

INTEGRATING PERSONALITY IN E-MODERATING – A DISCUSSION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. *Moderators in e-learning courses fulfill a variety of functions, all of which are focused on helping e-learners reach the desired learning outcomes. They are called upon to motivate and encourage, provide bridges between different environments, facilitate progress, support and respond. The style and level of formality adopted in mostly written communication with e-learners is left to their discretion. This paper discusses the merits of adopting an informal and personal style, in which the e-moderator's references to his or her own experience and personal circumstances helps e-learners perceive the moderator as a real-life person, enabling them to connect on a personal level, thus creating a basis for successful learning.*

Key words: *teacher personality, teacher persona, e-moderator, personal interaction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers in various disciplines, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL), who are engaged in setting up or moderating e-learning courses and who want to improve their courses or develop their skills, will find a wide range of literature and advice, which is usually focused on strategies to reduce drop-out rates, make content easy to process and, in general, help e-learners reach the desired learning outcomes. The elements these strategies are based on include specific ways of organizing and presenting content, specific types of activities, a recommended frequency or type of communication between e-learners and moderators, and communicative skills aimed at clarity, motivation and support. How to give feedback is also accorded a central role. The writings of Gilly Salmon (Salmon 2011; Salmon 2013) feature prominently among the references that have been used by practitioners in e-moderating for the past 15 years. Communicative style as an expression of the e-moderator's personality, or of the teaching persona the practitioner consciously or unconsciously adopts, have only more recently been focused on in guidelines for practitioners (Major 2015).

For the purpose of the present discussion, the term 'personality' will be used in a general sense, in line with one of the definitions for *personality* provided by *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd Edition (1984)*: "3. habitual patterns and qualities of behavior of any individual as expressed by physical and mental activities and attitudes; distinctive individual qualities of a person, considered collectively." Teaching persona, as used here, refers to "an aspect of identity that individuals apply in different situations," (Major 2015: loc. 3054). As pointed out by the

same author, the origin of the word persona is in the Greek word for mask. Teaching personas are among the factors influencing students' experience and learning (Lang 2007). In his article, Lang argues as follows: "If we want our students to reveal themselves in our classrooms, to show us their ideas and beliefs in a discussion without fear of mockery or dismissal, we owe them that same level of self-exposure." (Lang 2007). The present paper provides practical examples for how this can be achieved in online courses. It focuses on how and to what extent an e-moderator might allow his or her own personality and personal experience to shine through in his/her teaching content and style. For this, the paper provides practical examples for how an informal and personal style might be adopted. These examples are taken from online EFL-courses the author moderated, and from an e-moderating course provided by International House London (www.ihlondon.com), in which the author participated as a learner.

Section 2 describes an e-moderating style in which the moderator adopts a teacher persona aimed at staying neutral and impersonal. Section 3 describes a more personal moderating style and the motivation behind adopting such a style. Section 4 summarizes the merits of adopting a personal style in e-moderating.

2. IMPERSONAL E-MODERATING STYLE

Many e-moderators from the generation of digital immigrants, who grew up without any experience with social media and or the like, have thus never been in situations in which personal relationships were established without face-to-face contact before taking up their new professional roles. Thus, they set out to develop the skills and competencies required for the new assignment without ever having been at the receiving end of the communication channels typically used for online courses. In 2008 University of Applied Sciences Technikum Wien (www.technikum-wien.at) started developing a new distance study program awarding a bachelor's degree in Electronics and Business. This was one of the first distance study programs at an Austrian University (Neugebauer 2011:43), and thus university lecturers with experience as e-moderators were rare at the time. The syllabus of the program was to be similar to that of an already existing part-time program, and the lecturers involved, the present author among them, sat down to work on electronic versions of their courses, following the advice provided in teacher training courses for the newly-assigned distance study lecturers at UAS Technikum Wien, using Gilly Salmon's five stage model of online learning (Salmon 2011:32) to adapt their course contents. For the EFL course, the present author started out on the assumption that e-learning would, almost by definition, be more impersonal than classroom lectures. Adequate technology and tools would be at centre stage, the lecturer turned e-moderator would provide advice and guidance from the wings. According to Salmon's model, the e-moderator's functions at the individual stages are to welcome and encourage (stage 1), to familiarize and provide bridges between cultural, social and learning environments (stage 2), to facilitate tasks and support use of learning materials (stage 3), to facilitate progress (stage 4), and to support and respond (at stage 5), (Salmon 2011:32). It is evident that the course design, that is the material and type of activities, as well as the sequence in which these are provided, need to be such as to accommodate the performance of these functions. Just as evidently, the e-moderator has to be willing to play an active role. Stages 1 and 5 in particular require a lot of involvement and commitment on the part of

the moderator. Salmon portrays the e-moderator as someone who carefully monitors the course participants' moves and contributions, intervening to provide advice and guidance whenever necessary. Salmon identifies various types of e-learner personalities, basing her classification on participants' behaviour, and recommends customized e-moderator responses for each type (Salmon 2013:180). Salmon is also very specific about e-moderator competencies and how to best develop them (Salmon 2011:106), and throughout her writing, the ideal e-moderator is portrayed as one willing to and capable of fulfilling each of the functions as requested at each stage of the 5 stage model, but there is no reference to a specific type of behaviour that could be related to a certain type of e-moderator personality or teacher persona. Involvement and commitment, which are undoubtedly essential to good e-moderating, are not synonymous with bringing in one's own personality. Quite the contrary, an e-moderator can actively participate in what is going on in an online course and still adopt a rather impersonal style. The new online degree program at UAS Technikum Wien was first started in September 2009. With the exception of one on-campus session at the beginning of every semester, which was devoted to introducing the courses, and two more used for exams and the delivery of presentations by students, communication with students was via forums and feedback tools provided by Moodle, the e-learning platform used for the program, and sometimes via e-mail. The EFL-course was moderated as recommended by Salmon (Salmon 2011; Salmon 2013), taking care to use language that would be welcoming, encouraging and motivating, providing information that would facilitate progress, and in general trying to be supportive and responsive. Forum posts were written adopting an informal, matter-of-fact style. Here are examples from two consecutive EFL courses in the first year of the new degree program:

Re: Scores persuasive speeches

Dear students,
the grades for your persuasive speeches have now been uploaded.
As all of you have made adequate use of the persuasive strategies available, your scores are quite high – congratulations!
Some hints about how to interpret scores for grammar and idiomatic language:
100 points ... no or just a few minor mistakes
90 - 95 points ... several mistakes, but still quite good
below 90 points ... please work on grammar and idiomatic phrases
Enjoy your weekend!
Gabriela

Re: Innovative Corporations

Dear students,
as there have been technical problems, please make sure to draft your text in a text file and then copy it into the glossary. Otherwise, your work might get lost, in which case you would have to start all over again.
Besides, this text file will also serve as your reference for comparison with my revisions (marked in italics).

Please note that I won't be able to respond to your contributions and messages next week.

Best,
Gabriela

Re: Opening the course

Dear students,
this semester's course on Technical and Creative Communication has now been opened.

All content material and assignments of topics 1, 4, and 8 as well as all the content material of topics 2, 5, and 6 can be accessed right away.

For technical reasons, Topics 3 and 7 cannot be opened now, but will be made available a.s.a.p.

I'm very much looking forward to working with your group once again!

Best,
Gabriela

With the exception of some teething problems, the first year went well, and the feedback from those students who successfully completed the courses was on the positive side, similar to the feedback provided by students enrolled in the on-campus version of the same courses. The dropout rate was above 50%, but literature implied that this was to be expected (Parker 1999; Levy 2004), so the program and the EFL-course as part of it had achieved what could have been hoped for. The two first year courses were repeated in 2010 and 2011. There were minor alterations in content, but no major changes in the moderating style as described above: it focused on providing support and guidance, avoiding personal remarks and comments, even when responding to inquiries by individual students:

RE: Persuasive speech

Hi Lukas,
you are allowed to use notes, but make sure not to simply read out a text.
Looking forward to your presentation,
Gabriela

3. DEVELOPING A MORE PERSONAL E-MODERATING STYLE

In traditional learning settings, people who go into teaching would normally have prior experience as students in a similar setting: school teachers have mostly been pupils, university teachers have mostly been university students, driving instructors have been taught how to drive a car by earlier driving instructors sitting next to them, and it has long been established that a teacher's experience as a student will, at least at the beginning, influence his or her teaching (Britten, 1988). By analogy, the lack of experience at the receiving end of e-learning will have an influence on the moderating style of those e-

moderators who were not e-students first. Getting experience as an e-learner after starting to moderate e-courses is thus likely to result in changes of this moderating style. In July 2012, after actively working as an e-moderator for 3 years, the author of the present paper enrolled in an online e-moderating course offered by International House London (www.ihlondon.com). This was an opportunity to look at e-learning from the other side of the fence, or rather computer. The second step in Salmon's model is online socialization, and the term itself as well as the explanations she provides implies a degree of interaction on a personal level (Salmon 2011:36-41) Salmon also suggests that e-learners should be invited to post a few details about themselves early in the training to make participants feel more comfortable (Salmon 2011:133). From this, one can expect to find a group of e-learning students interacting not too unlike other groups of learners, albeit via different media. It does not necessarily imply that the e-moderator, too, should act and communicate in such a way that participants would not primarily perceive him or her as fulfilling a role, but as a person. Major, on the other hand, points out that e-moderators necessarily choose which and how much information about themselves they make available and that they have various options, covering the whole spectrum from trying to recreate in virtual space who they are in the real world to appearing to be someone totally different (Major 2015: loc. 3083). This implies that e-moderators are able to leave out aspects of their personality at will, as long as to present enough of themselves to make it clear that they are really there (Major 2015: loc. 3114). Students will always scan the communication provided by the e-moderator for clues on who the e-moderator really is (Major 2015: loc. 3131). If it is true that e-learners always try to find the real person behind the teaching persona projected online, trying to be natural in a virtual environment (Major 2015: loc. 3162) is a good strategy. The very first message sent out by the e-moderator (via e-mail) in the e-moderating course provided by International House London may serve as an example for what form this may take. It read:

Subject: Fwd: Welcome to your e-Moderating course! (and, sorry, your first task)

Dear All,

Apologies for the impersonal group email. I'm on a dodgy wifi connection in Spain and I don't think my individual messages went through yesterday so I'm retrying on my iPhone

Fingers crossed,

Bob

The e-mail was undoubtedly authentic and written out of necessity: an e-moderator resorting to Plan B because technology had failed him. By accident or intentionally, its informal style and reference to personal circumstances conjured up a picture of the person behind the role: a guy sitting in Spain, struggling to carry out an urgent job. The style of the messages that followed this first one makes one guess that, even if the moderator had been able to go through with Plan A, the strategy of presenting a real-life person rather

than an e-moderator-persona would have been the same. Here is a typical example for the style the e-moderator adopted, the beginning of a longer message sent later on during the course:

Re: Some tips on managing your forum posts:

Hi, all I thought it might be helpful if I posted a couple of tips on how to manage the numerous emails you are probably receiving from the Moodle site, as your colleagues post to the Forums. A lot of participants report feeling a bit overwhelmed as the modules get underway with the number of emails they are receiving, or knowing how to find out where the new postings are in any Forum [apart from clicking on each thread and looking for new posts, which is quite time consuming.] So here are a couple of things you can try:

1. **Change your Forum Settings.** This is what I do, because I am currently tutoring 3 separate courses and am overall supervisor on 5 others. If I have emails of each posting arriving in my Inbox I would be totally swamped, both psychologically and practically. So, I changed my settings in my profile so that I only receive one email per day, with full postings from all the courses. Go to your name in the participants' list, and click on 'edit profile'. Then select 'daily email with full digest' from the drop down menu in your settings, as indicated below. This will mean that you only get one email a day from the site, with all the postings of your colleagues in it. Rather sweetly, mine arrives around 4.30 every day, which means it's just the right time to sit down with a cup of tea and catch up!

This style enables e-students to relate to the e-moderator as a person. In this way, sitting down before one's computer can become an experience like entering a classroom. Figuratively speaking, students come in and go out as they please, but mostly the others can find notes on their desks and continue their own work based on these. On the e-moderator's desk there are more notes than on the others, and the desk is also better organized than some, but it is just as accessible. And as on all the others, there are traces of the person using it: paper cups, lunchboxes and newspapers. One might argue that e-learners do not need to see anything but the e-moderator persona, as long as the job is done well and all functions are fulfilled. This is in contrast to findings that one of the most important factors in successful learning is the teachers' ability to win the learners' trust, a trust based on seeing the teacher as somebody who is likeable, competent and reliable and as an authority (Roth 2011:195). An e-moderator can show competence, reliability and authority by doing a good job and fulfilling all functions in the Salmon model (Salmon 2013:16). Likeability, however, requires seeing a person, not a persona.

The 4-week e-moderating course did not only furnish the knowledge and skills for doing a better job as an e-moderator, it also provided a role model for how to interact with e-learners, not only as a professional e-moderator, but as a real-life person. From now on, the writing used in the present author's messages to students covered the whole spectrum, from conveying information matter-of-factly to a more personal style. Here are

two examples from the forums of a 1st semester EFL-course moderated in 2012. The first one of these is the present author's initial contribution to an icebreaker activity:

Re: My top three

There are high stacks of books waiting to be read on my bookshelves, and I can hardly pass a bookstore without entering and, a few minutes or a few hours later, coming out with one or two new ones. The top three of my list of wanna-reads are:

1. Peter Ackroyd's Shakespeare Biography – I've already started, and it's very interesting, painting a vivid picture of 16th century London, but with almost 500 pages, it probably will take some time
2. Taken, a crime story by Niamh O'Connor, an Irish author recommended to me in Dublin this summer
3. 'Adrian Mole, The Prostate Years' by Sue Townsend – I started reading the Adrian Mole Diaries in the 1980ies, when 'The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, aged 13 ¾,' was first published, and ever since I've followed his life-story, brilliantly invented by the author to mirror the political and societal developments in Great Britain and hilariously funny

Looking forward to reading and contributing to your Top Three,

Gabriela

Re: Hi everyone,

as always, I'm trying to sync my work rhythm with yours, so I'm back at my computer this weekend, too. I have now gone through the activities and am glad to say that in particular the contributions to the forums have been great so far. For everyone's convenience, just make sure to organize threads as suggested, e.g. 'one thread only' or 'one new thread for every speech'. By the way: great speeches in Block 4 already – I'm looking forward to more to come, as well as to your discussions. In case you're not sure where to go to look for interesting ones: www.TED.com is a great source. Just one more thing: please remember to make glossary entries on a continuous basis. Your contributions will be graded, so doing all of them on a last-minute basis will be a nuisance to you - and having to go through all of them in bulk at the end of the semester will not exactly be a picnic either...

Cheers,
Gabriela

A personal e-moderating style does not imply that all communication needs to contain references to personal circumstances or preferences. Very often, factual information is quite enough and messages will read like the following from the same course:

Re: On campus session

Dear all,

welcome to the final week of our course on Professional and Social Communication.

Please be reminded that if you want to deliver your persuasive speech this Saturday, you need not only register for the session, but also enter a topic in the list. Please remember that the speeches should **not exceed 5 minutes**.

Looking forward to meeting you in room BRC2.03, Saturday, 11:20!

Cheers,
Gabriela

Also, the personal remarks, if there are any, should relate to the course contents or circumstances that affect the course. It has specifically been avoided

- to voice any negative emotions: e-moderators may *like*, *welcome* and *enjoy*, but they do not *hate* or *burst into tears*, and hardly ever *disagree*;
- to show any preferences that would mean siding with one group within the class;
- to make jokes at the expense of anybody inside or outside the class;
- to mention events from personal or professional life that do not, at least indirectly relate to the course: if the computer breaks down, it might be worth a mention, if the moderator's car breaks down, this would normally not be relevant.

4. CONCLUSION

E-learning puts e-learners and e-moderators in a situation where personal relationships are established in different ways than in traditional learning environments. Many of today's e-moderators have little or no experience with communication via social media or the like and have therefore, outside their online teaching, never been in a situation where personal relationships are primarily established online. This, together with a focus on the fulfilment of specific e-moderator functions, could result in the e-moderator adopting a more artificial teacher persona than would be the case in a traditional classroom. Even though the experience is, by necessity, in a virtual world, e-learners always try to relate to a natural person. As such personal relationships play an important role in successful learning, e-moderators are well-advised to find a way of appropriately presenting certain aspects of their real-life personalities rather than adopting the role of a teacher persona not disclosing anything about their personal lives. For this, the e-moderator needs to develop self-awareness about what teacher persona he or she has adopted in the past and/or wants to adopt in the future. A willingness to

selectively share relevant aspects of their lives can help e-moderators win trust and credibility, which promotes successful learning. Measuring the extent to which this success can be attributed to a more personal style in e-moderating requires research yet to be done.

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