

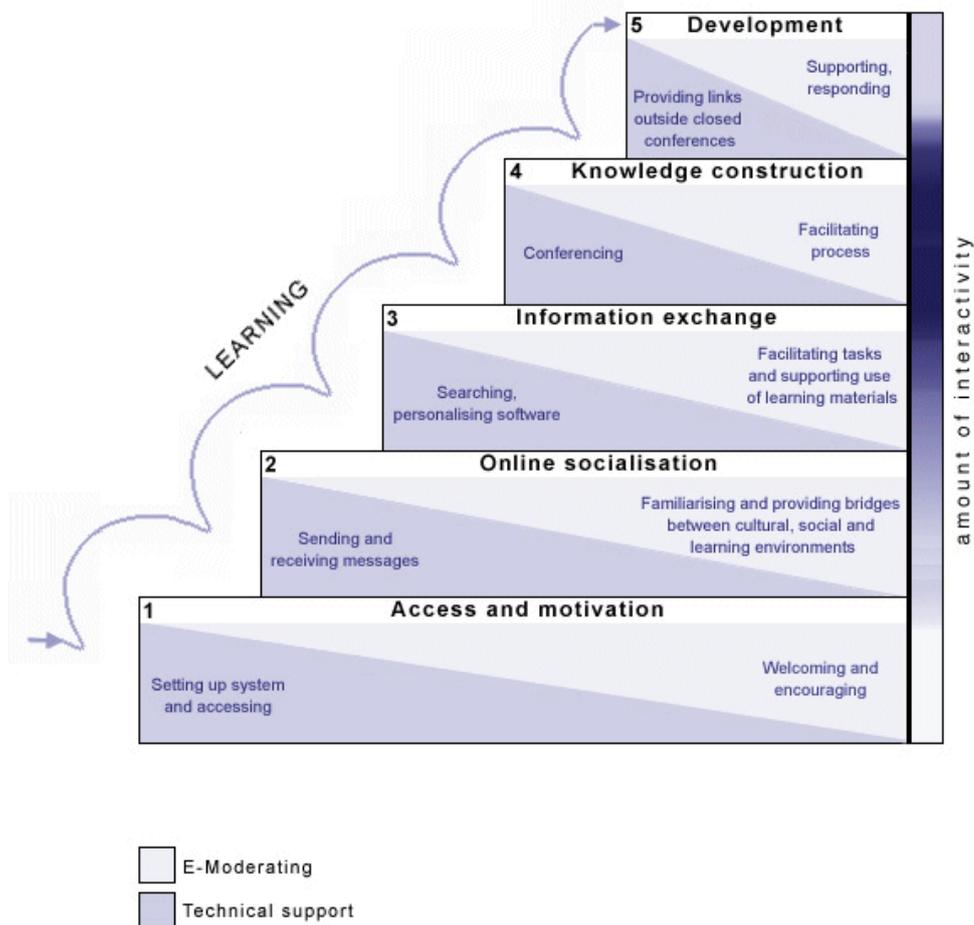
How to offer guidance in an online learning environment?

FIVE STAGE MODEL OF GILLY SALMON (Source: <http://oubs.open.ac.uk/e-moderating/fivestep.htm>)

Summary of the model:

Individual access to and disposal of the necessary skills are essential to be able to cooperate actively in a learning environment (stage 1). At stage 2, participants exchange coordinates with one another and receive the opportunity to interact with each other. At stage 3, students pass on relevant information concerning the course to each other. During this stage a kind of cooperation arises, more in particular a form of support that aims to obtain personal goals. At stage 4 however the focus rather lies on conducting course-oriented discussions and the interaction between participants can be characterised as collaboration. Building mutual knowledge is key at this stage. At stage 5 participants themselves look for ways to improve the benefits of working in a learning environment, they explore how a learning environment can be used for other learning environments or forms of learning and they reflect profoundly on their learning process.

Each stage assumes that participants master certain technical skills (look left at the bottom of each step). Each step requires certain e-moderating skills (look right at the top of each step). The "interactivity gauge" indicates the amount of interactivity that can be expected from the participants at each stage. In the beginning (stage 1-2) a minimal interactivity of 1 to 2 participants can be expected. After stage 2 the intensity rises as well as the number of participants with whom one interacts, although at stage 5 participants tend to fall back on personal reflections and goals.



Tips at stage 1: access

1. Have you and your students acquired the necessary skills?
2. Does each student have access to the learning environment?
3. Have you provided a word of welcome?
4. Are you able to track "latecomers" and encourage them to familiarise themselves with the learning environment as soon as possible?
5. Have you clearly developed and provided a (course) schedule (i.e. determined the theme, defined the goals and the group, provided an introductory text (an added value for students, evaluation, activities: what and how, time, cooperation), elaborated a work form (role playing in groups),...)?
6. Have you thought through the differences regarding the initial situation of your students (differences concerning ways of learning, culture, ...)? Do you take this into account when developing your session(s)?
7. Do you define clear topics for your forum that arouse the interest of your students? For example "questions and answers", "facilities of the learning environment", ...
8. Do you communicate personal messages through email?

9. Is there a “helpdesk” (to take away doubts/barriers!) and has this been communicated to the students?

Tips at stage 2: socialisation

1. Do you and your students have access to each other’s coordinates?
2. Do you encourage contact among students?
3. Are you aware that a number of students only access your forum in a small degree and that you should try to keep them there?

For this you can observe the following principles of communication:

1. Do not expect in the beginning too much of your participants. They might not have mastered sufficient technical skills.
 2. Be aware that a discussion implies multiple participants. Some of them need extra encouragement.
 3. It all takes a bit of time! Build in a sufficient margin!
 4. Be “real” yourself and do not be afraid to take a weak position. As such you will look as “online coach” also “humane”.
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4. Do you react on each contribution of a student (especially in the beginning, even though the contribution is very limited)?
 5. Do you welcome everybody (do you give it a personal touch)?
 6. In case you do not agree with the intervention of a participant, do you take up his/her point of view as a sign of recognition and then add your point of view to it? Avoid attacking the participant concerned! Make sure that the participant feels respected.
 7. Do you speak from your own point of view (or from that of somebody else, but then indicate whose point of view)? Try to avoid being “absolute” about certain cases.
 8. Do you end your messages with an open question, a request for confirmation or other point of views?

Tips concerning how to reply to contributions:

1. React immediately after reading the contribution (this can be a number of days after the uploading of the contribution)
2. Indicate that you have seen the contribution but answer later on.
3. Do not try to be “exhaustive”.

You can react in different ways to someone’s contribution:

4. Through the forum where anybody can read your input
5. Email to the private email address of the student (only the student will know that you reacted!)
6. Make a phone call (if appropriate)
7. Face to face in case you meet the person concerned in a short time span.

When elaborating a message try to keep it short (max. 1 page, without scrolling if possible):

8. Provide relevant titles (subject) for your contributions!
9. Clearly indicate the point of your message.

10. Clearly indicate which contribution you are responding to (often the system will automatically take care of this by means of a discussion tree).
 11. Avoid "jargon".
 12. Use plain language.
 13. Use appropriate emotions if wished for (icons or verbally).
 14. If you expect an answer, pinpoint a date.
 15. Before transmitting your message, read it again (from the reader's viewpoint).
 16. In case you use somebody else's viewpoint in your contribution, always indicate its source.
 17. Make sure your tone is encouraging and supporting. If you are angry, it is better to avoid reacting immediately!
9. Are you looking for a good balance for the frequency of your interventions?
Do not exaggerate! It might sometimes work counterproductive! Do remember it is a student's right to have replies. When the forum is used frequently, visit the website daily and reflect on whether your input is desirable and constructive at the time!
A professor who intervenes too frequently risks paralysing a discussion on the forum!

Tips at stage 3: information

1. Do you try to put every participant actively to work?
2. Did you compose a list with interesting background information about the topics that you deal with in your classes? This information can comprise different sources (books, articles, audio and video material, people, URLs, ...) You can put your reference list at the disposal of others. (Clearly indicate each time the source of your information!)
Tip: Select your information carefully! Privilege the information that really offers an added value (only putting your course notes online is not really relevant!) To achieve this, the following criteria can be taken into account:
 - Visualisation/simulation of certain aspects of the course content
 - Horizon extending: broadening/deepening of the course content
 - Variation (people, video/audio, URLs, ppts, ...)
 - Plain structure: cohesion and links (with the possibility to navigate through them according to one's individual learning path)
 - Stimulate students to cooperate
 - Accessibility and user-friendliness of the information
3. Do you promote exchanging information among group members by asking questions (multiple levels of thinking) and formulating challenging tasks?
Avoid to immediately answering to contributions of others. This can hinder the discussion (remember that you are probably the only one that can work online that day). Try to pass on questions or to pose new ones (make sure that "like-minded" and/or "opposite" participants find each other!) (look as well at the next stage).

Challenging tasks can be shaped as:

Problem task: this task has as goal that students analyse and explain phenomena and their underlying structures and processes. The following questions are central: What is going on? How can you explain this? ...

Strategy task: this task has as goal to set up a plan of approach by means of which the problems found in the problem task can be solved. A central question is: "What has to be done in the current situation and why?"

The students picture themselves as future professionals and look for the most appropriate approach.

Application task: the goal is that students apply their acquired skills (competencies). Following the strategy task, the application task ensures that students will carry out the plan of approach they formulated at the strategy stage.

Individual study task: The student acquires independently some course material. The individual study task can for example be linked to a learning conversation in which students explain course material to one another, and analyse and integrate together the individually obtained information.

Reflection task: the goal of the reflection task is that students reflect critically on their problem analysis, their plan of approach, its realisation and draw consequences from this.

4. Do you (when using a forum) regularly provide summaries (e.g. by professor/student)?

It is a powerful technique that offers the possibility to:

- evaluate the contributions of others and attribute a certain level of appreciation to them
- formulate a core message that enables “latecomers” to familiarise themselves quickly with the discussion
- close off a discussion and open up a new one
- give a discussion a new impulse
- allow participants to reflect (once again) on the topic

TIP: Try to:

- only include key points
- formulate a positive comment on the quality of all contributions
- pick a title that corresponds to the content of the message
- close a topic or open a new one if relevant

5. Do you want to file a discussion? You can do this if the discussion tree contains sufficient interesting information and if the discussion has been closed off.

Tips at stage 4: cooperation

1. Have you set up a learning activity that you can link to a forum?

When setting up the activity, observe the following rules:

1. Indicate its goal. What do you want to achieve? What is the activity's added value in a student's learning process? How will you be evaluating the activity?
2. How will you be introducing the activity? Are you able to formulate clear instructions?
3. Why would students want to participate? Will the activity undoubtedly deliver an added value to their learning process?
4. How are you going to try to pass off this activity successfully? What kind of preparation/sources do students need to complete the activity? Did you make an estimation of the initial situation of your participants (e.g. by means of a pre-tests, a questionnaire, ...)?
5. Plan your role and activities. How many times will you intervene? What do you do with the participants that do not contribute? Do students work in groups? Who takes which role (leader-moderator-reporter, ...)?
6. What happens if the activity has not been realised the way you anticipated? How do you obtain information to improve it next time?
7. Coach: plan the skills needed to succeed in the activity.

A limited checklist for the set up of learning activities:

Name of the activity?

Goal of the activity (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, feasible time schedule)?

Level of the activity (e.g. 5)?

Maximal number of participants?

Structure of the conference?

Online time of the coach?
Online time of the participants?
Actions of the coach?
Actions of the participants?
Create interaction?
How to evaluate?

Tip:

Possible actions on this level for a coach that you can consider are:

- 1 organise, frame, limit, attribute roles, agree on rules of the game, insert links, organise mutual support
- 2 analyse, weigh (relevant vs. irrelevant), put in order, divide into subtopics, differentiate, nuance, highlight, categorise
- 3 express, specify, draw parallels, give examples, clarify, reformulate, fit in a framework, indicate connections
- 4 conceptualise, name, divide, cluster, oppose, classify, summarise, visualise, aid to find the appropriate term (op het begrip brengen)
- 5 stimulate, activate, engage, provoke, confront, question, incite, vary, stir up, entertain, involve experts
- 6 integrate, level barriers, guard the tone, involve people, remind, keep people updated, urge, allow people to react to each other, ask for comments
- 7 canalise, offer new topics, keep track of time, hold the discussion on course, work result-oriented, remind participants of the goal, work towards a conclusion
- 8 evaluate, give reactions on the length, form, tone and frequency of contributions, reflect on the development of the discussion, compare with other discussion groups

2. Do you make sure that participants exchange relevant information (in depth/width) about your activity with each other?

In case you notice that participants need more information, indicate then where they can find some. Provide stimulating questions (e.g. make a comparison between theory X and Y) or hypotheses, and intensive tasks that force students to use sources, to give it some thought and to come up with arguments. Questions demanding their own opinion are often not sufficient. PAY ATTENTION! Also consider whether you want to leave more autonomy to participants or not. If you want to stimulate self-management, self-reflection, peer evaluation, ... you have to give less directions. Participants will be gradually made (more) responsible for their learning process over time!

3. Do you timely provide a summary of the whole (by yourself or by students!)? Think hereby of this:

- appreciation of everybody's contributions
- a list with essential points
- something valuable that you have learned/remembered from the discussion
- a question demanding any last comments before closing off the discussion.

4. Do you close off a discussion by referring on the one hand to a number of interesting interventions that were made after you wrote your summary and on the other hand the initial goals? Do you hereby take into account the following principles: recognisability, implementability, security?
Do you thank everybody who has participated?
Do you timely notify everybody when and where you have scheduled the next activity?

Tips at stage 5: (further) development

1. The following question is key: How can I help my participants to clarify, formulate and reach their personal (development) needs and necessities?

Tip: Try to sufficiently grasp the underlying meaning of each input!

2. Do you adjust your reflection tasks to the initial situation of your students? Neither too difficult nor too easy. Otherwise they will quit!
3. Do you draw up a plan together with your students that can help them with further professionalization (do you integrate this in the student follow up system?) ?
e.g. development needs/development goals/actions/evaluation
4. Do you reflect on your evolution as online coach? Determine for yourself 3 positive aspects and 3 aspects that can be improved concerning for example your management style, the content of the messages, the readability and user-friendliness of the messages, a topic you thought valuable in the context of the course.
5. Assess the quality of your interventions by means of the following tips:
 - Did you make agreements concerning what students can expect from you (information, guidance on demand, ...)? Did you clearly explain tasks and indicate time limits?
 - Did you make agreements concerning when and how participants can reach you?
 - Possible interventions:
Did you help taking decisions regarding the goals?
Did you give feedback?
Did you answer questions?
Did you help defining the next steps?
Did you coach and/or give tips?
 - Did you determine when the agreements could be considered as wrapped up?
6. (For yourself!) Do you identify and share sources with your colleagues that can help with your further development as online counsellor for students?

TIPS:

10 causes of possible silences:

- Failing infrastructure
- Failing software
- No clarity concerning why to go online
- No clarity concerning when to go online
- No clarity concerning where to go online
- No clarity concerning how to go online
- Me myself and I

- Catastrophic event in the family
- Workload

10 motivation strategies:

- Provide a valuable advantage to motivate students to participate
- Keep providing useful advantages such as:
Fun, a heightened sense of self-worth, sense of (professional) development, being involved, meeting other people (like-minded ones and others), receiving confirmation, the opportunity to gain knowledge, the opportunity to get in touch with the professional world

10 possible sources are:

- your organisation (2)
- the internet: search engines (1)
- places: library, book store, ... (2)
- people (colleagues, friends, you) (3)
- the news: TV, radio, newspaper, news websites ... and books (2)

Source:

Gilly Salmon, 2000, E-moderating, the key to teaching and learning online. Kogan page Limited (UK)