

The Preparation of E-Moderators to Run an International On-Line Teacher Training Course.

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Abstract

In this paper we describe the development of a course designed to prepare on-line teacher trainers (e-moderators) to deliver an international on-line teacher training course. The e-moderators were to deliver the courses to teachers worldwide using a simple 'home-grown' virtual learning environment consisting of ordinary e-mail and e-mail-based discussion lists. We describe the training issues we identified, the training provided, and how the lessons learnt during the various iterations of the course have informed subsequent phases and design of the moderator-training.

1. Introduction

The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) is a major provider of examinations both within the UK and internationally. It consists of three externally facing business streams: OCR (which deals with UK examinations), Cambridge International Examinations (CIE, which deals with examinations in the rest of the world), and EFL (which deals with examinations of English as a Foreign Language). UCLES is committed to providing high quality support and training to teachers of its syllabuses and has an extensive programme of in-service training.

This paper describes an initiative of CIE. CIE provides assessments for schools in more than 150 countries, and providing training at reasonable cost and useful intervals for a teacher community so disparate and geographically widespread is a continuous challenge.

The Interactive Technologies in Assessment and Learning (ITAL) unit is a research group tasked with investigating the use of new technologies in UCLES' business. One area of investigation has been the use of Internet-based technologies as a way of bringing together geographically isolated teachers.

Strands of recent thought about effective learning and professional development stress the primacy of peer interaction, continuing reflection, the importance of experience and the grounding of theory in practice [1, 7].

The building of teacher networks or communities is increasingly seen as a way of fostering the conditions in which this type of development can take place, allowing teachers to share experience, information and good practice [2]. We have already shown how email-based discussion list technology can be used to build lively, syllabus-focussed, on-line teacher communities and how these communities can contribute to effective teacher development [4]. We therefore decided to use such lists as the technological basis of the course. We later supplemented these lists with web-based repositories of documents and Frequently Asked Questions to create a low-cost and easy to use 'virtual learning environment' [3].

The facilitation of such communities demands new roles and skills of those charged with the task. Successful face-to-face teachers do not necessarily make successful on-line moderators. We agree with Salmon [5] that:

Any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods or the introduction of technology into teaching and learning should include effective e-moderator support and training, otherwise its outcomes are likely to be meagre and unsuccessful.

Our task was to devise a course that would convert good face-to-face teachers into good on-line moderators.

The experiential view of learning also informed the way we, as staff and potential moderators, designed and modified the course itself. We were relatively new to on-line learning and understood that however much we read in the literature and talked to practitioners, there could be no substitute for our own experience. We needed to make sure that we provided ourselves with opportunities and time to reflect on the courses and the research and to allow that reflection and learning to feed into subsequent stages of course design.

2. The Course

*[A note on terminology. In this paper we deal with three sets of learners and teachers. To avoid confusion (as much as we can), throughout we refer to ourselves, as the facilitators of the course, as **tutors**, the potential teacher trainers we refer to as **e-moderators**, and the teachers in the field we refer to as **teachers**].*

The potential e-moderators were all experienced face-to-face practitioners, but they had varying degrees of knowledge and experience of internet-based technologies and of on-line teaching and learning. All had reasonable keyboard skills and were comfortable with e-mail and web technologies.

The initial structure of the course to be run by the e-moderators consisted of three separate modules, each of two weeks, making a six-week course. Each module would consist of stimulus materials, reading materials and a research activity. Finally, e-moderators would set a formative assessment assignment. The assignments would all involve some aspect of teaching practice. This structure was open to revision and development based on our own and the e-moderators' experiences.

Initially the course was entirely e-mail based, with assignments distributed and returned as attachments. The moderators were to use person-to-person e-mail messages to communicate with individual participants and to give personal instructions, encouragement and feedback on assignments. Running in parallel to this was a many-to-many e-mail discussion group that would enable the moderators and teachers to discuss matters of common interest and concern, as a group. Later, as will be seen, we developed a web-based system for document sharing.

2.1. Course aims

We took Salmon's five-stage model of e-moderating as the basis of the course design [6]. This model provided a useful framework on which to base the first iteration of the e-moderator training course. It describes five levels of competence ranging from simple access to the technology, to autonomous learning and critical thinking.

Our aims roughly mirror these five stages. We wanted to give the prospective e-moderators:

- An understanding of the technology to be used (stage 1: Access and motivation)
- An understanding of the concepts surrounding the use of email discussion lists and how the different methods of communication would facilitate conversations person-to-person and person-to-group (stage 2: Socialisation)
- The conceptual information necessary to set suitable on-line tasks, to enable them to write effective content materials and to produce useful formative assessment. (stage 3: Information exchange)

- An understanding of the issues arising from and the techniques required for the effective moderation of on-line discussion and the creation and fostering of on-line communities (stage 4: Knowledge construction)
- Opportunities to reflect on their on-line experiences and to begin to think about how they would approach their own teaching on-line. (stage 5: Development)

3. Iteration 1

This first course was initiated by a face-to-face meeting with the four e-moderators and the two tutors. During this day-long meeting we demonstrated the mechanics of using the discussion list technology, including the moderation process. We also discussed issues relating to the management of on-line groups, and also made decisions about the range and content of assignments.

Following the face-to-face meeting the e-moderators remained in contact with each other and with the tutors through the medium of an email discussion list. This, we hoped, would allow them to continue discussion of issues raised during the day, and provide ongoing support during the running of their courses. By using the same technology as they would use to deliver their training, it also provided 'hands on' experience.

3.1. Feedback and reflections on iteration 1

There were 4 e-moderators in the first cohort and following the training they guided most of their participants to a successful outcome in all but a handful of cases. All of them reported that they would be happy to be involved in future on-line training courses. All of them felt that they had been 'well' or 'very well' supported during the training and the delivery of the courses, and they all reported that they felt 'more confident' with the use of the technology after the training and after running their courses.

The amount of time they reported having spent in learning to use the technology varied from 20 hours in the case of the least experienced e-moderator to only 2.5 hours in the case of the most. This suggested that there was probably a need for more exposure to the technology during the initial training.

We were disappointed with the lack of on-line discussion that occurred between the e-moderators during their training and it was obvious to us that we tutors needed to be much more active in encouraging discussion and reflection.

It was clear that some e-moderators were much better at facilitating discussion and a sense of community among the participants. It was also clear that the amount of reflection that the e-moderators elicited from teachers varied widely – on some courses the discussion was dominated by 'procedural' messages while on others the discussion was more involved. This led us to conclude that we needed to work with the prospective e-moderators in alerting them to the techniques and skills needed to encourage such interaction.

When asked what would be the ideal preparation for e-moderators, given their own experience, they were unanimous in saying 'doing it!' This was as strong an endorsement of the experiential methodology as we could have hoped for!

There were therefore a number of issues that we would need to address before embarking on the second course.

- More 'hands on' experience of the technology and the on-line environment before starting their courses.
- E-moderators need more training in the moderation of discussion lists. If we are to engage teachers in on-line reflective discussion, the e-moderators need to be better at promoting and maintaining such discussion
- E-moderators also needed help with dealing with the process of on-line 'classroom management' (e.g. dealing with 'difficult' or disruptive students)
- We as tutors needed to develop our own e-moderating skills to more effectively create a community of e-moderators who will support each other during the training and afterwards

In order to address these issues we made a number of changes to the course structure.

4. Iteration 2

The main difference between the first and second course was that the second was conducted entirely on-line, with no face-to-face meeting. In addition to our feeling that the more experience the e-moderators got on-line the better, one of the e-moderators was based in Switzerland and therefore unable to attend a face-to-face session.

For the first phase of the training, we had the new e-moderators 'observe' (take part but not actively participate) the on-line courses run by the more experienced e-moderators from the first courses. For half of this time we asked them to observe the process from the viewpoint of a teacher, for the second half from that of an e-moderator. For both halves we asked them to identify two 'critical incidents' which illuminated, for them, the differences between face-to-face and on-line training.

The second phase was to be based around a two-week on-line discussion forum. During this phase the main focus was the critical incidents identified during the first phase. We aimed to use these as jumping off points for discussion. We wanted the e-moderators to relate them to their previous experiences as face-to-face teachers. We would pull out general principles and relate them to the literature and other people's experiences. We would provide various inputs – documents, website and book references, but we saw these as background reference and summary information and not essential to the course itself. We did not expect the moderators to read them all. We expected them to spend a minimum of nine hours reading and responding to discussions over the two-week period.

We invited the more experienced e-moderators who had already run on-line training courses to join the discussions.

We had no fixed content for the discussion in phase two; we wanted to respond to the concerns and interests of the e-moderators as much as possible. Having said that, we aimed to cover some if not all, of the following topics:

On-line teaching and learning

- The technology
- The vocabulary
- Advantages
- Disadvantages

Roles of the on-line tutor

- Social – creating an on-line community
- Pedagogical – promoting effective learning, types of interaction, feedback
- Managerial – dealing with and managing on-line discussions, motivation, facilitation
- Technical – dealing with email discussion lists

During the third phase, the on-line discussion facility would continue to be available into the teacher training courses themselves, to provide continuing support from peers and from us, and as a forum for continued reflection.

In this way we hoped to provide prospective e-moderators with examples of good practice (either on the observed courses or on the training course) and also allow us to concentrate on issues such as the creation and maintenance of an on-line community where discussion flows.

4.1. Feedback and Reflections on iteration 2

Again, feedback from the 5 e-moderators who took the course was very favourable, all of them reporting that they felt 'well' or 'very well' prepared for the on-line experience, and all expressed an interest in undertaking more work along these lines.

The amount of time they reported having spent in learning to use the technology was generally less than that reported in the first cohort, ranging from 1 to 8 hours, suggesting that the increased exposure to the technology had been useful. However, this cohort was perhaps slightly more familiar with technology than the first one.

The observation exercise in phase 1 was seen as particularly useful. Certainly their experiences during this phase provided useful foci of discussion even before the start of the 'formal' part of the training. The 'task' (identifying critical incidents for future discussion) was found useful: in the words of one e-moderator they 'made you look even deeper and not want to miss anything' but 'didn't distract from the job in hand of watching what was going on'.

Although we did not expect many messages or discussion during this six week period there were 61 messages to the discussion list, with discussion covering a wide range of topics, from basic issues like the mechanics of dealing with a lot of emails and technical issues, to more 'advanced' topics like the advantages and disadvantages of asynchronous communication and the effect of the lack of visual cues in on-line discussion. Despite this, many of the e-moderators would have welcomed even more discussion, and for the third iteration we intend to lift the (informal) embargo on discussion during the observation phase. An important part of this phase was the participation of the more experienced e-moderators (who actually ran the observed courses).

The activity during the observation phase compared very favourably with the discussion that took place during Phase 2, the 'formal' two-week period. During this latter phase we saw 31 messages to the list. These fell into two categories – those that were elicited by our (planned) activities, and those that arose 'naturally' and informally from contributions by the e-moderators. As mentioned above, we intended to cover a range of issues, using e-moderators' 'critical incidents' as stimuli, and although we tried to do this, we found that time constraints, and the interests of the e-moderators tended to preclude this. Discussion that followed 'our' tutor's agenda included:

- How to prepare teachers for the technology
- Advantages/disadvantages of on-line learning
- Pedagogical issues (how best to encourage reflection and discussion)

Discussion that followed the e-moderators' own agenda included:

- Classroom management issues (how best to organise workgroups, etc.)
- Advantages and disadvantages of having a synchronous option
- The nature of discussion – the balance between 'nitty gritty' administration messages and 'real' professional discussion, the value of 'socialising' messages,

Discussion during the third phase (i.e. during the actual running of the teacher training courses) saw a brief initial burst of activity as the e-moderators got to grips with the reality of being in charge of a course and the technology. Issues raised were chiefly technical (how to work the moderation, how to deal with assignment download problems). Following this discussion died down as the e-moderators got on with the task of running their courses. One or two issues did arise (e.g. the ethics of sharing email addresses among teachers) but these did not elicit much discussion

So, how did this group get on with teaching their courses? Post course feedback from the e-moderators did express some dissatisfaction with the level and intensity of discussion on their courses, although we tutors felt that the quality of discussion had been better than during the first course. This lack of engagement was put down to a number of external reasons; the nature of the exercises given to the teachers (which involved them working in small groups 'away' from the main discussion list), to the fact that the teachers were unused to or unwilling to engage in this form of teacher training for cultural or other reasons, or the fact that the course took place toward the end of the academic year for many teachers which affected their ability and motivation to get involved.

This does at least show some awareness among the e-moderators of the difficulties that on-line students have in participating in such courses. Iteration 3 of the training will include time to reconsider the types of activities to be used on the teacher training courses. In addition we will address the cultural issues raised and discuss ways of addressing these.

5. Conclusions

Although we set out with an experiential learning agenda, we initially fell into the trap of trying to create a traditional course with a face-to-face meeting and with a well-defined beginning and end. However, we

found that no matter how much we tried to describe or provide a semblance of the experience of being an on-line tutor, there was simply no substitute for actually experiencing it from a student and from a tutor's perspective. Although our e-moderators were experienced face-to-face tutors, with well developed teaching skills, they needed to see and feel for themselves what on-line training means in reality, and relate that experience to their own.

An important lesson we learnt was that it was important to be flexible and responsive to the group's own agenda and to allow time for this to be addressed. Our (rather ambitious) plans to cover a long list of 'issues' were subverted by the group, who, understandably, had their own borne out of their experience.

For that reason we are moving away from a 'one-off' event with a well-defined beginning and end and toward a more diffuse model that starts to build what Wenger [8] calls a 'Community of Practice'. This type of community is characterised by the common purpose of its members, by its own self-defined agenda, by its ongoing nature, and by its membership, which includes experienced as well as novice practitioners. New e-moderators join this larger community during their 'formal' training and receive the ongoing benefit of having access to more experienced moderators.

It seems as though a community of e-moderators has started to grow which will develop over the future iterations of the course, raising and addressing its own issues, sharing expertise and providing its own training programme in parallel to ours. Future research will investigate to what extent this is true.

6. References

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7. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank colleagues in Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), in particular Melanie Baker of the Curriculum and Teacher Support Group, without whose help this work would not have been possible.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the European Distance Education Network (EDEN) Conference in Granada, Spain, in June 2002.