

Listen to a radio show discussion on the role of online moderators in distance learning.

Radio show presenter = P

Mark = M

P: ... from the number of emails we get {fade-in} we know that a lot of our listeners are studying on-line. So they'll be interested to hear what our next guest has to say. Mark McRae, is a lecturer at Manchester University whose specialist area is online moderation. Mark, what makes moderators different from teachers in a classroom?

M: Hi June. Erm .. I think the first point is that, online or not, the most important thing is well-designed learning goals and objectives – the use of technology is secondary to getting the learning goals right. But, having said that, there obviously are differences between online and face to face learning. Just as an example, people often like classroom teachers who make them laugh, but trying to be funny in computer conferencing is a dangerous business and often not very successful.

P: Why is that?

M: Mainly because, when you're just reading text – you can't hear the person's tone of voice or see their face – it's much easier to misunderstand.

P: This whole thing about communicating only through text on a computer screen. Don't you find that impossible?

M: It's not impossible – it's just different. Online communication can either be synchronous, when all the people in the 'class' are online at the same time, or asynchronous, where they aren't and people can post in their own time, and the moderator's role is different for each of those situations. Like teachers, moderators will praise people or point out to people where they may be going wrong, although they may do it privately, away from the main forum. What they won't do, and will discourage others from doing is lecturing. Very long posts, even if they're interesting and well-argued, don't usually get a good response. It's very difficult to do that online.

P: What if people argue? Does that happen?

M: It does. As I said, it's much easier to have misunderstandings when communication is all text-based and people will, occasionally, flame each other ..

P: Flame?

M: Sorry. Flaming is what happens when one person 'attacks' another person online. It doesn't happen very often and ...

P: ... and how do you deal with it?

M: Well, it's up to the moderator to set the rules for how people interact, the netiquette we call it, and if someone breaks those rules the moderator will talk to him or her privately and remind them of how we should deal with each other. It's the same with lurkers who aren't participating actively - the moderator may decide to talk to them privately and check they're OK.

P: As you would in a classroom.

M: Exactly. In fact, the aim of moderators is to make the technology transparent – so people don't notice it's there. It's very different from the traditional classroom but there's no reason why it shouldn't be just as effective – even more so for some people.