

e-Moderation: A Professional Way to Facilitate Team Collaboration and Project Work via Internet Platforms

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Introduction

If you want to successfully use the Internet for the collaboration of working teams whose members are spread globally – you will need first, common objectives and a strong commitment of all participants and second, a professional e-Moderator.

Common objectives and commitments could be for instance to participate in project work across borders, like monitoring and follow-up reports, to elaborate new ideas or concepts, to conduct expert brainstormings and to continuously share experiences. Assuring the flow of information between team members and to reduce expenses for travelling and live meetings while at the same time increasing competence will become more and more a must for companies and organisations having their staff and working groups scattered around the world.

Facilitation of the successful functioning of an Internet supported collaboration is done by a specially trained e-moderator. The skill to facilitate meetings, trainings or an exchange on an Internet platform is a rather new task which requires specific knowledge about web-based communication, new methodological approaches, experience – and a motivating way of expression.

It's the responsibility of the e-moderator to lead group members to a mutual understanding of their common objectives. He or she is the core figure initiating discus-

sions on content as well as the process of socialisation within the group. Therefore, the e-Moderator doesn't have to be the leading subject matter specialist but s/he should be able to mobilise and recognise the capabilities and the competence of the participating people and take care of them. A professional e-moderation is based on specific "e-pedagogics" – its steps are easy to follow from the simple to the sophisticated stages of team members' interaction and knowledge transfer. This e-pedagogics is listed in the five-steps-model of group development compiled by the e-moderating pioneer **Gilly Salmon**², a British university teacher who came up first with practicable and successful e-moderating training courses.

The above mentioned method allows all group members to get access to the virtual environment, to overcome initial problems, to support and train each other while using the various technical facilities and virtual course centre spaces skilfully. At the end of the training it can be observed that the participants – by continuous "conferencing" – increased their knowledge and strengthened the networking among them.

First e-moderation training course for coaches of "Communities of Practice"

Gabriela Renggli, a trained e-moderator from LBL, offered in January 2005 and for the second time a specific online training in e-moderation, using the www.myNetworks.org environment. This platform, formerly designed for the exchange of experience and for training courses in Ecological Engineering, offers the "classic" spaces for web based interaction, which are:

- News Board
- Resources Space (library, private bookshelf)
- Discussion Space (forums)

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² steps for learning, teaching and collaborating online

- Courses Space (group facilities, chat rooms)
- Personal Space (private desk)

In January 2005 eighteen professionals working in the field of development co-operation were taking part in this e-moderation training. It lasted 4 weeks and its special focus was the coaching and moderating of “Communities of Practice”.

The two main questions that had to be sorted out before starting the course were dealt with at an initial Kick-off Meeting. They consisted in:

- How much technical support the participants would need and
- How to provide an efficient introduction to this web platform?

At the kick-off meeting, the participants also got first insights into the basics of e-didactics and the principles of web-based communication. Then, the adventure in the cyberspace took off in good spirit. Three teams were formed for a first warm-up exercise.

Successful start into the cyberspace



The participants, enthusiastic about their successful e-moderation training course – a lively and interesting time in cyberspace!

After the kick-off meeting which, in fact, was the only face-to-face meeting during the whole course, the participants learned to organise themselves using online

forums. The parallel real-time meeting in an interactive chat-room helped them to sort out the most relevant problems and obstacles the participants faced at the beginning. Step by step, they were guided through weekly exercises which increased in complexity and co-ordination skills. Interesting tasks for sub-groups, facilitated by the participants themselves, helped to build up e-moderating know how, while mutual support and making use of individual competence proved to be the key for successful solutions. Three short stories, written by the participants were the result of a moderated story telling process during the first week. Each story with an exciting, funny – and even unexpected content. It made all participants enthusiastic about the good start of our very first online collaboration.

Transfer into practice

The following two weeks of the training were dedicated to a team work viewing the “transfer into practice”. This meant the application of the newly acquired know-how in e-moderation along with elaborating project ideas and working out concepts deriving from each participants special job situation, assignment or daily work.

According to participants’ expectations three subjects for the practice oriented final group works were chosen:

- **Task force** – should present an interesting solution or suggestion for a project, as an outcome of a result oriented collaboration.
- **E-Coaching / E-Training** – design and develop a modular Web Based Training in the field of international co-operation. Train and coach the necessary trainers for this WBT as well.
- **CoP in Action:** facilitate an e-activity and discuss the topic: “Sustainable support of a Community of Practice”.

After participants had chosen the group of their interest – the teams started to organise brainstormings and project design activities in a professional manner: By setting up discussion forums, periodic chat appointments for backstopping and mid term reports the e-moderators and group members organised their project planning process.

The idea – to use the lessons learnt in “e-Moderation” for interesting projects worked perfectly: The three projects got started with enthusiasm. They used all available competence of the team members and turned out three projects ready for implementation:

Task Force: planned a WIKI (a multiply linked web-site) about “ The impact of AIDS on agricultural systems” to be edited and published permanently by the team members. Thus, WIKI becomes a thematic newsletter with network character containing the most recent and manifold information about the subject.

E-Coaching: This team started designing the first modules for a web based training in “Project Cycle Management” for civil servants in Kosovo including co-operation with a local counterpart. It followed an already existing setting and made valuable contributions for an improved implementation.

CoP in Action: This group collected ideas on an effective online support for a Community of Practice. It focused then on the idea of organising and facilitating the “International MyNetworks Day”: Events, meetings,

riddles, expert discussions during 24 hours should make it an attractive world-wide virtual happening for all users of this web-platform and by that strengthen and intensify their interaction and co-operation.

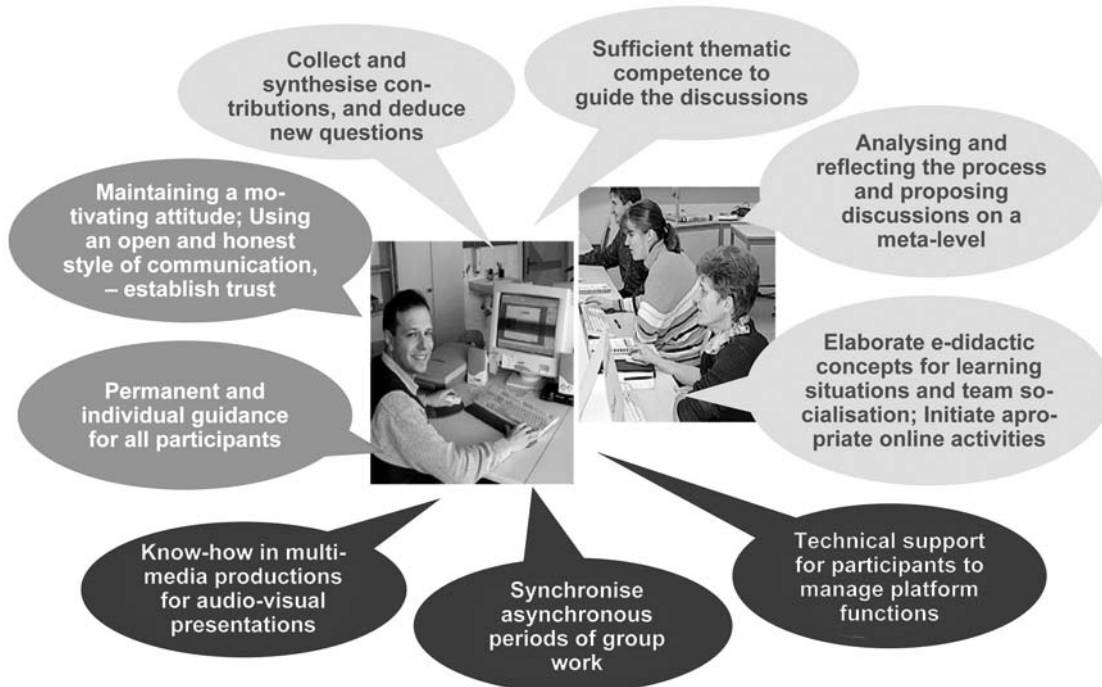
Developing different skills in e-moderation

Organising and facilitating for the first time an online task-force, or a story writing group, or an expert brainstorming shows what it really takes. Especially the “three outstanding freedoms of Internet use” – Anywhere, Anyone, Anytime – became the real challenge for facilitation skills.

To our understanding there are three types of skills, described in the picture below:

- facilitation skills and methodology (light grey)
- technical skills on how to handle the tool (dark grey) and
- social skills on how to deal with the members of the group (black with white types).

What an e-moderator should be able to do... facilitation skills needed in web based collaboration



Facilitation skills and methodology

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Collect and synthesise contributions, and deduce new questions | <p>The e-moderator of a working group has to get control and an overview about all the contributions coming in asynchronously and to “weave together” the inputs. S/he invites the team members regularly for real-time live chats so as to synchronise the ongoing work, to provide syntheses, deduce new questions – and prepare decisions about further steps.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sufficient thematic competence to guide the discussions | <p>Acceptance of the e-moderator also comes from being familiar with the discussed subjects and the ability to make helpful and relevant contributions.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Analysing and reflecting the process and proposing discussions on a meta-level | <p>To make reflections about results, decisions, approaches and the different styles of moderation of the group e-moderators are helpful to find out Do’s and Don’ts in e-moderation. If such discussions on a rather meta-level are guided in a constructive atmosphere they can contribute considerably to team socialisation.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elaborating e-didactic concepts for learning situations; Initiate appropriate online activities | <p>A skilful e-moderator is setting up a tailor-made concept taking into account the experience of the participants as well as their desired outputs of the discussions. The same importance has the ability to develop appropriate online activities according to the progress the whole group is making concerning participants interactions.</p> |

Technical skills

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Technical support for participants to manage platform functions ■ Synchronise asynchronous periods of group work | <p>The e-coach should have the necessary know-how about the platform functions, its technical possibilities and other Internet services and be able to help solving problems quickly. It is important to overcome the first technical problems at an early stage of collaboration to prevent frustrations while using the new working environment.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Know-how in multimedia productions for audio-visual presentations | <p>Having skills in image processing, graphics or video cutting is of great advantage for visualising the common work or initiating further steps, taking in consideration as well that the non-verbal expressions that support our daily conversations are missing online.</p> |

Social skills

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Permanent and individual guidance for all participants | <p>E-moderation is a full time engagement giving the participants the possibility to work anytime. It means, that each member of a virtual team may request and deserves guidance and support anytime.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintaining a motivating attitude; Using an open and honest style of communication; Establish trust | <p>An honest and empathic style of communication will bring people nearer to each other – and will help to establish mutual trust. But one question should be taken into consideration: How does the e-moderator avoid getting stressed by the expectations of the group members?</p> |

An important focus during this course was put on “modelling” – i.e. the critical observation and analysis of the e-moderators job regarding the above mentioned skills. In the training we reflected the Do’s and Don’ts in e-Moderation using the method of a so called “hot chair”. It was done as an online forum where all people involved in e-moderation (trainer and sub-group facilitators) had to answer questions regarding their intentions, the applied

methodology and the steps in guiding their teams or discussion groups. The critical but fair views and the regular reflections about “what was going on” were important means for additional know how inputs and for sharing.

With many thanks to all who took part – and best regards to all who would like to join us in future or to know more: gabriela.renggli@lbl.ch

Information about the training

Basic information and scope of such an e-Moderation course:

The training is focusing on the management of working together via the Internet. There are situations where members of a team (or an organisation) need to keep up their communication flow, the increase of their competence and produce results over a long distance. A special focus is put on the facilitation of a community of practice.

The training provides insights into new techniques and in the use of web services for project management tasks. It offers opportunities to make first experiences.

Objectives of the training:

- Getting to know and testing methods and techniques of e-moderation for facilitating groups in the Internet.
- Producing results together and transferring the newly gained knowledge to your own daily work.
- Being able to evaluate the value of e-moderation for your own work.
- Developing ideas for possible applications (project coaching, CoP moderation, training in specific subject matters etc.).

Target group:

- Professionals working in development co-operation (or some other international setting of collaboration) who are using or facilitating a "community of practice" in the Internet.

Basic data about the course:

- **Duration:** 4 weeks, work load about 4-8 hours per week.
- **Date:** the next e-moderation training will take place from **Oct. 17th till Nov. 12th 2005**.
- **Costs:** there will be a course fee of about 990 EUR per person.
- As an **additional service**, there will be an “on the job” coaching package for the time after the course (when the real problems are felt!).
- **Number of participants:** 15 - 20 participants.

For more detailed information consult www.mynetworks.org