The Voice in the Wilderness: Enabling Online Teachers and Tutors to Tame Learning Technologies

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Abstract

Higher Education (H.E.) is facing the complexity, strangeness and contradictions of a transformation the like of which no generation has seen before. Societies are in the midst of a fundamental rupture with the past that involves both loss and gain (Stille, 2002). The patterns of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) cannot easily be determined, as the ways people adopt and use new forms of technologies are largely unpredictable. The introduction of ICT into these complex territories can result in academic deskilling rather than enskilling. Teachers and researchers in H.E. face a greater variety of tasks with fewer resources. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) may increase these trends unless we recognise it for what it truly is – a tool and a medium to be embraced, moulded and shaped to our purposes. Using the metaphor of taming the wildness of the new landscape, this chapter explores the importance of the role of the human mediators in the support of online learners, giving an example of how their skills can be developed through the online medium.

1. About the Wildness

Although most learners are comfortable and familiar with the use of new technologies in their everyday lives, many teachers in Higher Education (H.E.) feel that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are worrying, risky or 'wild' when applied to learning and teaching environments. They experience ICT as strange, difficult to understand and not sufficiently well adapted to teachers' and learners' needs. Productive use of ICT does not have a long tradition from which teachers can draw and reflect.

The patterns of use of ICT in everyday life cannot easily be determined. The ways in which people adopt and use new forms of technologies are inconstant. Networked and digital technologies have been absorbed at a very rapid rate into entertainment and business. The speed and the unpredictability of the growth of the use of ICT have left the traditional architects and guardians of structured change processes in education struggling to keep up. Teachers concerned with the quality of learning experiences, may worry that ICT are insufficiently well tuned to learning needs and that some learners may focus on the technology rather than the learning content or process.

Acceptable use and the meaning given to new technologies are a complex mix of "… distinctive and perplexing forms of rational and non-rational behaviour" (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996, p. 45). Silverstone and Haddon see the implementation of ICT as a process of 'taming' wild objects, and adapting them to the routines and rituals of every day life – a process that has yet to happen on a wide scale for teaching and learning. At the same time that there is an increasing need for assistance in finding a way through the wilderness in the educational context, but a key aspect of the Internet is its ability to cut out the 'middle man' or agent.

These recent trends and pressures created by ICT have reduced operational control and discretion in H.E. and resulted in something of a 'humbling' of the academic profession (Ramsden, 1992). Hence, some academics and teachers have felt deskilled rather than enskilled by the addition of 'wild' solutions to their teaching and learning environments. They may be unsure which of their well developed teaching skills from the classroom are suitable for the less familiar online world or what expertise they need to acquire.

1.1. Taming the Wildness

In practice, the uses of the Internet are essentially *social* (rather than about computing), instrumental and closely connected to work, family and every day life. Castells tells us that [the Internet] '…is an extension of life as it is, in all its dimensions, and with all its modalities' (Castells, 2001, p. 118). The attempt by educational institutions throughout the world to jump on a highly technological 'solutions' approach to tapping into this amazing opportunity for enhancing H.E. and lifelong learning has contributed to many expensive disappointments.

First, moving online does *not* have to mean a loss of active and social learning. The key to success is a balance between applying useful older concepts about learning and the implementation of innovations using the best of networked technologies. Successful and productive online *teaching* is a key feature of positive, scalable and affordable e-learning projects and processes.

Second, regardless of the sophistication of the technology, online learners do *not* wish to do without their human supporters. Instead, learners talk of challenge and support by their lecturers, or of contact with the thoughts and the work of others. Most people also mention the fun and companionship of working and learning together. Such benefits do not have to be abandoned with the introduction of ICT to learning.

1.2. Clearing the Way

We are now at something of a crossroads in H.E. Some would say a watershed. Many colleges, universities and training organisations are 'moving online' with the associated challenges of student satisfaction, quality and professional uncertainty. For campus-based (terrestrial) students, e-learning is an addition to more traditional approaches and needs to add its own value. It may be necessary, in blended situations, to make the online components especially enticing or students and teachers will naturally gravitate to more familiar modes. For distance students, it may be their whole learning world. Either way, the role of the online teacher or trainer is known to be a major influence on success and pedagogical changes (Coldeway, 2002).

Many campus-based universities are seeing the benefits of enhancing classroom-based work with technology. Technology-enriched classrooms result in more student-centredness, and more collaborative and applied learning. Most importantly the roles of teachers are transformed.

> As the students began to use the technological resources to manage their learning, the role of the teacher was transformed from lecturer to guide. The availability of vast amounts of easily accessible information freed the teacher from the role of purveyor of facts… to encourage the students to use the computer as a tool for problem solving and decision making. (Hopson, Simms, & Knezek 2001-2, p. 117)

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2. Empowering Human Mediators

The impacts of links and networks have the power to redefine the roles of teachers at all levels, but they need to fully engage in the *experience of working online* in order to appreciate both the needs and benefits of the environment for teaching and learning. There are multiple paths for reading and writing, and a huge range of possibilities for learning and teaching interactions. The culture of teaching in H.E. was created largely through apprenticeship in disciplines and consists of complex sets of values, attitudes and behaviours. Hence, influencing teaching practice to accommodate the best ICT, whether as a replacement or within a blend, needs careful consideration beyond simple ideas of training.

There are many instructors who are admirably trying to offer to others the chance to be 'trained in new technologies for teaching and learning'. The subjects or participants of training however, jump straight into their usual trusty vehicles, framed by a complex world view acquired mainly through their formal education topped up by sprinkles of advice from people they admire and their own good and bad learning experience. They then believe if they learn about the menu items on, say, Blackboard or some other pre-prepared environment and maybe revisit 'learning styles', or teaching techniques and haul all this online, that all will be well. It's not. However, offering online experiences to faculty for their development, preferably with peers, means that less training is needed and more online empathy and professionalism is encouraged.

Clearly, such attempts to address the reskilling of academic and teaching staff through half-day workshops only scratch the surface of influence and change. Indeed teaching faculty are often then convinced that teaching online is mainly about learning to use a computer programme. Similarly, focusing training on the use of the features of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) creates the merest dent in the long apprenticeship in practical and theoretical knowledge or competence in the teaching profession, much of which is acquired rather mysteriously, or at least informally. The innovators and the early adopters persist with more or less grace. Many of the others become convinced that satisfactory knowledge transmission and construction must happen in classrooms!

What we know of learning is that if we want professionals to change what they actually do, they need opportunities to explore what they already know and what they are prepared to develop. They need a little specific detail but then to engage in dialogue to investigate its implications in wider contexts. They must also engage in actual practice but with the chance to reflect (Harvey & Knight, 1996). First new skills must be acquired to enable teachers in H.E., new and experienced and at all levels, to be able to create, manage and successfully promote participation in interactive conferencing online. Second, attention needs to be given to how teachers can regain confidence, professionalism and keep up to date (Barker, 2002; Bennett & Marsh, 2002; Tsui & Ki, 2002).

The mechanism for acquiring and continuing to develop should be through the *medium itself* and depend on the role of experienced facilitators and peers. In this way, universities can operate as a *community* of scholars. There are two motives for groups of people to work together. One is self-interest and the other common interest (Csikzentmihalyi, 2003). The first can be promoted through extrinsic factors, such as incentives, but the second needs trust and mutual respect. By enabling groups of H.E. teachers to work

together, through the new media, intrinsic motivators will gradually emerge and successful good practice be promoted.

3. The Lion Tamer

The term 'e-moderator' has been adopted for teachers, trainers, instructors and facilitators in the online environment, especially those working with asynchronous networked technologies such as conferences and bulletin boards.

Stepping down from the 'spotlight' of the lectern and into the more shadowy virtual world can be hard to do. However, lecturers used to being successful 'leaders' in classroom situations have the basic skills and knowledge to become e-moderators, including introducing topics, engaging participants, and running plenary and feedback discussions (Broadbent, 2002). Knight's (2002) summary of the move towards online facilitation is instructive: 'It is ironic that what some take to be dehumanising technology may actually need teachers to be more empathetic and considerate' (p. 122).

The more successful and scaled networked courses for teacher development use scaffolding (that is, intentional staged skill-building) approaches. Scaffolding is also a way of gradually moving from what we might call directed instruction to a constructivist approach, from short term needs to longer term and from immediate to more holistic learning (McNaught, 2003; Salmon 2004; Cummings & Bonk, 2002). I use a five-stage model of gradual increasing competency for learning and teaching online to offer structure to the process. The model can be used to give insight into what can happen with online discussions groups and to scaffold individual teachers' development processes (Salmon, 2004).

The underlying assumption of the five-stage model is that learning involves very much more than undertaking activity on a computer. Indeed, online "Learning…includes an intricate and complex interaction between neural, cognitive, motivational, affective and social processes… " (Azevedo, 2002 p. 31). Learning is a transformation where the energy and impetus takes place, not smoothly, but in leaps and bounds. Learners move from the known to the unknown (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2002). A further assumption is that participants learn about the use of computer networking *along with* learning about teaching and *with* and *through* their peers, not under separate instruction.

If it is hoped that a learning community will develop, even a short term one, the e-moderators need to give very explicit attention to enabling and promoting all aspects of online socialisation, time management, and dynamic knowledge construction. To engage the participants in active involvement in negotiating meaning from the experience of working online, and to promote knowledge sharing and support, imaginative and creative images need to be deployed. Energies need to be harnessed towards the shared enterprise and purposefulness of the learning community. In a sense, a special cultural experience is created by *belonging* to *this group* at *this time* and through discussion and negotiation (Bruner, 1986).

3.1 The Lion Tamers' Qualities

The most successful e-moderators have some particular qualities. These characteristics can be found in traditional lecturers but are often surfaced and developed by those teachers more familiar with the online environment. For example, e-moderators need to

be able to support text-based communication, know how to 'weave' and classify and be able to handle relationships without physical meetings (Bygholm, 2002).

Much of the experience of working online is mediated through human feelings as responses not only to the technology but also to relating remotely with peers. E-moderators need to learn how to understand the impact of the emotions on the success of teaching and learning online. The idea of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002) is controversial but acknowledges that a great deal more is going on than cognitive capabilities in learning and teaching processes. Emotional Intelligence includes aspects such as motivation and intuitiveness (which act as goal drivers) together with resilience and conscientiousness (which curb excesses in the drivers). Especially important for e-moderating are self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and the ability to influence. There is evidence that people who display higher levels of emotional competence have greater success in relations with others (on and offline) and superior performance. In particular emotional intelligence is related to leadership competencies (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2002).

E-moderators need to appreciate the differences between cognitive methods of teaching and learning where new information is assumed to be directly assimilated by participants and constructivist approaches where learners create their own meanings (Fibiger, 2002). Stimuli for this construction process can happen through interaction with other participants messages, by the introduction of 'sparks' of information or through the interventions of the e-moderator (Salmon, 2002).

It is important that participants appreciate that knowledge is not something that is fully 'fixed' and can easily be codified and transferred from one person to another. To learn from online conferences, participants need to be able to select, organise, elaborate and explore new understandings, in relationship to their existing knowledge. E-moderators need to learn to ask open questions, seek more discussion, motivate, challenge, compliment, and encourage all participants. Much of this can be enabled and promoted by the *design* of online conferences (Salmon, 2002) but also by the appropriate interventions by the e-moderator, including excellent threading and summaries and the removal of irrelevant messages (Schwan, Straub, & Hesse, 2002)

The nature of asynchronicity makes it harder for e-moderators to create positive group experiences and the excitement, rhythm, engagement and focus that we know as 'flow' (Csikzentmihalyi, 2003), compared to face to face groups. Only by experiencing this for themselves and then learning and practising all the ways of tackling it can this be overcome successfully. The most important skills to be learned are those of summarizing, archiving and weaving of participants' contributions. Further key issues are the ability to create clear goals and appropriate challenges, both a vision of the learning outcomes and very short focussed steps. In addition, ways of gradually reducing the dependency of the virtual group on the e-moderator should be demonstrated. E-moderators should learn to *design* for group interaction whilst creating a feeling of personal 'presence' to make it clear they are *not* always available. New and continuing teachers benefit from feedback and support provided by experienced e-moderators in order to develop and professionalize their online roles (Weller & Robinson, 2001). There are many benefits in sharing both resources *and* understanding (Barker, 2002)

3.2. The Lion Tamer's Manual: Online Training for OU Tutors

The UK OU was founded in 1969, as a single mode distance teaching institution, charged to use the technology of the day. It has since spawned over 30 similar open university institutions around the world. The learning support system operates on what Peters calls the 'industrial model' (1994). Phase one consists of developing high quality and paced learning materials. Over the years, more and more technology such as CD ROMs and Websites have been included. The second phase is the delivery of group tutorials, feedback on individual assignments and support by part time tutors. Tutors have gradually learned to run their classes and groups in online environments as well as face to face.

In the first half of 2004, the Open University Business School (OUBS) offered development to around 80 of its tutors. We wished to enable them to work remotely using problem-based learning and assessment approaches as part of the fully distance and online, large-scale Certificate in Management.

There was a need to enable them to acquire e-moderating skills. These new approaches need to become embedded and professionalized with the overall tutoring role, to ensure quality and confidence when working with their students.

For effectiveness, efficiency, acceptability and coherence, we chose to offer them a two week, five hour, asynchronous online course. Participants worked entirely online with members of the course team and specially trained e-moderators in the software platform (FirstClass) they would use with their students. Our main intention was to encourage the tutors to feel they were 'on top' of the technological application and hence to feel free to develop a professionalised approach to deploying it happily and successfully as a tool in their tutoring. We promoted and valued their previous knowledge and teaching experience, whilst guiding them towards their new online roles.

Our message to staff about the objectives of the training was:

The purpose of this entirely online activity is to:

- *engage you in the continuity and changes between the older and newer version of the Certificate in Management*
- *introduce new and critically important aspects of the online teaching and learning process*
- *enable you to practice skills and develop ideas for use with your student groups*
- *offer you a focussed and structured opportunity to work with other tutors, course team members, colleagues and supporters of the Certificate in Management*
- *to enable you to save time and be more effective when tutoring online on the Certificate in Management*

What we are offering to help:

- *a structured and paced series of online activities (called e-tivities)*
- *3 online discussion conferences*
- *a web site with resources for viewing and/or downloading, if you wish*
- *an opportunity to develop a short personal development plan in preparation for the tutoring on the Certificate in Management*
- *a Certificate of Course Completion for your portfolio*

What we expect of you:

- *that you start on time and finish on time*
- *that you commence the week 1 activities within 24 hours of the start of Week 1 and that you start week 2 activities within 24 hours of the start of day 1 of week 2.*
- *you will get the most from the online activity if you visit each day for the next 14 days for a short time*
  and complete a minimum of:
    - *contributing at least two messages to each of the 3 discussion forums*
    - *complete and review at least 4 out of the 5 e-tivities*
    - *complete and submit your personal development plan*

Submission of your personal development plan and of the exit questionnaire will result in issuing of your Certificate of Completion and a claim form.

Our first message to our colleagues described their roles on the training course:

Online roles

It is important to keep in mind your roles as you work your way through the course. You will take the roles in this course of:

1. a participant in an online course process
2. a developing e-moderator and
3. an experienced tutor moving to a new approach to the Certificate in Management course

The roles may each have different objectives:

1. a participant aims to learn the skills of the e-moderator by taking part
2. an e-moderator aims to enable other participants to gain from the online interactions & as a group member aims to work with others to draw key insights from the course
3. a Certificate in Management tutor will want to know what is continuing, what has changed and why, and what s/he needs to know or do

In many of the e-tivities you will contribute initially as a participant and then respond as an e-moderator.

Each online course of 11–12 colleagues was typically completed by 95% of the participants, and attracted around 250 message contributions to the discussions and e-tivities. The feedback questionnaires and their Personal Development Plans demonstrated that all participants felt they had developed skills of direct use in working with their students, including how to:

- entice full participation online
- be inclusive
- encourage independent learning
- enable successful student interaction and groups
- use 'sparks' of information to promote dialogue and knowledge sharing (rather than big 'chunks')
- use archiving, weaving & summarising.

Critically, we observed a major shift in the tutors' thinking from the focus on the features of the technology to what it could offer to the students on the Certificate in Management, and the key skills they needed to help. The tutors' own learning happened very visibly through the online dialogue, and we could observe increased confidence in their online roles and in their development of specific 'taming' techniques.

As might be expected, the tutors worried about the use of their time, but they recognised that as they honed their skills, the time taken to work online would reduce. Participants felt they had got to know and learned from their colleagues and had enhanced their professional and support networks by taking part. Costs were tiny compared to those of bringing the tutors together for a face to face briefing and training sessions.

The OU Business School tutors particularly appreciated being able to work with each other and more experienced peers and especially recognised the value of taking part online. They realised that by undertaking their skills development in the same environment as their students, their understanding of feelings, responses and opportunities developed rapidly:

"I experienced what it is like to be a newcomer faced with a brand new conference and lots of instructions about what to do next; found the discussions really stimulating and interesting both in terms of content and the dynamics of how an online group focussed on particular tasks can work; also appreciated the practical honing of skills – i.e. here's what we mean by weaving or closing." R.M.

When asked what aspects of the experience they found most valuable typical comments were as follows:

"Interaction with a diverse group of fellow tutors who grasped not the opportunity for some 'valuable' learning about e-conferencing as well as the changes in the Certificate in Management course." T.H.

They also recognised that there was 'modelling' occurring that lead them gently towards consideration and revision of their own roles:

"Our colleague who took us the role of 'e-convenor' did a great job. He offered just the right level of guidance and intervention. He's now my e-moderator role model!" B.B.

We were especially pleased to note that tutors recognised that their key role was to promote online activity between their student groups. We offered the rationale for and practice in the techniques of 'weaving' and of 'summarizing' to show tutors that they still have an important *teaching* role to play with their online groups. Nearly all the feedback questionnaires mentioned the great value of learning these techniques. Many had previously viewed their role more as a host than a tutor:

"I enjoyed taking part in the activities, reading the comments of others and practicing weaving and summarizing which I'm now going off to try with my own groups!" P.R.

Even the more negative comments by the staff showed that they had gained new insights:

"Overall I found the exercise a bit like leaving home by car in a thick fog. Signs were difficult to read and at various points I completely lost my way. My time estimates were all wrong (mainly my fault), and when I got there I was not sure I had arrived at the right place! I must make sure my students don't experience these barriers." B.T.

Those tutors who had some experience of working successfully online were valuable in supporting their peers with less or different experiences. Even experienced e-moderators felt that they had benefited professionally:

"As a result of taking part, I have increasing the range of possibilities of interventions and initiatives available to me with my Web group students." I.J.

"This has been extremely valuable time investment for me and I anticipate I will be a much better e-moderator having completed this course." J.U.

Of the 80 participants, only 3 indicated that they needed more help with the technology. We feel that this indicates a shift in their thinking about the usability of the conferencing environment (FirstClass) and its relevance for their managing teaching.

4. Beyond the Wildness

The academic culture of H.E. is not yet ready to deliver and embrace teaching with ICT at a level that suggests massive institutional reform. The promise for faculty and learner support remains too tenuous, the risk-reward ratio too high, and the sense of urgency too low for the majority of faculty to change their current practices. Many teachers still experience the wildness of the technology and attempts at taming are still in the early days.

Hence in the early years of the 21st Century, there are few universities that have successfully restructured and fully adopted technology based learning. Conventional project-based approaches do not address the need for organisational restructuring (Kenny, 2002). Change has been gradual and unsystematic. In practice we need a process of negotiation of meanings through experience and dialogue amongst the divergent cultures and sub-cultures, and plentiful opportunities to develop and practice skills through the online environment itself and with peers.

Many commentators are now claiming that the impact of networked and digital technologies in education are likely to be less in the in the short term and but greater in the long term than the original naïve predications. Somewhere between prescriptive management and decentralisation, lies a balance with agreed educational objectives to the fore, and an action research approach to enable the territory to be reclaimed for online teachers with confidence. We need central vision with delegation, collaboration, flexibility…and maybe reward? Meanwhile teachers need to be *taking part*, using, understanding, and experimenting in the online environment itself. In this way online teachers in H.E. will go beyond seeing their online system as 'wild' and into viewing it as an active and lively human network with meaning and purpose for their teaching.

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