

Online adventures in the global world of e-learning – the musings of 3 ‘armchair’ cultural explorers.

A collaborative paper by Louise Housden (West Coast College of TAFE WA), Frankie Forsyth (Pelion Consulting, Tasmania), and Christine Bateman (FLL 2001, WA Department of Education and Training) with an introduction from Dr. Gilly Salmon.

In the 21st Century, times have been a-changing across all levels of education throughout the world. Drivers in education are many and complex. Borders and boundaries between physical locations, disciplines and levels are reducing and sometimes disappearing. The use of Information and Communication Technologies to support easy access to learning or flexibility of all kinds, is often a central tenet of educational missions. Some countries, like Australia, forged ahead using leaders and champions to show direction. In others, such as the UK, Government initiatives have promoted new institutional forms or technological systems approaches. Naturally, the allure of the technology has received the lion's share of attention. Although the ideas of increasing access, participation, skills and competencies for new forms of societies of the 21st Century are at the heart of many intentions, the investment in the role of human intervention and support to harness the technology into the service of teaching and learning has been meagre by comparison.

One notable development in the last few years is the increasing exploration around the nature of teaching and learning itself, which has been fed, stimulated and challenged by the increasing use of computing into most educational arenas. Many educationalists are excited that networked technologies provide a new kind of window on the world of information, but feel uncomfortable that they also may serve to reduce the social and collaborative aspects of learning. The debate about how to fully engage students online continues and about what kinds of technologies, provided by whom, create the right kind of environments for what!

Three key themes have emerged. First there's less reason to convince the world that we need support for online teachers, trainers and facilitators, (i.e. from a happy and successful band of e-moderators) to make e-learning work well. Thinking has moved on a little from believing technology may do away with teachers, towards how they can be trained and supported to work online. Second, researchers have stopped counting online messages, making spurious comparisons between online and face to face and started instead to explore when and what we need to make online really worthwhile. Third, and as yet largely unresolved, is the search to find ways of scaling up the e-moderating task force beyond the early adopters, without consuming huge amounts of diminishing resources. (Salmon 2003)

We have all heard stories about trainers who commit a faux pas in front of an audience that is perplexed or even offended by a training technique or communication style that would be quite acceptable in our own culture. However, these are not just stories, there are real cultural differences that you need to consider to make your e-learning as effective as possible.

This paper draws on the experiences of three facilitators (e-convenors) of Dr Gilly Salmon and David Shepherd's 'e-moderation' course, a five-week online course that introduces Dr Salmon's five-stage model of online moderation through the completion of staged 'e-tivities' via a group discussion board. The program is managed by Gilly's team at All Things In Moderation (ATIMOD). The e-convenors are from all over the world including Australia and from around Europe. Typically, each course will have up to 15 participants from different countries. The content is text-based, very structured and somewhat dry, so the course relies heavily on the socialisation and participation of learners to bring it alive. It is this socialisation and participation that enables the development of a 'third culture' - the learning culture of the online teaching and learning experience (Goodfellow, Lea et al. 2001).

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The e-moderation course offers an online experience to teachers, trainers, academics, instructors and tutors in order to give them successful frameworks to work with virtual groups and develop their own skills in key aspects of online facilitation. The course is based on constructivist principles and a five-stage scaffold of increasing competency and comfort in text based online interaction. It operates successfully in any Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) with a good bulletin board or forum. During 2002-2003 around 900 individual participants completed courses. Twenty five publicly available courses and 24 in-house courses have been completed to date. A follow up course focussing on e-tivities is also available.

Of course it's not all plain sailing and challenges include dealing with differing languages and cultural expectations, time zones and money exchange rates. We put much effort into recruiting and training our e-convenors (e-moderators of the e-moderators, trainers of the trainers) since it's impossible to predict exactly what will happen when global e-learners get together, the role of human intervention is critical (Salmon 2004, in press).

In a global context, the challenges are many. Recent research (Conner 2000: para. 5) shows that '...92% of the world doesn't speak English; 43% of today's web users are non-English speaking; and over the next few years, Internet use is expected to grow by 79% in Asia, 123% in Latin America, and over 2000% in Japan'. Elearning in a global context is still at an early stage of development, and more is unknown than known.

In our experience, each country tends to have its own 'quirks' when it comes to learning styles, and for the uninitiated, these can easily catch you unawares as they may differ greatly from the personalities and styles with which you are used to working in your own culture. We've found that there are two key aspects towards cross cultural collaboration: the expectations of the participants, which may come from deep-rooted concepts based on their experiences of teaching and learning in their own culture, and the relationship with the e-moderator, some cultures view the teacher (in our case the e-convenor) as an authority figure (Salmon, online). By sharing our experiences with you, we hope that you will be able to not only accept and understand these differences, but also work with them, to help create an inclusive, dynamic and productive online learning environment across cultural divides.

The purpose of this paper is to share with you some of our experiences and insights from facilitating online learning in a global setting. Our comments are firmly based on our practical experience in the online world, over a combined total of approximately 17 years. For ease of understanding, we will refer to online facilitators, trainers, teachers and so on as e-moderators, students, learners, etc. as participants and we use the term e-convenor for trainer of the trainers, or e-moderator of the e-moderators.

Also 'learning culture' is defined as the general set of conditions under which participants are the most motivated and satisfied. It describes issues such as socialisation, information sharing, knowledge building and teamwork. Whilst a learning culture can be shared across countries, it can also be quite specific to a particular region, language or demographic. Educational and/or professional background may also play a part in the profile of a learning culture, as may previous learning experiences. So facilitating the creation of a unique learning culture for the course is one way of transforming the learning experience.

Please note that the information presented may be generalised in the interests of keeping this paper brief and we intend no offence to any cultural group or individual in our reflections.

The Australian culture is known for its tendency to be 'laid back', or 'easy going'. With this, we have generally adapted quickly to various forms of online communication. We love a good yarn (– 'not backward in coming forward' are we Aussies), and we tend to partake in discussions readily and (for the most part) quite comfortably. In an elearning

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course or on a discussion board, you can usually rely on us to be the most vocal and social contributors. This was evidenced recently during the Teaching in the Community Colleges (TCC) 2003 Online Conference (University of Hawaii) and prior to that, the NET*Working online conference in 2002, as well as every day in places such as the Australian Flexible Learning Community. We are very sociable and welcome the opportunity to get to know co-participants and e-moderators alike.

This can prove a little disconcerting for e-moderators used to working with a more reticent cultural group. However, the world of elearning is much larger than our own backyard, and many in our community are now enjoying the opportunities available ‘out there’ in the global world of elearning.

Here’s how one Australian participant viewed her online cross-cultural learning experience.

As part of my Flexible Learning Leaders scholarship in 2001, I enrolled in one of the e-moderation online courses run by Dr Gilly Salmon. It was ‘challenging’ being a learner again but exciting, sharing the learning space with others from all over the world. I was amazed at some of the similarities within the group – we were all involved in some way with education and training, and our education/training environments were undergoing significant changes.

As we shared stories online, I felt I could have been talking to any one of my colleagues here in Western Australia. Whether from Brazil, Uruguay, Hong Kong, Canada or the UK, we all were facing the same issues – how could we develop learning opportunities to assist our students to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for the workplace, and the lifestyle, of the future?

I enjoyed being an ‘eavesdropper’ in the international education arena. Even though we can read where Australian VET sits within the OECD comparisons, it is always more interesting to hear it directly from our colleagues around the world (C. Bateman 2003, pers. comm., 6th October).

How amazing it is to e-moderate a group of participants that are physically situated in different places all around the world! Exciting, yes... but with this comes the realisation that some cultures have their own unique characteristics when it comes to online learning and communication, and these can be vastly different to those of one’s own learning culture. This can present quite a challenge to the e-moderator, and has the potential to lead to miscommunications and/or misunderstandings.

Some e-moderators assume that varying cultural backgrounds and experiences from participants result in very different approaches to learning and try to adapt their e-moderating accordingly. It is extremely difficult to get to know and understand someone else’s culture and attempts to do this can result in unhelpful stereotypical views. Instead we find it’s best to promote interest and respect for the backgrounds of all participants. The nature and support of the learning environment is just as important as participants’ cultural backgrounds. We find that online participants are very adaptable and able to respond to challenges and new opportunities, and we avoid simplistic views of cultural influence on online learning. Building a ‘third learning culture’ within the group/course, which values different perspectives and strokes, seems the best way (Salmon citing Goodfellow, online).

Working within the Asia-Pacific region

Geographically, people in this region are our closest neighbours... yet culturally, have a different approach to learning. Typically, we’ve found the learning culture of Asian participants in our online courses is solitary, self-paced learning in content rich, but

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interaction bare, online environments. Participants take a somewhat passive role and interaction/collaboration within the group is not a strong feature of online courses. The concepts of reflection, sharing knowledge and discussing feelings online are not practised often in the Asian learning culture, and socialisation/collaboration is not generally a feature of online courses.

Add to this the language barriers and you have a vastly different set of parameters in which to work. On a more positive note, we’ve seen a strong task focus and work ethic in participants from Asian cultures, so it is worth the effort.

Here is a quote from a Taiwanese participant (spelling and language left ‘as is’) at the beginning of a course

In the past, I had learn something in online course. My e-learning experience was ‘reading’ in online course, no talking. Most courses here do not have e-moderator. This is my first time to learn something in online course by this way - discussion and sharing. I am not used to this. This course is providing me a very interesting experience (Student One, online, 2003.).

Here’s the same student, five weeks later:

This is the class I never imagined could be for me. There are less reading in this course, more discussion in here. I have never before had an e-moderator to guide me. In 5 weeks, I learn many things from my e-convenor and classmates. I did not think it possible to learn so much by discussing and sharing. I am surprised that I have enjoyed it so much. Usually I learn alone. Too many thanks to our e-moderator and my dearest classmates. You have shown me new way of teaching (Student One, online, 2003).

From another participant, at the course’s end, are similar reflections:

I have never before experienced a course like this, I did not know the degree of interactivity could be so intriguing, both in the conference, and with the e-convenor. There are so many information ‘weaving’, from socializing, information changing, to knowledge building, and now developing. From the interactions and each other we learn, not from books, jobs, instructors, as we have done for so many years. This is a whole new way of learning and I think this is a very valuable experience for me. I will always keep it in mind (Student Two, online, 2003).

So how do you do it? We believe the following staged pointers will assist you to cater for cultural differences online.

Before the course begins

- Remember that participants may not have experienced an interactive and/or collaborative online course before, or be familiar with the role of an e-moderator.
- Try to make individual contact with each participant, personally. Introduce yourself and clearly explain your role as e-moderator.
- Offer your assistance with any technical or ‘getting started’ issues.
- It may be helpful to outline some basic expectations.
- Give very clear and specific directions on what needs to be done, try to keep your words simple and concise.
- Aim for a friendly yet professional tone.

Socialising the group

- You may have to work hard to get the participants talking to each other. Sharing personal information is not a feature we’ve experienced with participants of Asian cultures.

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- Try an activity in which participants are asked to share something about themselves or their surroundings.
- Give very clear instructions as to how you expect/require participants to interact.
- Look for areas of commonality (eg. who has a dog or who has children) and encourage discussion on these points.
- Maintain personal contact with any participants who have not yet contributed to the discussion.
- Encourage other participants to ask questions and talk to each other.
- Aim to be friendly and encouraging rather than intrusive and intimidating.

Sharing information and knowledge

- This may not come naturally, so you will need to give very clear instructions and, where appropriate, make personal contact with individuals to seek their contributions.
- Capitalise on any experience/s each participant has to offer, eg. “Lin, you have worked before in community services – I’m sure the group would like to hear about your experiences”.
- Be sure to recognise the efforts of individuals when they are forthcoming with information and/or knowledge. A little praise goes a long way. However, be sincere.
- Actively encourage participants to give each other feedback, ask questions or seek more detail about the information and/or knowledge presented.
- Lead by example – be willing to share your own stories and experiences.

Maintaining motivation

- The Asian culture has a strong work ethic – recent research indicates that employees in some Asian countries such as Taiwan and China work more hours than those in any other country. Therefore, you need to be mindful that study is probably going to be squeezed into what is already a heavy workload for the participants. Again, personal contact is the key.
- In the early stages of the course, try to establish an attendance pattern – for example, participants may log on every second or third day. This helps you know when it’s appropriate to contact an absent participant.
- Establish a way of keeping track of your participants, one that easily identifies individuals that may have fallen behind. A simple checklist in which you can tick off progress through the course will probably suffice.
- Courses that are unstructured in terms of attendance and/or participation (ie. a set ‘timetable’ does not exist) may be confusing. Try to set clear time and participation expectations for your group.
- Contact individuals personally once you notice they have not been active on the course for a period of time.
- Offer your assistance. Ask if there is anything you can do to help. Try to find out what is the cause of their absence from the course.
- Avoid intimidation tactics such as: “If you don’t catch up soon you will not be able to continue”.
- Use a friendly and helpful tone. Focus on the personal aspect of the participant’s absence, for example, “We are missing your contributions to our discussions”.

If you are willing to take the time and apply the extra effort to establishing a relationship with each participant, individually, you will find it easier to take the next step and establish relationships among participants so that they feel comfortable interacting and collaborating together. Although this may be a new concept for Asian participants, once the ice has been broken and trust established, they will likely adapt reasonably quickly to this new way of learning and flourish within the online environment.

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In some countries the participants (teachers in their own right) are focusing on how to change the teaching and learning practices within their own culture. For example, one e-convenor working with a Singapore polytechnic commented,

The Singapore experience has been interesting. The polytechnic has a very clear focus to make sure its graduates are well prepared for the new economy. Participants in the e-moderation course energetically debate how they need to change their teaching practices to break away from the passive, teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning that has been a characteristic of many Asian societies for a long time. The discussion now is about how to help learners develop “flexible minds” and the skills to seek, process and apply knowledge from diverse sources while developing skills and attitudes to sustain life-long employability while able to effectively respond to change and to manage the complex issues of the future (C. Bateman, 2003, pers. comm., October 6th).

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Working with multi cultural groups.

While working with just one cultural group is fascinating, working with a cross-cultural group is even more so! In this situation it's not just the emoderator who has to acknowledge and work within the ‘third culture’ but all participants. Letting participants know where their co-participants come from is one way of preparing them for the multicultural experience ahead. This is an extract from a typical welcoming message...

Hello and Welcome to the course ☺

Well done for opening this first message in our course conference. There are 14 of you registered for the course, 2 from Australia, 3 from Italy, 2 from Canada, 1 from Hong Kong, 1 from France, 1 from Poland, 1 from Sweden, 1 from Africa and 2 from the US... (F. Forsyth, 2003, pers. comm., 8th September)

Managing participants from such geographically and socially disparate groups can be exhilarating as the exchanges begin and the group members begin to find commonalities and differences, despite, or perhaps because of, the cultural mix. Let's explore, briefly, some ‘pointers’ or ‘triggers’ to watch out for when moderating such groups.

Writers of non-English speaking backgrounds or those for whom English is a second or third (or more) language may apologise for their ‘poor’ English. In our experience, this has rarely proved problematic from the perspective of participants understanding each other, as long as all participants are encouraged to rephrase or gently question where they need clarification. E-moderators’ responses that are positive and encouraging, often backed by other participants, are usually enough to ease such fears.

However, coming from a non-English speaking background can slow down a participant's ability to keep up with the high volume of postings in a forum-based online learning environment. The e-moderator's role here is to monitor and support the participant, ease the burden with good summaries and provide tactics to make full use of the software's features, to increase the speed of accessing posts and reduce the reading time. Additionally, where participants are using language likely to be confusing, for example, abbreviations, acronyms or shortened versions of words, then a friendly word can prevent this becoming a problem. Providing extra time for completion may also be required.

Idioms and culturally specific terms can create hilarious exchanges (eg. the Australian use of ‘arvo’ for afternoon, Polish use of ‘ludki’ for folks) but don't usually prevent understanding once they've been identified. Often they help to create the group's combined ‘culture’. The tone used by the e-moderator can also be an issue: too friendly and upbeat and those expecting or used to a more formal tone have to adjust; too

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formal and those expecting a more friendly approach are alienated. Even more off-putting though, is inconsistent use of a tone. Then everyone is confused!

There can be culturally based differences in the expectation of the role of the e-moderator and so it is important to outline how you plan to work with participants. Some cultures expect detailed feedback from the 'teacher' and feel let down if this doesn't happen. They may also resent other participants providing feedback to them and feel uncomfortable providing feedback to others. This is less likely to occur if roles are established early, constructive participant feedback is supported and each participant is given an equitable level of response by the e-moderator. Making your own e-moderating style (and how you establish equity) transparent, can be helpful too.

When cultures clash, as they sometimes do, participants may not be aware of why they are experiencing difficulties in communicating. For example, Australians are keen to 'get to know' other participants and e-moderators while some cultural groups are much more reticent about opening up online. One group may appear 'pushy' and 'nosy' while the other may appear 'disinterested' or 'standoffish'. Being aware of potential areas of dissonance and encouraging participants to explore their differences and similarities can bring about greater respect and understanding and even prevent drop outs. It may not always remove participant discomfort, but it can certainly ease it enough to move forward.

A little encouragement often breaks down cultural barriers, and some social discussion built around familiar 'safe' topics such as the weather or food can bring groups together despite the distance. For example, when one participant posted her favourite vegan cake recipe to a forum, the momentum quickly gathered...

E-convenor writes:

this just keeps getting better! Now, who has a good time converter?

B writes:

OK - Since I started this whole thing off - and I LOVE the idea of our synchronous cake eating .. (and I happen to have a handy-dandy time converter on my PDA) .. here's a plan :

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1st - New month - New experiences !

If we plan to eat cake together (a sweetened version of breaking bread together I guess) at 11:30 Greenwich Mean Time, we'll all be awake (more or less). It will be of course almost lunchtime in England and Scotland , (11:30am) 1:30 pm in Thessaloniki, 12:30pm in Lund and Aarhus and Switzerland (by my calculations), after dinner in Hobart (8:30pm), and wakey wakey time here in Canada (6:30am) - I'll just be returning from my morning walk with our big dog.

We could try the synchronous chat as M suggested - I think that would be a hoot !

See you next Tuesday ! (I'm sure we'll chat more before then) (F. Forsyth et al. 2003, online, October 1st).

So, what's needed in the multicultural global online environment?

Transparency of approach, an ability to read through the message to the person who wrote it, some knowledge of different cultures, a willingness to explore, share and celebrate differences and similarities and an ability to e-moderate that '3rd culture' within each group, are essential to successful e-moderating in a multicultural global, environment.

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Related Links

All Things in Moderation <http://www.atimod.com>

Australian Flexible Learning Community <http://learnscope.flexiblelearning.net.au>

NET*Working 2002 Online Conference <http://nw2002.flexiblelearning.net.au>

Teaching in the Community Colleges (TCC) Online Conference 2003
<http://tcc.kcc.hawaii.edu>

Author profiles and contacts

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Louise is currently working at West Coast College, a large vocational education and training College in Perth, Western Australia and has been involved in teaching and learning for more years than she cares to remember. She has been involved in the development of some complex multimedia-based online courses, as Project Manager and Instructional Designer. From these large-scale courses through to more simple discussion-based and content-free online programs, Louise employs a range of instructional design strategies to engage and stimulate learners in an online environment.

As well as doing instructional design, Louise also facilitates a range of online learning programs – from structured accredited courses through to professional development for online teachers. She also participates in a number of online communities, and is usually undertaking at least one online course at any given time. With a range of experiences from the corporate, private and government education and training sectors, Louise is fascinated by the process of learning and the way that people relate to, and interact with, each other.

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Frankie lives and works in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, is Scottish by birth and Australian by adoption (since 1988). She has worked all over Australia and has lived in Tassie since 1994 and loves it. She is Co-Director of a micro private Registered Training Organisation, Pelion Consulting Pty Ltd, providing professional development/facilitation, online and face-to-face. Frankie is a dabbler in lots of 'things' online. Her passion is moderation (or facilitation as it's known in Aussie), online and face to face.

She has facilitated teams and/or mentored other team facilitators, across Australia in a range of environments and for different purposes. These include organisational change and planning, staff professional development activities, action learning and achievement of qualifications. She has worked in private enterprise (small, medium and large), in a range of local state and commonwealth government agencies as well as in community based organisations.

Frankie has lived and worked with three different cultural groups, as well as travelling extensively before becoming an e-convenor for Gilly and David in early 2002. With 9 courses under her belt (including one as a participant and another as a shadow e-convenor) she has worked with participants from all around the globe. Some courses have been with one broad cultural group eg. participants from the United Kingdom; others have incorporated participants from most continents.

Frankie likes variety (the spice of life!), enjoys learning/experiencing new concepts, sharing her learning and is very fond of chocolate and good food! She lives with her husband, daughter and cat and has a huge garden.

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Christine has spent most of her career in education with experience as a teacher in the primary, secondary, vocational and higher education sectors. The focus of her work in the last five years has been in the area of organisational development and change with the Western Australian Department of Education and Training, the lead agency for vocational education and training in WA with particular responsibility for preparing vocational teachers with the skills for online training delivery.

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Currently Christine is managing the LearnScope project across WA. LearnScope is an Australia-wide professional development initiative, which aims to help education institutions understand how the information and communication technologies can be used to provide more flexible, client focused services to their learners. As well as assisting organisations to use Action Learning methodology to explore the potential of the new learning technologies and to adopt or develop appropriate online applications, which will improve the service they provide to their learners, Christine has developed and delivered numerous online professional development programs for teachers and trainers.

As a result of this work in the area of flexible learning and the use of online learning technologies, the Australian National Training Authority awarded Christine a 2001 Flexible Learning Leadership scholarship. The focus of her scholarship was building online collaborative learning teams within organisations as a means of helping staff and organisations maintain their professional competence.

Dr Gilly Salmon

Dr Gilly Salmon is a full time academic in the Centre for Innovation, Knowledge and Enterprise at the Open University Business School based in Milton Keynes and Visiting Professor at Glasgow Caledonian Business School, both in the UK. She is Chair of the Open University's large online Professional Certificate in Management programme. She has research degrees in both change management and educational technology (both of which she says she needs in the e-world!). She has extensive experience of working with students, tutors and trainers through online learning and has been teaching on line since 1989. Gilly researches and speaks internationally about online teaching and learning and e-learning scenarios for the future.