

Experiences with international online discussions: Participation patterns of Botswana and American students in an Adult Education and Development course at the University of Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences gathered in a Masters of Adult Education course at University of Botswana (UB), where 26 students of the University of Botswana and the University of Georgia (UGA) engaged in discussions within the University of Botswana Learning Management System WebCT. Individual participation patterns in the discussions varied widely in this course. Based on variables found in the literature, student participation patterns were analysed – both in terms of quantity (messages read and written) and quality (status of conversational moves and level of critical thinking). Results show that culture or membership of a specific group did not seem to influence participation patterns. Gender was the major influencing variable for participation patterns in terms of both quantity and quality. Other influencing variables were course design, assessment of discussions and the presence of a learning community.

Keywords: *Online discussions, student participation, gender, Botswana, adult education*

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, eLearning was introduced at the University of Botswana (UB) as one strategy to transform teaching and learning. The appropriate use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at UB reflects a blended approach to teaching and learning, with asynchronous online communication tools, such as email or online discussion forums forming an essential part. Online discussions can be valuable in several ways: they encourage students to actively participate in communication (Im & Lee 2003; Edelstein & Edwards 2002); they can promote students' active participation and enhance students' learning (Fassinger 1995); they may lead to cognitive development (ibid); they allow students time to reflect before contributing to the discussion; (Markel 2001); they promote social interaction which motivates membership and participation in a virtual community (Oren, Mioduser & Nachmias 2002); and they can also be enjoyable for students (Williams & Purry 2002). The usage of online discussions is therefore promoted at UB to encourage students' participation in learning conversations within courses.

This paper analyses the participation of students in a Masters of Adult Education at UB, where nine UB students and 17 University of Georgia (UGA) students engaged in international discussions using UB's online Learning Management System, WebCT. This study sets out to identify the factors that influence student participation patterns, which have been anecdotally noted to vary widely. Student participation is analysed and compared both in terms of quantity (messages written and read) and quality (type of conversational moves and critical thinking levels).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current research suggests that there are several key variables, which are relevant to understanding the participation patterns of students in online discussions in blended learning academic environments. This literature review briefly reviews four of these: target group (in terms of gender and student type), course design (including assessment), access (to both technology and computer skills) and the presence of a learning community.

Target group

Gender

A detailed knowledge of the target group involved in the learning process is critical in order to use online discussions efficiently. In this study, two descriptors of the target group were considered – gender and student type.

Gender in particular is an influencing variable that has been heavily researched, with conflicting results and a lack of consensus to date. A body of research exists to suggest that the online environment offers women possibilities for active engagement. It has been found that women participate more actively and enjoy greater influence in environments where norms of interaction are controlled by an individual entrusted with maintaining order and focus in the group, e.g. where a teacher controls/moderates the interaction (Herring 2000). These findings are consistent with the results of several empirical studies, which attempt to assess the factors that influence participation in online discussions. Im and Lee's study (2003) on students' participation in online discussions (n=40) in a course from the cyber university of North Korea shows that the anonymity and the social distance offered by the Internet seem to allow female participants to be more active.

Other research suggests that gender differences can work to the disadvantage of women (Herring 2000). And a third group finds no differences in online participation on the basis of gender with, for example, no significant difference in number of postings or readings according to gender (Masters and Oberprieler 2003 in their study of first-year Health Science students (n=311) at the University of Cape Town); and no difference in gender participation (Oliver 2003 in his study at the California College of Podiatric Medicine).

Type of student: Traditional and non-traditional

This study involves Botswana and American students. Generally student populations differ widely in these two countries. In the USA there is a remarkable change in the student population that benefits from flexible forms of learning like eLearning. A study carried out in the USA by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCSE) reported that three-quarters of all undergraduates are 'non-traditional', defined by: delayed enrolment, attending part-time, working full-time, financial independence, having children, being single parents and lacking a high school diploma. (Oblinger 2003)

At the University of Botswana, the only university in the country, out of a total of 15 414 students, 12 620 (82%) are enrolled full-time and only 2 447 part-time (16%). Three hundred and forty-seven students currently participate in distance learning programmes (2%). Fourteen thousand six hundred and eighty-nine students are enrolled in undergraduate studies (95%) and 725 in postgraduate programmes (5%) (UB Fact Book 2004/2005).

Course design and assessment

Course design

One of the essential conditions for building effective online learning communities that the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (n.d.) has found in its examination of research literature is carefully establishing and planning online activities, including online discussions. Knowlton and Knowlton (2001) highlight the importance of instructions in helping students to focus on course content during online discussions. Edelstein and Edwards (2002) list as some of necessary considerations, the time students need to effectively participate in the discussions, how critical the discussion is to the achievement of the learning objective(s) and the need for guidelines for the level/quality of participation that is expected from the student(s).

Assessment

The integration of online discussions into course assessment is closely linked to the integration of online discussion in the overall course design. This is particularly true for blended learning environments, where learners do not rely solely on online communication methods to interact with their lecturers or colleagues. Assessment is widely acknowledged as a cause of increased postings. Edelstein and Edwards (2002) postulate the use of effective assessment methods to evaluate students' performance and knowledge integration, if the online discussions are to remain an integral part of the eLearning experience. Warren and Radda (1998) come to similar results and conclude that grading contributions was one cause of increased postings. Other authors, like Oliver (2003), are more critical about the usage of assessment as a means to increase students' participation. In Oliver's study a content analysis of postings in the discussion forums revealed that contributions were not strongly interactive and that students were simply playing the "game of assessment", making postings that earned marks but rarely contributed otherwise.

In their study, Masters and Oberprieler (2003) tried to promote student participation by following the philosophy of the Health Sciences Curriculum, that focused on problem-based learning, with no overt reward or punishment system, by drawing on methods, philosophy and content of the main stream, and asking questions that were important to students' course of study and structured in a way to encourage free and open debate and allowing unhindered debate. These strategies obtained large-scale and equitable participation across the student body despite the lack of immediate assessment incentives.

Access

The ease of access to technology and the level of student computer and information skills in developing countries are receiving diminishing attention in the international literature. This might follow Oblinger's (2003) description of the new generation of students, who grow up with ICTs and often more computer-savvy than their lecturers. The Internet and e-mail are used for schoolwork and research and online communication tools seem to function as a natural communication and socialisation mechanism. Developing countries face a different situation, with scarce resources and a lack of basic computer literacy. Limited access to technology outside the University campus and the lack of necessary computer and information literacy skills is a major limitation to broadening the reach of eLearning in Botswana. One of the major reasons for using eLearning at UB is in order to expose students to technology. (Giannini-Gachago & Molelu 2005) The associated lack of student IT skills can be one of the major barriers to equitable participation in online discussions (Masters & Oberprieler 2003).

Learning community

The presence of a learning community to enhance participation and the role of tutors' support feedback in promoting and moderating this community have also been identified as success factors in blended learning. Rossman (1999) conducted a document analysis of course evaluations in courses that used asynchronous learner discussion forums at Capella University in the USA (n=3000). Results showed that the primary requirements expressed by participants included feedback, either from a tutor or from colleagues. Oliver (2003) reports that the major factors for stimulating student participation were tutor enthusiasm and expertise.

The role of tutors are many: Lim and Cheah (2003) argue for more assertive roles of tutors for more effective online discussion, such as answering queries, providing feedback, keeping the discussion focused and posting conflicting views to elicit thinking or reflection in the conclusion of their study with preservice teachers. Im and Lee (2003) postulate a variety of roles for tutors to successfully promote online discussions, such as guiding students, providing prompt input and feedback, offering summaries of the discussions and providing resources to support discussions and thus enhance participants' learning experience. Nevertheless the tutor needs to strike a balance between encouraging participation through his/her input and letting students take the initiative. Pilkington, Bennett and Vaughan (2000), based on their experiences with strongly tutor-led online communication, suggest that the tutor should take a more hands-off approach and encourage students to express themselves more, to make communication more inclusive. From an analysis of a private chat session between two students in a one-to-one situation, students were more active and inquiring in a private chat than in a tutor-led chat on the same topic held later the same day. This indicates that when space for one-to-one peer-to-peer interaction is provided it is spontaneously and constructively used by some students. Oren et al. (2002) found that, as a result of five studies carried out at Tel Aviv University's School of Education, a decrease in teachers' involvement was an important factor in the development of social climate in virtual discussion groups. Social interaction developed more easily when students' discussion postings not moderated and when they used nicknames. These studies reassert that tutors are process facilitators, encouraging student-to-student interaction, but should not dominate the content discussion.

The site of study

For this project students from the Adult Education and Development course at UB and the International Adult Education course at UGA were linked through WebCT. The objective of this co-operation was to facilitate international student interaction about topics like globalisation, in a project initiated just before the start of the semester. The ensuing inadequate time for effective planning means that it was viewed by both institutions as an exploratory step and work-in-progress.

The Master of Adult Education Programme offered by the Dept. of Adult Education at UB

The teaching and learning methods in DAE 642 include lectures, group and individual activities, online research and intensive reading. Classes take the form of interactive seminars, involving discussions of topics in the whole class as well as in small groups and in online discussion forums. The participants meet once a week for three hours in one of UB's computer labs, where they have access to the Internet and WebCT (Youngman 2003).

International Adult Education is a fully distance online Masters course of the University of Georgia. Students, supported by a lecturer and an online tutor, are given mandatory weekly reading assignments and optional discussion topics (Hill 2004).

To facilitate the online discussions two discussion forums were set up. The main forum was a discussion space for introductory remarks and any other topics students wanted to discuss. The globalisation forum was dedicated to a specific discussion of globalisation. Later on the collaborative task forum was added, after experience showed that the group was too large to conduct efficient discussions (n=26). Students were divided into three sub-groups and allocated two weeks to discuss a given topic and to reach a solution in form of a summary of the discussion. (For examples of discussions postings see Appendix 1.)

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study follows a quantitative design with some qualitative elements. Data was gathered throughout semester two of the Academic Year 2003/2004. The sample of the study consists of nine students of the UB course and of 17 students from US (total n=26). Twenty-seven per cent (n=7) of the students were male and 73% (n=19) were female students.

Data were collected in the following ways:

- Participation in the online discussions was tracked using the WebCT student tracking tool, providing data about student levels of activity, for example, total discussion messages read and posted.
- Discussion postings and e-mails sent to lecturers were collected through WebCT.
- A focus group discussion was conducted with the students to provide insight into students' perception of the online discussions.
- US students provided additional feedback by e-mail to their tutor.

The data was analysed using the statistical package SPSS to determine frequencies. Independent Sample T-Tests and Pearson's Chi-Square Tests were executed to determine the significance level of the influencing variables (significance level $\alpha=0.05$).

The quality of the messages was categorised in two ways:

1. Following the study of Oliver (2003), who based his content analysis on the work of Pilkington et al. (2000), discussion messages were classified according to their status as conversational moves. This involves classifying messages as questions, self-contained statements or responses. This allows a more detailed investigation of how students act in an online discussion and a judgement of whether or not this engagement is particularly constructive. For examples of different levels of conversational moves in discussion postings see Appendix 1.
2. Messages were also classified according to their level of critical thinking, following a framework presented by Meyer (2004) for her study of 17 online discussions in two doctoral-level classes in educational leadership at the University of North Dakota. Garrison (2001) developed a four-stage cognitive-processing model that can be used to assess critical-thinking skills in online discussions: 1) triggering (posing the problem), 2) exploration (search for information), 3) integration (construction of a possible solution) and 4) resolution (critical assessment of a solution). For examples of messages coded for different levels of critical thinking see Appendix 1.

The researchers' main limitation was the small sample of students and the experimental implementation of the course that did not allow for a thorough planning of the study, especially the evaluation phase of the course.

FINDINGS

In this section the courses are analysed along the variables found in the literature review that influenced students' participation in online discussions: target group, course design and assessment, access to technology and level of computer skills and the presence of a learning community.

Over a period of 11 weeks the 26 students using the online discussions wrote a total of 234 messages and read 3 143 messages. On average a student wrote nine and read 121 messages.

Altogether, 217 posted messages were analysed in terms of:

1. Status as conversational moves, for example, question, self-contained statement or response;
2. Level of critical thinking along Garisson's critical thinking categories: triggering, exploration, integration and resolution.

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis based on the type of conversational moves of students:

Table 1: Messages per conversational move

	Frequencies	Percentage
Question	18	8%
Statement	31	14%
Response: answer Response: additional question Response: answer and additional question Response: statement	168	78%
Total	217	100%

Oliver (2003) cites Morris and others, who observed approximately three replies to every original message. In this study each original question triggered nine replies, which shows a high level of constructive engagement of students.

An analysis based on the level of critical thinking shows that the majority of messages were triggering or explorative messages. Very few students managed to integrate other students' contributions and none reached a resolution (see table 2).

Table 2: Messages per level of critical thinking

	Frequencies	Percentage
Triggering	45	27%
Exploration	104	63%
Integration	16	10%
Resolution	0	0%
Total	165	100%

Ten messages per participant over a period of 11 weeks does not correspond to what the literature would classify as high participation, but the individual students' participation suggests

interesting results (table 3).

Table 3: Number of postings per student

Postings written per student	Frequencies	Percentage
0–5	13	50%
6–10	6	23%
11–15	3	11%
16–20	2	8%
20 and above	2	8%
Total	26	100%

This table shows that a few students dominated the discussion. The two most active students posted 37 and 38 messages each, while the majority of the students (50%) posted five or less messages. Seven students (26%) posted more than the average of ten messages. Out of these seven students, four were Batswana and three were American students, five were female and two male. The next section tries to establish the reasons for the differences in students' participation patterns.

Analysis of participation pattern by groups

Both the Batswana and USA-based students in this exploratory intervention were predominantly 'non-traditional' students. The majority of UB students, for example, are part-time Master students (78%), work full-time (67%), have financial independence (67%) and have children (78%). US students are distance education students and are by definition 'non-traditional'.

Table 4 shows a comparison of the participation level of the two student groups:

Table 4: Usage of discussion forums for UB and UGA

Usage	UB	UGA
Messages written in total	116 (49%)	118 (51%)
Messages read in total	1 185 (38%)	1 958 (62%)
Messages written per student	13	7
Messages read per student	132	115

The analysis shows that the individual UB (Motswana) student was more active writing and reading messages than an UGA (US) student. An Independent Samples T-Test however did not show any significant influence on the participation level based on group ($p=0.614$ for messages read and $p=0.141$ for messages posted).

Table 5 shows the postings per student per group.

Table 5: Number of postings per student per group

Postings written per student	UGA		UB	
	Frequencies	%	Frequencies	Frequencies
0–5	11	65%	2	22%
6–10	3	17%	4	44%
11–15	2	12%	0	
16–20	0		2	22%
20 and above	1	6%	1	11%
Total	17	100%	9	100%

In both groups a small number of students dominated the discussions: One American student (6%) wrote 31% of all messages of the American group, while 65% of the American students wrote five or less messages (22% of all messages). In the Batswana group the distribution of messages posted is slightly more balanced, with one particularly dominant student composing 47% of all messages, but only 22% of the students composing five or less messages (8% of all messages).

Analysing the types of conversational moves and level of critical thinking in the discussion messages reveals the following results (see table 6):

Table 6: Type of conversational moves by groups

Type of conversational moves				Total
	Question	Statement	response: answer response: additional question response: answer & additional question response: statement	
UB	9 (10%)	15 (17%)	64 (73%)	88 (100%)
UGA	9 (7%)	16 (12%)	104 (81%)	129(100%)
Total	18 (8%)	31 (14%)	168 (78%)	217 (100%)

No significant difference can be found in the type of conversational moves between the Batswana and American students (Pearson Chi-Square Test revealed $X=0.455$), with Batswana composing slightly more questions and statements and American students responding more than raising questions. Similarly, an analysis of critical thinking levels shows that Batswana contribute more triggering messages, while Americans contribute more explorative and integrative messages (see table 7).

Table 7: Level of critical thinking by groups

	Triggering	Exploration	Integration	Total
UB	28 (38%)	40 (55%)	5 (7%)	73 (100%)
UGA	17 (18%)	64 (70%)	11 (12%)	92 (100%)

Analysis of participation pattern by gender

In total the female student population dominated the course with a percentage of 73% (n=19). UB (UB) female students accounted for 67% (n=6), UGA (US) female students for 77% (n=13) of the whole students' population. Table 8 shows the distribution of messages along gender in total and per student group.

Table 9: Usage of discussion forums according to gender by groups

Combined groups	Total number	%	Postings written total	Postings written (mean)	Postings read total	Postings read (mean)
Women	19	73%	187 (80%)	10	248 (79%)	131
Men	7	27%	47 (20%)	7	657 (21%)	94
Total	26	100 %	234		3143	

UB	Total number	%	Postings written total	Postings written (mean)	Postings read total	Postings read (mean)
Women	6	67%	83 (72%)	14	908 (76%)	151
Men	3	33%	33 (28%)	11	277 (23%)	92
Total	9	100 %	116		1 185	

UGA	Total number	%	Postings written total	Postings written (mean)	Postings read total	Postings read (mean)
Women	13	77%	104 (88%)	8	1 578 (81%)	121
Men	4	24%	14 (12%)	3.5	380 (19%)	95
Total	17	100 %	118		1 958	

This comparison shows that the female population was more active than her male counterpart – both in terms of writing and reading messages – in total, but also in their respective groups. An Independent Sample T-Test however did not show any significant influence of gender on the participation level ($p=0.288$ for messages read and $p=0.478$ for messages written). Out of the seven students who wrote more than the average of ten messages (see table 5), five were females (71%). For a detailed self-presentation of the seven most active participants see Appendix 2.

With regard to the length of postings, females show a slightly higher mean (132 words) than males (130), but an Independent Samples T-Test shows no significant influence of gender on

length of postings ($p=0.288$).

Analysing the messages along types of conversational moves, one can see interesting results in that a Pearson Chi-Square Test shows a significant influence of gender on types of conversational moves ($X=0.000$). Table 10 shows the results of the analysis. Forty-six per cent of all messages male students sent are either questions or statements, while only 54% are replies. Women's questions and statements accounted for only 22% of their messages, while 78% of their messages are replies.

Table 10: Type of conversational moves in messages per gender.

	Type of conversational moves			Total
	Question	Statement	Response: answer Response: additional question Response: answer & additional question Response: statement	
male	9 (16%)	17 (30%)	30 (54%)	56
female	9 (6%)	14 (9%)	138 (86%)	161
total	18 (8%)	31 (14%)	168 (77%)	217

This corresponds with the analysis of critical thinking levels according to gender. Table 11 shows that the majority of male postings were triggering messages (48%), while females posted mainly explorative messages (69%).

Table 11: Level of critical thinking per gender.

	Triggering	Exploration	Integration	Total
male	19 (48%)	18 (45%)	3 (8%)	40 (100%)
female	26 (21%)	86 (69%)	13 (10%)	125 (100%)

A Pearson Chi-Square Test however shows no significant influence of gender on the critical thinking level ($X=0.010$).

Analysis of participation pattern by course design and assessment

Since the plan to link Botswana and American students in the online discussions arose only shortly before the start of the semester, the international discussion was not explicitly part of the course design or course assessment scheme. Both courses, though, had planned to use online discussions. UGA – being a distance education course – relies heavily on online communication tools such as e-mail and discussions and the course outline clearly states discussion topics for each module of the course. UB allocates 10% of the total course marks to lifelong learning skills, including participating in discussions (defined as “frequency and quality of contribution to the WebCT Discussion Forum” [Youngman 2003]). The international discussions, though, were integrated in the course as the semester continued and were not specifically assessed, especially not for the American students. The UGA lecturer made participation completely voluntary since the international discussion was an additional activity.

Analysing the different forums, the amount of postings written per forum category are as follows:

Table 12: Messages as per forum

	Frequencies	Percentage
Main forum	78	36%
Globalisation forum	54	25%
Collaborative task forum	85	39%
Total	217	100%

Even though the task students had to complete (using the collaborative task forum) was not assessed, it triggered the highest amount of messages posted (39%), followed by the open forum. An analysis of the level of critical thinking based on the various forums (table 13), shows that the collaborative task forum triggered comparatively the highest amount of exploration messages, whereas the globalisation forum triggered the highest amount of triggering messages and the main forum the highest amount of integrative questions.

Table 13: Critical thinking level per forum

	Levels of critical thinking			
	Triggering	Exploration	Integration	Total
Main forum	12 (29%)	24 (59%)	5 (12%)	41
Globalisation forum	15 (30%)	31 (62%)	4 (8%)	50
Collaborative task forum	18 (24%)	49 (66%)	7 (9%)	74
Total	45	104	16	52

There was some negative student feedback concerning the task forum from students who felt they didn't have enough time and that instructions were confusing. An American student wrote, that he "would like to return to having open discussions where anyone can post anywhere and we don't divide up into groups. That way, we would be letting the 'market' work – people who post interesting topics will attract posters; others may not. When we are free to post to all threads, I believe the discussions are more lively and interesting." In the focus group discussion with the Batswana students, they pointed out that the task was confusing and they were not sure whether they had to contribute individually or as a group. They also stated that they preferred the open discussions in the main forum to the task forum.

Analysis of participation pattern by level of computer skills and access to computers

UGA students participated in an online distance education course that required intensive online communication. Therefore one can assume that all students possessed the computer skills needed to efficiently participate in online discussions. UB students have poor computer skills, limited exposure to computers outside UB, and in this case, were using online discussions for the first time. Extensive support was offered to these students, in the form of an orientation class on the use of WebCT, continuous support through members of the Educational Technology Unit during classes, support from the lecturer as well as peer-to-peer support between students. US students accessed the online discussion from home, using their own computers and bandwidth. A weekly session in the eLearning SMART classroom provided computer access to

the UB students. Outside of this scheduled class UB students could use the graduate computer lab and, if available, networked computers in their workplace. Only 38% of their messages were sent during the scheduled classes and 62% were posted outside the classroom. This implies that physical access to ICTs was not a problem for these students.

By contrast US students complained about problems accessing UB's Learning Management System WebCT. Two examples from the discussion forum posted by American student, state: "After much trying, I have finally made it to this site! Hooray!" and "Sorry for joining in on the discussion later than I would have liked, there were technical problems delaying this."

Analysis of participation pattern by presence of a learning community

Both the UB and US lecturers moderated the discussions. The intensity of moderation was rather low and consisted mainly of giving instructions, keeping participants on track for completion of tasks or giving cues to keep the discussion going. Most of the moderators' messages were posted in the task forum, where students had to actually produce results (table 14).

Table 14: Amount of tutoring according to forums in UB

	Lecturer UB	Lecturer UGA	Total	%
Main forum	2	3	5	20 %
Globalisation forum	5	2	7	28 %
Task forum	10	3	13	52 %
Total	17	8	25	100 %

It is unclear whether a virtual learning community and a social climate emerged through the international discussions. The feedback in the focus group with Batswana students, gave the impression that the UB students differentiated clearly between themselves and the "American" group. They were using words like "us" and "them" and only few could say that they had developed an individual relationship to particular American students. They admitted to relying on stereotypes, for example that all American students are middle-class and ignorant of African realities, that Americans are not affected by globalisation and therefore lack a general understanding. Both groups felt they had contributed more than the other. An African student said in the focus group discussion: "Participants did not contribute evenly, the UGA students commented on our points, but did not bring new items of their own." They suggested a need for more time to socialise and "get to know each other", despite the fact that one-third of the messages were posted in informal discussions (see table 15).

Table 15: Comparison formal and informal discussion messages

	Frequencies	Percentage
"Formal" discussion topic	151	70%
"Informal" discussion topic	66	30%
Total	217	100%

DISCUSSION

The objective of this co-operation was to give Batswana and American students an opportunity to discuss the topic of globalisation from their specific perspectives. The discussions started off energetically with high expectations from both sides. Students openly discussed topics that affected both groups, including HIV/AIDS, cultural identities, spiritual growth, environmental issues, problems in schools and family breakdowns. Over time the intensity of discussion decreased. In their closing messages some American students stated that the discussions had changed their ways of viewing topics like globalisation, for example, "I learnt a lot from all of you. I now see globalization in a different light", or "My experience on this discussion board was enlightening and interesting. These conversations helped me learn more about your concerns and to look for ways to solve the problems that concern us all." The focus group with Batswana students, however, showed that their expectations for the discussion were not met, and one American student wrote, that she "so looked forward to the opportunity to learn from these folks, but am saddened that they would not even respond to most of the people who posted, myself included. I can't blame our guys since most attempted to converse with relevant and meaningful discussions."

The participation level was low, with nine messages posted on average by a student. An analysis of the individual participation, however, demonstrates that some students were very active, with the two most active participants (one American, one Motswana, both female) posting 36 and 37 messages each. An analysis of the seven students (26%), who posted more than the average of ten messages, shows a slightly higher participation of Batswana students (n=4) and a higher level of female students (n=5) compared with 2 male students.

The discussions were generally constructive. Coding for Pilkington's conversational moves revealed that each question posed triggered approximately nine responses. The level of critical thinking based on Garrison's four-stage cognitive-processing model, however, remained mainly on the two lowest levels, triggering (27%) and integration (63%), while none of the messages reached the highest level of resolution.

Batswana students were more active, having written about 13 messages on average as compared to seven written on average by an American student. In both groups a few individuals dominated, yet the dominance in the African group was less distinctive than in the American group.

Gender was a significant influencing factor on participation pattern, with the female population being more active both in posting and reading messages and in writing longer messages. A Pearson Chi-square test revealed a significant influence of types of conversational moves along gender, with males asking more questions and posting more comments and women replying more. When we considered the level of critical thinking males sent more triggering messages, while women were more explorative and integrative. This is true for both groups. This is in line with Herring's observation (2000), that even if males tend to dominate online discussions, once a discussion is moderated and women feel safe, this dominance can diminish. It also supports research that shows that men tend to open discussions and state their opinion as facts or statements, while women tend to be more supportive by replying to messages.

While 10% of UB students' continuous assessment was based on their participation in the discussion forums, UGA students participated in the international discussion purely out of personal interest – without being rewarded for it. This is likely to explain why relatively few American students participated actively in the discussions. The collaborative task students had to carry out triggered slightly more participation, but did not generate a higher level of critical thinking as compared to the other forums. Student feedback revealed that they did not enjoy the

limiting nature of the forum and preferred the openness of the main forum. This corresponds with findings in the literature review, which state that assessment can trigger more participation, but needs to be integrated very carefully, without limiting students' perceived freedom of expression in the forums (Edelstein & Edwards 2002; Oliver, 2003).

Despite their low starting level of computer skills and their more limited access to networked computers, the UB students learnt to use the online communication tools quite rapidly with extensive support. Some of the American students experienced slow navigation within the course due to network problems at UB as well as technical problems accessing WebCT. Since participation in the international discussion was voluntary for the American students, they had limited motivation to overcome technological hurdles.

Lecturers provided limited moderation of the discussion to allow students take the initiative. According to some of the literature, this should help in building up a learning community (Oren, Mioduser & Nachmias 2002). The clear distinction in two groups – the American and the Africans – however, made it difficult to build up a feeling of belonging to one single group. Right until the end of the course, through feedback in focus group discussions and e-mails, the students talked about themselves as belonging to either the Batswana or the American group.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes an experimental international discussion, which took place in an adult education course. Students reported positive experiences and valuable insights concerning perspectives from the other country group on critical topics related to globalisation. In general, the quality of messages in terms of conversational moves was satisfying, but messages did not reach a high level of critical thinking, remaining mainly on the triggering and explorative level. The opening discussions provided a lively start to the course, with students showing interest in each other's perspectives and providing constructive feedback, but over time the intensity of discussion decreased. A detailed analysis revealed that the discussions were dominated by a few students (mainly females) and were unsatisfactory for some participants. Some students managed to develop personal relationships with selected participants of the other group, but cross-group relationships were rare.

Membership of a specific group did not seem to influence participation patterns. Out of the seven students (26%) who posted more than the average of ten messages, four were from Botswana and three from the USA. Gender was the major influencing variable: out of the same seven most active students, five were females (71%). Gender also significantly influenced the distribution of conversational moves in student messages.

The imperfect integration of discussions in the course design including their assessment was another factor that influenced participation patterns. Participation in the discussions should not be seen as an 'additional' burden, but as an integral part of the eLearning experience. This would also help to make participation more inclusive and avoid domination by some participants. One of the critical unresolved challenges is whether and how participation should be assessed and how activities in the forums should be structured, in order to increase participation levels and also promote a higher level of critical thinking (integration, resolution) without limiting participants in their freedom to discuss issues of personal interest.

In future courses of this type the learning community needs to be carefully moderated and supported to keep participants interested throughout the whole semester. This might include increased moderation and support by lecturers to balance out inequalities in the participation pattern of students, in this case, male students, who seem to need more encouragement to

participate. Allowing more time to socialise might also help in building an effective learning community.

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APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLES OF POSTINGS IN DISCUSSION FORUM

(Extracted from the main discussion forum)

Posted by African student 1

Subject: GLOBALISATION

GLOBALISATION IS A DEVELOPMENTAL CONCEPT, WHICH SEEKS TO UNITE THE WHOLE WORLD AS ONE VILLAGE. THE QUESTION IS – IS IT A VILLAGE WHOSE CULTURE IS BEING OBSERVED IN THE VILLAGE? IS IT NOT A CONCEPT TO DESTROY THE CLOSE ASSOCIATION USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH THE SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS THAT EXIST IN VILLAGES?

Type of conversational move: response (answer and additional question)

Level of critical thinking: exploration

Reply by African student 2

Subject: Re: GLOBALISATION

Hi Mr

I wish to comment on your observation of globalisation seeking to unite the world into a single village, since you end up confusing yourself with other questions there after. The issue here is not other peoples cultures being used over other cultures but it is a way of making societies of the world create common trends of doing things such that when you are in America you do not find yourself far displaced. For instance, since English language has been used as universal language information sharing has become very easy. Technology advancements have brought people close to each other even though they are in their various continents. Therefore, you can still hold on to your culture but globalisation is saying, Do not be confined, Be a citizen of the world not just an African or a MoTswana in a bottle.

Type of conversational move: response (answer)

Level of critical thinking: exploration

Reply by American student 1

Subject: Re: GLOBALISATION

Your comments reflect what we have learned about diversity and the ways we interact with people from areas of the world other than our own. A primary objective of globalization and or diversity should be to allow all of us to become familiar with the customs and cultures of others so that we can appreciate them – not necessarily change them. We are more likely to accept people when we understand why they behave as they do. Knowledge helps us overcome our fears about others and opens avenues of communication. We don't all need to be just alike; that would create a very boring world.

I'm not sure what your reference to a "MoTswana in a bottle" means, but I'm guessing you don't know what the Cherry Blossom Festival is either. That doesn't make either us of less important; it just shows that we are different because of the communities where we live.

Type of conversational move: response (statement)

Level of critical thinking: integration

Message posted by African student 3

Subject: The global paradox

The global paradox of the twenty first century is what we are facing today. Botswana has turned completely into the opposite of what it ought to be .The ministers are going around telling the

nation about privatisation without having consulted with us about the concept of privatisation. Our leadership is completely swept away by the western mentality of development. They do not even conceive the consequences of privatisation which in my home-made philosophy I see as brainchild of globalisation and imperialism and a sister of corporate capitalism. One big question is who in this country would be in a position to buy the hospitals lest we give that to the Europeans. Can Botswana really dream of privatising while people die every second as a result of the HIV/AIDS scourge? Whose responsibility would that be if the health care system would put it in the hands of the corporate bourgeoisie? Would we still shout and say "the illiterates of the 21st century would not be those who do not know how to read and write, but those who are not IT sound".

Type of conversational move: statement

Level of critical thinking: exploration

Reply by African student 4

Subject: Re: The global paradox

I CERTAINLY BELIEVE THAT THE CORPORATE POWERS OF THE WORLD ARE FOR WANT OF A BETTER TERM ABUSING THE NOTION OF GLOBALISATION AND RUNNING OVER WEAKER ENTITIES IN THE THIRD WORLD.

I STRONGLY DISAGREE HOWEVER THAT THEY ARE TO BLAME FOR THE BREAKDOWN IN OUR CULTURE. THAT IS UP TO US AS CITIZENS. OUR OWN PRESIDENTS SHUN TRADITIONAL GARB IN FAVOUR OF THE WESTERN SUIT AND TIE EVEN IN THE MIDST OF SUMMER!

WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN SHAKESPEARE INSTEAD OF WOLE SOYINKA, WE SHUN TRADITIONAL FOOD AND GLAMORISE WIMPY AND KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN AND WONT GO NEAR ANY LOCALLY PRODUCED ITEMS IF WE CAN FIND AN ALTERNATIVE IN A PRESTIGIOUS SHOP PREFERABLY WITH A MADE IN ITALY LABEL.

ON A GLOBAL SCALE THERE ARE IMMENSE POWERS AT WORK BUT NO ONE CAN REMOVE OUR CULTURES IN AFRICA WITHOUT OUR GIVING THEM PERMISSION TO DO SO.

Type of conversational move: response (answer)

Level of critical thinking: exploration

Reply by American student 2

Subject: Re: The global paradox

I think what you said was very wise and true. Do you have a free press in your country where people such as you can write letters to the newspaper saying what you think about these issues?

Reply by African student 4

Subject: Re: The global paradox

YES WE DO HAVE A FREE PRESS AND THERE ARE ALSO A NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE VOICED CONCERN OVER HOW THE LOSS OF OUR CULTURE IS IMPACTING ON AIDS. RECENTLY THERE HAS BEEN DEBATE OVER WHETHER THE RITUAL OF INITIATION CEREMONIES SHOULD BE REVIVED ALTHOUGH THAT MAY BE TAKING THINGS BACK TOO FAR!

WE ALSO HAVE A MINISTRY OF YOUTH AND CULTURE AND A FEW NGOS LIKE THAPONG VISUAL ARTS THAT PROMOTE LOCAL ARTISTS. UNFORTUNATELY

THOUGH, WHEN ONE MOVES AROUND THE CAPITAL THERE IS NO ELEMENT OF BOTSWANANESS, BUT A VERY WESTERN APPEARANCE. YOU WILL HAVE TO SEARCH CRAFTSHOPS AND VISIT RURAL AREAS TO GET A FEEL OF THE CULTURE AS THE CITY IS FILLED WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AMERICAN ACCENTS AND SNOOPDOG LOOKALIKES!

Type of conversational move: response (answer)

Level of critical thinking: exploration

Reply by American student 2

Subject: Re: The global paradox

Thank you for your reply.

Even though I live here in America, I do not always understand the appeal of some aspects of American culture, especially Snoop Dog! What is it about American culture that you believe Botswanan's find attractive?

Posted by African student 4

Subject: Re: The global paradox

I think in many developing countries, it is the glamorised image portrayed of America. All that is seen on TV, by the younger generation is the large living and fancy cars. No-one sees the homeless or poor in America on the media and thus in their minds, America is the ultimate.

Reply by American student 3

Subject: Re: The global paradox

I truly hope that the younger generation there does not think that the "Snoop Dog" appearance is what America is really all about!!

Reply by African student 4

Subject: Re: The global paradox

I think the younger generation has a selective perception of what they believe is out there in the "ultimate" society.

Reply by American Student 4

Subject: Re: The global paradox

This is also happening in our county. You must go to craft shows to buy things not only made in the US but also made in Georgia. They also cost more. They are better made though.

Posted by American student 5

Subject: Re: GLOBALISATION

Shouldn't we all try to achieve our own personal renaissance and find our own cultural identity? This is something I struggle with. I am a daughter of a Cuban exile. My father fled to the US in 1961 and became an American citizen years later. He married my mother, who was born in the US (Miami) but whose parents were also from Cuba. My family is very Americanized. I have never and may possibly never see the country or place my father grew up. I have relatives I have never met. My father wanted to get out of Cuba and never look back. He is a very patriotic American now. He fought in the US Army for 23 years. He wanted freedom and to protect it. Now I find myself very proud of him, yet at the same time, upset for leaving out so much of my rich culture.

Now that I have a daughter, I want to try to keep Cuban customs alive, yet I only know of so few that we practice. I am so Americanized, my language is a mixture of English and Spanish (just as

my diet). With intermingling of cultures, it is difficult to find your own identity sometimes. I am looking forward to these personal and country renaissances for us all.

Type of conversational move: response (additional question)

Level of critical thinking: triggering

Reply by African student 4

Subject: Re: Greetings from Athens, Georgia, USA

I think the average westerner and person in the developing world can start by teaching our children. The future generation is where our hopes lie. As parents we need to make a concerted effort to teach our children the value of life, to appreciate nature and to nurture an interest in the arts. We overemphasise the role of technology and our children are becoming anaesthetised against the real world. They cannot interact with one another without technology. Technology has its place but not as a baby sitter. Our schools in both worlds are guilty of ignoring environmental issues outside of tree-planting days that come annually.

We are guilty of neglecting areas such as the arts and agriculture. The reason I may seem fixed on the arts is that I believe art is an expression of the soul and is nurtured through artistic expression. Think of the power that art therapy has for depression and for abused children. If we go back a few generations we see the difference in peoples' outlook on life as education always involved some sort of craft. I mention agriculture because it is the basis of life and it is increasingly become the domain of multinational corporations. We cannot feed ourselves save by chasing after the Dollar. I am not advocating returning to a pristine life but believe as educators it is important to keep our children in touch with these issues and how they impact on us.

To emphasise the need to educate the future generations, I will cite what I read in a South African Magazine called 'Farmers weekly'. A French farmer was being interviewed about the impact of European agricultural subsidies in the Third World countries. His response? "What is the third world?" Hopefully the next generation will know.

Type of conversational move: response (answer)

Level of critical thinking: exploration

APPENDIX 2: SELF-PRESENTATION OF SEVEN MOST ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS

(Extracted from main discussion forum and student homepages)

Hello, My name is am (American Student). I live in Northwest Georgia, USA, and I teach adult literacy classes at Northwestern Technical College. My interests are humane education, political science, history, and environmental issues. I look forward to meeting students from your university and learning more about your countries and your cultures.

I am (African Student), a citizen of Botswana and of Zambian/British origin I therefore consider myself a citizen of the world! I am married with three children. I completed my first degree at the University of Zambia in Psychology and Economics in 1990 and briefly worked for a consultancy which involved a number of projects with development agencies and this is where my interest in issues of development arose. I moved to Botswana in 1991 and in 1997 studied for the Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling Education and a year later commenced work as a school counsellor at Lobatse Senior Secondary School where I am currently employed. I opted to pursue a Masters in the field of Adult Education as my experience in the senior school setting has taught me that many of the issues that young people are undergoing are a manifestation of national and

societal issues that cannot be tackled in the classroom or counselling room alone. My interest lays in learning and contributing to society as a whole as opposed to one segment of it. I also strongly feel that that as educators we are not providing youth and by extension the wider society with the correct 'tools' for true development and empowerment.

I am (African Student) from Tju/'ho in Gaborone. 'Tju/'ho' means 'home' in Ju/'hoansi language of San people. My parternal (Badisang) and maternal (Busang) links originate from Dikoloi and Difetlhamolelo respectively, in Molepolole. Badisang literally means 'empowering people to read', not herding cattle. Intonation becomes important in expression of the context. I am on the MEd (Adult Education) course 2003/4. I hold MA in Library and Information Systems; Post Graduate Diploma in Information Science from Universities of London and North London respectively, where I researched extensively on Publishing; Media, Indexing and Abstracting and Bibliographic Databases; a Bachelors Degree in English and Environmental Science; Diploma in Education; and Post Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies from UB. I'm a published literary fiction author who writes in English and Setswana. I have produced annotated bibliographies on Drug Abuse; African Folktales for Children; Botswana's Environment; and Women and Gender Issues. I am a book reviewer columnist for Flair Magazine. I have also published newspaper articles on environmental issues. My poetry has been published in a Millenium moment: Anthology of African Verse and in Mokwadi, Journal of the University of Botswana Writers Workshop. I was initially employed by the UB as a documentalist at NIR, but was later redeployed to the UB Library where I now work as one of the Customer Services personnel.

Friends regard me as a literacy and cultural activist. I work with budding and experienced creative writers, young and old. I have been contributing to simplified 'fictionalised fact' readers targeting new literate people for the past 10 years. I enjoy writing, reading and reciting poetry. I can't wait for another 'Live! Poets' session at Meropa Jazz Club where we meet every second Thursday of the month to render poetry and enjoy raggae music with our buddied Steppin' Razor. (Sadly Meropa has been closed and we now rely on Maruapula Music Room for venue). I belong to a number of associations, among others Chartered Institute of Library and information Science Professionals (CILIP, London), Writers Association of Botswana (WABO), Library Association, Somarelang Tikologo (Environment Watch Botswana), and Mmegi Publishing Trust
I treasure the people of Tju/'ho; Dikoloing and Difetlhamolelong. I respect all humanity.

(AFRICAN STUDENT), A CITIZEN OF THE KINGDOM OF SWAZILAND, WAS BORN ON 29TH OCTOBER 1964 IN THE MANZINI REGION. I GREW UP IN A RURAL AREA CALLED EMBELEBELENI AND DID MY PRIMARY AND HIGH SCHOOL IN THE LOCAL MISSION SCHOOL. I OBTAINED MY O LEVEL CERTIFICATE IN 1984. IN 1989 I OBTAINED A CERTIFICATE IN ANIMAL HEALTH THEN WORKED AS AN EXTENSION OFFICER (ANIMAL HEALTH) IN THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE IN SWAZILAND.

I OBTAINED MY DIPLOMA IN ADULT EDUCATION THOUGH PARTTIME STUDIES WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF SWAZILAND IN 1993. I THEN CROSSED OVER TO BOTSWANA FOR MY FIRST DEGREE IN ADULT EDUCATION IN 1995 AND COMPLETED MY PROGRAMME IN 1998. WITH MY FIRST DEGREE I WAS ABLE TO GET PROMOTED FROM EXTENSION WORK AND BECAME A LECTURER IN ONE OF THE AGRICULTURAL COLLEGES IN SWAZILND, TEACHING RURAL SOCIOLOGY AND AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION. AT THE SAME TIME I WAS APPOINTED AS A PARTTIME TUTOR FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE UNIVERSITY OF SWAZILAND, HELPING IN LEADERSHIP, PSYCHOLOGY AND EVALUATION COURSES. ON ANOTHER NOTE, AS A TRADE UNION ACTIVIST, I WAS ELECTED AS A NATIONAL PRESIDENT OF THE SWAZILAND PUBLIC SERVANTS UNION IN 2001, A POSITION I RELINQUISHED WHEN I WAS COMING TO BOTSWANA FOR MY M.ED PROGRAMME. I STILL WISH PURSUE THIS CAREER TO BE TAKEN TO HIGHER LIFE HORIZONS. WITH YOUR HELP I KNOW I CAN MAKE IT.

Hi everyone! My name is (American Student) and I work in the IT field for an area hospital in Georgia. I have no children, but have two dogs that are treated like children, and am married to an international man. I am from Thailand. I look forward to interacting with everyone as we explore the effects of globalization, socialism, and capitalism among so many other topics imperative to our field of study.

Hello everyone, I'm (American Student) visiting from the University of Georgia in the USA. I'm a Master's student pursuing a degree in Adult Education. Just a little background info on me... I'm 27 years old, married for 2 years, with no kids yet! I have a BA in Psychology and work at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, as an Academic Advisor for the Education department. I enjoy the outdoors, running, going to the movies, and writing. I'm also an avid animal lover. I'm looking forward to this opportunity to learn from you all!

My name is (African Student). I am a Botswana national. I was born on the 15th of October 1976 in Lobatse. I am not married. I did my primary and part of my Junior secondary in Lobatse and Kane respectively. For my secondary education I went to Gabion and Gnats respectively in 1994 to 1996. In 1997 to 1998 I went for my national service (TireloSechaba) in Sorrowed village. Upon completion of TireloSechaba I subsequently joined the teaching service in Malaysia as a Primary school teacher. In the same I was absorbed by University of Botswana to study Adult Education. I finished my BED Adult Education programmed in 2003. I immediately enrolled for MED Adult Education. I have been a student of adult education for the past seven consecutive years of learning. I am currently enrolled for full time MED Adult Education. I am also the Committee Secretary for Botswana Adult Education Association (BAEA). I also work for Emang Basadi (local women Ngo) as the Political Education Officer. I have written a number of papers on gender. Such include; Women and gender based violence, Women participation in Politics. Women and entrepreneurship in Gaborone and lastly Participation of Women in Vocational Education in Botswana. My academic interest is on Gender and Political Economy of Adult Education. Besides academics I like farming and also camping. I am also a Christian.

I must confess that Adult Education is my intellectual home. It is through adult education that we have a classless, pure and just society through different kinds of social reform found in the discipline of adult education. Adult education conscientizes and liberate individuals from illiteracy. I would love to welcome everybody to seek refuge in this home and drink and a spring water from the pure chambers of social reform.

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