E-tivities: The key to active online learning
(Book Review)

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Distance educators struggle with trying to develop activities that will promote interaction and reflective thinking in their classrooms. Gilly Salmon’s latest book (2002) E-tivities: The key to active online learning addresses the need to develop relevant online instructional activities that can be used in a diversity of academic disciplines. The term “Etivity” refers to a conceptual framework for discussing interactive learning activities.

Salmon’s Five-Step Model

The online instructor continues to play a major role in the success of any academic program because they can personalize learning experiences for their students. Additionally, contemporary online instructors realize that distance education is a “work in progress” that continues to evolve with time and experimentation. Yet, the basic trial and error methodology is a very time consuming way to identify effective teaching practices. Instructors really need research-based teaching strategies that have demonstrated that they have effectively worked in a computer-mediated environment. Salmon’s (2002) E-tivities: The key to active online learning offers an excellent resource for meaningful curriculum activities for instructors who operate in a diversity of online environments. The book is built upon conducting action research projects involving computer-mediated education at the Open University Business School, United Kingdom.

Salmon’s (2002) recent studies have added more depth to her innovative five step model that offers practical advice and ideas for new and veteran online instructors. The five-step model reflects a positive progression in the quality and intensity of interaction between students and between students and their teachers. The online instructor’s role is multidimensional and changes at different stages depending upon the student needs and circumstances within each class. Therefore, the instructor has to use discernment about their teaching strategies to effectively meet student learning needs.

Step 1 Access & Motivation: The first step involves helping new students become familiar with the online setting by learning how to use the course software and having instructional activities that are relevant. Salmon (2002) reminds instructors that “E-moderators should not be complacent about entry level skills to online learning! There are still many novices ‘out there’ (p. 24).” It is important to address the technical issues and the underlying feelings and emotions that students have about the learning online. People can become quite frustrated over their technological problems. It is important to help students handle these negative emotions and work with the technical staff to resolve the issues. Students can feel somewhat embarrassed by their struggles in learning how to use the software. Instructors can alleviate the student’s anxiety by sharing email messages that are supportive and optimistic in tone. Additionally, instructors can share email notes that highlights the purposes of their assignments. Student motivation is partially dependent on their perspective on their ability to complete the class work. Instructors can enhance student confidence by starting with less difficult assignments. It helps students to experience more academic success before taking on more difficult work.

Step 2 Online Socialisation: The second step involves building the foundation for a vibrant online community by using short e-tivities that cultivate trust between students. Student relationships will grow during group and individual work as student share personal stories and ideas. Then, as students become more comfortable with the online culture they can move into sharing and exchanging information. Instructors can introduce e-tivities that
explore cultural differences, recognize the value of diversity in an online community and help students discuss differences in educational expectations.

**Step 3 Information Exchange**: Salmon (2002) warns that “it is common for novice e-moderators to spend huge effort and time in trying to encourage contribution at stages 1 and 2, only to find themselves largely logging on to read their own messages. If e-moderators are too rigorous, they soon burn out! (p. 36).” During this step, instructors should utilize online e-tivities that promote discovery learning. Students need assignments that give them opportunities to explore and share knowledge in class discussions. Instructor will realize that this step is completed when students are successfully processing information and become more proactive in their learning.

**Step 4 Knowledge Construction**: The advent of this step marks the development of e-tivities that focus more on helping students use higher order thinking skills and become independent learners. Students must have projects that help them to learn how to construct their own personal knowledge. Also, instructors need to be intentional in their online remarks and aim to enhance their student’s critical thinking skills. Students will start moving from being merely knowledge transmitters to creators or authors of innovative ideas. It is an exciting time in the online class as students are challenged by e-tivities that require working on problems that have multiple interpretations.

**Step 5 Development**: This step represents the development of new cognitive skills that enable students to learn to monitor and evaluate their thinking. Students take personal ownership of their learning experiences and assist students within their study groups and new students to the class. Instructors select e-tivities that encourage reflective thinking by sharing problem-based situations or scenarios that require interpretation information, creativity and a willingness to test assumptions.

**Salmon’s (2000) Five-Step Model**
Characteristics of E-tivities

It is important that online instructors have the appropriate educational resources to individualize their lesson plans and course materials for their classes. Salmon (2002) provides a host of educational resources (i.e. scenarios, ideas for reflective dialog and professional development activities) in *E-tivities: The key to active online learning* that can used by instructors in their classes. The e-tivities are designed to engage online students in meaningful work that captures their imagination and challenges them to grow. There are five vital features to e-tivities:

- A small piece of information, stimulus or challenge (the ‘spark’)
- Online activity which includes individual participating posting a contribution
- An interactive or participative element-such as responding to the postings of others
- Summary, feedback or critique from an e-moderator (the ‘plenary’)
- All the instructions to take part are available in one online message (the ‘invitation’) (Salomon, 2002, p. 13).

Conclusion

Salmon’s (2002) research provides a solid foundation for relevant and purposeful online instructional activities. The Five-Step Model offers an excellent paradigm for combining theory and practice into the teaching and learning process. It affirms the importance of the having teachers who are prepared to share meaningful activities in a learner-centered atmosphere.

References
