Review: *E-tivities –The Key to Active Online Learning*

E-tivities –The Key to Active Online Learning, by Gilly Salmon. London: Routledge, 2002. Reviewed by Fiona Baker, PhD, College of Education, Zayed University, Dubai.

E-tivities – the Key to Active on-Line Learning (G.Salmon, 2002) published by Routledge, is a comprehensive, informative and accessible text which addresses processes for promoting participation and active engagement in asynchronous on-line learning. In the university setting, and especially in the Gulf, where technology plays a hugely important role in the delivery of learning, this book holds a wealth of knowledge and practical advice for anyone enticed into taking on the essential role of e-moderator in an on-line learning environment. The text suggests a five stage framework for developing a systematic way of organizing successful and enjoyable on-line learning, which simply requires access to the Internet. The author claims that e-tivities are cheap, easy to run, and designed to be efficient. The framework can form the whole course, replace, or support all kinds of learning and teaching methods in any discipline and for any topic. The book is written and compiled by a member of faculty at the UK's Open University Business School, and has arisen from action research in a bid to stimulate achievable actualization of enjoyable on-line learning activities. The book is a collection of evidence of processes involved in promoting participation and active engagement of learners in systematic ways, accompanied by pictorial representations of the processes, and examples of on-line communication which are given as highlighted examples in the text.   Clearly this text is invaluable for anyone in the Gulf region who would like to learn how to avoid the pitfalls and learn from the merits of this systematic approach.

As the author states, this book is written in the context of all the hype and failures of distance learning which provides a real niche for this understandable and highly practical book. The book is enticing and has the aim of encouraging the reader to become an action researcher and participant collaborator in the e-learning process. Indeed, it is persuasive in drawing the reader into the on-line learning environment. The author invites the reader to "read on and then try it and see …." It uses illustrations to pictorially represent the five stages of the framework and includes verbal exchanges that enhance the text, making it more easily understood. The models are easy to follow and could easily be replicated for a number of settings.

Throughout the text, there is emphasis on the importance of the e-moderator whose role is to be responsible for creating and structuring productive e-learning encounters as a "spark for on-line interaction." The author suggests that emphasis should be placed on the interaction rather than the content in making e-learning work. This involves using Crystal's (2001) Netspeak (which is similar to a combination of writing and speaking) to provide a clear set of motivating instructions called "invitations" as successful on-line communication. The author states that finding, structuring and delivering on-line content is less important than teaching techniques when designing and running e-tivities. The author emphasizes that e-moderators are essential as they add the real value to learning technologies by designing and running e-tivities for greater interaction and group participation. This stance is supported by real-life stories, presented as "stories from the e-tivities frontline", which add to the authenticity of the text as a fully tried and tested approach to e-learning. The reader can glean important insights from these on-line stories which are interspersed throughout the text.

The book is divided into two parts which are equally explicit and practical. Part I talks about the design and how to run e-tivities by following a five-stage model. These five stages, according to the author, are

essential in avoiding common pitfalls by knowing how participants are likely to exploit the system at each stage. Part II is a set of resources and considerations for practitioners in successfully supporting the five stage model.

Chapter 1 focuses on how to make e-tivities successful and happy through a five stage framework which can provide a "scaffold' for a paced program of e-tivities that build on prior experience. It talks about the technical and moderating skills required at each stage of the process. Throughout the book, the emphasis is on appropriate activities and human moderation in the asynchronous environment and networking opportunities as the on-line participant progresses through the stages. A guarantee is given that all participants, with the correct human intervention and appropriate activities and technical support, will progress through the program for as long as the needs of access, moderation, value and success in achievement are felt.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 outline the five stage framework. The first stage is "Access and Motivation" where it is suggested that at least a week is allowed for everyone to log on in a welcoming and encouraging supportive environment. The second stage is, "On-line Socialization" where the e-moderator's role in building the bridges to promote webs of trust is emphasized, as participants begin to send and receive messages. In building bridges between hopes and achievement, a community of learning is developed. Learners share stories and ideas and explain styles and ways of learning. In stage three, "Information Exchange" the moderator plays a role in promoting information exchange and dissuades participants from "lurking" in favour of participation and interaction. This stage of information exchange requires finding and exchanging information and familiarity with the technology.   "Knowledge construction" is the fourth stage, where there is a challenge to provide critical, creative and practical learning experiences by providing neither too much nor too little structure. The e-moderator is responsible for building and sustaining groups. The moderator is also responsible for encouraging the flow of discussion, which involves summarizing the interaction from time to time. It is important that the e-moderator stimulates fresh thought, and hears and acknowledges contributions that surface in the discussion. The final stage, "Development", involves supporting and responding where there is a need for sufficiency of data and quality of argument at this stage of the process where participants confidently challenge and build on each other's contributions.

In closing Chapter 4, valuable advice is given to the organizers of e-learning. Reference is made to the preferred number of participants in each group; smallish groups are said to work more easily, as a larger group runs the risk of non-participation, involving "lurking" and "vicarious" learning. The author comments on how, in designing on-line learning for lower costs, discarding human intervention is rarely appropriate, once again emphasizing the importance of the e-moderator in taking time to design which requires space and experimentation.

The concluding remarks for Part I point to the richness of the web, which depends largely on its volume, multimedia and linked presentation of information and to the creative rein of the e-moderator and the "subtle power" of e-tivities because they are low cost, fun and enjoyable.

Part II offers resources for practitioners and interestingly, draws from Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Effective People and Principle-Centred Leadership* for each of the five stages. It provides a list of action words for e-tivities to promote on-line action and provides "sparks", such as icebreakers, quizzes and images. It discusses building programs and processes and cites Glasgow Caledonian University's pioneering approach for undergraduate e-tivities combined with lectures as an example to be followed. Resources for practitioners include e-mail games and using images and metaphors. Again the emphasis is on promoting collaboration in work groups, active sharing and intellectual resources amongst

participants and the e-moderator's role in the learning process, and provide environment to enable collaboration to take place in optimum conditions.

Part II reiterates the necessity for "the enjoyment factor" and discusses autotelic theories, moderation theories, enjoyment, and conditions that underline it. Online emotions such as "emotional quotient" and how to increase it through e-tivities by working with on-line emotions are discussed. There is also consideration given to intelligent e-tivities which encompass MacGilchrist's ideas of "the intelligent school".

The text notes that we live in changing times , and emphasizes finding time, working to a regular rhythm, making adjustments, following protocol, following patterns of participation, the rhythm of on-line learning and the habit of coming back regularly to on-line e-learning, counting the time in design, participation and e-moderation, and including on-line language. A section in the text also discusses how e-tivities might open doors for individuals with disabilities through greater ease of accessibility.

As a conclusion to the text, there is a light-hearted self-reflection questionnaire called, "Are you addicted to e-tivities?" followed by example interview questions for e-moderators on e-moderator competencies and operational training which summarize the full intent of the message of the book and make it valuable for those who has been enticed through reading the book into becoming an e-moderator. This is a must-read for anyone involved in organizing on-line learning in the Gulf, and especially for those in the university setting.