

An e-moderating guide for voice boards

1. Voice discussions and the 5-stage model (Salmon, 2004)

Stage 1: Access and motivation

Students were provided with a log-in, a Wimba Voice discussion board user guide, a link to the voice board from the VLE and ongoing technical support. In practice, we found that throughout the study, students did not require much technical support.

The board opened up in a new window in students' browsers. The e-moderators sent out a brief text guide to using the board and students had three weeks to try out the board before starting on their tasks. Because the navigation and functionality of the voice boards are similar to the Blackboard forums, we did not offer any new training. Students had no difficulty with access.

However, some of the students' expectations were not fulfilled. They were not able to attach sound files or any other attachments to their posts; nor were they able to download each other's audio posts onto their hard drives to listen to them offline. The e-moderators had access to these functions as 'super-users'; it would have breached the university's security protocol to give students super-user status. The 'subscription' function (i.e., receiving an e-mail alert whenever another participant had posted something to the voice board) did not work and had to be disabled. These problems were unsolvable technically: students and e-moderators had to accept the platform's limitations.

Stage 2: Socialisation: preliminary voice-tivity (v-tivity)

Students were invited to participate in a preliminary voice-tivity (v-tivity). They were asked to share a little information about themselves on the voice board, and to say why they had chosen to participate in the pilot. This gave everyone the chance to sort out any technology access issues and to play with the technology, while also establishing rapport with one another before beginning the assessed tasks. Many students commented on how appealing it was to hear one another's voices at this stage, and that they felt more connected than on the text-based discussion boards.

Stages 3 and 4: Information exchange and knowledge construction

Four voice-based online v-tivities were prepared, following the five-stage model. The v-tivities were based on an e-tivity template from the Beyond Distance Research Alliance's 'Carpe Diem' workshops. Each v-tivity had a 'spark' to start the dialogue, an explanation of the purpose, a mini-research task for students to conduct and share via the voice board, and the requirement to respond, using voice, to two other postings. Students were also asked to reflect on their experience of using the voice board.

As an example, V-tivity 1 (see table 1) focused on the concept of World Englishes, and asked students to elicit a voice recording from someone else (a friend, colleague or student). The respondent was required to speak about their experience of learning and using English. Students then gave an audio commentary on the recording, analysing both the speech style and the content of the recording in terms of sociolinguistic criteria discussed in the module materials and the

literature. Each student was then required to respond to the commentaries of at least two of their peers, adding any further insights they could think of.

The requirement to respond to peers' contributions proved critically important in enabling a positive learning experience. The students' responses to one another's posts fostered further dialogue. They constructively built upon what other students had said in the thread, or in other threads. These responses were the key to enabling positive interaction between the peers.

Voice Board V-tivity 1 – World Englishes	
Spark	<p>Listen to one of the following World Englishes podcasts in the Module Materials section of Blackboard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Module 3, Part A. Unit 3: Matt, Jai or Sandra · Module 3, Part A, Unit 4: Sahm (Note: this podcast has been placed here as an illustration of bilingualism, but is also highly relevant to World Englishes)
Purpose	To show your understanding of the concept of World Englishes and related issues.
Step 1: The task	<p>Ask an Inner, Outer or Expanding Circle speaker you know to talk about their use of English for approximately 5 minutes. Record the speaker onto the V-tivity 1 Voice Board. (Click here to access it.) Then give a short commentary on what the speaker says, relating it to any of the issues covered in this unit. Your commentary can either be spoken (as a separate Voice Board message) or written (in the Voice Board text box).</p> <p>Your commentary should be a maximum of 500 words (if written) or 4 minutes in length (if spoken).</p> <p>Timing: To be posted before 25 April</p>
Step 2: The response	<p>Respond to at least two other people's postings, adding any additional insights you can think of to their commentary. Your response can be spoken or written. Please start by responding to someone who has not yet received any other responses.</p> <p>Timing: To be posted before 2 May</p>
Step 3: Reflection	<p>Please remember to reflect on the use of Voice Board for the v-tivities. You can click here to go to the Reflection discussion. This discussion board will be available throughout the pilot.</p>

Table 1: Education V-tivity 1

Stage 5: Development

The v-tivities were designed to provide students with food for thought for their longer assignments, which they wrote as individuals, and which encouraged them to pursue their own specific professional and developmental interests.

2. The voice board e-moderator (v-moderator) role

The first v-tivity took place over three weeks, and the second, third and fourth v-tivities took two weeks each to complete. The e-moderators explained the task at the beginning of each v-tivity and

at the end of each provided feedback: they did not want to direct or inhibit the students' conversations during the v-tivity.

In setting up the threads for the v-tivities, the e-moderators paid attention to the structuring of the voice board. According to e-moderator Gabi:

Unlike in written discussion boards, you can't just skim through all the contributions at a glance. You actually have to take the time to listen, and if a message isn't relevant to you, that can be quite frustrating. So it is even more important to set up the voice threads with clear headings, and make sure students post their contributions in the right, relevant place. It is also a good idea to ask students to write a very clear and descriptive subject line (rather than just re-using the existing heading for the thread, which appears in the subject line by default). For example, if your post contains a detailed explanation to help one person solve a specific technical problem they are experiencing with the voice board, this is unlikely to be of use to everyone, so a clear heading will help to avoid frustration.

The e-moderators supported individual students via e-mail, for example by reminding those who had not yet posted their contributions when the deadline was approaching and by answering specific questions. A student in Saudi Arabia was unable to access a website that had been used by several other students in v-tivity 3, and so he could not respond to his peers' commentaries. A special arrangement was made with this student for him to give extra responses in the final v-tivity to compensate for his 'absence' in v-tivity 3.

The e-moderators gave audio and text feedback at the end of each v-tivity. Both moderators chose to give the more academic feedback in written form and the more emotional feedback (praise and encouragement) in audio form.

In summary, one of the tutors summarised her role as a v-moderator:

As one of the moderators, my role at the start of the study involved designing the v-tivities, informing the students what to expect and what was required of them, answering students' questions about the way the voice board worked and its technological limitations (Stage 1), and providing a relaxed, pleasant environment for socialisation (Stage 2) while the students tried out the platform. During the v-tivities (Stages 3 and 4), we posted encouraging messages on the voice board, and afterwards we gave feedback to students on their performance. It was extremely helpful to have a co-moderator, as he gave me useful feedback on the design of the v-tivities, and we also discussed issues that arose regarding student participation and performance. For example, we agreed on a solution for a student in Saudi Arabia who could not access certain web sites, and we agreed to add more detailed assessment criteria to the later e-tivities to support students who were prone to 'rambling' in their postings. We also shared the workload, with each of us taking responsibility for moderating two of the four e-tivities. We decided to keep our contributions to a minimum during the v-tivities, partly so as not to inhibit the students, and partly because we didn't want to provide input which might impact unevenly or unfairly on the students' assessment results. In other situations, however, it might be more appropriate for the moderator to play an active role in leading, weaving and summarising the discussion, and challenging the students, on the voice board.

And a comment about the ideal length of post:

Although we (moderators) recommended 4-5 minutes as the maximum length of post in the pilot, students often went over this limit – the longest post was around 8 minutes. Interestingly, the longer

posts tended to contain more unsubstantiated subjective comments and repetitions. The students who made a greater effort to be concise generally also managed to include all the relevant points required in the task guidelines – within the 4-5 minute timeframe. One of these students noted the importance for him of writing his main points down to help him keep focused. I think in future I would challenge students to be more rigorous and more concise, and to try making notes in preparation for recording their posts. We have calculated that v-tivities require many more moderator-hours than text-based e-tivities, with all the concomitant resource implications for institutions. Without fairly strict limits on posts, the use of voice boards would simply be unviable.