# Assessing Gilly Salmon's five stage model of teaching and learning online

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Despite e-learning technologies having now been available for some time, our understanding and skills in using them have arguably yet to consolidate and move over into mainstream teaching in Higher Education. The dedicated literature tends to be of edited volumes, with disparate (though insightful) case-studies based mainly only on an individual's experiences of implementing localised aspects of e-learning (see: Murphy et al., 2001; Fallows and Bhanot, 2002; Littlejohn, 2003). Of course, this problem is a more general one. Since the 1980s, debates over methodologies have been somewhat sidelined, instead there has been 'a proliferation of case studies,' which arguably has meant 'a failure to establish the means whereby studies could contribute to an accumulation of knowledge' (Turner, 2004: 21). Alternatively, more systematic accounts tend increasingly to be concerned with the 'quality' and management of education, so, for example, the 'business' of e-learning is often emphasized, with the focus on costings, workload models, performance enhancement, and systems analysis (see, for example, Morrison, 2003). Crucially, what has been lacking has been a more pedagogically informed approach to the use of e-learning technologies.

As Lisewski and Joyce (2003) note there is a sense in which the learning technology profession – being a relatively new profession or community – is genuinely looking to develop and adopt specific codified models, tools and practices within e-learning in order to help establish greater legitimacy. As an exemplar of this growing trend they cite Gilly Salmon's (2000; 2002) 'five-stage e-learning model' which on first impressions would appear to provide a robust 'off-the-shelf' tool or model. However, in their assessment of *using* this model, Lisewski and Joyce raise a number of critical concerns regarding its potential lack of flexibility, transferability, and reflexivity. Picking up on

these same issues, this essay seeks to provide a more extensive overview of Salmon's model, providing a critical evaluation of her account of the model as recounted in Chapter 2 of her book *E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning* (2002: 10-36).

To give some of my own context in coming to write this paper, I am a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts, York St John University. I have recently been awarded an e-learning Teacher Fellowship, which has provided impetus for developing an e-learning project of my own, linked with a module I teach to Year 2, BA Comparative Media students. Whilst I do have some prior basic knowledge of web-design and electronic media production, I wish to gain more detailed knowledge of e-learning pedagogy (though as I have come to realise such theory may be something of a chimera!). I first came into contact with Salmon's model of teaching and learning online through a staff development event she herself presented at the University of Leeds (February 2006). My initial reaction was positive and I quickly found myself thinking through my intended project with respect to the parameters of her model. Subsequently, however, in researching further and evaluating the model through the lens of various associated literature I have come to adopt a rather more sceptical position. Thus interrelated with the concerns raised by Lisewski and Joyce, noted above, this essay asks three underlying questions: (1) how has Salmon researched her model (and how is this research presented)?; (2) are the research methods and findings relevant to my own practice (and more generally to practices other than her own)?; and crucially, (3) can one apply this model in one's own practice?

**The Problem with E-learning**

Information and communication technologies (ICT) should 'in theory' already be providing us with learning environments that allow for: the intensive and complex engagement with a subject being taught; access to large amounts of data and resource;

as well as enable individuals to set their pace and engage in greater levels of peer-group learning and reflection (see: Laudrillard, 1988; 2002). Whilst the potential is surely there for new technologies to encourage deep approaches to learning, we have really yet to see their effective use in any sustained manner. Happily, of course, the more extravagant claims for the impending 'demise of campuses, the redundancy of lecturers, the end of face-to-face teaching, and the standardised production of curriculum ... have not been realised' (Ramsden, 2003: 151). Yet, the relative failure of e-learning is cause for real concern, not least given that today's average student is typically highly IT literate (or, at least needs to be in so many aspects of personal and professional life) and, with regards to leisure pursuits, often can demonstrate a high degree of awareness and/or control of the creative potential of new technologies. In thinking about the excited status of computer games, whether in social, cultural or economic terms, Laudrillard (2003: 143) raises an interesting point about the lack of *educational* computer games. Potentially, these could provide highly sophisticated, flexible and motivational learning environments. 'They ought to exist,' she suggests, since 'they would constitute the acme of educational media if they did'. Yet, all too inevitably perhaps, 'the research agenda has diverged from education, driven by more rewarding markets than education can ever aspire to'. Arguably, it is somewhere into this gap that new, innovative methods of e-learning need to be located.

To date, as Ramsden (2003: 151-152) argues, the most serious inadequacies in our use of ICT in education derive from a false assumption that their mere use can lead to good learning. All too frequently, in conjunction with naïve technological determinism, what we see is 'the failure to articulate principles for designing [e-learning] teaching materials,' and, worse still perhaps, 'the use of potentially interactive media in a passive way that takes no account of the individual learner' (151). The latter is, arguably, the most noticeable problem, with the risk that we are 'becoming rich in information but poor in knowledge' (Hart, 1987: 172). Or, as Race (2005: 177) puts it, 'the hub of the problem we currently face with e-learning is that most of it is presently just e-

information, not yet e-learning'. Biggs (2003: 218) points out, for example, that even the use of simple applications like PowerPoint, at least when used in isolation, 'reinforces the view that good teaching is a one-way transfer of information'. The task, it is argued, is to consider the use not of information technology as such, but, what Biggs (2003: 213-228) terms 'educational technology'. Fundamentally, his point is that we need to consider how technologies can be constructively aligned with *educational* aims and objectives.[1]

**Gilly Salmon's Five-Stage Model of e-learning**

Gilly Salmon's (2002) approach to e-learning is based upon her own devised five-stage model, derived she suggests from many years of practical experience in establishing and managing distant and online learning. The result of which is seemingly a clear, workable model for all, so potentially overcoming many of the problems, or false-starts in e-learning noted above. Yet, as Lisewski and Joyce (2003: 56) note, the learning technology profession has been 'bolstered' with the arrival of conceptual frameworks such as Salmon's model, to the point at which it is 'in danger of forming a …totalizing explanation of how to design and deliver online training programmes'. In fact they list some 13 recent 'uncritical citations of the Salmon model across very different contexts'. Before going on to consider in more detail the kinds of criticism Lisewski and Joyce allude to (and also the problematics set in place vis-à-vis the research methodology used in the development of the model), I outline here the key elements and design of this apparently generic model of e-learning

[1] Constructive alignment is an overarching approach to teaching and learning in the contemporary context of Higher Education, underpinned by the idea that the learner constructs his or her *own* learning through relevant learning activities, with the teacher's task being to support and facilitate learning and its environment appropriate to the desired learning outcomes (Biggs, 2003, pp. 11-33). Thus, as in the case of Gilly Salmon's approach to teaching and learning online, the required approach aims to facilitate a dynamic, collaborative and reflective e-learning environment.

Fitting perhaps with Biggs' (2003) notion of educational alignment, Salmon tends to use various construction metaphors. She explains, for example, that her five-stage model aims to provide 'a "scaffold" for a structured and paced programme of e-tivities' (Salmon, 2002: 10). Certainly, e-learning differs from traditional, face-to-face teaching in that it is very much more design-led. Quite literally, you first need to build your learning environment before any teaching can take place. The foundational 'bricks' we need to put into place are ones, she argues, that we are generally quite familiar with: (1) the *design* of curriculum and activities; (2) *pedagogy*; (3) the role of the *teacher* (as facilitator); added to which in the case of e-learning is of course, (4) *technology*. Salmon (2002: 37) stresses that her approach is not technology specific, with implementation apparently able to translate across all manner of Virtual Learning Environments, regardless of their level of sophistication. Thus, irrespective of platform, in bringing together – or layering – these four foundations or 'building blocks' of design the aim is always to create a *manageable* nexus of learning-knowledge-technology, with the emphasis very much upon the learners' perspective.

In pedagogical terms, Salmon's model situates within a (social) constructionist perspective, so marking (as befits current trends) a clear distinction from either a behaviourist or cognitive perspective. For example, the 'scaffolding' metaphor she employs suggests the idea of 'gradually building on participants' previous experience. A structured learning scaffold offers essential support and development to participants at each stage as they build up their expertise in learning online' (Salmon, 2002: 10). Given that the constructivist approach encourages the learner to explore and discover for themselves – to learn by *doing* – the result is that participants 'are likely to cycle through the model many times' (Salmon, 2002: 12). As will be discussed below regarding critical implications and problems, this raises a certain tension that perhaps comes to exit between Salmon's description of the model and its actual usage. Lisewski and Joyce (2003) report issues with the rigidity of the model, so that, whilst participants may well feel they want to 'cycle' through the model in different ways, there is a specific

structuring of time and pace that precludes variation. Nevertheless, Salmon's systematic explanation of an approach to online learning can be said to connect neatly with Biggs' (2003) concept of constructive alignment in which curriculum objectives and assessment methods not only dictate the learning activities, but in fact drive right the way through, like the writing through the middle of a stick of rock.

Arguably, mirroring the change of perspectives from behaviourism to cognitivism and more recently constructivism, Biggs (2003, pp. 20-25) argues we go up a level in how we think about teaching. We need to take a step, as he describes, from thinking about learning solely as a function of individual differences between students (what the student *is*) to thinking about learning as a function of teaching (what the teacher does); and then, finally we need to reach the point at which we think of learning in terms of what the *student* does. The process of online socialisation so central to Salmon's model (as explained below) would seem to develop 'scaffolding' highly appropriate to this third level of thinking about learning. Yet, equally, a subtle difference of emphasis may be seen to undermine it. In trying to think about what the student *does*, are we considering what they do in relation to a learning environment devised by the 'teacher' or are we thinking about what the student does themselves to construct the learning context in the first place? Salmon's model would appear to place emphasis upon the latter, which, for example, can raise questions about the nature, status and depth of curriculum covered.

So, what exactly does an e-learning course entail for Salmon? From her accounts, a typical course runs over a minimum of five weeks, with each week allocated to develop a five-step learning process. The courses are run in the form of distance-learning, with participants from a variety of geographical contexts 'meeting-up' via computer messaging software. Exchange can take place both synchronously (real-time chat) and asynchronously (threaded-discussion board). Essentially all learning is conducted by completing various stipulated tasks, which participants respond to by writing messages

and reading those of their fellow participants. Explained in such brevity, such 'e-learning' can appear rather limited, all confined to simple text-based exchanges, with a lot of emphasis upon contributing subjective, informal responses.

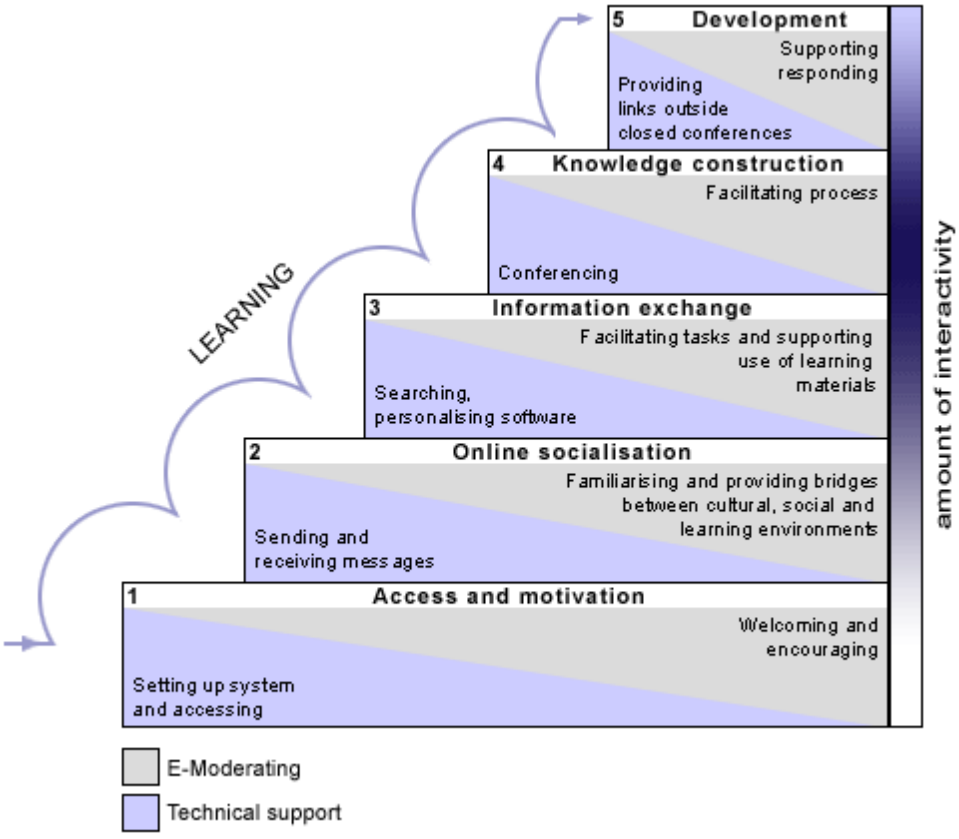


**Figure 1 Salmon's (2002) Five-Stage Model of e-Learning**

Salmon explains her approach with reference to a diagram of a five stage model (Figure 1). This shows a five stage process that leads from the initial access and motivation that a student requires (in order to get started) through the gradual development of gathering, sharing and finally reflecting upon the subject matter being 'taught'. Most importantly, shown on the left-hand side of the diagram is the steady progress of

'learning' (seen to be bounding its way up the model!). However, each stage in the model relates to specific and developing aspects in the facilitation of the learning, which require differing levels of technical, 'teacher' and peer-group support (see captions on either side of the dialogical division for each stage). A brief, critical overview of these five stages can be explained as follows:

*Stage 1*: individual access and the ability for participants to use the online environment or Virtual Learning Environments (e.g. WebCT) are essential prerequisites for participation. Activities at this stage are simply designed to 'check' that participants are able to access the learning materials. It is obviously important to show participants how to use the software, but crucially (as befits constructive alignment), Salmon strictly argues this needs to be done whilst they are actually taking part in online activities; in other words, participants need to learn what to do through the process of doing it. Simple activities – or icebreakers – are used to enable participants to become involved and feel comfortable with the technology. From the quoted 'evidence' Salmon provides (a series of real responses written by the students to the various task), the process of 'logging on' can be rather frivolous text messages you might associate with emails or mobile-phone texting between friends. Nevertheless, Salmon (2002: 12) urges the importance of basic orientation to help students acquire 'the *emotional and social* capacity to learn with others online'; a process that actually underpins a majority of the learning activities set online.

*Stage 2*: involves individual participants establishing their online identities and then finding others with whom to interact. In short, this stage is all about establishing a micro-community through active and interactive activities. As Salmon argues, the lack of face-to-face contact can aid the process of weaving webs of trust and connection between participants. Typically, activities at this stage solicit the views of participants on simple issues of taste and interests as a means to help share personal accounts (not dissimilar perhaps to 'meeting' a pen-friend through letters).

*Stage 3*: participants share information relevant to the course. Up to and including Stage 3, a form of co-operation is being developed, so supporting each other's needs and goals. However, by this stage, activities of collecting and sorting information can become much more specific to the needs of the module. However, what this information gathering amounts to is not explained in any detail – one specific example is a basic idea of pointing other participants at a suitable internet website page in order to elicit discussion.

*Stage 4*: 'deeper' course-related group discussions occur and the interaction becomes more collaborative. The communication depends on the establishment of common understandings. At this stage – as participants become more familiar and comfortable with the asynchronous interaction of e-learning – there is a growing recognition of the potential to take control of one's own knowledge construction. Activities at this stage need specifically to promote the skills of critical, analytical, creative and practical thinking. Ideally, at this stage, each online group is *constructing* knowledge through online interaction and indeed successfully handling of its own group dynamics (again, however, specific details are rather patchy).

*Stage 5*: participants look for more benefits from the system to help them achieve personal goals, and explore how to integrate the use of the Virtual Learning Environments into other forms of learning and reflect on the learning process. At this stage, activities can begin to encourage metacognitive skills, i.e. people's understanding and control of their own thinking. The focus moves to greater reflection and consideration of how what has been learnt can be handled in new contexts, or how concepts and ideas can be applied in new ways. Activites at this stage may usefully ask about the point of learning.

In one sense, when looking at the step process of the five stage model, we might think of Bloom's (1965) taxonomy which similarly describes a gradual step change in our ways of thinking, developing from a basic memorisation of information through the application and analysis of ideas, and finally at the 'highest' level evaluation or reflective judgement. At the pinnacle of Salmon's model is certainly a similar notion of critical reflection. However, this model is less about an individual's cognitive processing, and instead almost all about social interaction and social knowledge construction. Underpinning the whole process, certainly as developed through Stages 1-3, is a gradual process of socialisation for the purpose of forming distinct learning groups and objectives. Arguably, then, participants spend as much time forming working relationship as they do in engaging in some form of 'deep' learning. The point, however, is that without the emphasis upon the social aspects of learning and supporting learning, the deep learning cannot take place.

In line with Bigg's (2003: 20-25) argument that at the highest level of teaching we need to think about learning in terms of what the *student* does, Salmon largely dispenses with the term 'teacher' in favour of various, fluid appellations such as mentor, enabler, facilitator, task setter, host and welcomer. As an umbrella term, she refers frequently to the role of the lecturer as 'e-moderator,' whose task is described to visualise success for the individuals involved and engage them in achieving that vision by providing focused activities (or, what she terms 'e-tivities' – more on which below), as well as needing to manage the flow of interactions between participants.One of the most important jobs an e-moderator needs to take on is the digesting of all of the dialogues which have taken place between participants. As Salmon has found, if too much information appears without acknowledgement or summarizing by the e-moderator, 'lurking' quickly takes-over – meaning that participants stop contributing and *exchanging* ideas, in favour simply of reading and digesting what is on offer.

Gunawardena et al. (2001) note similar – if not more systemic – problems when using discussion boards. In their study they argue that discussion boards are in fact avoided both by high and low achievers. In the case of the former, the discussion board is deemed an ineffective resource, with these students finding that they can gain answers to their problems from more traditional study activities. With lower achievers, the discussion board is perhaps either too much effort, or something that they feel too anxious to use. The net result is that the discussion board is frequently left blank. Salmon suggests the role of the e-moderator is crucial to keep dialogue flowing; certainly, then (and not unusual with computing), this undermines any espoused hopes of the technology reducing one's workload! As can be seen on the far right-hand edge of the diagram, the amount of time of interactivity (which refers to the interaction of students to teacher) is at its most intense at the later stages of the learning process, though not necessarily in the final stage, when, as Salmon observes, participants begin to draw away from working in groups and online dialogue in order to synthesise and focus on specific aspects of what they have learnt. Such isolation during the later stages of the model's learning process – as echoed by the findings of Gunawardena et al. (2001) study – potentially undermines a social constructivist approach, and so opens up a query about the central importance of socialisation in the model.

Nevertheless, the model is not solely based upon managing peer interactions, the role of the e-moderator as 'designer', or more specifically the role of the 'task-setter', is paramount in establishing the grounds, creativity and interactivity of the learning environment. Salmon actually refers to these learning activities or prompts that solicit the various responses from participants with the neologism of 'e-tivities', by which she means frameworks or tasks for active and interactive online learning. There are five main aspects to e-tivities: (1) all the instructions to take part are available in *one* online message; (2) they begin with a small piece of information, a stimulus or challenge, which Salmons refers to as the 'spark'; (3) online activity is prompted by the spark, which generally includes individuals posting message contributions; (4) an interactive or

participative element follows, such as responding to the postings of others; (5) finally, summary, feedback or critique from an e-moderator (the 'plenary') is produced from the exchanges. The critical content of e-tivities should naturally grow as learning progresses further up the key stages of the model. Importantly, however, whilst the activities may grow more complex and challenging, an important principle of e-titivites is that they remain simply a 'spark' – an immediate spark for learning activity, they are not the activity itself, only participants can make the activities happen.

I have tried to offer a fair amount detail about Salmon's model of e-learning so as to provide a better sense of what can be challenged. Inevitably, of course, given more room, more subtly could be afforded the analysis. Nevertheless, it should be evident enough that Salmon presents a very clearly defined model for learning, which she suggests has great potential for adoption across all variety of teaching and learning. Of course, even if one simply wants to take the model on trust, it is at least pertinent to ask questions about the validity of research and findings that went into developing it. Such questions, however, as discussed below, open up numerous ambiguities in assessing the relevance of this model for one's own practice.

**Research Methodology**

Despite the evident clarity of Salmon's model and reports of its adoption and/or uncritical interest by a significant number of education practitioners (see Lisewski and Joyce, 2003:56), there is very little to go on regarding research methodology, so potentially undermining its validity for others. As Turner (2004: 4-5) notes, various reports into the current state of educational research argue that 'if researchers reported their methods more accurately, the details of their analyses, samples sizes and so on, then it would be possible for research to be developed in a cumulative way and for policy outcomes to be informed by research'. Taking this view, Salmon's comment

on methodology is disappointing to say the least. She states that her model of teaching and learning online was:

> researched and developed from scratch based on the experience of early participants in computer-mediated conferencing but subsequently applied to corporate training and across may learning disciplines and for different levels of education and contexts (Salmon, 2002: 10).

Not only is there no reported context within which the model was devised (being 'developed from scratch'), but equally there is only a very vague sense of how the model has evolved and to what ends it has been put. We can only take Salmon's word that the model has been applied to a variety of contexts and more significantly we are not given any follow-up on how well the model has translated between contexts, what particular strengths, modifications or limitations have been noted. Salmon does, however, direct her reader to a previous book, *E-Moderating* (2000), for more details. Yet, really all we can ascertain from this earlier account of the model (which in places is almost word for word the same!) are some rudimentary specifics of the initial research. Most notably, the model was used/tested on participants using an online discussion environment usually referred to as computer-mediated conferencing. This technology – common with early corporate use – can enable both synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums, so offering what are perhaps now more prosaically referred to as chat-room style discussion and 'bulletin board', threaded discussion groups. Also, the model is adopted for online e-moderating training-courses which are explicit in using the model itself, i.e. the model is used to teach about how to adopt and manage teaching with the model. It is never quite clear, but this embedded use of the model is common to all of Salmon's research.

With respects to 'cumulative', empirical and statistical research methods, these rather vague and seemingly insular terms of Salmon's research would appear to raise some

serious doubts about the validity and nature of the devised model. However, her research is actually situated within the current vogue for 'action research'. It is not easy to give a single definition of action research; it incorporates a range of different approaches and techniques. However, as broad principles, it is usually concerned with the study of professional practice within a specific, concrete situation and with the focus of 'acting' on that situation in order to improve the quality of practice.

Salmon perhaps complicates the picture a little, since her research is conducted both by studying how participants use her proposed model, and also the model itself is researched by her participants who reflect critically upon the model, using the model. As Turner (2004: 53) identifies, action research can have two quite different foci: 'The first is that it is focused upon programmes of institutional change' – or in Salmon's case focused upon the creation (or change) of a programme or model of e-learning. The second focus, however, is 'upon the critical reflections of a professional acting upon their own practice'. Salmon's use of the model for its own reflection would, then, appear to incorporate both foci Turner suggests. However, as he goes on to argue, the growing status of action research in professional development is potentially undermining academic research, as there is increasing emphasis placed upon the 'nuggets of wisdom' (and the brevity of their description) that individual practitioners can offer from small-scale, informal 'studies' (2004: 59). The problem for Turner is that the 'focus on reflective professional practice is not necessarily conducive to the effective development and application of theory. In too many Action Research studies,' he suggests, 'research questions are addressed which cannot be adequately answered with the methods chosen' (54). Here, then, we hit upon a specific problem with Salmon's model having been devised and described solely through action research.

It would be fruitless to want to deny the genuine insights offered from Salmon's work. However, given both the high degree of specificity to the design of the model, and the lack of clear explanation of its development, it is difficult to make decisions about how

the model can be applied into new contexts. Or, at least, it is the case that in adopting the model there is likely the need to work out everything about it 'from scratch' again, specific to one's own context. Of course, this might be argued not such a bad thing. The whole point about action research is that it is both an on-going, emergent process and in pursing change as a part of the research process it is constituted upon a notion of praxis. In other words, action research is 'participative', its 'results' achieved when and by those affected by the change *involved* in the process.[2]

As Turner notes, 'Action Research incorporates, or implies, a critique of large-scale survey methods, and statisitical methods which aspire to being scientific' (Turner, 2004: 54). As such, action research dramatically alters the very landscape upon which we might assess issues of objectivity, validity and universality (or transferability). Thus, from a 'hard' scientific approach to assess the efficacy of a model of e-learning, Salmon's study does very little. Conversely, from the point of view of action research, her explanation of the model as embedded in her own practice potentially yields some significant insights into online teaching and learning. However, in *asserting* her model of e-learning as one that can seemingly 'plug and play' in all manner of virtual learning environments and for variety of teaching purposes, a certain tension is at stake between the emergent, on-going, and adaptable principles of action research and a more emphatic, rationalising approach. Potentially, Salmon's model of e-learning (and her research methodology) suffers from the worst of both 'worlds'. Turner's (2004: 53-65) criticisms of action research, its privileging of the individual (or local context); its impossibility to generalise; and the fact that researchers 'spend a great deal of time doing work which has been more carefully and adequately addressed by other researchers' (60), are all problems that can be associated with Salmon's presentation of her model of e-learnning. Yet, equally, the heavy-handedness of survey methods – which aim to be measurable, repeatable, objective and secure – is as much encountered by the supposedly generic nature of Salmon's model.

[2] More details, see Action Research Resources: < http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/whatisar.html >

Turner's underlying argument, aimed to temper action research, is that 'by giving no explicit place to the application of theory, Action Research encourages atheoretical studies, and consequently inhibits the development of theory' (54). Citing Kuhn's (1996) study of science discourse and taking his labels of 'normal science' (long periods when scientists devote time to solving puzzles) and 'scientific revolutions' (periods of upheaval, when laws and theory can be rejected in place of another), Turner suggests that at best action research is only ever 'an agenda of normal science'. It cannot proffer the kind of change that is a change of direction, or the assertion of a new shared truth. Instead, action research constantly tinkers with the available knowledge. In trying to bridge between contemporary research practices (such as action research) and conceptions of science (particularly a stunted 19th century view of science as the accumulation of facts and designs of Grand Theories), Turner defines theory as something very much beyond a static notion of theory (as if a screwdriver to be applied to something) and instead draws attention to theory as a *process* – theorisation as a critical, reflective but systematic *mode* of examination of phenomena. Arguably, then, in order to cement the potential gains made by Salmon's model of e-learning much more theoretically-engaged research (and literature) needs to be made available. In doing so, as inferred by the various implications and problems to be outlined below, it is unlikely a truly 'revolutionary' approach or model of e-learning can look as neat and defined as does Salmon's current model.

**Implications and Problems: Reification of a Model of E-Learning?**

A clear benefit of implementing e-learning is that the whole process foregrounds the practice of teaching *design*. Like designing for distance and open learning programmes there is a clear need to start with the end in mind, to ask what one wants to achieve by the online activity – so establishing from the outset an agenda of alignment. In addition,

central to Salmon's concept of e-tivities is the design of motivating, engaging and purposeful activities, based on interaction. In some cases, the asynchronous nature of the online environment is also a significant aspect of e-learning, allowing participants to manage their own time. It also means that activities, ideas and information exchanges can be revisited and re-examined in a way that is unprecedented against more transient verbal conversation. E-itivities are also cheap and easy to run. However, given the relative theoretical vacuum in which Salmon presents her model of e-learning, are we in this case really only looking at a neat, but potentially unrealistic/idealistic diagram of a five-step programme of learning (Figure 1)?

Drawing on Wenger's (1998) notion of reification, whereby educational practice and participation is given form through objects that codify practice (or model it), Liseswki and Joyce (2003) raise the concern that the succinctness and portability of Salmon's five-stage model has meant it has 'become too reified as a type of product in informing and guiding learning technology practice' (59). They locate this process of reification within the broader context of a emerging learning technology profession, looking to greater academic legitimacy. However, as Wenger notes, the dangers of a reified tool or model is that it 'can ossify activity around its inertness … And knowledge of a formula can lead to the illusion that one fully understands the processes it describes' (1998: 58).

In adopting Salmon's model exactly for the kind of training course that Salmon describes in her account of the model, i.e. for e-moderating training, Lieswski and Joyce reveal some significant problems. On one level participants described their experience of the course 'in a relatively positive light'. Yet, Lieswski and Joyce remind us that these participants have an invested interest in online learning, since they wish to train as e-moderators. When they delve a little deeper there are a number of complaints regarding course design:

> ‘Many thought it to be too rigid and restrictive and the five-stage/five-week structure was considered to be problematic … Moreover, the external tutors discouraged deviations from the structure of the course. As new ideas arose, it became increasingly difficult to change the focus of activity and explore new avenues of thought’ (Lieswski and Joyce, 2003: 58).

Of course, in one sense, e-learning is only as good as what has been programmed into it, hence a problem with responding dynamically to human changes. Even following the e-moderating principles of farming information from discussion boards etc. it is going to be limited by the time the moderator has to complete these duties and how well the task fits in with the overarching design and desired goals. More specifically, Salmon’s five stage model tends to assume teleological progression, which surely undercuts the socially-orientated learning process. And even with a highly structured and targeted process of socialisation there is always going to be room for error – how, for example, can you best deal with late comers, or those who dip in and out and those who simply don’t learn in any kind of linear fashion? Lieswski and Joyce also raise doubts over the depth of learning and specifically – from the findings of their student responses – criticise the lack of reflection generated by the course.

However, a further, and arguably more troubling, criticism by Lieswki and Joyce is the failure for the model to transfer beyond its use for training e-moderators. Picking out on a distinction which can be made between action research, as it is situated specific to particular subjects and practitioners, and education research which seeks to enhance its professional practice, they argue that the working premise of Salmon’s model is too reliant upon its use for training educators, or e-moderators, and so ignores subject-specific issues. Clearly this is a matter which requires further scrutiny and research, but essentially the distinction they raises ‘the question of whether the five-stage model offers general transferability of educational practice across widely differing teaching and learning contexts’ (60).

Furthermore, a more general caution should be noted regarding the model's assumption of an apparently transparent mode of language (primarily written) communication. The question always needs to be asked 'do we always say what we mean, and mean what we say?' There are all sorts of issues over power relationships between communicators online and in whose name we might be said to speak. Of course, theories of teaching tend to rely on an unhindered transmit and relay of language, despite uses of metaphor and poetry quickly complicating any such process. However, even side-stepping these potentially deep philosophical waters, online environments clearly handle a variety of communication modes with different levels of specificity. Laudrillard (2002, Part II), for example, breaks electronic media down into narrative, interactive, communicative, adaptive and productive forms. In doing so, she demonstrates how each of these forms achieve different levels of conception, interaction, adaptation, feedback and reflection. Crucially, as part of what she terms a 'Conversational Framework', which entails various stages of dialogic communication between teacher and student, she identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the different media forms to achieve educational ends – ends which are actually only met through an ongoing process of interaction, comphrension and reflection (Laudrillard, 2002: 86-90). Interestingly the computer-mediated conferencing that Salmon predicates her model upon clearly works adequately for dialogue between teacher and student. And as Laudrillard suggests conferencing media can certainly aid pedagogy as much as it can over-come logistical matters, such as geographical displacement. However, she stresses, 'success is totally dependent on a good moderator … and this is likely to be as time-consuming as any other form of face-to-face tutoring. None of the existing studies suggest that this is the kind of medium where students can be left to work independently' (151). Furthermore, she notes a significant flaw: 'The claims made for the educational value of [Computer-mediated Conferencing] rest on the assumption that students learn effectively through discussion and collaboration … However, this is not a well-tested assumption as far as the research literature is concerned' (147).

E-learning undoubtedly reflects the changing environment that is increasingly technology-driven. However, whatever model of e-learning is proposed it has to be recognised that it is unlikely ever to finally solve the fundamental educational problematic (or pleasure?) of teacher-student communication. As Laudrillard (2002) suggests university education is defined by the quality of its 'academic conversations' and not by the technologies that relay them. As Ramsden (2003, p.152) puts it: 'ICT cannot alter the way teachers understand teaching. In using it sensibly, the least we can do is try not to reinforce existing pedagogical errors; but we should aim for a great deal more'. Thus, as a final cautionary note, it is worth making the point that the discourse of learning and teaching can often appear rooted in a hegemony of form over content. By which I mean the emphasis seems very much on methods and methodologies of *how* we learn and teach and not so much – if at all – what and why we learn and teach. To use Wenger's (1998: 58) term again, we can become tethered to the 'power of reification', to the codifications that lead us to forget what really underlies the processes we adopt. If we are to grow out of habits of rational instrumentalism and overbearing governmentality, perhaps the scope and ethics of *what* we teach needs to move more firmly to the centre-stage. Of course, lacking perpetually in time and resource, mass-Higher Education is perhaps not easily placed to handle the delicateness and (as with the academic conversations Laudrillard alludes to) the time consuming nature of such questioning. Yet, equally, we might hope that the courses we deliver (regardless of their environments, virtual or otherwise) go someway themselves to garner new levels of achievement and attainment, affording those we teach a better place to think about the future(s) of learning and teaching in Higher Education and beyond.

**Concluding Remarks**

Salmon's model of e-learning is without doubt a very clearly defined 'object' of design, which on one level, for all intents and purposes, can be applied to all manner of teaching and learning contexts. Arguably, however, the quality of learning that takes place is going to be far less certain. The transition from the context in which Salmon has developed her model (which is not always made clear) to the context of one's own practice is perhaps only something that can be determined by trial and error. In my own practice of teaching arts students it is likely that a great deal of adaptation is required, most obviously because I do not teach at a distance, but also because temporal rigidity and teleological design is largely counter-productive with the kinds of creative, productive assessments I set for my students. Of course, the method of 'action research' used to develop the model could be adopted for teaching in my field, but, then, the outcomes are going to be quite different to the ones that Salmon arrives at. To refer again to Kuhn's (1996) distinction between 'normal science' and 'revolutionary science', interaction with Salmon's model of e-learning is likely only to result in more of the same 'normal' repetitions and re-articulations of what we already know – nevertheless, this need not mean to suggest a process inferior to the more dramatic, revolutionary kind. In fact revolutions in education are perhaps only destabilising of the kinds of 'conversations' we seek in the classroom.

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