

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM and INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

International cooperation in Distance Education which is a very popular phenomenon today can be explained by the rise of social constructivism in social sciences, namely Education and International Relations, for the purpose of this paper. Social constructive approach in International Relations with its emphasis on building social bridges via learning common values and social constructivism in education highlighting learning communities, pave the way for institutionalization of cooperation in Distance Education. Multi-cultural, multi-linguistic models that adopt educational materials according to local cultures and demands, serve as a good mean of meeting educational needs globally. Information and Communication Technologies ease interactions and lead to a global flow of information, some advantages of which are emphasized in this paper.

Keywords: Social constructivism; distance education; globalization and distance education; European Union and distance education.

INTRODUCTION

According to the social constructivist theory of International Relations (IR); social interactions and communication are crucial in the international system (Adler, 2002: 99). Constructivist scholars, use the concept of cognitive development, to study "common values" and their dissemination. This is also the starting point of institutionalization of values that develop into cooperative behaviours in the international society. In this framework, international cooperation is studied as a sociological concept, based on "learning". Institutions are important in this process, since they affect interest and identity changes. According to this sociological approach, common values and interests are learned through interactions and are accepted as common norms. This is how identities are formed vis-a-vis the institutions. A good example for this network can be the European Union's cooperative programmes and projects conducted by the different Directorates of the Commission (Checkel, 2003: 352-54). As cooperation frameworks among states and non-state entities increase in number, common cultural values develop and pave the way for further cooperation. Information and communication technologies ease this interaction and namely "globalize" every field in life. This in turn, accelerates the process for building common institutions. The aim of this paper is to evaluate international collaboration in distance education, on a social constructive theoretical basis.

One of the main critiques in the IR theory is that concepts like "identity, interest and value" can not be studied through positivist approaches. The subjectivity inherent to these concepts is by their nature. They develop through social interaction and are relative to different people and communities. They are in a way what people think of them and where they see themselves. Therefore institutional studies involving these concepts, necessitate the acceptance of subjectivity. The social relations among state, non-state entities are integral to international relations as well. They are a part of the international system where states are not the only actors. This understanding has fostered constructivism in IR (Christiansen, Jorgensen and Wiener, 1999: 530-539). When common rules, norms, institutions are studied; communication thus language comes to the fore. Since constructivists are interested in the formation of communities, they are interested in identity and value changes that develop through communication. At this point, the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is important as an accelerator of interactions; easing, helping build bridges. These

developments have underlined the effects of globalization. International applications of distance education, closely interrelated with the developments in ICT, exemplify socioconstructivist collaboration in IR and socioconstructivist learning in education at the same time.

ICT, GLOBALIZATION and DISTANCE EDUCATION

International collaboration and integration initiatives have increased in the framework of organizational cooperation at different levels and in different issue areas. The European Union (EU) and cooperation in its different policy areas; projects for both member and non-member states are examples of how ICT ease and facilitate interactions (Wendt, 1994: 384). By the same token, education proves to be an important mean of achieving this type of interaction. Here, distance education via ICT, is the appropriate mean of reaching communities far away and creating relations with them despite long distances and difficulty of traditional methods of education. It is then possible to be in contact with masses and share information, values and world view.

Globalization and effects of ICT specifically the Internet are criticized for cultural monopolization due to hegemony of certain states mainly the US and the UK. The critics have certain arguments that have to be taken seriously in the name of democracy and equal rights of peoples. Since ICT are an important political mean and education can be a powerful political tool; it can be used both for assimilation and/or for developing the ones in need of such opportunities. Though there are two sides of the coin, it should be stated frankly that ICT narrow gaps and brings understandings closer. People are closer to different societies' values and have more to share. Collaboration in distance education is possible as a result of development of this common understanding. But this process works both ways, in this study it is underlined that international applications of distance education can serve to further connect peoples and help promote new common values.

European Union's Distance Education Policy and its Partners

Distance education is convenient for institutional frameworks, organizations that provide platforms of international cooperation. In the case of higher education for example, there are international networks of e-learning databases. The EU is a good laboratory for collaboration in distance education. The organization is the locomotive and main facilitator in the political sense, initiating the collaboration programmes. Besides, there are many state/non-state entities, bureaucratic/professional groups that take their parts. Though the Commission is mainly in charge of evaluating and tracking the individual projects; there are other organizations that it cooperates with, in the name of matching correct partners and finding the right experts and institutions. An example may be the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) that acts as a network and meeting place for the open, distance and e-learning community in Europe (<http://www.eden-online.org>). EDEN aims to facilitate Europe-wide projects and assists the European Commission and EU member states with recommendations in their action plans for enhancing the integration of ICT in learning. After the accession and integration of the Central and Eastern European countries with the EU, for example EDEN had a particular mandate to facilitate the East-West cooperation in distance education. European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), European Association for Distance Learning (EADL) are other two networks EDEN and EU cooperate with. Therefore, the European Commission especially its Directorate General of Education and Culture, works in contact with many organizations and networks at the international level.

Apart from being a large and profitable market, distance education provides political advantages to the Union. It is a mean of initiating common values with the communities to be integrated with, such as the example of Central and Eastern European countries. All European summits (especially from Lisbon 2000 on) have declared the importance of education in creating the "European knowledge society" (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/higher/higher_en.html).

E-learning and lifelong learning are also part of this target. In 1999, ministers of 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration for the realization of a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in line with the Lisbon strategy of the EU that calls for a stronger European economy (<http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>). In order to achieve these aims, multilingualism appears as an important pillar. The EU is founded on unity in diversity, diversity of cultures and languages (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/com596_en.pdf).

Multilingualism enables people to work/study in other member states and strengthens integration; besides other advantages such as making people more open to other cultures, improving their cognitive skills and developing learners' mother tongue skills. Distance education serves as an important mean here again, for language education, supporting multilingualism. The meaning of "unity in diversity" is that integration develops in the atmosphere of a common identity though people keep their own cultures, use their own languages which mean their identities. Meanwhile, ICT ease sharing information and these easily accessible environments bring people together.

The European Commission has made many investments in projects like Lingua, Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci; for training teachers through courses on the CDs and the internet. For example "Lifelong Learning Programme" is evaluated as an opportunity for language education. These projects and programmes are important channels for especially the non member and candidate states for developing ties with the EU and initiating collaboration. Thus, distance education projects provide opportunity and excellent venue for both sides; the EU and the outsiders for a dialogue and warming up. The EU member states have agreed in Lisbon, in 2000 to establish an effective internal market to encourage research and innovation and to improve education aiming that the EU becomes the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by the year 2010. Through the "Education and Training 2010" process, the EU members have agreed on common objectives. In this framework, the improvement of language skills has been identified as a priority (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/com596_en.pdf). As regards research and development in multilingualism; the Information Society Technologies Programme includes utilization of new information and communication technologies in order to overcome language barriers. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Programme is on issues related with social inclusion, exclusion; identity, political participation, cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding.

This general information on EU's vision and policy of distance education, reflects the appropriateness of the field for international collaboration. Having distance education as an effective mean in mind, the EU has in cooperation with EDEN investigated how to develop the distance education networks in Central and Eastern Europe. During the accession and integration phases of these countries to the EU; feasibility studies have been made by EDEN for distance education in Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (EDEN, 2005: 5). The EU's TEMPUS and PHARE funds were used for these studies, in cooperation with EADTU. The institutional cooperation exemplified in these projects regarding the integration process of the Central and Eastern European countries is interesting for they support the social constructive approach of harmonization of values and institutions in international relations and emphasize the role of distance education besides other means of education and integration. "Learning" is important for building bridges but distance education through the use of ICT is a very convenient venue for those that would like to meet for regional /global cooperation in education.

With an eye to the appropriateness of distance education in language education to masses, it can also be evaluated as a cultural bridge. International distance education is a political tool as well since it affects peoples of different countries and creates ties among them. It even creates a kind of dependency. Though education as an area of collaboration seems to be of low-politics when compared with security and economics e.g.; analyzed with a critical eye, its link with values and identities makes it strategic. Propaganda which

is a foreign policy instrument, is closely related with the use of the media (Holsti, 1988: 202). Distance education via new communication technologies especially the Internet, provides an opportunity and may well support this instrument. It's a way of affecting the world public opinion though limited to a specific target audience. Though an educational project may not intentionally carry any political aims, apart from the vision of the bureaucrats shaping it, international projects affect at least the reputation of the countries involved.

CONSTRUCTIVISM and COLLABORATION

Distance education has increased the opportunities for international collaboration as regards educational projects. The target of "knowledge-based society" points to individual expertise in the sense that individuals create knowledge in a truly interactive net and the subject diversity of information have again social and political implications (Sagorra, 2005: 6). Such a perspective, increases the importance of joint efforts of educational research and development because borderless exchange of information bring societies closer and raises issues like global interaction, participation and democracy. Access rights and ownership of communication environments become important issues then.

According to the constructivist approach in education, participants are the creators of the contents. Life-long learning and e-learning support this understanding since participants visiting the websites add value to these sites (Sagorra, 2005: 7). The difference of constructivism from the traditional instructional models is that, in the former, learners have to be active and construct knowledge themselves. Thus knowledge is subjective and dynamic; tutor is a guide. In such an approach, student becomes part of the knowledge society (Bodil and BJORKE, 2005: 10-11). This so-called knowledge society is globalized in the case of international distance education. In this connection collaboration as regards distance education is important. The student is part of a knowledge-generating community and tries to solve cases and learn with others. The use of ICT and environments such as virtual classes are opportunities making geographical barriers, borders meaningless. To an extent though, they can also erase the social barriers (Bodil and BJORKE, 2005: 13). This is because; minorities, women, the poor (especially in case of traditional distance education where high technology is not used) and students from different countries may have access to the same educational materials. E-libraries, on-line resources have made access to data very easy and distance education takes the students to campuses, classes and office hours of their tutors, by clicking on addressed websites, in and out their countries.

One of the advantages of globalization is that educators can use technology and form partnerships to re-design the customized education materials, in order to meet specific needs of the participants (Wellburn and Claey, 2004: 81-82). In this way participants can enjoy their right to control the use of their knowledge and overcome the negative side effects of globalization. This is how "one-size-fits-all" understanding can be avoided. In general, globalization leads to standardization of materials for geographically dispersed learners, in the name of efficiency. But educational content must be designed to meet diverse needs (Wellburn and Claey, 2004: 83). Collaborative learning across different cultures by community-based learning, in place of individualistic models, can be tracked by international regulatory frameworks for quality standards and meet local educational needs as well.

International Distance Education

Distance Education has become international long ago. The International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) was founded in 1938 in Canada. It was then renamed as the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) (Moore and Kearsley, 2005: 257) (<http://www.icde.org>). The Council is important for networking and offering environment for strategic partnerships via regular meetings for member institutions. Through the Internet, institutions can enroll distance learners from different

countries and experiences can be shared. By the same token, distance education as a mean of transferring knowledge from developed to developing countries has been utilized by international organizations like the World Bank and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (<http://www.worldbank.org> and <http://www.unesco.org>). Both have distance education policies as regards international development portfolios and also offer distance courses of their own. In order to cope with the gap in knowledge, developing countries can “adapt” the knowledge available in richer countries via organizations or through direct dialogue with educational institutions. The development of communication technologies has decreased the costs of transferring knowledge. The important point here is the emphasis on translation and adaptation of information, for local needs, while benefiting from these opportunities. A statement from the 1999 Human Development Report is that 80% of websites are in English and less than 1% of the world’s population reads English (Moore and Kearsley, 2005: 282). UN Development Programme Human Development Reports indicate the magnitude of the global digital divide (<http://www.undp.org/reports>).

Constructivism in IR and Distance Education: International Collaboration

According to the constructivist theory of learning; learner is an active participant and develops “knowledge” through his own perception and meaning making (Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland, 2005: 167). Opposed to objectivism, learner is not a passive recipient of information. He can manipulate, interpret and make sense of his environment, using his experiences. In this way he can construct an understanding to help him achieve his goals (Duffy and Kirkley, 2004: 6). Through these glasses, cognitive information processing means that the learner is the processor of the information and shapes the learning process. This is the same mentality why the social constructivist approach in IR emphasizes learning and social human relations for changing perceptions and behavioral changes as regards cooperation in IR. For the constructivist-based pedagogical models; e.g. the learning communities offering collaborative (conversational) learning environments such as discussion forums, computer conferencing, video teleconferencing and virtual chat; they serve as platforms of social learning and ease attitude changes (Dabbagh and Banna-Ritland, 2005: 170-178). Socioconstructivist and sociocultural approaches to learning argue that human cognition is very sensitive to social and cultural contexts. According to Lave, “...learning is recognized as a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice; the process of changing knowledgeable skill is subsumed in processes of changing identity through membership in a community of practitioners and mastery is an organizational, relational characteristic of communities of practice” (Gunawerdana, 2004: 144-145). Developing an identity as a member of a community motivates learning and becoming skillful. In this understanding, cognition is “individually owned but socially shared” (Visser, 2003: 804). Thus the international use of distance education environments can support learning “international cooperation” and expanding institutionalization of common values. Taking socio constructivism into consideration, in both cases, community building is necessary for interaction and collaboration. New educational models offer such communities. Distance education networks are growing domestically and internationally because of the “global” education and information infrastructure, availability of qualified human resources, access to education by different economic levels and the opportunity for lifelong learning (Williams, Paprock and Covington, 1999: 7). The way the world communicates, shares information thus the way people teach and learn have changed drastically.

CRITIQUE OF INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION APPLICATIONS; WITH AN EYE TO INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

There are two sides of the coin: Besides the comfort of using the information technologies and benefiting from distance education; the digital divide, meaning the IT needs of the developing countries is a barrier for those who are in real need of education and sharing information with the developed world. Apart from the critiques and anxieties of cultural assimilation by the countries that own the technologies, economic and technological

assistance becomes an issue. For transnational collaboration in education and building international learning communities the divide has to be overcome. Internationally competitive education means that the learners can work in international and multi-cultural environments, further broadening their horizons (Latchem, 2002: 153-155). This is important for individual and societal development. Collaboration and adaptation of learning environments in accordance with the domestic culture are the keys to eliminating these fears of assimilation.

Another contribution of collaboration is support given to peaceful coexistence of peoples by building multi-cultural and multi-linguistic societies (Sakamoto, 2003: 2). International distance education is among means turning the international system into an international community, but has to be utilized carefully and ethically. It is not idealistic to believe that the ICT and specifically the Internet ease the development of a global community. At the same time, realists from non Anglo-Saxon countries (non US and UK scholars and practitioners) are right to be suspicious e.g. about the dominance of English as language in the Internet (Ebuchi, 2003: 21-22). This dominance is among the indicators of the power balance in world politics and can be evaluated as the final stage of the American hegemony after the end of the Cold War. This is what the realist "hegemonic stability theory" of the IR field would argue. Hegemonic powers have always tried to overcome the distance barrier between the core and the periphery states (Evans and Nation, 2003: 782). Today new ICT have won this quest against time and distance.

The argument in this paper is that, besides these power related evaluations of "realpolitik", the virtual world offers many opportunities to be wisely benefited from. Distance education is one of these. The inequality of access to ICT is the new phase of the gap between haves and have-nots (Ebuchi, 2003: 23-31). It is mainly economic. But the cultural and linguistic concerns about the use of the Internet or international distance education in general are ethical too and most of the time are related with the state policies as well. Government support and institutional structures in a country are important for international cooperation in education. Globalization has eased collaboration by bringing values closer. But this cultural homogenization has to be balanced with the heterogeneity and richness which necessitate a multi-cultural approach and respect for rights of societies protecting own cultural values. The less developed may generate their own models of ICT applications and utilize distance education tools the way that would fit their conditions best. They can adapt contents and make translations. The global environment offers opportunities to benefit from, it is not a monster to run away. The negative effects of globalization can be minimized; technologies can also be used for refreshing people's own values.

The same is true for distance education, it is important for meeting educational needs that can not be met through traditional ways. Education is globalizing like every other field and ICT is a bridge for "interaction"; but it is not a one-way road, cultural interaction works both ways. Thus the use of ICT in distance education, making international collaboration easier, is among advantages of globalization. Through collaboration and projects of international organizations like the World Bank and UNESCO, right to education can be enjoyed. The fundamental human right to education is specified in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "...Everyone has a right to education...Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the UN for the maintenance of peace..." (Visser, 2003: 796). Distance education when well-equipped can serve these aims. It can be used to solve the problems of the less developed societies. Easily accessible and multi-cultural approaches shall of course better serve global concerns of under development including the educational needs.

CONCLUSION

New ICT, especially the Internet means freedom to reach information, freedom to publish information. For spread of ideas like democracy, human rights ICT play vital role and are important in the new governance models in politics, where non-governmental organizations play increasing roles. These developments accelerate multi-culturalism. E-mails, discussion groups, but especially "learning communities" provide environments where people learn from each other. In this way, they learn to be tolerant to other cultures and even better learn their own values while comparing them with others (Ozkul and Ulukan, 2003: 42). Taking these advantages into consideration; problems of educational globalization have to be overcome, such as bringing regulations, standards like the accreditation and quality issues, showing sensitivity to ethical concerns and better motivating the e-learners (Mason, 2003: 744-745). Today's multi-cultural learning environment (online or on campus) accelerates the number of web-based programs and this shows the magnitude of the growing demand.

One of the repercussions of globalization; increasing number of non-state entities in IR is effective here; since these organizations are dealing mainly with distance education programs with or w/out government support. Of course universities as the first users of technology have welcomed distance education ahead of many institutions and offer domestic and international online courses. The increasing number of open universities is academically an advantage. Because distance education is not just a product for the global market; its pedagogic and quality related issues are very important. The learning communities that the ICT can create and international collaboration are very useful for higher quality distance education products.

Global web-based learning models are spreading mainly from the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and Europe; influencing the trends, causing IR to be influential in decisions and institutional structures of cooperation. International education has already flourished and necessitates multidisciplinary approaches to construct better contexts for learning. In this way, technology can be a better tool in the hands of the academicians. Social constructivist theories of IR and education well support and explain the increasing magnitude of international cooperation in distance education. This collaboration in education via the utilization of the ICT is a good model of socially shared and learned common values; leading to further institutionalization of cooperation.

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