

Dissemination Report

## **E-Learning Event: 'Online Brick Laying' with Gilly Salmon**

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### **Issues Raised**

The issues and methods considered in this case aim to critically evaluate the potential impact that an online learning framework – devised by Gilly Salmon – can have on the management of one's own teaching, as well as on the individual learning experience of students.

### **Background**

This report is based on my attendance at a staff development session at the University of Leeds on February 14 2006, as part of their 'Talking about Teaching' programme (organised by the Staff and Departmental Development Unit). The session, entitled 'Online Brick Laying', was led by Gilly Salmon who set out the main pedagogical and practical aspects of her own model of teaching and learning online.

I attended this event in order to gain insight into a workable model of e-learning as part of a project I am in the early stages of developing, having recently been awarded an e-learning Teacher Fellowship. Whilst I do have some prior basic knowledge of web-design and electronic media production, I do not have specific experience with e-learning pedagogy. My initial investigations have led me to consider ideas from the design and implementation of distant learning, but I have not found any systematic approaches specific to e-learning.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Gilly Salmon's staff development session was a welcome opportunity to consider (in the company of like-minded peers) a practical, adoptable model of teaching and learning online.

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably, despite the technology having now been available for some time, understanding and skills specific to e-learning have yet to consolidate and move over into the mainstream of teaching in Higher Education. The dedicated literature tends to be of edited volumes, with disparate but insightful case-studies based on an individual's sole experiences of implementing various aspects of e-learning (cf. Murphy et al., 2001; Fallows and Bhanot, 2002; Littlejohn, 2003). Alternatively, more thorough accounts tend to be overly concerned with the 'business' of e-learning, i.e. focusing on costings, workload models, performance enhancement, and systems analysis (cf. Morrison, 2003).

## 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 (cf. 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, perhaps, 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, p.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 and generally, with regards certainly to leisure pursuits, demonstrate real understanding and control of the creative potential of new technologies.

As Ramsden (2003, p.151-152) argues, the most serious inadequacies in our use of ICT in education derive from a false assumption that their mere use in themselves can lead to good learning. All too frequently, then, 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' (p. 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, p. 172). Or, as Race (2005, p.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, p. 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, pp.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.<sup>2</sup>

## Gilly Salmon's Five Stage Model

Gilly Salmon's approach to e-learning is based upon her own five stage model, derived from many years of practical experience in establishing and managing distant and online

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<sup>2</sup> 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 (detailed below), the required approach aims to facilitate a dynamic, collaborative and reflective e-learning environment.

learning. As she explained at the beginning of the staff development event, 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 is keen to stress that her approach is not technology specific, the implementation of her ideas can translate across all manner of Virtual Learning Environments, regardless of their level of sophistication. More importantly, in bringing together – or layering – these four ‘bricks’ the aim is to create a *manageable* nexus of learning-knowledge-technology, with the emphasis very much upon the learners’ perspective.

In pedagogical terms, Salmon explained how she situates what she is doing within a (social) constructionists perspective, so marking (as befits current trends) a clear distinction from either a behaviourist or cognitive perspective. Given that the constructivist approach encourages the learner to explore and discover for themselves – to learn by *doing* – the result, Salmon noted a little wryly, is never going to be neat, but rather ‘messy’ and complex. Nevertheless, her systematic explanation of an approach to online learning neatly connects 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.<sup>3</sup>

Salmon explains her approach with reference to a diagram of a five stage model. 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 overview of these five stages can be explained as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> In some respects, mirroring the change of perspectives from behaviourism to cognitivism and more recently constructivism, what Biggs (2003, pp. 20-25) argues for, is that 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.

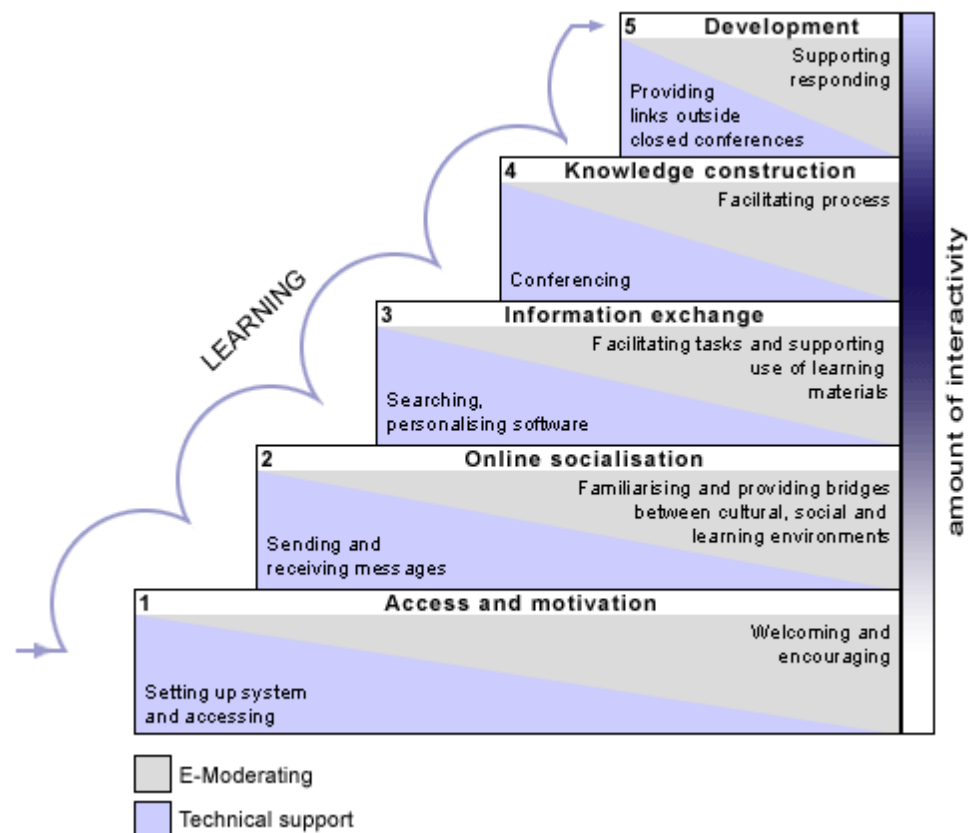
Stage 1: individual access and the ability for participants to use the online environment or Virtual Learning Environments (e.g. WebCT) are essential prerequisites for participation. Activities at this stage are simply designed to 'check' that participants are able to access the learning materials. It is obviously important to show participants how to use the software, but crucially, as part of 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 – need to be used to enable participants to become involved and feel comfortable with the technology.

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.

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 really constructing knowledge through online interaction and indeed successfully handling of its own group dynamics.

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. Activities 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 rather more 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 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 tasks 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. 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. 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.

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. In outlining the model (see text accompanying diagram), I have pointed out the importance of learning activities. Salmon actually refers to these 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-tivities 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.

*For more information: a full account of Salmon's five stage model and the concept and application of e-tivities is available in Salmon's (2000; 2002) two book-length accounts, and a condensed account and resources (including templates for e-tivities) are available online at: <http://www.e-tivities.com>.*

### **Summary: Implications and Problems**

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 (that underpin her whole approach) is the design of motivating, engaging and purposeful activities, based on interaction. 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-tivities are also cheap and easy to run.

Given that the aim of this dissemination report is to encourage further discussion of Salmon's model for teaching and learning online (and even to stimulate experimentation with her ideas), I have not sought to provide a critique of her account. Nevertheless, it is perhaps pertinent in closing to raise – albeit briefly – a number of key implications and potential problems:

- e-learning (and certainly Salmon's approach) suggests the need for a significant change in the role of the 'teacher', shifting more towards the facilitator or – using Salmon's terminology – moderator role. What comes with this change is undoubtedly a change in working patterns, easing some of the burden of the busy lecturer, yet equally creating new pressures (– not least in Salmon's model, the emphasis upon managing and digesting the ongoing exchange of information).

- The asynchronous nature of e-learning can be both a good and a bad thing. Where it goes wrong it can leave students feeling isolated and uninspired. Whilst Salmon has devised her model based on her experiences of teaching purely within an online (distant) learning environment, she is quick to point out, it need not only be applied in such a strict fashion. In fact even with her online teaching, she is quite willing to simply get on the phone or (where possible) hold a face to face session if she feels a student is experiencing problems. However, it remains to be considered more fully how the five stage model and e-tivities can be best combined with other teaching styles. Inevitably this can only really come from trial and error.
- Perhaps, more troublingly, Salmon's five stage model tends to assume teleological progression – a criticism that Salmon acknowledged during a question and answer session at the staff development event. 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?
- One of the great attractions of e-learning is the idea that it will save time and energy. Yet, as Salmon's model shows, whilst time might be saved in some respects there is a need at other times to intensify one's input in order to best manage the information flow. And of course, the initial design of any activity is likely to be time expensive (though its easy re-use may in the long-run offset such investment).
- Finally, caution should be noted regarding the model's assumption of an apparently transparent mode of language (primarily written) communication. Yet, the question always needs to be asked 'do we always say what we mean, and mean what we say?' Theories of teaching tend to rely on an unhindered transmit and relay of language, but use of metaphor and poetry quickly complicate such a process. How, then, does the online environment handle different levels of communication – perhaps it can be managed very well, but it is likely that this needs to be thought out in advance, as with every other aspect of e-learning.

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 will never finally solve the fundamental educational problematic 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. Thus, to close on words of Ramsden (2003, p.152): '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'.

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