

## DISCUSSION SECTION

# The tipping point

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How delightful that Pam Moule (2007) has taken the trouble to challenge the five-stage model for e-learning! I would hate to think that the model has served to cut off any discourses about e-learning at a time of huge potential for the future of higher and professional education. No one benefits by any model being taken or used uncritically or out of context or culture. The challenges we face in providing exciting, worthwhile and effective learning through whatever medium grow daily. I would be so pleased if others could respond too, so that this model, first developed more than 12 years ago in a different era but since used extensively, could continue to be further examined for relevance and helpfulness.

The five-stage model is rooted in social constructivism as Dr Moule spotted, but more as an underlying philosophy of the world of knowledge than as an instructional or normative theoretical stance. The model was originally researched using the literature of the day and large-scale text-based asynchronous conferencing platforms (CoSy and FirstClass) in the first few years of the 1990s when virtual learning environments still weakly twinkled in the developers' eyes. My study deployed cognitive mapping methodology (Eden & Ackermann, 1998) and resulted in the emergent grounded five-stage model. More than 1000 students and tutors in distance-taught Open University Business School courses were involved. At the time they were offered free rein, through the software, to interact with each other in whatever ways they chose. I would find it all but impossible, perhaps unethical, to undertake such a study now so I am glad I did so at the time, over two years.

I suspect that the grounded nature of the model later resulted in its popularity as a device for understanding, since it felt 'natural' and educators and learners reported 'ah ha!' moments of recognition of their early online experiences. No *prior* theories of learning were 'applied', although they were later used to interpret and build upon constantly emerging understandings and uses.

The model 'caught on' when the first edition of *E-moderating* was published in 2000 (Salmon, 2000, 2004). My approach in that book was to describe one major application of it—to explain the competencies and training development of online university teachers and facilitators and all the different ways in which these can be promoted and

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experienced. That work continues still and more recently has been combined with a wide range of established face-to-face group work ([www.learninggroups.com](http://www.learninggroups.com)) in the service of learning. There have been many others in different contexts who have used and written about it, not only for e-moderating training but for student and community development.

For me, the five-stage model's popularity arises because it works as a framework for use that has enabled individual academics and course teams (often those working without the benefit of instructional designers) wishing to work online productively, to customise, personalise and adapt it to many purposes, contexts, countries and technologies rather than as a constraint. It's proved 'blendable' in its application to notions of communities of practice (see, for example, our use in a widescale community of expertise project: <http://uk.omnium.net.au/elks/base/>) and to growing notions of e-literacy among learners of different kinds. We now have the 'blessing' of virtual learning environments and of many more learning and knowledge technologies. There is also a range of new issues where the model is still providing a relevant backdrop, typically in conjunction with small-scale low-cost online activities (Salmon, 2002). For example, at the University of Leicester we are now applying it across disciplines from arts to science in campus-based and distance learning through our Higher Education Academy (HEA)-funded pathfinder project 'Adelie' ([www.le.ac.uk/adelie](http://www.le.ac.uk/adelie)) as well as in Web 2.0 research including blogs, wikis and podcasting ([www.impala.ac.uk](http://www.impala.ac.uk)). We have found, for example, that the model is useful in encouraging wiki use among small professional communities and in blending podcasting into virtual learning environments.

A key issue that is raised by the suggested 'ladder' approach in the Moule article is one that we are currently researching at Leicester through Tony Churchill's study, and one with which I am sure many readers of *ALT-J* are wrestling. To what extent and in what ways can we suggest, enable, encourage, promote (demand that) academic staff design for presenting and facilitating online learning? There is no evidence so far that there is an easy pathway between instructivist and constructivist approaches. Many courses report learners and teachers tipping into the abyss as attempts are made to move from information provision to knowledge generation. Can it be a choice, a step-by-step approach, or does it need evangelical support or lots of staff development? Can we explore this?

## References

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