Managing online communities: an e-moderation collaboratively constructed paper

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Abstract: - This paper presents a proposal for the development of academic activities using collaborative hypermedia environments that allow synchronous communication and interaction. This proposal emerged as an initiative of a group of people concerned for successfully moderating video-conferences with e-presenters from all over the world in order to reunite different experts and people sharing the same interests to generate knowledge. The moderation of these video-conferences, through five major online events, led to the creation of an e-moderation team that planned, coordinated and monitored all video-conferences. This document, collaboratively created and edited, provides a guide for organizing virtual events. Additionally, this document offers a proposal for e-moderators to logistically, pedagogically, managerially, socially and technically assist e-speakers during their e-presentations. In this paper, we present guidelines for moderating video-conferences, including e-moderators’ roles. The results that derived from the analysis of participants’ feedback are shown. We also include a section describing the most common technical problems that may hinder the successful development of video-conferences. Finally, we give some recommendations to e-moderators to effectively organize, plan and manage online video-conferences.

Key-words: - on-line communities, e-moderation, roles, skills, collaboration, guidelines.

1 Introduction

The advance of new technologies has introduced different modes of delivering information digitally: it is not just about distributing content but about creating online communities to interact and generate knowledge collaboratively. Synchronous communication – real-time communication-, through online video-conference platforms, has recently jointed educators worldwide to share and discuss topics of their interest and expertise. Video-conference systems constitute an excellent way of communicating and interacting synchronously with an e-presenter and his/her audience, generally the e-presenter communicates with the audience through audio, video and text. Video-conferences, generally, call for moderation in order to logistically and technically assist the e-presenter and the audience. The organization of the video-conference is planned by an e-moderator team that, before, during and after the event, coordinates the general dynamic of video-conferences to successfully run on-line events. The e-moderator team is represented by a group of trained people with enough technical skills to manage and administer the e-platform. Apart from these skills, the e-moderator- a person who presides over an electronic online meeting or conference [2] - needs certain managerial, pedagogical and social skills that allow them to control online groups. To achieve this goal, e-moderators make decisions about the agenda, the netiquette, and the general guidelines, among others, to successfully run on-line events. The expertise gained through organizing and running video-conferences- provided an insight into the understanding of the different roles e-moderators should play.

2 How we started
In 2009, we planned an on-line conference that reunited Open Knowledge and Education experts from different parts of the world. The organization of this event led to the creation of several documents through collaborative work that supported the e-moderation of the video-conferences. When the event was about to finish, we met online to discuss the challenges we faced in terms of communication, interaction and technical issues. We also analyzed the participants’ feedback obtained through a survey and through the feedback system offered by the online platform. This initial document was, then, changed, edited, used and validated in four more online events.

3 Justification
Over the last 20 years, we have witnessed that technology and its infrastructure have evolved: one of the major changes is represented by the connection speed brought by the broadband. Broadband and the emergence of new online open and free platforms allow teachers, researchers and students to hold online activities using synchronous multimedia environments. Apart from this technological development, the conceptualization of the Web has also experienced changes that were mainly represented by the social Web 2.0 and its collaborative tools that allow users to share content and learn powerful tools easily and rapidly. With the Web 2.0, new forms of publishing, sharing, editing and distributing information emerged. One of the most useful e-tools for synchronous communication and interaction is represented by video-conferences systems that permit educators, researchers and students to hold online academic events using audio, video, and text.

Currently, video-conferences are commonly used to join up people from different geographical locations synchronously, using an easy and quick platform in order to bridge the distance and time constraints. Video-conferences have been integrated to the teaching and learning process in different areas because they provide teachers and students with the opportunity of working collaboratively and synchronously. These virtual environments, apart from offering teachers an online space to meet their students, share and discuss ideas, offer teachers, researchers and students an e-platform to hold multidirectional and multimedia discussions or events. In this virtual scenario, e-moderators are needed to guide and develop video-conferences in order to facilitate communication and interaction. E-moderators require enough communicational and technical skills to access, manage and administer any online platform to successfully hold synchronous academic activities. Some authors have emphasized the critical role of e-moderators in organizing conferences and in guaranteeing socialization and networking amongst the conference participants [1]. We strongly believe that the key features of video-conferences which enhance learning involve an e-moderator who is able to:

a. Establish a climate for communication, interaction, information exchange, knowledge construction and development [1].
b. Engage with problems and challenges.
c. Play a pedagogical, social, managerial and technical role.

4 Objectives
This document was collaboratively created and edited in order to:

a. Write a paper to support academic events and/or activities using online platforms that allow users to communicate synchronously and work collaboratively through multimedia content (audio, text and video).

b. Register the paper under the Creative Commons License Attribution + Noncommercial + ShareAlike + Author acknowledgement + permission to generate a derivative work or adaptation, published on the Web in order to be used and validated by different people using online platforms.

c. Analyze participants’ feedback and use this information to edit this document.

d. Publish a final document, under the Creative Common License, edited collaboratively considering the feedback generated from different online scenarios and e-moderators. (The Spanish and complete version of this document is available at: http://www.scribd.com/doc/39073413/Protocolo-videoconf)
5 Results

The analysis of the participants’ feedback from an after-event survey and the messages sent throughout the e-platform feedback system provided enough information to reflect on our own practice as e-moderators. The results shown in this section emerged from the data collected from a survey administered to 1000 participants – just 212 responses were obtained. From the data, we gathered open comments and closed answers related to the e-moderation of video-conferences. The open comments are presented into two main themes: a) e-moderators play multiple roles and b) e-moderators skills. These two themes were considered fundamental to understand the nature of e-moderation in on-line events and to create a proposal to guide e-moderators’ performance in video-conferences.

5.1 E-moderators play multiple roles: are they really needed?

E-moderators significantly play multiple roles that varied from technical to social ones. It is important to emphasize that e-moderators constantly work – before, during and after the event, to guarantee communication and interaction. Among the roles they play, participants considered that it was important that they technically manage and control the e-platform, as one of them mentioned:

“E-moderators were helpful; they guided the speaker and know the platform.”

Apart from the technical role, participants felt e-moderators’ confidence was important. Participants considered video-conference were organized and they valued e-moderators’ social and managerial skills when interacting with the e-presenter and the audience, as one of the participants highlighted:

“The video-conference was excellent. Congratulations to the e-moderator who managed to solve the technical problems and kept the audience motivated.”

E-moderators are needed – to facilitate communication and interaction, to guarantee access to the e-platform and to manage it.

5.2 E-moderators´ skills: only IT experts?

Apart from these responses, we analyzed data obtained from the e-platform feedback system. This data provided us with important information about how participants value moderators in terms of the potential they have to facilitate communication and interaction.

Most participants (75%) agreed on indicating that e-moderators were always helpful and that they felt at ease when e-moderators managed not only the e-platform, but also monitored participants’ interaction during video-conferences. Participants, fifteen of them, signaled that the success of video-conferences depended on how e-moderators organized the video-conferences. The findings of the on-line survey suggested that participants and e-presenters appreciated being guided by an e-moderator. Most comments were related to the quality of on-line moderation rather than to the e-platform selected. Survey results seemed to indicate that e-moderators are vital to video-conferences as participants and e-presenters added open comments praising e-moderators role. 68% of the respondents also indicated that the moodle space opened to provide participants with information related to video-conferences: timetable, technical requirement, among others, was extremely useful. They value the fact that video-conferences were recorded and hosted in moodle: it allowed participants to have access to the video-conference at any time and to participate in the forum related moderated by the e-presenter. 63% of the participants indicated that the e-moderation facilitated interaction and communication and 72% signaled that fringe asynchronous activities allowed them to continue sharing ideas with other participants and the e-presenter. Similar responses were also noticed at the end of each video-conference: participants, when everything ran smoothly, showed appreciation to the e-moderators’ role. Most responses were highlighted e-moderators’ main characteristics: organized, motivating, encouraging, approachable, flexible and IT competent.

E-moderators’ skills are closely related to the roles they play: a) to play a pedagogical role they need to know how to pace the discussion and use on-line time and to be able to be polite and respectful in on-line written and oral communication; b) to play a social role, e-moderators need to know when to use on-line strategies for interaction in order to introduce the audience to e-presenter; c) to play a technical role, e-moderators need to be confident in the operational understanding of the e-platform: and d) to play a managerial or organizational role, e-moderators’ need to establish an on-line identity and show a positive attitude, commitment and enthusiasm.
Roles interwoven with skills: the more skillful e-moderators are the more efficiently they can play their roles.

6 Guidelines for e-moderation: a proposal

This proposal was collaboratively constructed in order to guide e-moderators to organize, manage, communicate, interact, socialize and evaluate effectively academic events and/or activities using video-conference platforms.

6.1 Organizing and planning video-conferences

6.1.1 Before the video-conference
Select the video-conference platform considering the number of people that will be roughly attending it, the type of interaction (text, audio and/or video) and the platform features in terms of recording and sharing it.
Configure the video-conference session to adequately record it and uploaded using the embed code provided by most video-conferences platforms. This will allow participants to access the video-conference asynchronously at any time.
Identify the e-moderators that are going to be part of the e-moderators team in order to collaboratively organize the video-conferences.
Define the e-tool that e-moderators are going to use for communication (e-mail lists, instant messaging, among others).
Create a database to register the contact details of e-moderators and e-presenters. This database needs to include emails, academic web pages, skype or gtalk IDs.
Compile all materials needed for the video-conferences such as slides, agenda, e-presenter’s resume, among others.
Plan training sessions with e-presenters to get them familiar with the e-platform and verify connectivity issues.
Motivate participants to attend video-conference and read general guidelines using email lists or/and social networking tools.
Direct participants and e-presenters to training material related to the e-platform selected for the video-conference.

Elaborate technical guidelines in case the e-presenter needs extra resources such as web hosted videos, images, documents, slides, spread sheets and or websites. These technical guidelines need to include enough data related to type of files, description, and URLs. When these resources are not available on the Web, e-moderators need to upload them to the e-platform well in advance or to publish them on on-line repositories to access them during the video-conference.

6.1.2 During the video-conference
Manage and administer the e-platform effectively to allow equal participation and minimize text comments that are not related to the conference.
Have an alternative plan in case technical problems may arise.
Have audio and text control.
Guarantee access to the e-presenter and participants.
The e-moderator needs to check audio, text, video and materials before running the video-conference.
Socialize with the audience while technically set up the e-platform before the e-presentation and after the round of questions.
Establish turn taking and the protocol for the chat.
Close the video-conference providing a final comment to the audience.

6.1.3 After the video-conferences
Write and share via social networks a summary of the main issues discussed during the video-conference.
Find ways of hosting an open-forum to promote discussion between the e-presenter and his/her audience.
Download the video-conference recording to edit it and create a reduced version. This will allow e-moderators to publish video-conferences on on-line repositories (youtube, vimeo, blip, among others) to share them.

7 E-moderators: what roles they play

E-moderators logistically and technically assist the e-speaker. They generally need to welcome the audience, present a plan and the norms for interaction and socialization. To successfully achieve this, e-moderators need to carefully and collaboratively establish their roles. The e-presenter is accompanied by two moderators: one e-moderator with text, audio and video control and a second e-moderator who helps the main e-moderator with the chat interaction.
The main e-moderator needs to:

a. Have all access details to be able to access and control the platform and assist the e-presenter.
b. Plan a training session with the e-presenter before the actual video-conference.
c. Assist the e-presenter at least five minutes before the video-conference starts to check text, audio and video.
d. Upload all video-conference materials to the e-platform.
e. Grant text, audio and video control to the e-speaker.
f. Announce the video-conference.
g. Constantly check text, audio and video control – sometimes the e-moderator can mistakenly grant it to the audience.
h. Read the e-presenter’s resume.
i. Close the chat room during the video-conference.
j. Indicate when the question session is going to start.
k. Thank the e-presenter for the video-conference and read the summary with the main issues raised during the video-conference.
l. Thank the audience and give information related to the next video-conference and the open-forum for comments and discussion.
m. Allow at least five minutes for socialization.
n. Close the chat room.
o. Log out from the e-platform.

The second moderator needs to:

a. Monitor the comments/questions session via the chat room.
b. Remind the chat protocol to the audience (turn taking - @, among others).
c. Close the question session.
d. Assist the main e-moderator through the backchannel selected for communication.
e. Overtake the main e-moderator’s role in case any technical problem arises.
f. Help the main e-moderator write notes for the summary – you can use the backchannel selected to share ideas.
g. Share with the audience via chat details about the next video-conference, links, e-presenter’s contact details, among others.
h. Farewell the e-presenter and the audience and ask the main e-moderator to officially close the video-conference.

8 Technical requirements
There are certain technical aspects e-moderators also need to consider when holding video-conferences. The most relevant technical requirements for video-conference are: Good Internet connection (preferable broadband connection), Headset (microphone and audio system) and webcam. Good illumination to get a high quality image for the audience. A place with noise isolation. A technical checking session just before the video-conference.

9 Recommendations
The experience gained through different on-line events and the feedback obtained from participants provided us with an insight into the understanding of the various and important aspects to organize and successfully run video-conferences. E-moderators, then, need to consider not only the on-line platform selected for the video-conferences, but their organizational, managerial and social skills to guarantee communication and interaction. In this sense, e-moderators should:

a. Have enough IT skills to manage and administer the platform.
b. Organize and plan video-conferences jointly with the e-moderation team and the general organizing committee of the on-line event.
c. Plan training sessions with less trained e-moderators.
d. Organize training sessions with e-presenters before the video-conference.
e. Have an agenda and an alternative plan in case any technical problem arises.
f. Be sure all the video-conference material is organized and uploaded to the on-line platform before the video-conference.
g. Bear in mind that an e-moderator needs to play not only a technical role, but pedagogical, social and managerial ones.

10 Conclusion
The organization of on-line events requires time, but most importantly, a coordinated team that plans, makes decisions, shares ideas and generates knowledge. Being part of the e-moderators team has been one of the most gratifying experiences in our academic life: we were able to observe how our previous knowledge was reconstructed through
collaborative exchanges that allow e-moderators to develop enough organizational, technical and managerial skills to organize, plan and evaluate video-conferences. This document emerged from informed experience and it represented a well-grounded source for moderating video-conferences. It also calls for experts in the area and on-line events organizers to use these guidelines and validate them in order to continue enriching this experience and opening windows to the e-moderation world.

References
