



INTERNET-BASED EDUCATION FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE: A SOUTH-AFRICAN CASE

Louise Frykheden



Since the year 2000 Linköping University (Sweden), together with the University of the Western Cape (South Africa), the University of British Columbia (Canada) and the University of Technology (Australia) offers an educational programme called The Intercontinental Master's programme in Adult Learning and Global Change (60 ECTS credits), which engages students with varied language, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The programme offers global perspectives on learning in cross-cultural environments by providing insight into globalisation and cross-cultural collaboration for practitioners within the field of adult learning. One of the South African teachers describes one of her personal aims as regards the course: "I want them (the students) to leave the course with a firmer and more confident sense of themselves as global citizens with a more nuanced sophisticated understanding of what that mean. So where am I in the world? That sense of actual real connection to other people in other countries, which they might be able to use in different ways".

The programme is taught through distance learning, part-time over a period of two years. The dominating working forms and types of contact between teachers and students are electronic communications via flexible web-based distance learning tools (such as virtual classrooms) and e-mail. The concept is to give all students a fair chance to take part in the education on equal terms. However, the results of this programme, a Sida^[1]-financed research-project, as derived from ongoing studies, have shown that there is a large variation in student's participation and communication, and that participation and communication require very different things for different students. Studies suggest that the socio-culturally situated identities of the participants influence not only their presence but also their absence, and that the technological obstacles are much higher for the South African students than for the others.

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Before leaving for South Africa to develop my field research, in November 2003, a couple of questions occupied my mind. I knew that the South African ICM-students had to handle technological obstacles such as direct access and time-space-related problems more than the others did. I knew also that there were conflicting priorities between studies and personal and social conditions and demands. But what I did not know was whether these obstacles for participation and communication were heavier for the female students than for the male students. There was nothing about gender in the then existing reports. My prime interest was to find out if gender within Internet-based education was an issue or not. I also wanted to know if Internet-based distance learning did create real opportunities for female South Africans. The overall question was: is Internet-based distance learning, which enables more flexibility for the individual, a useful tool for higher education for women?

I was also curious of how the intercultural perspective of the course was received by the South Africa students. Globalization can be many things: but what does it mean for an African student, born and raised in a country with an extra-ordinary history of racism and a closed society against the rest of the world?

Research about women and Internet-based education points in different directions. It could be a better option for women who usually are silent in the classroom or unable to go to regular classes due to domestic responsibilities. For those reasons, some scholars emphasise Internet-based learning as especially suitable for women. However, on the other hand, it is proven that women do not have equal access to Internet, and some studies have showed that women suffer from loneliness in cyberspace more than men do.

When interviewing both students and teachers in the field, three with teachers and eight with students, I noticed an ambivalent and sometimes gender-blind approach. I do think that some of the informants felt this to be an important issue, but not as important as those of class and race. Since the racial and social problems are so present in South African society, gender is regarded as a subordinate issue. However, in the interviews, the teachers seemed to rethink the matter. One actually said: "It is embarrassing to admit but I actually don't know if our female students have a harder time following the course. We have, up until now, been gender-blind. We have had big issues, like the North-South-perspective, to deal with, and lost the gender-perspective along the way".

On the question of how to balance daily life with studies, the interviews gave unexpected answers indeed. Women as well as men revealed the problem of keeping the pace, and the fear of falling behind, and the female

students I interviewed seemed as determined and focused as their male counterparts - maybe even more focused, knowing that discipline is crucial for the outcome of their studies. In the interviews, I never put the gender issue up-front to start with. Instead, I asked if the informant could identify a group or groups of people (in terms of age, geography, gender, race, religion or whatever) that might have to face more problems than others when attending an Internet-based course. Often the informant thought of race, and therefore social status, but not gender. However, when asking about their personal situation, how they balanced life and studies, the gender differences started to appear between the lines. Women described how they strive to make sure that their studies do not interfere or disturb for their families. Most men, on the other hand, talked more about problems that were job- and/or ICT-related. And one of them was fortunate enough to have full back-up from his (also working) wife.

Even though all students found it difficult to balance studies, work and family life, none of them wanted to change to a traditional classroom. The convenience of being independent in terms of time and space was put forward in several interviews as necessary for even considering taking the Master course. If South African, adult women do have access, Internet might be their only solution in order to have access to further and higher education.

Therefore, for the ICM students I met, the advantages of Internet-based learning did exceed the disadvantages. One advantage mentioned, that could only be accounted for students from a Third World country, was the access to First World researchers and teachers. South Africa's higher education system has its shortcomings, and qualified teachers are scarce. Internet can provide high quality education for those who otherwise would not be favoured by it.

Most of the students seemed to have equal access to Internet, but more female than male students talked about uncertainty towards the media. They talked about their fears prior to the course's start and used words as "affinity", "anxiety" and "stress". One of the reasons that women are less familiar with computers and Internet, according to the informants, is that they have less time for ICTs, since they must devote time to other social and domestic tasks.

The ICM programme defines a number of aims in its syllabus. For instance, as a student you are supposed to learn how to learn and teach globally, use global connective technologies, understand globalization discourses, develop cultural sensibilities and sensitivities and develop an equality perspective on learning. But what is globalization for a South African student? What does cultural sensibility mean? Why do students

sign up for this course and what are their expectations?

The reason for signing up for the ICM was not so much the global outlook, but the possibility to combined work with education. Nevertheless, it was interesting to see that the global dimension of the course seemed to make more sense and widen in importance once the communication and cooperation had begun. For some, the globalization dimension was mentioned as a very important reason for signing up, but -as I saw it- for unselfish reasons. The South African students simply do not see themselves working abroad or teaching in an international context after they graduate. Instead, they want to adopt best practices from the First World and implement them on a local level. They want to participate in the development of their country, to build a knowledge-based society out of the young democracy in South Africa. For the South African students at the ICM, the local-global relationship was something positive.

The other dimension, the North and South-divide, was indeed present for most of the students and they seemed to have ambivalent feelings towards it. Language, for one thing, is an issue, for all students at ICM. But when the informants spoke I felt they talked less about lack in communication due to grammatical/linguistic problems, and more about language as a cultural expression. They also mentioned the “academic-pragmatic”-polarization as a cultural difference. Several S-A-students saw themselves as pragmatics, opposed to “those” academics (in the North?).

Many talked about the richness of intercontinental communication and learning from other cultures. But there were also feelings of inferiority shining through, which inhibited the communication and the exchange of knowledge. The fact that communication on the web is done through the written word and not orally was a challenge expressed by several. One example was a student who, instead of asking the teacher or students what they meant by their contributions, questioned her own capability to comprehend and preferred to discuss matters with a fellow student from her own culture. Another student talked about of South Africa and its people as being “10 years behind”.

Internet as a neutral space where participation and communication take place on equal terms is highly questioned by some scholars. However, in fact many of the students actually felt quit comfortable and equal in this setting. This was also confirmed by the ICM evaluation according to which 86% of the students felt encouraged to participate by the instructors and found that they had the freedom to proceed according to their own interests (Watters, 2004).

The view of the Internet as an equal playing field was in fact the reason

why almost everyone said they addressed their fellow students and teachers equally, almost surprised by my question. But again, informants seemed to have a one-way perspective on global learning. They talked a lot about taking in knowledge, experiences and best practices from “the others” and implementing them at home. Despite the teachers’ ambitions to create a meeting point and a learning-environment where everybody’s experiences could be used as learning material, students talked less about what they can offer to the First World, about the South African contribution in the process of building knowledge. Here, again, the feeling of inferiority shines through. One student actually criticized the course for being too Eurocentric. She would give Selfe and Hawisher (2000) right in their criticism of Internet as being a too culturally reductive and Western-orientated. Even Castells (2001) himself talked about “the culture of virtuality” as a construction by the constructors.

Overall, I think that the South African students enrolled in the Master, and especially the female students, consider Internet-based courses as a possibility for them to educate themselves and be a part of the global world. They were very much aware of the challenges involved, but the obstacles they anticipated did not prevent them from signing up. More importantly, they were also determined to stay on the course.

I believe Internet-based education is one good example of empowerment though networking and mutual learning. But there are still questions left, and finding answers to them would deepen the understanding of this phenomenon, especially from a South African point of view.

[i] Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

Louise Frykheden is Public Relations Officer in the External Relations division of Linköping University in Sweden. She holds a Master’s degree in Communication Studies from Gothenburg University, also in Sweden. This article is based on her Master thesis in Communication for Development “Voices of South Africa - Internet based education for globalization and communication” (Malmö University, June 2004) louise.frykheden@liu.se

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