewer strictures on instructor responses to individual students, give an example of an instructor who typically spent 7 to 8 hours a week preparing for and teaching a face-to-face class, but who spent 18 or 19 hours a week for an on-line version of the same course.

All agree that facilitators (a.k.a. e-moderators or on-line instructors) need skills different from those involved in face-to-face teaching; they also agree that those new skills can be learned. Collison and colleagues provide specific techniques for the on-line facilitator, Salmon gives more general guidance to the trainer of e-moderators, and Palloff and Pratt provide fewer specific techniques but more conceptual justification for the role. All agree that these skills are not simply transferred from face-to-face classrooms and that they entail working “on the side” of the discussions, not as the expert or authority.

Why is there so much agreement among these books? The broad agreement appears related to the fundamental dilemma inherent in using a medium that appears to
focus on text-based transmission to achieve much more than transmission. The only way
to imagine on-line education that is more than simply providing content on-line or giving
individual tutoring is to include some kind of interaction among participants. The options
for interaction, given the technology that exists today, are supplementary face-to-face
meetings, synchronous virtual meetings (whether text-based, audio-enhanced, or video),
and asynchronous discussions. The first option defeats some of the primary purposes of
on-line education, and, according to Collison and colleagues, makes it even more difficult
to create an on-line community. The second option—synchronous virtual meetings—also
runs counter to at least some of the benefits of on-line education (any time/any place). In
addition, it has proven difficult to conduct on-line meetings effectively, especially for
groups of 15 or more participants. This leaves the third option, which all three books
argue can be a successful platform for creating on-line community and thus for
meaningful student learning.

Putting all these claims and suggestions together, what are the authors saying
about on-line teaching?

- On-line teaching means creating community by facilitating discussions. All
  three books believe this is possible and necessary. It is possible to develop an
  active, engaged group of learners who communicate with one another, sharing
  personally and intellectually. It is necessary to do this if the class is to be a
  constructive learning experience, more than transmitting information through
  a new medium.
• Students will learn from their discussions. The focus is on learning from each other and constructing one’s own knowledge through these interactions. With adept facilitation, this can happen.

• On-line teaching demands time to train moderators. Although they do not necessarily need to be content experts, moderators need special skills that take time to learn.

• On-line teaching requires time to facilitate classes. Facilitators need to read all postings and write appropriate postings themselves, in addition to attending to social and cognitive issues, evaluating student work, and even taking care of technical problems.

• On-line teaching requires skills to facilitate classes, and those skills are teachable.

• The skills needed are different from those required to teach in face-to-face classes.

• The on-line teacher is not necessarily a content expert (Palloff and Pratt’s book is less explicit about this than are the other two books.)

Conclusions

Reading these descriptions of e-moderating and facilitating draws one back to a fundamental question: What does it take to turn information into knowledge? These authors submit that it takes at least some thoughtful reflection on the information, making connections to prior knowledge and making sense in one’s own way. For some students, that kind of reflection and sense-making occurs in even the driest of lectures, while other
students need assistance. These authors are convincing in their contention that connection is key: students need to be connected to each other and to the content being studied. They have developed compelling arguments for their versions of how to help students get connected in these ways.

These authors are also making the case that learning is a social activity. We learn from and with other people; without that human connection, the Internet merely provides information. That information becomes knowledge only through our interactions about it with others and our incorporation of the information into our own understandings.

One issue that lurks beneath the surface of these texts is this: What would happen if face-to-face instructors applied some of these on-line techniques in their classrooms? Suppose face-to-face teachers saw their primary job as creating community, helping students learn from each other, building knowledge through dialog, getting students engaged with course content in thoughtful and reflective ways? It sounds good, so why does it not happen more often? Whether in the face-to-face setting or on-line, the work of facilitating learning—work that some people equate with teaching—is complex and difficult, requiring skills and understandings that are neither easily learned nor easily applied. A major difference is that without these skills, on-line learning turns into a clear case of delivering information, while in classrooms, there can be so many other lessons being learned that the contrast is not so stark. A physical classroom where information delivery is the primary goal of the teacher is nonetheless a social place, where students interact with each other whether the teacher wants them to or not (although they may not interact about subject matter.) We often see these interactions as beneficial, whether or not they are related to subject matter. A face-to-face classroom can get away with subject
matter being merely delivered and still be the locus of other kinds of benefits. On the other hand, an on-line class could easily be devoid of anything but content delivery, and particularly devoid of student-to-student interaction if the teacher designed it that way. In some sense, on-line classes require interaction and facilitation to justify their existence in ways that face-to-face classes do not.

The optimists among us have long been hopeful that technology would somehow revolutionize education, that some device, in some way at some time, would make it possible for more students to more readily understand complex ideas, and thus for teachers to be more effective. Now the Internet presents a technology that, on the face of it, can do things differently. It clearly makes a new kind of distance education possible. The Internet is not limited to sending out packets of printed information and receiving back completed work (as in the old correspondence courses) or delivering information via a talking head (as in the old educational television courses). It allows rapid exchange of information delivered as print or multimedia, but it also allows for various kinds of discussion and interaction among the participants and with the instructor, from live synchronous chats or conferences to asynchronous text-based discussions. This is different, indeed, but we are only at the beginning of figuring out how to take advantage of these affordances. These three books go a long way toward convincing this reader that on-line facilitation is a method with great potential for realizing many of the benefits the Internet seems to offer for teaching and learning.