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**Bios:**

**Panos Vlachopoulos** is Lecturer in e-Learning in the College of Education, at Massey University, in New Zealand. His research interests include e-moderation, and the facilitation of student-centred learning in virtual learning environments. He is involved with online tutoring in various undergraduate and postgraduate university programmes in New Zealand and in the UK.

**John Cowan** is Emeritus Professor of Learning Development of the Open University. He has developed and researched student-centred learning in higher education for over 40 years, and has considerable experience as a tutor in various e-learning situations. His primary concern in these activities is to identify, with his students, the features of their online relationships which will most effectively contribute to learner-directed and learner-managed learning and development.

Reconceptualising e-moderation of asynchronous online discussions: a grounded theory study

This paper reports a grounded theory study of e-moderation of asynchronous online discussions, to explore the processes by which tutors in higher education decide when and how to e-moderate. It aims to construct a theory of e-moderation based on some key factors which appear to influence e-moderation. It discusses previous research on the definition and practice of e-moderation, and then describes the study, which involved four e-moderators working in two different university contexts. Key themes on e-moderation, which emerged using a grounded theory approach, are discussed. It proposes a paradigm framework for e-moderation and suggests that as a facilitative activity, it should be sufficiently contained within ‘a ring-fenced learning arena’. Factors outwith and inside the ring-fence which appear to influence e-moderation and their implications for future theory development and validation are discussed.

Keywords: e-moderation; grounded theory; online learning; asynchronous discussions; ring-fence

**Introduction: ‘moderating’ online discussions**

Moderated online asynchronous discussion board activity is still the commonest form of interaction online, whether in programmes which are fully online, or blended (Sharpe & Pawlyn, 2009). Consequently much analytical research attention has been concentrated on discussion activity, whether undertaken for its own sake, or focused on a purposeful task for a group.

Mason was among the first to characterise online tutor’s roles, which she distinguished in three major categories (Mason, 1991). These were the organisational role, the social role and the intellectual role. Tutors facilitate the learning of the students through each of these roles. A fourth and transient role of the e-moderator was added by Berge (1995), namely, the ‘technical’ role. The facilitator (or e-moderator), according to Berge, must make participants comfortable with the system and the software used for the conferencing.

The value of these attempts to describe the roles that tutors play online has been widely recognised. Many researchers embarked upon the initial characterisations of online tutoring, trying to map them with educational theories. This has led to the proliferation of conceptual frameworks and models for online tutoring (e.g. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001); and for e-moderating (Salmon, 2000), as well as a number of guide books aimed to assist tutors with their online teaching (e.g. Bender, 2003; Ko & Rossen, 2004); MacDonald, 2006; Salmon, 2002). Paulsen (1992) recommended that online tutors should identify their preferred pedagogical styles based on their educational orientation, which presumably influences their chosen pedagogical style and subsequently their preferred facilitation techniques. The essence in the literature of online facilitation and moderation is not so much the effective use of the technology, but the ways in which tutors may intervene online. In most published work on the topic of the tutors’ role online, a clear definition of what is online facilitation or e-moderation has not been provided. Exceptions to this are the works of Salmon (2000, 2003) who provided a definition of an e-moderator and a structure (ie, five stages) for e-moderating and from whom the term e-moderation in this paper is borrowed, and the definition of ‘teaching presence’ as part of the ‘community of inquiry’ framework advanced by Anderson *et al* (2001) and by Garrison & Anderson (2003).

**Salmon’s model of ‘e-moderating’, and its limitations**

For Salmon (2000, p.3), “an e-moderator presides over an e-meeting. They are generalist tutors who may know something about the subject matter but have experience in dealing with students”. In the second edition of her book, she suggested for the first time that an e-moderator is mostly a “manager of online learning and group working” (Salmon, 2003, p.4). Her model describes an online scaffolding process progressively engage the students in the online discussion, by following a five stage approach. When the model was tested in online tutors’ training situations (similar to those in which the five stages were developed), positive feedback was received in relation to its effectiveness for trainee moderators. Independently Churchill (2005) reported that, following the five-stage model, tutors had had a positive online training experience, and that their confidence in using computer-mediated-communication (CMC) in their tutoring had been increased. Similarly, Daw and Riding (2002) reported that Salmon’s model met their aims in training novice teachers on how to use technology.

Nevertheless, Salmon’s model should be treated with caution if expected to be effective in contexts other than the one within which it was developed. For example, when Lisewski and Joyce (2003) tested the model in a formal higher education context, they expressed concern “that such objectified models become ‘off the shelf’, ‘one size fits all’ products that are seemingly transferable and usable across widely differing teaching and learning contexts.” As such they become unquestionable components of the learning technologist’s knowledge base” (Lisewski and Joyce, 2003, p.59). In the same vein, Moule (2007) pointed out that not all e-learning occurs within a community and that, in this regard, Salmon’s model is limited because it only focuses on the social learning approach while ignoring other possibilities.

Another limitation of Salmon’s model was pointed out by Jefferies and Seden (2006). In a blended learning context in a traditional university, these researchers tried to implement the five-stage model to roll out an e-tutoring training model. They reported that “upon examination, the Salmon model appeared to lack both a preparation and a post- evaluation phase which would be necessary for implementation within a campus-based undergraduate context.” (Jefferies and Seden, 2006, p.54). Thus the general transferability of the model and its pedagogy to e-moderation, in differing contexts and with different purposes for discussion, has yet to be established.

**The notion of ‘Teaching Presence’, and its limitations**

Garrison & Anderson (2003) introduced the ‘Community of Inquiry’ as a conceptual framework for online learning. It consists of three linked elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Anderson *et al.* (2001) had previously defined teaching presence as “the design, facilitation and direction of the cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.” According to Anderson *et al.* (2001), the tutor has three main roles to fulfil within this teaching presence, which is as:

* The designer of the educational experience, including planning and administration duties as well as evaluating the programme and certifying the students’ competence;
* the facilitator and co-creator of a social environment;
* the subject matter expert, who knows a more than most learners and, therefore is in a position to scaffold learning experiences through proactive prompting.

Nowhere in the descriptions of this framework (Anderson *et al.*, 2001; Garrison & Anderson, 2003) did the authors argue for one role over another. Instead, they encouraged tutors to explore the educational impact of different approaches. Teaching presence was also assumed by Anderson *et al.* (2001) to exist in both tutors and learners to the same extent. For that reason they wrote of ‘teaching’, and not ‘teacher’, presence. This distinction raises the question of power and control over the teaching-learning process.

**The need for a conceptualisation of e-moderation informed by evidence of practice**

Salmon (2007) pointed out that there is no evidence so far of an easy pathway between instructivist and constructivist approaches to online moderation. Other unresolved issues in the area of online tutoring have been identified, including the practical complexities associated with being concurrently a tutor and an e-moderator in credit-bearing courses (see for example, Barker, 2002; Bennet & Marsh, 2002; Ham & Davey, 2005). There is seemingly no study to date which has observed the naturalistic process of acting as an ‘e-moderator’, capturing the practical complexities associated with this process. Thus, this paper’s intent is to report an exploration and formulation of a theory based on the practices of university tutors as e-moderators. The theory of e-moderation that is proposed is based on university teachers’ reports, activity and reflections about their own e-moderation experiences. This was done to conceptualise the process by which university teaching staff (e.g. tutors, lecturers etc) act as e-moderators, and to identify the issues associated with sustaining an ‘e-moderator’s role’.

A grounded theory approach was selected as the core methodology because it allows the construction of a theory which is grounded in the data and which can be used as basis for testing through future research (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The end product of a grounded theory study is a paradigm or model that systematically links experience, context, coping strategies, and consequences to the phenomenon of interest (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory thus enables a deep understanding of a phenomenon or a process – in this case, the process of e-moderation.

## Research Context

One of the authors, Vlachopoulos (2008), conducted research in two settings, with a total of four e-moderators. Each e-moderator was studied as a distinct case.

In the first setting, in an English university, three academic teachers and 17 students from different countries participated over a period of one academic semester in a blended Masters course in ‘Communications, Education and Technology’. This was delivered using a mixed-mode approach of face-to-face tutorials, blended with sessions in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The students worked online with their face-to-face tutor, then with an online guest expert (M2, supported by M1) and then a second online tutor (M3). Students and e-moderators used a threaded discussion model, where all users had the option of responding to one another directly. The three settings occurred in consecutive weeks, in the second half of the module.

The second setting was an undergraduate course within a School of the Built Environment at a Scottish university. One lecturer and 25 students participated over a period of one academic semester in a blended course. This was delivered weekly using a combination of traditional face-to-face teaching in a two-hour “lecture” session, and a further two-hour online problem-based learning (PBL) “tutorial”, in an asynchronous virtual learning environment (VLE). This choice involved an interesting naturalistic (real world) setting, featuring an experienced lecturer who had decided to operate as an e-moderator (M4).

**Data Collection and Analyses**

Data for all cases were collected using the grounded theory procedures described in Strauss and Corbin (1990), and analysed by following an open, theoretical, and selective coding process. The three-stage data collection strategy is summarised in Table 1. All coding, analysis and search for relationships took place in NVivo7, which is specialised software for the analysis of qualitative data, following tested technical advice described in the related literature (Richards, 2005).

Themes and categories emerged from each of the stages of the analysis by following the grounded theory procedures. These themes were assembled according to hypotheses, in order to support the generation of theory.

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| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **Phase** | | **Coding** | | **Purpose** | | | **Data** | | | 1 | | Open  Theoretical | | Identify preliminary codes with categories for further analysis; explore codes in detail and decide on key themes | First stage interviews with the e-moderators. | | | 2 | | Open  Theoretical | | Identify new codes from new data;  explore codes in detail; relate codes to one another to construct themes. | Second stage interviews with the e-moderators; reflective protocols analysed, and used in comparisons; online transcripts from both e-moderators and students continuously collected and analysed. | | | 3 | | Selective | | Construct paradigm model and discuss themes in relation to the model with the subjects concerned; establish story line that integrates paradigm model. | Third stage interviews with e-moderators following the critical recall event approach. | | | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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|  | Table 1: Three Stages in Data Collection |  |  | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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Stage one data collection involved a semi-structured individual interview with each of the e-moderators, who gave open-ended responses to the following questions:

1. What, in your views, are the key roles of an e-moderator?
2. What are your expectations of your role in the online activities?
3. On what will you base your e-moderation approach?
4. What do you see as possible pitfalls in e-moderating?

The open coding of the interview transcripts was to identify significant themes worth of closer study and explanation. Four major themes containing initial categories were identified as classifying meaningful topics for further enquiry, being related to the contextual conditions which may influence the process of e-moderation positively or negatively.

The four key factors which were identified from the e-moderators’ responses and acknowledged as influential to their decisions on how to approach the activity of e-moderation were:

* their understanding (or lack of it) of the role of the e-moderator;
* the compatibility of that role with the overall programme or course aims;
* the creation of tasks and criteria, which should be communicated clearly and easily, for students to understand;
* how the students’ activity would, or would not, be assessed.

These four factors were used to set the context and the conditions of the paradigm model which is presented in the findings section.

Stage two involved the collection and the open coding of two further sources of data. These were chosen to inform a better understanding of how the e-moderators chose their preferred approach to their e-moderation, and to enable comparison of their actual e-moderation with their intentions and expectations, as declared in their first interviews.

Verbal protocols (Ericsson & Simon, 1984) were selected as one method of data collection. All e-moderators involved in the study agreed to proceed with a ‘think-aloud’ task, which required e-moderators to record their immediate thoughts and feelings while they were ‘e-moderating’. Three of them (M1, M3, and M4) kept tape-recorded protocols, whereas one (M2) maintained his protocols as his notes made at the time on the printout which was prompting his responses. The researcher gave both written and oral instructions to the e-moderators regarding this think-aloud task, and provided them with a digital recorder where the verbal protocols were recorded. All complete and incomplete verbal protocols were collected and transcribed, and used in the analysis. Three further major themes, with a total of 14 categories, emerged from this analysis and are the style of e-moderation, learning position and significant postings. These themes were added to the paradigm framework of e-moderation, having been discussed with the e-moderators during stage 3. The online transcripts from the discussion board were also open coded to identify the techniques used by the e-moderators. The main theme, that of the ‘purpose of the e-moderator’, was used to form one more element of the grounded theory.

In stage three, selective coding was used. This process allowed a comparison across categories and themes, together with reference to the various notes made using the function of NVivo memos. These notes included the task descriptions, important deadlines for the activities, etc. The process ended when possible relationships amongst categories had been identified and when themes were linked together. This had generated the ground for the suggested hypotheses and theory presented in the following section.

A story line was constructed containing key events in the e-moderation process. This was then discussed with the subjects concerned in critical recall event interviews, in order to check it for trustworthiness (Goulding, 1998). In these interviews, the subjects concerned were presented with the key elements of the theory, and a draft paradigm framework. They were asked to discuss the key events which had contributed to the generation of the theory. For example, it was noticed that one e- moderator chose to comment on certain points of one type of students’ messages, and not on others; and that another e- moderator had made many comments of a certain type, on many students’ postings, but that the researcher had no information about the intentions of these postings. E-moderators were asked to elaborate, offer their agreement with any hypotheses made, or suggest alterations to the theory. In this way, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the theory moves from the stage of hypothesis to the process of validation.

**Findings and Interpretation**

Throughout this study, all four e-moderators involved were examined as separate ‘cases’, providing a rich and detailed source of contrasting data. The findings are presented in two sections. The first is based upon the key themes, in the form of hypotheses, which emerged from the open and theoretical coding process, linked together through the selective coding process. These formed the basis for the suggested paradigm framework of e-moderation. The second section presents the researched framework and the main storyline behind it.

In the formulation of these hypotheses, the analysis has taken cognisance of, and benefited from, the examples of imperfections in the e-moderation or the learning experience.

*Hypothesis 1: The “e-moderator’s style” and the “e-moderator’s purpose " should align with the predetermined role definitions.*

Each e-moderator’s declared intention was to promote a learner-centered style of e-moderation. All four e-moderators wished to adopt a facilitative role, with the students being at the heart of the online discussions. They so declared during their first phase interviews. Nevertheless, when asked to elaborate in more detail about what they actually meant by a ‘learner-centered approach’ in their roles, their answers varied.

* M1 had wanted learners to go about the process of online learning and to reach conclusions autonomously. Nevertheless, she recognized that she would monitor that process and intervene if things were not going according to plan. She saw herself primarily as the module director who had to manage the students’ work online, while occasionally adopting the e-moderator’s role.
* M2 had aimed to promote deep thinking and independent learning by making thought-provoking comments and asking worthwhile questions. He had expected e-moderation from M1, which was seldom forthcoming.
* M3 had followed a more directive approach by modeling ways of dealing with the task for the students. He had hoped, in this way, to help the students to develop the skills to complete the task effectively, to an acceptable standard. Although he claimed that his role was not that of a tutor, he appeared at times to intervene deliberately and in a rather authoritative way.
* M4 had opted for a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach to promote deep thinking regarding difficult engineering problems. He had intended to facilitate and not to direct his students’ learning activities. Nevertheless he frankly admitted that this approach went against his own instincts as a teacher and authority in the subject area, and so he set it aside.

In practice, then, the e-moderators’ purposes of these e-moderators’ interventions did not match their declared intentions. None of them succeeded in effectively engaging the students online, or in promoting the desired student-centred learning.

* M1 did not promote autonomy on the part of the students; instead she often intervened to make sure that students were meeting deadlines and the nominal demands of task.
* M2, when the students did nothing, or did not collaborate with each other, or did not address the task, only pointed out these omissions. He did not facilitatively pursue the lack of responses to his promptings – since so doing would have been at variance with his view of student-centred learning.
* M3, when he realised that the approach of modelling good practice had failed, gave up and tried to push the students to the solution of the task.
* M4 did not engage in much overt moderation activity. He initially left the students on their own to tackle each of three progressively more demanding tasks. Then, when they failed to do so, he intervened to direct them to the solutions.

The extent to which the e-moderators were clear or not about their roles in online discussions, and were ready to adhere to them, thus directly influenced the e-moderation style which they adopted, as well as their purposes for intervening.

Further, there were various pre-established power-relations between the tutor-moderators (M1, M4), and the guest-moderators (M2, M3), and the students. Two tutor-moderators (M1 and M4) were the ones who would eventually, informally and formally, assess the content and process of the discussion, and thus appeared to the students to have the final say in a judgment of moderated activity. In contrast, a guest or expert moderator was perceived and acknowledged by students for their expertise in the content or the process; but their views seemed to need to be validated by the course tutor/moderator. This was evident in the cases of M2 and M3, who were active in content interventions but whose guidance on the process was only accepted and followed by the students after the course tutor/moderator (M1) had intervened to endorse their suggestions. Thus, when deciding the role(s) of the course tutor or the teaching person in online discussions, care should be taken to ensure that this role is explained, accurately understood and eventually accepted by the students. For many students still lack the skills to ‘resist’ a tutor’s directions (Kitto, 2003, cited in Anderson, 2006). Yet in the absence of the teaching presence, students may be suspicious of anyone else who tries to fulfill this role (Anderson, 2006).

*Hypothesis 2: “Programme aims” should influence the “e-moderator’s purpose”.*

Each of the four e-moderators in this study intervened in different ways to encourage groups or an individual student to progress with the online discussions or with their thinking. And the e-moderators did so with different aims in mind. From the comparative analyses of the interviews, the reflective protocols, and the online transcripts, it was evident that the decision to intervene at a group or at an individual level was often made on the basis of the progress, or lack of it, in relation to the programme aims, as perceived by the e-moderator. This, in turn influenced the way that e-moderators facilitated towards the desired learning position for the students to reach.

* M1’s overall programme aim was to support students to understand the various processes of being online, and to establish a feeling of belonging to a community of learners. This general aim influenced her decisions about how to support such development. The purpose of M1’s intervention was thus to focus on the development of process abilities, leaving any discussion of content to the students. She was also group orientated, rather than dealing with individual students. This resulted in few responses from students, perhaps because, at the early stages of their interactions online, the students were expecting more personal communication with each other and the e-moderator, as opposed to vague and general messages to groups. Additionally, since M1 was also the module tutor and administrator for that particular group of students, her proactively posted messages could have been taken as instructions - to be followed and not discussed.
* M2 understood himself to be principally a pro-active resource, as a visiting expert. Consequently his facilitation concentrated on prompting deeper and more searching engagement with content, but not with the task or development of generic abilities.
* M3, having seen the failure to achieve student-centred learning in the two previous weeks, aimed to model and disseminate good practice in student-directed learning.
* M4 initially opted to engage his students in PBL scenarios, where the aims are usually left flexibly for students and tutors to determine. He was led by his expectation that the students would be mature enough to tackle the problems on their own. After sending some minimal proactive messages to the groups about task requirements, he therefore stopped facilitating, until eventually returning proactively to present and explain his own solution to the problem, and to instruct them how to submit their tasks. Occasionally he was reactive to individual students who were not necessarily asking for his advice. Yet according to the principles encapsulated in the literature on this pedagogical format (e.g., Jonassen, 1993), he should have carefully distinguished and separated out his inputs and postings in accordance with the PBL pedagogy and the negotiated aims, including the learning position which he wanted the students to reach. He might have provided for initial technical instruction or tutorial inputs on process development in accordance with standard PBL practice (Stepich, Ertmer & Lane, 2001). That could have been followed by facilitative group postings to help the whole group to begin to engage with the task - and with the consequent learning. Thereafter he should have encouraged the group towards a rigorous and effective process, in which they should thereby autonomously encounter, learn about and master the relevant principles of building construction.

*Hypothesis 3: “Tasks and criteria” influence the “learning position” reached or desired, and what the e-moderator considers as “a significant posting “meriting a facilitative intervention*

The analysis of the reflective protocols showed that the e-moderators gave attention to students’ postings which were directly addressed to them - asking them, for example, questions or making requests for advice. They were also likely to reply to a posting which showed a misunderstanding on the part of a student in relation to the task and the criteria. Most of them concentrated on the declared task and criteria when framing their interventions.

E-moderation, as a process of facilitating the discussions, thus followed the following procedure:

1. The e-moderator identified a message or a posting (or a lack of it) which merited an input, in accordance with the moderator’s interpretation of the declared tasks and criteria.
2. The form of the e-moderator’s intervention and posting then resonated partly to the e-moderator’s style and purpose, but mostly to the immediate learning destination of the students.

These observations suggest a new definition for e-moderation - taking into consideration the starting point of the facilitation of the discussion. It takes e-moderation as an activity in which the e-moderator facilitates discussion in the virtual environment, making interventions that are designed to encourage the discussants to engage with and achieve overall learning outcomes, in accordance with predetermined aims, roles and tasks (after Vlachopoulos, 2009).

# A paradigm framework of e-moderation

This proposed framework brings together the various elements of the grounded theory presented in the previous section. It suggests that moderated student online learning should be self-sufficiently contained within ‘an enclosed learning arena’ (ring-fence) which encloses the activities of the students and the e-moderator (see Figure 1 below). Since this learning is student-centred and implicitly student-directed, inputs and instruction do not feature within or outwith the learning arena. For they should be located beyond the boundaries of this diagram, as sought out by the learners.



Figure 1: The ring-fencing framework for e-moderating student-centred learning

This framework proposes a stark temporal distinction between the design and the delivery of any e-moderated activity where the learning is student-centred. It concentrates on the subsequent and consequent activities both of students and of the e-moderator, while recognising those which the e-moderator may have undertaken in a previous role.

Outside the ring-fence are located the various activities undertaken by the tutor, or members of the programme team, or the module leader – any of whom may subsequently features as an e-moderator. These external functions include:

* Amplification of **programme aims** into specified intendedlearning outcomes, or a statement of the expectations which the outcomes of fully flexible learning should fulfil.
* Planning of the **tasks** which should promote student-centred learning in accordance with these aims and outcomes.
* Specifying the **criteria** against which the eventual performance of students and of the programme will be judged.
* Determining, defining and communicating accordingly, the **roles** for the various teachers (module-tutor, tutor-moderator, guest-moderator or any combination of these).
* Deciding the manner in which learning and development will be assessed against the intended or claimed learning outcomes (and by whom, including the possibilities of formative and summative **assessment**, and self- and peer-assessment).

These are all functions of general ‘educational leadership’ (Johnston & Westwood, 2007) rather than of ‘teaching’. This framework thus suggests firmly that they can and should be kept distinctly clear from the e-moderation and the moderator/learner relationship, which should take place autonomously within the ring-fenced learning activities.

Located within the ring fence are the activities of the students and in particular of the e-moderator, who facilitates the students’ learning and development:

1. Identifying a posting (or lack of one) (a ‘**significant posting’**), which merits a facilitative response in accordance with the programme aims and task.
2. Constructing and **posting** an intervention which resonates both with the moderator’s style and purpose, and with the current and desired learning positions.
3. **Influencing**, but not directing, the students’ progress towards self-directed completion of their task, and achievement of the learning outcomes.

The e-moderator’s activities within the ring-fenced arena are, of course, strongly influenced by the *predetermined* outside factors. They are also directly influenced by factors inside in the developing situation, and are responsive to aspects of the action there, in particular:

* The **learning position** of the group and individuals within it at any point in time; and the progress they have made with the task in hand. An e- moderator may well concentrate differently on learning needs which arise in the opening stages of tackling a task, from those which arise as a group nears completion of its task.
* **Significant postings** which prompt the e-moderator to act. These might be unjustified and dogmatic assertions, failure to explore options or illogical reasoning, straight differences of opinion which thwart progress – or brilliant flashes of insight.
* The **purpose** which the e-moderator seeks to achieve, in accordance with their predetermined pedagogical principles and, it is to be hoped, in accordance with the programme aims. The activity, for example, may seek to deepen understanding of particular content, or to develop transferable abilities – or both.
* The e-moderator’s personal **style.** Few will wish to provide direct instructions or solutions to problems or even judgemental comments. Most will frequently question; but their mode of selection of points to question, and of the presentation of such questions, can vary, without necessarily prejudicing their impact on the learning.
* The students’ **responses** to the e-moderator’s previous facilitation.

The difference between what happens inside and outwith the ring-fence should keep the arena inside clear for all the remaining decisions in learning to be made by the learners, facilitated by the e-moderation. The function of the ring-fence is to ensure that **decisions** by anyone other than the learners which will influence learning are located outside the arena.

# Conclusion

This research set out to explore in detail the practice of e-moderation in four particular examples. Data was collected from diverse sources, involving varied and far from ideal practices. It was examined for common themes and advice. The methodology for the study was to construct a preliminary paradigm framework of e-moderation that could be tested in future research, rather than to test an existing theory or framework. The conclusions are therefore presented as claims to be tested and refined in future qualitative studies. They are drawn especially from aspects of the observed e-moderation which had apparently had negative impact on desired outcomes and learning behaviour within the ring-fence.

Collectively, the findings of this paper support a number of claims made in previous research, are incongruous with others, and yield several new findings. The findings confirm the well-referenced argument advanced by both Mason (1991) and Berge (1995) argued, namely that online tutors and e-moderators are required to adopt a number of roles in online discussions, which include a ‘social’, a ‘pedagogical’ and an ‘intellectual’ role. Further, the findings were consistent with the ways in which Paulsen (1992) described how personal teaching philosophies may influence the way that a tutor facilitates online.

This study found some evidence to suggest that there may be important differences in the nature of the e-moderators’ intended and actual roles. The observed processes were influenced by a number of contextual factors, and the combination of more than one of the roles suggested by Mason (1991), Paulsen (1992), and Berge (1995). It involved a demand for some to act as both a tutor and an e-moderator. This brought some serious implications for the role of an e-moderator, in facilitating student-centred activity. The tutor as moderator may be committed to a student-centred approach and to allowing learners to take responsibility over their own learning. But this self-responsibility is still defined, monitored and even (clearly) judged by a tutor as programme manager, who is in a position to both allow and disallow students the exercise of such a responsibility.

The work reported here raises concerns about the concept of ‘teaching presence’ (Anderson, *et al.*, 2001), and the definition of ‘e-moderation’ offered by Salmon (2000, 2004). ‘Teaching presence’ asserts that learners and tutors may establish together the teaching, learning and cognitive conditions for learning development to occur in a collegial manner. No such negotiation was evident in any of the four cases studied. Rather had the tutors’ eschewed principles of teaching a marked and unilateral influence on way the e-moderating was realized. Furthermore, the definition offered by Salmon (2000), which suggested that an e-moderator can be ‘anyone’ who presides over an e-meeting, is not in accord with the evidence of this study. All the evidence from the reflective protocols and the online transcripts by the e-moderators reaffirms their conviction that they were deliberately attempting to do more than preside.

**Implications**

As shown earlier, researchers and practitioners of online tutoring and e-moderation still continue to report a lack of understanding of the functions of e-moderators, either in fully online or in blended naturalistic contexts (Sharpe & Pawlyn, 2009). They argue for more research on how and why tutors adopt one or another role and with what outcomes for student learning. The approach to enquiry based on conceptualised grounded theory, as presented in this paper, should prove to be of relevance to such researchers and practitioners. It can raise awareness of the factors that should be taken into consideration while planning, designing and delivering e-moderation activity, and of the desirable and undesirable outcomes ensuing from the decisions taken.

It is envisaged that the questions raised by the tentative ‘ring fence framework ‘concept may help e-moderators to reflect upon their own practices, and to examine and inform their current and future e-moderation approaches. E-moderators, in shouldering multiple responsibilities for learning, may well consider when to ‘enter’ or ‘exit’ the ring fenced learning arena; and importantly, to then signal to students when they have done so.

Schiefner & Ebner (2008) recently suggested that e-learning as a concept had had its time and that new ways of communicating, interacting and educating will soon become the centre of research and practice in higher education. Some researchers have already started reporting preliminary findings on instructional techniques in new learning spaces (e.g. Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrarth & Trivedi, 2009). Possible new arenas for tutorial moderation may occur in social spaces such as social networking sites, wikis and other co-authoring spaces as well as immersive virtual learning environments. It may be useful to proactively identify the characteristics of such environments, and determine the ‘ring-fenced’ learning arenas which should be operating within them.

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