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On-line, Off-campus but in the Flow: Learning from Peers in Development Studies

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ABSTRACT

Development workers studying at the graduate level benefit from exposure to the great variety of cultures and worldviews. In the Australian National University's Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) program, peer learning is giving current and future development workers in the field and in the classroom the chance to exchange knowledge, experiences and ideas that bring theory into sharp relief.

The program offers flexible and blended delivery options, and has recently focused on using online discussions to nurture the exchanges among on- and off-campus students. Students working alone in development settings as diverse as remote Australia, East Timor, Egypt or Afghanistan can thus interact with their peers in the program to compare their day-to-day experiences of social development, conflict, justice, exploitation, gender or environmental issues, as they attempt to apply theory to practice.

Using survey feedback from MAAPD students, this paper examines how the online discussions supported peer learning and provided opportunities for more shared engagement in critical thinking about issues of concern.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2002, the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) program at the Australian National University (ANU) has provided current and would-be development workers with the opportunity for advanced study of relevant topics. The program—which overall includes more than fifteen separate courses focusing on community development—offers a general program or specialisations in 'gender and development', 'conflict and development', 'society and environment', or 'indigenous policy'. All students undertake core courses in social mapping and social impact, at least one advanced course in their specialisation, and several electives.

In educational terms, the program takes a strongly constructivist approach, with students encouraged and enabled to negotiate meaning about current development issues in the context of their own experiences, and assessment focussed on real-life development problems (Mishra, 2002; Sumner and Tribe, 2004), with a strong emphasis on academic rigour (Sumner and Tribe, 2004). In particular, there is emphasis on students engaging with the diversity of cultures and worldviews they may encounter.

The lecturers in the MAAPD—all of whom are practising development practitioners with experience across the Asia-Pacific region—encourage student-led learning activities focused on comparing practice with theory, contrasting cultural contexts with theoretical paradigms, and facilitating information exchange. Students are provided with extensive opportunities to engage in structured, critical reflection on their learning, and to share this reflection with one another, with an expectation of significant peer learning, defined in this context as ‘the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher’ and with little focus on the acquisition of particular facts and information (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999, p. 413).

The nature of the MAAPD student cohort naturally supports such peer learning: most students are Australian or international mature-age professionals either already working in the development field or keen to increase their range of skills pertinent to such work. Many of the students have first-hand experience of a wide range of development contexts, which enables them to contribute to discussions in a highly critically-informed way. Different teaching moments may thus see very different people taking centre stage on the basis of their knowledge or experience: a female Indonesian student may be well qualified to lead a discussion on gender issues relevant to development, while a Pacific Islander may take the lead in explaining concerns about the impacts of global warming on indigenous traditions. This diversity in who constitutes an ‘expert’ from topic to topic facilitates ‘reciprocal peer learning’, where ‘students within a given cohort act as both teachers and learners’ (Boud et al. 1999, p. 414).

Cookson (2002) identified the fastest-growing education sector as postgraduate education delivered via the Internet to working men and women, and this is certainly true for the MAAPD. Already half the enrolled students are off-campus development workers, in countries as diverse as Uganda, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, East Timor, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, Colombia and Panama, as well as in remote Australian indigenous communities. The program offers flexible and blended delivery options, so that it is available in fully on- and off-campus modes. The students see clear benefits (Kilby and Beckmann, 2008):

[After] 18 years of professional and volunteer work in the field of development, it was a dream come true to have such an opportunity [to study] amid the very busy schedule of fulltime work and the absence of similar options in Egypt. (Off-campus student)

... flexible delivery of the MAAPD enabled me to apply the learning directly to my work [in Papua New Guinea]. Had I taken time off to attend full-time study in Canberra, I would not have had this opportunity to apply principles and practices from the coursework. (Off-campus student)

The MAAPD courses aim to provide learning outcomes as attainable by students off-campus as by those on-campus, and to provide rich learning experiences for both groups. Elsewhere we have described how the program’s flexible delivery is allowing off-campus students to benefit in a way that not only enriches their career functionality and long-term prospects, but also enhances their day-to-day activities as development workers in the field (Kilby and Beckmann, 2008). This paper more specifically explores how the program’s flexible delivery and assessment is ensuring that the peer learning opportunities so carefully

constructed in on-campus teaching are now being fully extended to off-campus students.

ONLINE DISCUSSIONS AS A TOOL FOR PEER LEARNING IN THE MAPPD

Obviously, central to the full integration of off-campus students is the use of accessible technology that allows for effective study online (Volery and Lord, 2000). However, Kimball (2001) explains why, contrary to the emphasis often suggested by funding, teaching strategies are actually far more important than technology in terms of the quality of learning in distance education. To support off-campus learning communities effectively thus requires lecturers to adopt new approaches to managing the teaching and learning process, and, in particular, to seek out the qualitative advantages of distance technologies. Kimball (2001) thus rephrases the question 'How can we engage learners via distance learning technology?' as 'How do we engage learners in more meaningful learning activities?' (p. 28).

This was the guiding principle behind a recent redesign of MAAPD courses carried out with the support of ANU's Flexible Learning Project (FLP). For on-campus students, a focus of the MAAPD teaching sessions are discussions, group work, simulations and role-plays, all designed to facilitate reciprocal peer learning. The FLP review sought to ensure authentic and equivalent peer learning experiences for both on- and off-campus students through a more flexible and student-focused use of educational technologies, acknowledging the constraints and realities for off-campus students working in developing countries where online options may vary greatly in availability or quality (Marginson, 2004).

Online forums were identified as one way of replicating these in a more flexible mode, to try to recreate the immediacy and energy of face-to-face engagement (Meyer, 2003). Although most MAAPD courses had previously used email and online discussion tools for this purpose, there was evidence that the online dialogue that arose subsequent to classroom discussions sometimes served merely to reinforce the isolation of off-campus students. The design review therefore recommended formalising the classroom discussion formats into more focused online forums for all students, and integrating the opportunities for peer learning more securely within the online learning/assessment process. In doing this, we were aware that creating effective opportunities for peer learning in online environments requires care in creating groups, structuring learning activities, and facilitating group interactions (Graham, 2002).

Rather than using the relevant tools in ANU's current learning management system, WebCT 4, these new forums were hosted on individual password-protected websites on ANU's online collaboration environment Alliance (based on open-source Sakai software). By using Alliance, we were hoping to differentiate clearly for the students a learning environment that was equally relevant to both on- and off-campus students, where the emphasis was on an exchange of ideas among students rather than a flow of information from the lecturers. (Alliance was also more attractive and user-friendly than WebCT.)

Funaro and Montell (1999) reported that the most influential variable affecting learning with asynchronous online communication tools is careful planning to

ensure effective integration of such tools into the teaching/learning process. Empirical research also suggests that the use of 'threaded' discussions increases the amount of time students spend on course objectives and on reflection (Meyer, 2003), and that meaningful discourse is improved by facilitator guidelines, evaluation rubrics and posting protocols (Gilbert and Dabbagh, 2005).

Our redesign therefore included all these features, with an educational designer working one-on-one with individual MAAPD lecturers to develop online discussion formats, assessment tasks and marking criteria/rubrics appropriate to each course. Notably, the formats were quite different, based on individual course and lecturer needs: some were highly structured with groups of four to six students and specific assessment-focused objectives, while others were guided conversation opportunities open to all 60 or so enrolled students. The focus in all cases, however, was to facilitate peer learning, that is, to limit lecturer input and to emphasise the role of students as knowledgeable and influential in starting and steering discussion processes.

COLLECTING FEEDBACK

The redesigned courses were first taught in Semester 1 (February to June) 2008. An action research model was adopted in the design and implementation of the online discussions in all courses, the key research question being 'Are the online discussions providing meaningful peer learning experiences to both on- and off-campus students?'

Both lecturer and student feedback was sought informally throughout the semester. More formally, in May 2008 (i.e., near the end of semester, when most online discussion tasks were complete) an anonymous online survey (comprising mostly open-ended questions) was conducted of all enrolled MAAPD students (n=120). Some 38 students responded (32%), across all MAAPD courses, of whom 16 (42%) were full-time and 22 (58%) part-time, and 26 (68%) were on-campus, 11 (29%) off-campus, and 1 (2.6%) both (i.e., enrolled in different courses using different modes).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Engaging and Integrating

Most students were satisfied with the way the online discussions had been incorporated into the teaching and the impact on learning, although there was an interesting diversity of views (especially depending on the course, and hence the structure of the online discussion). Off-campus students were generally very positive:

Unequivocally FANTASTIC! I am doing three courses (and working as well) so I can really testify how great it is to be able to do some self-paced online work.

As an external student, I find this system really great as I feel more a part of the course and enjoy the opportunity to hear from people from such a broad range of backgrounds and those posted all around the world. I think this system allows greater flexibility in learning, and is inclusive of all types of students in different environments.

The online discussion is a really good place for topic discussion, especially for off-campus students. It also provides a space for both on- and off-campus student to exchange ideas, case studies, extra reading materials, news and personal experiences, which I consider as essential for our learning. The online forum created a virtual community for students to extend their participation and take their knowledge beyond general classroom activities and I think it is fantastic.

Like Maor and Hendriks (2001), we found students' communicative styles ranged from the formal to the more informal fairly consistently. Given the range of language backgrounds among the students, it was important that conceptually difficult ideas were communicated clearly. A few students presented an excessively formal and 'academic' voice which alienated—at times even intimidated—students from a more practical or applied background. This emphasised the lecturer's important facilitative role in modelling the appropriate level of formality and language while keeping the discussion focused, informative and academically rigorous.

Grouping and Facilitating

Maor (2007) has noted that the cognitive conflict encountered by individuals coming together in online learning environments means they are continually 're-constructing' their learning experience, which itself requires continued interaction and negotiation within the group (Pallof and Pratt, 2005). Just as in the classroom, one variable that had an impact on the quality of the online discussions was the structure of groups in terms of the relative responsiveness of individuals. As Kimball (2001, p. 37) explained, "in face-to-face situations, people can quickly form small groups by making eye contact and moving physically near each other [whereas] it can be very difficult and time-consuming to self-organise into teams or small groups in an asynchronous environment."

In the courses with online discussions based on small groups (four to six individuals) working together for the semester, lecturers had assigned students at random. Notably, students who failed to contribute tended to have a negative impact on the whole group, whereas in the larger groups, as in the large classroom, the presence of 'free-riders' was not so noticeable. As an on-campus student taking several courses noted, "There are people who post and there are people who don't post. Full stop."

Kimball (2001) suggested two relevant strategies: self-selection by "letting groups define their mission or letting people switch groups" (p. 37); and good facilitation i.e. "paying attention to what is happening in your group as distinct from what you wanted or expected would happen ... you must detect where members are now and work with that energy to move in the direction you need to go" (p. 36). This parallels the relative importance students placed on the influence of lecturer facilitation on their learning. MAAPD lecturers are reconsidering their facilitation approaches, and using intervention strategies to re-assign active students in dormant groups to more active groups, to maximise individual peer learning experiences.

Widening and broadening

Unequivocally, the online discussions gave off-campus students unique access to the knowledge and experiences of peers working in a range of international contexts on the development issues being studied:

I was able to learn about experiences from all over the world, especially those from Australia and the Asia Pacific region on which I had very limited knowledge. (Student working in Egypt)

A typical example was the student working with indigenous Australian communities, who reported being very reassured when the online forum demonstrated that students in community contexts in other countries were also struggling with the same kinds of issues. Similarly typical was a student in Nepal who described the 'precious opportunity' of being able to discuss daily work issues relevant to the course with student peers online. Moreover, issues contentious in some cultures—for example the veiling of Muslim women—could be addressed in more depth when students from different cultures had opportunities to explain the cultural and rationale.

On-campus students also benefitted from the breadth of perspective:

I loved it. I loved hearing from people on assignment overseas/regional Australia. It was a great system.

I enjoyed most from those off-campus students who live all over the world. They bring in field experiences which we do not have. Learning what people do in another culture is always fascinating.

Interestingly, several on-campus students found that the online discussions actually enhanced their interactions with on-campus peers: the forums not only enabled the sharing of experiences and information from different contexts but also enabled a human connection to be made. For on-campus peers, therefore, the discussion online often spilled over into face-to-face engagement in class tea-breaks or 'down at the pub':

In class [after online contact] I hear comments like 'Hey, I enjoyed reading your posting last week', 'Thanks for your comments on the discussions'. I would say the same thing to others.

As a counterpoint, however, some less confident on-campus students found the online discussions provided a more sheltered entry-point into the world of debate:

[With] English as second language, I'm shy to speak up in tutorials or lectures. But with online discussions, it's more comfortable for me to express my point of view.

Structuring and enhancing

Nevertheless, the outcomes were not universally positive. A few on-campus students were markedly less enthusiastic, as they found the online engagement an unnecessary burden given they were coming to class:

I can see absolutely no connection between my learning and the online discussions. I appreciate online discussion may be useful to external students, as it presents perhaps the only opportunity to interact with other students and the lecturer. However, the situation for on-campus students is very different: we attend lectures, have active discussions in class and can talk to the lecturer. ... To me, online discussions feel very forced (i.e.: undertaken because they are assessable) and time-consuming (much more so ... than to ask a question in class) for little educational value. (On-campus student in course C)

Although this kind of response was few and far between, it was a useful reminder of some students' tendency to "structure their learning activities, as far as they are able, to optimise their assessment performance" (Houghton, 2004), although this disadvantaged those looking more for the peer learning opportunities:

... some people didn't participate—or once they had, didn't follow up their arguments because they felt they had already posted enough to get their marks.

It also confirmed, as we had anticipated, that the structure, level of facilitation and assessment of the online discussions—which differed across courses based on lecturer's chosen approaches—strongly influenced students' feelings of success in being able to learn from their peers:

I definitely preferred the more structured discussions ... the weekly [Course A] and fortnightly postings [course B]. I was less fussed about [course C where] it was ... unclear exactly how much was enough ... it was harder to get interesting dialogue going because there were simply too many opportunities to post. (On-campus student)

.... Online discussions ... assist my learning ... we can post considered responses. I feel I learn more from students than I did at in-person tutorials, as written posts are more thought-out. (Off-campus student, previously enrolled for some MAAPD courses on-campus)

Overall, the feedback emphasised the better outcomes when the online discussions involved significant structure rather than *ad hoc* commentary, when there were incentives for follow-up discussion by students, and when facilitation was positive and responsive. The best outcomes—high-quality sharing and vigorous and informed debate—were more common when individual discussion groups were relatively small (6-8 people) but had access to 'view' other groups. Conversely, larger groups were more likely to lead to student frustration and a feeling of discussion 'overload' (Kimball, 2001, p.35).

Many students, like the lecturers, found the quality of online discussion, with its more reflective and equitable opportunities, can easily surpass the expected standards of in-class discussions. Not least, the greater possibilities for all students to have their say and respond to others made it easier for peers to engage one another in different viewpoints:

The liveliness and openness of the discussions were great. Had me re-reading and re-thinking lots of my positions. (Off-campus student based overseas)

Sharing and learning

Like Maor and Hendriks (2001), MAAPD lecturers have found that informal and friendly exchanges among on- and off-campus students gave rise to 'a feeling of collegiality ... helping to ease the anxiety of geographical and psychological distance, and leading them to a sense of a community'. When isolated development workers are able to share their field experiences in a virtual classroom with their peers, the practical benefits of sharing and learning are clear:

I presented [my] field work, such as reforestation alongside women's empowerment, in online conversations. (Student in Panama)

It is often the little issues that arise from discussions and general chat that fill in gaps in what we are doing, and make a difference to the overall work that we as practitioners are able to provide. (Student in Papua New Guinea)

CONCLUSION

With its focus on flexible and blended delivery, the MAAPD's recent emphasis on online discussions is clearly supporting the peer learning opportunities among both on- and off-campus students. Students working alone in development settings as diverse as outback Australia, East Timor, Egypt or Afghanistan can thus interact with their peers to compare their experiences of conflict, social justice, exploitation or gender issues, as they attempt to apply the theory they are learning to their day-to-day practice.

Current debates on the relationship between knowledge, learning and development make it essential that development workers personally experience the "crucial role of practices in knowledge creation and learning and...the importance of conceiving learning as a social process" (McFarlane, 2006). The ANU's MAAPD program is ensuring that its peer learning focus, so successful in the classroom, can now be experienced by its many off-campus students. Like McLeod, Dawson and Berg (2002), who incorporated online chat into clinical field placements, we have found that well-designed online discussions not only "negate the tyranny of distance and the associated feeling of isolation", but also allow graduate development workers to benefit significantly from the cultural and worldview diversity of their peers.

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