**Factors that contribute towards students' successful participation and completion
of the online intercontinental Masters Programme
(Adult Learning and Global Change)
at one of the partner universities.**

COLETTE ANN FEBRUARY

A research paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Magister
Educationis in the Faculty of Education,
University of the Western Cape.

Supervisor: Professor Shirley Walters

June 2007

**Factors that contribute towards students' successful participation and completion
of the online intercontinental Masters Programme
(Adult Learning and Global Change)
at one of the partner universities.**

Colette Ann February

Key Words

Higher Education

South Africa

Adult Learners

Part-Time Study

Academic Success

Persistence

Online Learning

Abstract

This research sets out to understand the participation experiences of a selected group of adult learners at one of the partner institutions of the online intercontinental Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change.

The study offers an understanding of adult learners' experiences of success and persistence in relation to online study within a higher education context, and also offers insights into what may constitute successful learning communities.

In relation to the literature, student perceptions obtained via the study largely affirm what 'successful' can mean to a group of postgraduate adult learners in an online learning environment. This study also contributes to the ongoing conversation in terms of the unique experiences of students in one particular cohort of the programme.

Declaration

I declare that "*Factors that contribute towards participants' successful participation and completion of the online intercontinental Masters Programme (Adult Learning and Global Change) at one of the partner universities.*" is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Colette Ann February

June 2007

Signed: ……………………………………

Acknowledgments

UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

Contents

pages

Chapter 1   -   Introduction

My research interest and aim is to understand a particular set of experiences of a group of adult learners of the intercontinental Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change (ALGC) programme[1]. As part of the South African cohort, I have come to know the ALGC programme as the 'ICM' programme, where the intercontinental dimension of the master's programme has always been foregrounded. In particular, I would like to explore student perceptions pertaining to what counts as successful participation on a course such as this: a postgraduate programme in an online learning environment.

The appeal in probing adult learners' experiences of success and persistence of online study at Masters level resonates with my interests at two main levels: as an adult learner currently participating in an online postgraduate programme, as well as an adult education practitioner with an academic interest in exploring certain dimensions of what counts as success for adult learners, who study in similar higher education contexts. Although the study's focus is successful student participation and completion, the participatory dimension is necessarily foregrounded in this research because the present cohort, who commenced in August 2005, is yet to complete the programme as a whole. In relation to the literature, my probing could contribute towards insights and strategies for best assisting adult learners in the successful participation and completion of their studies within similar learning environments.

Part of this research project aims to explore perceptions about what may serve as motivators for academic success for a group of adult learners who are currently participating in an online programme. While considerations pertaining to successful completion are important to the conversation about academic success, this study intends to focus on the participatory dynamics and interactions within the online environment that may contribute towards successful participation during the programme. As an adult learner and educator, I am interested in building a picture from respondent information about the kind of adult learning principles that may be at

---

[1] The intercontinental master's programme in Adult Learning and Global Change aims to offer global perspectives on learning in a cross-cultural environment, and encourages reflective and strategic practices pertaining to globalisation. Attached as Appendix 1, additional information can be found about the course design, as reflected on the information sheets of two of the partner institutions, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa and the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada.

1

work during participant interactions. I would like to get a better sense of the kinds of learning, supporting and sharing that are valued by adult learners in participatory situations.

In a previous study (February, 2003)[2], my own area of investigation as an adult learner, or mature student, probed the benefits of an adult education course offered at university level. In this regard, a selected group of adult learners was invited to share their experiences of the course in the following respects: how had they experienced this course as being most beneficial to their needs in the areas of personal growth, career advancement and academic achievement.

For the purposes of the present study, it has been interesting to consider whether factors pertaining to personal growth, workplace and academic advancement have served as motivators for success among a different group of adult learners, most notably the South African Cohort 5 of the ICM programme. How they may have used these motivators to excel, in and of themselves and to support others, may yield important information concerning how and why successful participation happens.

The intercontinental masters programme is my first experience of online study. The online nature presents an added, and exciting, dimension, and I am also keen to explore to what extent adult learners have experienced this aspect of teaching delivery as part of their learning success.

As a part-time adult learner myself for more than ten years, I was also interested to know the extent to which adult learners may have experienced the pressures and constraints associated with the blend of online and part-time study, and what strategies for success they are able to offer others in this regard.

The literature consulted for the purposes of this research has made me aware of the many metaphors in use with reference to students participating in online learning - indicative of the ways in which researchers are trying to name and understand the kinds of participation and identities of students who are studying online. The notion of respondents in this study as 'learning citizens' has a distinct appeal and relevance, as the data presentation and discussion in Chapter Four will illuminate.

---

[2] "What counts as useful knowledge? Perceptions of a group of Adult Learners in Higher Education." A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy, Colette Ann February, February 2003. Faculty of Humanities, University of Cape Town.

Delanty (2003) puts forward the view that there are rich societal and cultural benefits in linking learning to citizenship:

"The advantage of theorizing cultural citizenship as learning processes is that it shifts the focus of citizenship way from the fact of membership of a polity onto common experiences, cognitive processes, forms of cultural translation and discourses of empowerment. The power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and cultural processes is an important dimension of citizenship as an active process, " (2003: 602).

In my research study, the participation stories from respondents present an opportunity for me as participant-researcher to examine the ways in which the ICM programme may have been a moment for one South African cohort to exercise what Delanty has outlined, as well as to explore the extent to which 'learning citizen' is one appropriate naming for some of the identities revealed.

UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

Chapter 2   -   Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Two broad concepts have been selected for the purposes of my exploration into the factors that may have contributed towards online students' successful participation and completion of the ICM programme. The notion of what a successful learning community might look like, firstly, as well as the perceptions from students of their roles and contributions towards such an environment, are of central interest to my exploration. The second major focus is an exploration into perceptions about successful participation and successful learning, and in this regard two subcategories, pertaining to the nature of participation on the programme as well as the concept of academic success, are identified for further probing. The literature review speaks to the key themes and related elements outlined above.

2.1   Successful Learning Communities

Referring to the large sample size of approximately 2000 students studying online in the summer 2004 semesters across thirty-two State University of New York colleges, Shea (2006:37) remarks that it has been a "longstanding challenge" to arrive at a "common understanding of what a learning community is". His observations about measuring such a community lead him to believe that considerations pertaining to "… an abstract concept such as community is not trivial." Although Shea presents the results of the study as a possible benchmark for other institutions to "develop high quality online learning environments" (2006:42), that study's pertinent insights offer a basis for my own research project as a means to explore what it might mean to promote "higher levels of both connectedness and learning" (ibid) successfully within the online learning community of the ICM programme.

In addition to exploring the possible identity of an online learning community, the notion of what social presence is in an online learning environment, and whether or not it may be an important factor in successful student participation in those contexts, is also relevant to my research problem. Swan and Shih (2005), quoting an earlier, 2001, study of Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer, point to social presence "as one of the three fundamental 'presences' that support learning, the other two being cognitive presence and teaching presence, defining it as "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of enquiry."

Swan and Shih also discuss the concept of "hyperpersonalness" (ibid) in the context of participants building online communities. The notion of what "hyperpersonalness" might mean in relation to my own project is an interesting concept to examine as it could possibly uncover the kinds of multiple identities students might be taking on, or projecting, to ensure their success in online learning environments. An exploration of the term might also suggest that the notion of a successful learner within an online learning community might mean something very specific, in a strictly virtual sense, as opposed to a non-virtual setting.

With reference to the educator's involvement and intervention as a way of contributing towards successful learning communities, Schrum's 2002 research "presents seven dimensions of student success in online environments and also gathers various perspectives from educators who are well experienced in teaching in these environments" (2002: 66). She notes that educators did not display complete agreement on the identified seven dimensions, but "most emphasized the importance of students' goals and purposes that motivated them to take an online course" (ibid: 65). Schrum's proposed dimensions offer a comprehensive overview of dimensions and strategies for online success and are pertinent to my research exploration. These dimensions are: tools, technology experience, learning preferences, study habits and skills, goals and purposes, lifestyle factors, and personal traits and characteristics.

2.2   Participation and Learning

The kind of learning that takes place most successfully within a learning community is an important consideration for my research project, and Foley (1999) succinctly illustrates how learning may happen best in informal social interactions:

> "…while systematic education does occur in some social movement sites and actions, learning in such situations is largely informal and often incidental – it is tacit, embedded in action and is often not realised as learning. … Yet their learning … was profound and is of continuing use to themselves and others" (1999).

Foley's observations about the learning success associated with informal learning situations contribute towards the cluster of questions my research project sets out to

probe further. The extent to which the selected group of the ICM learning community perceive their participation as informal or formal in relation to their learning community, and the how successfully they have participated within it, could yield interesting insights regarding when and where a group of students have felt they have learnt most successfully.

For the purposes of this exploration, two focus areas, pertaining to successful participation and successful learning, are selected as sub-themes.

The review of the literature outlines the following key considerations in relation to the research problem:

2.2.1 Successful Participation

The online nature of the ICM course is an interesting feature in terms of the overall pedagogy of the course delivery. For the purposes of my study, it would be useful to know how the online medium supports successful teaching and learning as regards the ICM programme, and where the on-line component may detract from it. In Hammond's 2005 review of recent papers on online discussion in teaching and learning in higher education, he surveys what the 'optimal conditions for asynchronous online discussion' might look like, and also offers what the broad consensus on best practices might be in terms of his findings. Interestingly, in his directions for future research, Hammonds points out that most scholarly output to date has "taken a strategic view of interactivity", and "few papers make the case for interaction between learners as an educational value in its own right". I would like to explore further the notion of interaction in my research paper, and try to establish how the educational value of interaction has assisted in making learners successful postgraduate students, and where interaction, or any other factors, may have detracted from their success.

Bearing in mind that a few students had signaled their intentions to drop out of the programme, and few to stop out for a short while, the literature on student retention provides significant information about successful learning models and strategies, for higher education, although not specifically for online communities within that context. However, I have selected a small part as a reference for my own study as some participants had indicated their intentions to stop out of the online programme only for the short term.

Within a higher education framework, there are models and conceptual schema that offer explanations for students' academic success, or persistence, as well as why some students have chosen to drop out or stop out from their studies for a while. Brunsden and Davies (2000) suggest that an interactionist approach may offer the most appropriate theoretical framework for understanding student withdrawal, in particular. Laing and Robinson (2003) draw on four sets of variables, proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985), that influence non-traditional students' decisions to withdraw: (i) low academic achievers, (ii) an 'intent to leave', (iii) student background, for example, "high school performance and educational goals", and lastly (iv) environment, for example, finances, employment and family responsibilities.

2.2.2 Successful Learning

Kerr et al (2006) single out independent learning from "the subscale that yielded the most frequent, consistent, and useful results" (2006:101) from their research into student characteristics for online success. They observe the following: "Independent learning consists of items that assess one's ability to manage time, balance multiple tasks, set goals, and one's disposition regarding self-discipline, self-motivation, and personal responsibility. The current investigation found that independent learning is positively associated with self-esteem and Internet self-efficacy, and that students with high Independent learning scores had significantly higher course grades than low Independent learners," (ibid).

From a comparative point of view it is interesting to note whether students, in my own research project, have in some ways attributed themselves with similar independent-learning qualities. Strong correlation in this regard could suggest that they have brought much to the success of the online learning community as individuals outside of the virtual environment, and could also suggest that they would continue to be successful students in multiple and varied learning contexts.

Chapter 3 - Research Design and Methodology

3.1 A Qualitative Study

My research takes the form of a qualitative study. Seale indicates that Bauman (2004:81) distinguished between two kinds of research knowledge: legislating on the truth as opposed to interpreting or generating a conversation between groups. In the former kind of research, it is noted that the attempt to legislate on the truth is "so that debates can be resolved once and for all". It is noted further that, in the second view, "… researchers are more like *interpreters*, who generate conversations between groups of people who may not yet have communicated. Thus a researcher or an intellectual, Bauman says, occupies a facilitative role in society, encouraging debate rather than ruling on the truth," (ibid).

I feel comfortable with the latter approach for the following reason: data obtained for this research project are predominantly perceptions of one group of students, and I feel it is important to keep the investigation open by generating discussion and obtaining comparative insights from other cohorts based on the participation stories obtained.

Following on from the theoretical framework outlined at the beginning of this section, I am persuaded that interpretivism allows me the scope to understand and delve into a range of rich responses that I had received from the respondent pool.

The literature suggests the following about the inherent qualities of this form of qualitative enquiry:

> "Interpretivism proposes that there are multiple realities, not single realities of phenomena, and that these realities can differ across time and place.
>
> Unlike quantitative research, there is no overarching framework for how qualitative research should be conducted; rather each type of qualitative research is guided by particular philosophical stances that are taken in relation by the research to each phenomenon," (http://wilderdom.com/OEcourses/PROFLIT/Class6Qualitative1.htm)

However, the literature also points to criticisms of interpretivism, which are potentially limiting factors to my study:

8

- the central concepts of interpretivism (e.g., 'intention', 'reason', and 'motives') are misleading in that they imply that competent social actors engage in a continuous monitoring of their conduct - *routine* is the predominant form of day-to-day social activity, largely directly unmotivated;

- social scientists should give a different and competing account of social actors' action – there is more to reality than is expressed in the language of social actors;

- fails to acknowledge the role social structures that both conditions and produces social interaction, particularly divisions of interest and relations of power – social actors are either completely or partly unaware of structures; and

- implicitly conservative in that it ignores the possible structures of conflict in a society, and hence the possible sources of social change.

(http://uk.geocities.com/balihar_sanghera/carcinterpretivismslides.html).

The literature's identified key strengths and weakness of this qualitative method has been taken into consideration during the data presentation and discussion section.

3.2   Central Questions

My central questions explore the notion of success in broad terms. Although academic success is a key component for, and a primary marker of, being an able student, my research has probed what the notion of success may mean for adult learners beyond the academic indications. That is to say, my research would also probe the kind of support adult learners most enjoyed from their other learners, and would invite their views on whether this also contributed towards their success.

Therefore, the central questions of this research are following:

What does it mean to participate successfully as an adult learner on this programme? and

What counts as success in this regard?

Is there anything you would like to change about the course so as to promote successful participation for yourself or your peers?

I probe what success means in relation to the other skill sets of the respondent pool, and what my findings here might mean in terms of educational value for future cohorts on the programme. Furthermore, how would these findings be translated, or linked to, to their success in their learning environments?

3.2.1   Learning Communities

The research has addressed the following considerations about student perceptions and their participation within a learning community. As part of their participation stories, the following considerations were factored in:

Whether or not they were:

- successful students within their online learning community;
- part of a successful learning community as an online student;
- part of more than one learning community within the programme;
- mindful of tutor intervention and support is a large part of the success of the learning community;
- aware of a high level of connectedness and learning within their learning community; and
- aware of a high level of shared learning goals within their learning community.

3.2.1   Participation and Learning

The research has addressed the following considerations about student perceptions in relation to their participation and learning. As part of their participation stories, the following considerations were factored in:

Whether or not they:

- participated and learnt successfully in the online learning environment;
- they felt that participation and learning are the same things;
- their participation and learning in a virtual environment is markedly different from their participation and learning in a non-virtual environment

3.3 Data Collection Methods

I have selected the following approaches as the most effective way of exploring my research topic: 'Single Question Induced Narrative' and 'Auto-ethnography'.

3.3.1 Single Question Induced Narrative

With reference to Byrne's observations about qualitative interviewing, I have followed the example she notes about Wengraf, who aimed "to elicit stories from the interviewee with a single question such as"… 'tell me the story of your whole life' and no further questions except for clarification'…" (2004:190). This method has worked very well as a means of inviting students to offer their perceptions, broadly and with minimal restriction, in relation to the central question posed: "In your experience of the ICM programme, I invite you to tell me what successful participation means to you." One possible limitation of this method is that some participants may not have felt comfortable to speak to another participant (me) about issues that may have adversely affected them as a group.

3.3.2 Auto-ethnography

Because of my own role and experiences as an adult learner on the course, I feel an appropriate approach would be to declare and acknowledge my own central role as a researcher in "creating knowledge, therefore, both in the decisions made about what questions to ask and how to ask them and in the writing of research reports themselves, "(2004: 108).

I have chosen this method in an attempt to be transparent about my own role in the research process.

I would like to share my views on what constitutes successful participation, and in this regard it might be useful for a student to be interviewing me. Here, my identified limitations of what I have brought to the study are: that I belong to Cohort 5 and, although I have intimate knowledge as a participant on this cohort, I can also have subjective feelings about the course as well as participants.

The two approaches have not been applied in equal measure, and the bulk of the data has been obtained between 28 March and 16 June 2007 by means of the single question induced narrative method. I had originally intended to use a uniform questionnaire, followed by semi-structured interviews, to obtain the additional information I had anticipated I might need. However, when I considered the data in the form of participation stories received, I decided that the data I had was valuable, rich and interesting for my research purposes. Follow-up telephonic and email contact I had with some respondents from 24 April to 19 June 2007 assisted me in clarifying and confirming some aspects of the participation stories.

3.4   Reliability and Validity

Golafshani makes the interesting observation that in order to "ensure reliability in qualitative research, examination of trustworthiness is crucial," (2003:601). He notes further that constructivism acknowledges multiple realities and that multiple methods of triangulation may best ensure the reliability and validity of data obtained in a qualitative study (2003: 604).

In addition, Flicker (2004) notes that "qualitative research methods texts rarely discuss or even mention what to do with data that makes little sense (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1984), " (2004: 528).

The observations raised about reliability and validity in qualitative research are very important but I have not used extensive multiple methods in my research project. I have a small sample of students from one of four partner universities, and my active participation of the ICM programme has enabled me to discern between a participation story that was authentic or not. I have been fortunate that all of the participation stories received have interesting, detailed and unambiguous content, and it have left me with the impression that respondents have not only taken their participation in the research very seriously, but most had enjoyed writing them. One participant had not had the time to email the story to me as requested. When I contacted her, she apologised, for being "many modules behind" but would like to share her experiences over the telephone. I have subsequently made notes of this conversation, and this participant had given me permission to include extracts as I felt necessary.

3.5 Ethics Statement

With reference to, and in accordance with, the designated University's approved and publicly stated research ethics policy, I have communicated with the proposed respondents within this framework. My supervisor has had a monitoring and evaluation role in this regard to ensure that the study is being conducted within University-approved research ethics conditions.

Two ethics-related examples have had direct practical effect in this research project. I have edited participation stories where there were references to the names of participants involved or associated with the ICM programme in anyway. Even where good things had been attributed to people, the names have been removed. I believe it is sufficient that the data indicates that some individuals stand out as being motivators for successful participation on the programme.

I have anonymised the authors of the participation stories throughout, as had been undertaken when I invited them to participate in this research project. I have tried as far as possible to remain gender neutral when referring to participants as a way of safeguarding anonymity.
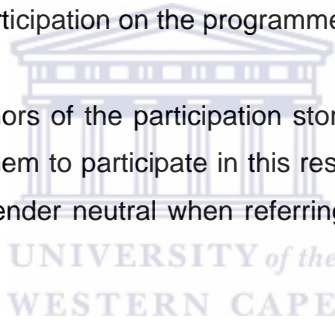
Chapter 4 - Results: Presentation and Discussion

I had set about obtaining information from a group of fourteen adult learners from the South African cohort as my respondent pool. Participation stories were received from eleven respondents, who registered as Cohort Five at the South African partner institution, and who had commenced their studies in August 2005. The data includes my own participation story.

Participants were invited via email on 28 March 2007 to tell their participation story briefly and from any angle they wished, as indicated in my invitation sent to participants of the South African cohort:

> " I would like to invite you to write me *your story* about *your participation* on the ALGC/ ICM programme, from any angle you wish, and foregrounding the elements you may want to.
>
> However, please could you find a way for your story to reflect your participation successes and challenges - this would be appreciated.
>
> I would be very happy to receive a submission of about 350-400 words, and would like to request a response date within a week from today. Therefore, I'd be grateful if your emailed submission could reach me by Wednesday 4 April 2007, if at all possible. "

4.1 Overview of the Data

Participation stories converged most strongly in instances of perceived successes, and where respondents cited examples of their successful learning experiences. All stories endorsed the view that respondents regarded their participation as generally successful and there is evidence that they ascribed a strong value to the programme as a whole.

Participation stories differed most concerning challenges to successful learning, and the general example used pertaining to lecturer and tutor intervention yielded interesting insights and tensions in this regard.

From all the participation stories received, it would seem that successful participation could be enhanced even further in some respects, and in this regard, some suggestions are offered for consideration.

4.2 Themes

In accordance with the literature reviewed, respondent information has been clustered in relation to their perceived participation successes and challenges as experienced on this intercontinental masters programme. To make more detailed discussion possible about factors influencing participation success, these themes have been sub-grouped further as indicated in this section.

In their participation stories, the following three themes and sub-themes emerged from respondents when they shared personal accounts of successful participation as they've experienced the ALGC programme thus far.

The first theme is "Participation Successes" and has two related sub-themes: "participation and learning", "global learning" .

The second theme is "Participation Challenges" and also has three related sub-themes: "participation and learning", "confidence" and "resources".

The third theme presents a discussion around suggestions for further consideration in the hope that they might enhance successful participation and learning.

4.2.1. Theme One: Participation Successes

Referring to their own study and specifically addressing how differences can be negotiated while forming team identity, Wang, Sierra and Folger (2003:55) observe the following about online communities constructed among a diverse group of adult learners in an online graduate level course:

> " In order to build a global learning community, teams must demonstrate positive attributes and behaviours to leverage diversity and to apply their different resources to learning tasks (DeSanctis et al, 2001). A major challenge for the distributed, multicultural groups was to maintain a sense of 'we' despite geographic separation and individual differences. "

In relation to the contributions in this theme called "participation successes", it would seem that respondents were able to build online identities that fitted in well with a global learning community, as you will see from the data presented below.

4.2.1.1 Sub-Theme: Participation and Learning

In terms of perceptions of participation and learning successes, this sub-theme has been grouped further in four main ways: (i) Participation in the Programme as a whole, (ii) General participation on Blackboard[3], (iii) Specific participation in Groups and (iv) Standard of Participation, as reproduced by the contributions below. It is interesting to note that the contributions below include very positive comments from a student who has decided to stop out of the programme for a while.

> "I felt the international sense of the course keenly, forming meaningful relationships with students, and learning from the educational challenges of their countries."

> "Bb is great because it gives you flexibility and that suited me perfectly. All the aspects of receiving tasks and submitting tasks on Bb, worked perfectly well for me. It was only the discussion part that I did not have energy for. Bb also gave me good guidance for what to read, through the modules and reading lists. I enjoy being in my own world of reading, and enjoy sharing my ideas but not the way it was "forced" on Bb."

> "The fact that it is students from 4 countries "give you some assurance" that the course is of good value. I have made some contacts that helped me in my work, and in that way the international links were very good. The biggest value I think was in putting the course together, with skills from different parts of the world putting effort into one course. That is a very unselfish way of working and I believe the way to go in education."

> " I also feel that in general the assessments were fair. I however want to conclude that whatever issues I have, I must deal with it, overcome it as I continue to believe that the ICM is the MBA of skills development. "

> "After all the moaning and groaning I still BELIEVE that the ALGC course was and will be the best course I have done and will remain so for a long time to come. I am at a point now where am considering to do a PHD but if it can't come in the form or the structure of BB, I will need a lot of convincing to get on board!!!"

---

[3] The Blackboard Learning System is an e-Education platform designed, *inter alia* , to transform the internet into an accessible educational environment. As participants on the ICM programme, we use shorthand refer to 'Blackboard' as "Bb" or "BB".

4.2.1.2 Sub-Theme: Global and Local Learning

Three main considerations emerged in the "global and local learning'" sub-theme:
(i) International Participation, (ii) Participating in Local Learning and (iii) Learning and Competition.

"My participation as a second class world citizen. It was quite refreshing and fulfilling to overtime learn and KNOW that we as South Africans are on par with and A LOT of times more enlightened than our counterparts on academic or social justice issues. There were far tooooooooo many times that I was reading contributions and or arguments from South Africans that just wanted me to shout/post/respond VIVA SA VIVA!!! I think that this response on my part is based on my insecurity about the picture painted out there which is based on the North's propaganda that we in the South and particularly those from Africa are backwards, knows very little about what is good for us and how to articulate our own thoughts and destinies. This course also opened my eyes and made me realise that irrespective where we are in the world we all face more or less the same challenges, joys, trauma, aspirations, etc and that life is much more real apart from the propaganda generated by the mass media that we (or at least I) are used to and subsequently base our thinking around.   This new insight was brought upon by reading about people's stories such as *[…edited]* from Bangladesh, *[…edited]* and   his work in Mexico, *[…edited]* and his work with Aboriginals, *[…edited]* in ESL classes in China and others with their work with first nations around the world. In addition to this outreach or sustainable development work I also experienced participants with   similar problems such my own such as English being my second language such as *[…edited]* and*[…edited]* participants who have experience a change of   job/career/house,   or   just participants who are not coping due to personal pressures."

"My participation was made very meaningful by the affection and empathy given and received from particularly the UWCers. We established an unselfish community of practice focused on advancing the learning and wellbeing of all its members. My participation extended and advanced my vocabulary, writing and reading skills and I remember how I initially used a dictionary to make sure that I understand the readings. Generally the course material was readily available and I found it most enjoyable where we had the freedom to internalize sections of the readings which were meaningful to us."

"I measure successful participation on two levels: firstly the extent to which the program enhances my professional competence and capabilities as an educator and secondly passing the different modules and completing the program. Therefore I am grateful about the fact that there is the likelihood that I would be allowed to complete with other cohorts."

17

Summing up "learning success", based on the perceptions of respondents, could be encapsulated by two factors that they have associated with the program, provided that there is a willingness to persevere: acquiring good academic and research skills and making lasting friendships.

4.2.2. Theme Two: Participation Challenges

In his research into knowledge building and the nature of online work in asynchronous learning networks, van Aalst (2006) offers a framework for rethinking the role and purpose of online work in three main areas: collaboration, learning how to learn and idea improvement.

The following insights are pertinent to the perceptions respondents in my research project have raised about their participation challenges:

> " … we need to rethink the purpose and nature of the work that students do online – from discussion to a variety of collaborative activities. …Thus, we need strategies – and tools – for indexing the database so that it is clear at any time what has been learned, what is of current interest and what opportunities for inquiry remain. …It is proposed that learning to learn in ALN requires a new kind of metaknowledge: knowledge about how students can use educational technology and the activity that is taking place to improve learning. … The main point … is that online work in an ALN is much more than writing, reading and commenting on notes. … The new ideas reported and illustrated in those views can then become *tools* that enable more sophisticated thinking that the community can use as it continues to its next inquiry; they also become artifacts of the community's accomplishments," (2006:282-284).

4.2.2.1 Sub-Theme: Participation and Learning

About a third of the respondent group raised significant factors that may be affecting their successful participation. With reference to their challenges, four sub-themes have emerged based on responses from students: (i) Learning from each other as students, (ii) Learning from lecturers, instructors and tutors, (iii) Group Work and (iv) Learning Plans and Stopping Out.

The views of respondents selected below have foregrounded the notion of learning community and have in turn led me to the views of Zhang, Perris and Yeung (2005)

---

[4] ALN is the abbreviation for Asynchronous Learning Networks

on the extent to which online interaction does indeed constitute a sense of community, and whether it is possible to "nurture a powerful learning environment for all,"(2005: 803).

Three respondents intimated their difficulties in learning either from most other students online or from a particular group of students. The third contribution comes from a respondent who has decided to stop out for a while.

- o **Learning from each other as students**

" … being one of the few students not in Cape Town, and having started a week late. Consequently, often felt bit of an outsider, changed only by going last June for the student meeting around the research project. I often felt closer to the international students in my discussion groups than I did the SA students. "

" As you know, I have not participated in DISCUSSIONS on Bb that often. The reasons are not clear in my mind, but I know that I have some resistance going to Bb. I think, because I am teaching full time, and it takes a lot out of me talking to students all day. By the time I get to Bb, I just want to get my tasks done. I want quick and clear information. I know that students can learn from each other but that is a slower process and not always clear and correct. I somehow do not trust students discussing on Bb (including myself) to give good and correct advice."

"This is the other problem. Joining this cohort, I feel like a complete outsider. When I joined Cohort 5 there was a sense of belonging. I have not settled in Cohort 6… there are one or two people from Cohort 3 or 4 … [who were] glad to see that there was someone else as well."[5]

In Zhang et al's own research, they have made the following observations (2005:801):

" Collaborating in open forums, and in particular via asynchronous mediums such as discussion boards, has been widely accepted as a positive avenue for engaging in deeper understanding (Harasim, 1990) and knowledge building (Brown and Duguid, 1996; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996). Of utmost necessity in such environments is participant contribution. The findings in this investigation point to the conclusion that students are not enthusiastic about contributing publicly online. There are numerous reasons as to why such feelings exist. One is the likely absence of community, as argued by Brown & Duguid (1996)."

Zhang et al note the challenges associated with providing an appropriate framework for a successful online community, and their data reveal that some students' feelings
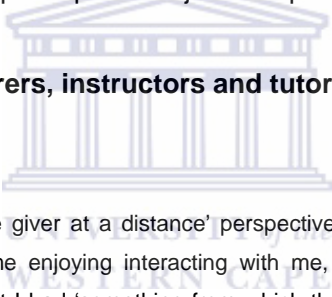
---

[5] That is to say, others who have also needed to leave the cohorts they had originally started with.

of discomfort with online contributing in open forums may lead to "peripheral participation". In this regard they note the work of Taylor (2002) who has conducted a study of learning outcomes of online learners at the University of Southern Queensland, and had categorised participants into three groups: "the workers, the lurkers and the shirkers" (2005:802).

Based on my data obtained from my own study, all respondents, even those who have expressed discomfort with contributing on Blackboard were nevertheless workers and, at times, lurkers. I did not get the impression from their contributions that they were completely opposed to engaging Blackboard, and their expressed discomfort remains a participation challenge rather than a sign of unsuccessful participation on their part.

More importantly, *all* of these respondents see themselves as successful students, and have indicated that their participation is just one part of being a student.

   o **Learning from lecturers, instructors and tutors**

"From the 'lecturer/course giver at a distance' perspective, I had both positive and negative experiences. I found some enjoying interacting with me, believing that I had a worthwhile perspective, and even that I had 'something from which they could learn (notably in the 'work and learning' course) – to others who gave the impression that I was simply a student in a cohort who was there to learn from their perspective and experience. Of course, with the former, their grades for essays/papers were better, and they expressed appreciation. This made me feel like I was a post-grad student with some life and work experience. The latter made me feel as if I were a student to be tolerated, who really didn't know much at all. Often, the introduction of an idea/area in which I am regarded by my clients as knowing something, and in which I do some fairly cutting edge work, was acknowledged as 'off beam' and not particularly " educationally valuable" from an academic point of view. The challenge however, was to try and draw my thoughts and contribution into an academic way of thinking and presentation, which was after all the aim of the study. So I learned both positively and negatively. But, also that many academics are protective about their territory, and like other professionals, jealous about guarding their territory. The challenge was how to become part of that with 'academic speak', and thinking. So, the challenge was painful at times, but a learning one. "

" Somehow I found it harder to work with the South African course facilitators. They were a bit too intrusive almost trying to extract from us what they wanted to hear. It was tough writing about South Africa to facilitators who had written extensively on the very issues they were

presenting to us. They made very sure that we knew that they were in fact, the experts on the topic that had selected for us."

"There were times during BB discussions when I would feel that maybe what I contributed was not up to scratch. This was especially when I contributed something and no one including lecturers or tutors would comment. At this point, I would not be sure what to do next. Maybe the constructive thing to do would have been to ask if I was on track. "

"The course structure and facilitation style at first was something to get use to. After getting use to the "lack" of facilitator/tutor input and realising that the course is based on drawing on learners' experience as well as the learners having to create their own meaning by engaging with the prescribed text as a guide I really and truly appreciated the way the course was structured. The first module with the Giddens readings, the capability envelope and the Learning Plan of course did not make sense to me until I started the next course which was Adult Learning Perspectives. In retrospect I can now see how the Giddens readers laid the foundation of what was to come, that being in my mind the interconnectedness between Learning (be it formal, non-formal, incidental or experiential), the changing nature of Work, the Global Economy and last but not least, Social Justice. I found the ALGC course also to be structured in building blocks, meaning that as we progressed through the course we were able to weave our learning through each and every module right through to the end. Even though I am saying this I still feel that in some courses the assigned tutors were absolutely absent as the only time we heard from them was on occasions such as announcing that some participant has dropped out or just by announcing the known which was the due dates of assignments. I feel that the ALGC convenors should set a standard for ALL course leaders and tutors in terms of assessment criterion and clear guidelines on the nature and amount of input, guidance and support to be given to learners on the various modules."

Van Aalst (2006: 285-286) offers interesting observations for his proposed notion of 'idea improvement' and I reflected on students' perceptions of their participation in relation to what he is putting forward:
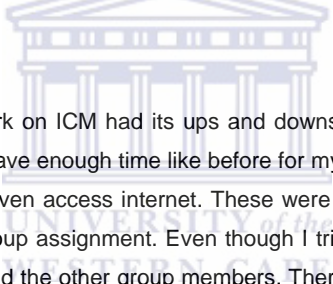
"The notion of idea improvement, as it is used in knowledge building, does not merely state that the ideas that students use in their thinking are improved, an outcome we can expect after teaching that is designed to promote conceptual change. The key question is whether students understand the discourse that they are engaged in as a *method for producing new knowledge.* In other words, do they treat ideas as object of inquiry that can be improved by scrutiny, debate, testing and modification (Bereiter, 2002)? ... Rather than seeing expert knowledge as certain and truthful, they may see it, too, as improvable. Such positions are consistent with the highest stage of King and Kitchener's Reflective Judgement Model, a model that describes the development of critical thinking in adolescence and adulthood (King & Kitchener, 1994)."

In my view, the notions of collaboration, learning how to learn and idea improvement present themselves as very significant and meaningful bases for engagement

between course instructors and the participants on the ALGC programme. It is possible that most students who have intimated their views on participation challenges may find this kind of "debriefing" a very important learning activity, and may in fact lead them to rethink their participation experiences in a more positive light.

o **Group Work**

In terms of my own participation experiences on the ALGC programme, the views of the first respondent, pertaining to group work, resonate in large measure with mine, although I note that this respondent experienced the conflict more intensely than I had in my own group work experiences. Conflict in my groups could be resolved "off-line" via email, and this is an interesting reflection point in itself; that there is an awareness to maintain a reasonably robust "group work persona" on blackboard – to show that we are all able to well work in a team, and at a "global level":

> "I also feel that group work on ICM had its ups and downs. I began to feel this when my job became hectic. I did not have enough time like before for my studies. At times, I went to remote areas where I could not even access internet. These were the most depressing times for me. At one point we had a group assignment. Even though I tried to put much effort when I came back, I was still very behind the other group members. There was a lot of pressure. I could see that others did not believe me. There was no way I could prove to them. There came a point when I felt that I'll do the best I can when I can. There were even remarks in our one group at one point that implicated that some people are to get marks from what only some worked. At this point, I really   nearly lost my temper. I sent all my contributions to our tutor and asked her to give me marks I deserved and not the groups' marks. I also communicated this to the group. We were however given the same marks. I personally do not yet have answers on how the problems can be handled. What is certain is that we at ICM are adult learners who have jobs which are not the same. Those with hectic jobs cannot give them up because we have other important demands."

o **Learning Plans - and Stopping Out?**

Interestingly, both respondents in this sub-theme have elected to stop out for a while. In terms of the first contribution, there has been a history of a difference of opinion between myself and this respondent regarding the role and function of a learning plan: how much of a private affair could it be and, and a more fundamental level, which aspects of our learning beyond the curriculum could, in fact, *be planned*?

Forum: Tutor Forum — South Africa

Date: Tue Sep 06 2005 17:11

Author: February, Colette Ann <cfebruar@bremner.uct.ac.za>

Subject: Re: Learning Plans

Hi […edited…]/ All

Perhaps I'm stressing too much but I'm finding Tasks 3 and 4 re Block 3 to be quite a tricky affair. And then also to ask: there are about 13 specific capabilities as outlined in the Task Three section, so do we have to develop and share with our learning partner a detailed plan for each of them? This is what I'm finding tricky as I find there is considerable overlap in some of them?? I feel that I'm not understanding this task properly? thanks Colette

Although my posting, reproduced above, shows evidence of engagement with a required task within a particular module, [6] and there are strong indications of a compliance dimension to the task. My reflections now lend a greater respect to the views of the first respondent, below, and in a deeper sense than during our conflicts on Blackboard about this very issue at the time. I am able to appreciate the view that a learning plan is a very personal journey, and it needn't be shared with anyone:

> "I also feel very strongly that our learning plans are personal and our own course map, own source of inspiration and source of motivation. *Ek is groot. Los my learning plan uit, moet dit nie merk, beoordeel of assesseer nie."*
> [Translation from the Afrikaans: "I am an adult. Leave my learning plan alone; do not mark it, judge it or assess it."]

> "Even though I'm many modules behind, I'm more disappointed that I'm not delivering. …I haven't given up. For now I'm chasing the paper. Let me tell you South Africa has so much to offer."

In a telephonic conversation with the second respondent (June 18, 2007) it is interesting that the respondent feels despondent about stopping out, on the one hand, but also notes distinct achievements, on the other. Since stopping out, this respondent has been a key driver in an exchange programme between a former

---

[6] The module referred to is "Locating Oneself in Global Learning".

workplace and Lindingö College in Sweden. In this regard, this respondent has maintained continuity with learning goals and plans and has arguably realised some of them to a greater extent than some of us who have remained in the original cohort since 2005.

But more importantly, my key reflection is that it should be possible for any learning plan to anticipate that "stopping out" can happen, and that this decision is in the control of the student, and by no means should indicate that the student is deficient by doing so. This would be a significant indication that students are in control of their learning processes and resources and are able to bring 'stopping out' or 'temporary withdrawal' into the conversation as a responsible and controlled activity.

Terrel's (2005:214) observations about attrition and learning style are offered as additional insights in this section:

> "To understand factors contributing to attrition, previous researchers have looked at the relationship between a given student's learning style and their likelihood to drop out of a program. In particular, this author's prior research, based on the work of Kolb (1984), has shown persons with particular learning styles and preferences are more inclined to failure in an online learning environment. … For example, in a study involving 98 students in an online masters program in information systems, students who preferred active participation, concrete experience and a "hands on" approach to learning (i.e. Kolb's Accommodator learning style) tended to leave the program at rates higher than those with other learning preferences (Terell & Dringus, 2000)."

In terms of the contributions received for my research project, I think that Terrel's insights into learning styles are an interesting way of participants themselves engaging with other participants about their own learning strategies and successes.

4.2.2.2 Sub-Theme: Confidence

> "Giddens was an excellent start to what turned out to be a relatively tough ALGC course. I enjoyed the discussions around globalisation. It made me realise just how marginalised Africa had become and that she was still being side-lined more and more. I found myself constantly on the defensive – in my mind the rich north first had to be conscientised about the poor south. Somehow I always felt the need to explain the South African historical context first and to situate the South African position in terms of its profound socio-political transformations before any debate commences. I struggled with creating the right impression – the need to get things right about Africa and especially South Africa. I now realise that I probably have a terrible 'complex' about my homeland. I remember fondly my initial tentative dialogues with my group

members and my early cautious postings on Bb. At first I was almost apologetic. I had the impression that everyone else had such an easy writing style – a sort of happy-go-writing style. Later I got bolder and I was able to contribute better."

4.2.2.3 Sub-Theme: Resources

Two respondents expressed very well the impact of a lack of appropriate resources as an impact on learning, as well as over-extending already sparse financial and physical resources:

o **Financial**

"Another challenge was resources. Though I am by comparison with many, a resourced person, the costs of the course were high – i.t.o of not being able to afford ADSL computer links, while really needing the same for efficient participation in the course. Another challenge was being a student who was working to earn a living while studying. I felt the pressure very keenly of working all day, and then studying at night, often too tired to focus. The learning was what many adult continuing education students experience. So, determination needed for any adult in continuing education, the cost of family life and lack of social life was a learning, and how to plan and organize life and time. I also have had to have 2 jobs, to provide for my family and pay for tuition. Many in South Africa do that all the time was the learning. "

o **Physical**

"Another challenge is when one find himself/herself in ill condition and that means he/she may stop for some days from the Blackboard until he/she get better. On this condition I have realized that our tutors and colleagues students are supportive as they always email to find out about the progress of the affected person and if the person is ready he/she is welcome and mechanism is made in terms of which the person can catch up."

In terms of my own participation story, my own experiences resonate with the former and not the latter.

4.2.3. Theme Three: Improvement Considerations

From the respondent contributions, three areas for improvement are noted in this research. As a way of enhancing successful participation, respondents have expressed the need for improvement in relation to the following items: (i) the

suggestion for a restriction on the length, or a prescribed length, for postings, (ii) the appeal to ensure that updated and current information is reflected at any given point on the grades roster and, more fundamentally, (ii) suggestions for finding ways of making the research component more closely integrated to participation on Blackboard:

- ○ **Prescribed length for postings**

   "I however feel that the postings of all participants should be restricted to 10 lines (or 5 lines). To avoid the dominance of some individual, to create an economical reading experience and to encourage Masters students to be concise and make their points economically without going into convincing mode (selling their ideas etc.)".

- ○ **Grades Roster**

   "One thing that the course administrators might have to brush up upon could be (at least in my mind) the upkeep of the Grades Roster. I would love to see and be able to print and have an official record of my progress (or non-progress) in terms of grades achieved throughout the course.   And this not only being at an end of a module but for every task/assignment/component completed during a module at the press of a button or should I rather say at the click of a mouse."

- ○ **Research Component**

Two respondents offer their views on the matter:

   "My research has suffered a bit of a setback. A few factors have caused this. On the one hand study-related factors in the sense that I miss the structure and exchange of ideas with others, on the other hand personal factors [… edited out…] and as a result my priorities have shifted and I am wondering why I need to do this research. At the moment I am sitting in this dip and I am not yet sure what the outcome will be. I think if some collaborative work or support among peers had been part and parcel of the research phase (in addition to the communication with the supervisor) it would have been more difficult for me to fall behind. Personally I think that I need the discussions with other students in order to maintain a research momentum. It is a pity that the research phase is not done by all participating universities as it would have been nice to participate in small discussion forums created around similar research themes. I think I would learn more from discussing research with others than doing research on my own."

" I feel that we as the SA cohort have lost our momentum and support base with the Local Options module where we had to work alone with our supervisors our research projects. I so much admired the way the Swedish research or local options were set up. The Swedish in my mind could continue in the supportive BB environment with their research projects where a lot of peer and tutor input and feedback took place. I also believe that this sudden disjointedness from BB affected our "comeback" and participation for the last leg of the Locating oneself module" as most us felt isolated and in a lot of ways "guilty" of not being finished with our research projects and having added pressure in meeting the final two assignments of the last course."

In terms of my own participation experience in relation to the research, or local options module, I strongly identify with the views expressed by both contributors.

4.3   My Participation Story

My participation story has already come through via my reflections, commentary and proposals for a way forward in relation to the respondent information provided in this paper. If I were to present my participation story more fully, I would foreground the strong sense of belonging to a learning community as an example of my successful participation, and I would have elaborated further on my own experiences that resonate so strongly with the views expressed as participation challenges, most notably in the examples cited about the lack of, or inadequate lecturer or instructor intervention. In terms of a theoretical frame for further developing the positive and addressing some of the challenges raised, I am interested in exploring van Aalst's notions (collaboration, learning how to learn and idea improvement) further in informal and ongoing conversations within my cohort of South African students.

Chapter 5   -   Conclusion and Recommendations

In this section, my concluding remarks and observations have been addressed in four parts. In the first section there is a summary of what my own research tells me with reference to the research question. The second part presents a brief reflection of aspects of this research that I may like to research further at another point, and am also offering here towards wider research conversations in this area. In the third part I offer some reflections on what the possible limitations of my research method. Finally, in the fourth part, I reflect on my own experience as participant-researcher.

Throughout this paper, the following have emerged as the main considerations pertaining to successful participation:

1. whether or not this cohort of ICM participants have experienced high levels of connectedness and learning,
2. dimensions and strategies for online success
3. characteristics of independent learning.
4. adult learning principles that support success,
5. constraints associated with the blend of online and part-time study and the possible strategies for success in this regard, and
6. social presence and multiple identities of online learners.

5.1   What was learned?

From their participation stories, and with reference to the data presented in this research paper, I can conclude that participants are affirming in large measure the considerations outlined in the first and second points indicated above. In my view there is also evidence of most participants displaying the characteristics of independent learning.

5.2   What remains to be learned?

In terms of the challenges, and with reference to the fourth and fifth points above, further exploration is needed to ascertain which adult learning principles support success for which types of adult learner. From this small sample of participation stories, it has emerged that some participations have different learning styles, rhythms and needs, and this research has not adequately addressed this matter.

Within the respondent pool, there have been two students who had chosen to stop out for a while, and they have offered insights into what may have sustained their studies so that they could have persisted successfully within a slightly longer timeframe, or within the prescribed time. Even here, these students in my view have shown strong signs of successful participation. The fact that they did not hesitate to participate in this research is one example, and another is that the first participant story I had received was from one of the participants who had stopped out of the programme. For me this is strongly indicative of the connection and sense of community that we continue to share as Cohort 5.

5.3   What are the limitations of this research?

In retrospect, it would have added value to the data if additional methods of data collection had been used. For example, some of the powerful perceptions emerging from the participation stories could have been strengthened even further if I had elected to interview a few of the participants. If I had requested that a co-participant interview me, this would also have added another interesting dimension as to how a participant has viewed my participation on the ICM programme.

5.4   Final Reflections

Drawing on my own experiences of the course has usefully served as a comparative element throughout the study. Thus far, I have experienced the ICM programme positively, in many respects, and the respondent group has largely endorsed my experience of our being a helpful and supportive learning community to one another as part of the South African cohort but also to the rest of the partner institutions, where our roles and identities were often impressively displayed as "as intellectual ambassadors" of the new South Africa.

Wenger raises many important considerations about what a community really is and when it functions optimally and meaningfully, and the element selected below highlights whether a community of practice is an homogenous entity, or something fluid and dynamic, often where members of the community could be learning best in situations of intense negotiation and even conflict:

29

" If learning involves the ability to negotiate new meanings and become a new person, then it also involves new relations of identification and negotiability, new forms of membership and ownership of meaning, and thus changing positions within communities and economies of meaning," (Wenger,2005: 219).

Walters (2000: 213) makes the important point about the relationship between adult learning and citizenship:

> "Adult learning for active citizenship is therefore both about pedagogy and politics, which requires local and global cooperative actions of solidarity to build alternatives that emphasize human development."

I believe that my strongest memory of my own participation on the programme in relation to the South African co-participants is that we chose not to lose sight of our strong sense of community and identity as learning citizens. Most of realised quite soon after our first interactions on Blackboard that we had as much to share with the rest of the world as we had to learn from it. On Blackboard our contributions as a South African cohort were validated, appreciated, questioned and sometimes respectfully jettisoned – which served to reaffirm the normality and legitimacy of the success of our learning, and our citizenship, as part of South Africa and as part of the world.
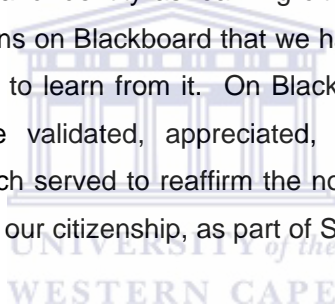
References

Chenail, R. (1995). Presenting Qualitative Data. *The Qualitative Report 2 (3), 1-8*
(http:ww.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR2-3/presenting.html)

Brunsden, V., and Davies, M. (2000) Why do HE students drop out? A test of Tinto's
model. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 24(3), 301-310.*

Byrne, B. (2004). Chapter 14. 'Qualitative Interviewing,' in Seale, C. (ed)
Researching Society and Culture. Second Edition. Alden Press: Oxford.

Delanty, G. (2003) *'*Citizenship as a learning process: disciplinary citizenship versus
cultural citizenship' in Jarvis, P & Parker, S. *International Journal of Lifelong
Education, 22 (6), 597-605.*

Flicker, S. (2004). "Ask Me No Secrets, I'll Tell You No Lies": What Happens When a
Respondent's Story Makes No Sense. *The Qualitative Report 9 (3), 528-537*

Foley, G. (1999). Chapter 1: 'Introduction' in Foley, G. *Learning in Social Action: A
Contribution to Understanding Informal Education.* Zed Books.

Golafshani, N. (2005). Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research.
The Qualitative Report 8 (4), 597-607

Hammond, M. (2005) A review of recent papers on online discussion in teaching and
learning in higher education. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks
9(3)*. Retrieved August 28, 2006, from:
http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/v9n3_hammond.asp

Kerr, M. S., Rynearson, K., and Kerr, M.C (2006). Student characteristics for online
success. *Internet and Higher Education. (9), 91-105.*

Laing, C., and Robinson, A. (2003). The Withdrawal of Non-Traditional Students:
developing an explanatory model. *Journal of Further and Higher Education
27(2), 175-185.*

Schrum, L. (2002). Dimensions and Strategies for Online Success: Voices from
Experienced Educators. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks. 6 (1),
57- 67.*

Seale, C. (2004). Chapter 7. 'Validity, reliability and the quality of research' in Seale,
C. (ed) *Researching Society and Culture.* Second Edition. Alden Press:
Oxford.

Seale, C. (2004). Chapter 9. 'History of Qualitative Methods*,' in Seale, C. (ed)
Researching Society and Culture. Second Edition. Alden Press: Oxford.**

Shea, P. (2006). A Study of Students' Sense of Learning Community in Online Environments. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks. 10 (1), 35-44.*

Swan, K., and Shih, L. (2005).   On the Nature and Development of Social Presence in Online Course Discussions. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks. 9(3).*   Retrieved August 23, 2006, from: http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/v9n3_hammond.asp

Terrel, S. R (2005) A longitudinal investigation of the effect of information perception and focus on attrition in online learning environments. *Internet and Higher Education, 8, 213-219.*

Van Aalst, J. (2006). Rethinking the nature of online work in asynchronous learning networks. *British Journal of Educational Technology 37(2), 279-288.*

Wang, M., Sierra, C. and Folger, T. (2003) Building a Dynamic Online Learning Community among Adult Learners. *Education Media International. 49-61.* http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals

Walters, S. (2000) Globalization, Adult Education and Development in Stromquist. N.P & Monkman, K (ed) *Globalization and Development.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, England

Wenger, E. (1998) Communities of Practice. Learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge University Press, New York.

Zhang, W., Perris, K. and Yeung, L. (2005)   Online tutorial support in open and distance learning: students' perceptions. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 36(5), 789-804.*

Internet sites:

February, C. (2005) "Learning Plan" posting on Blackboard. Tue Sep 06 2005 17:11 http://blackboard.liu.se/

Interpretivism:
Retrieved January 31, 2007, from:
http://uk.geocities.com/balihar_sanghera/carcinterpretivismslides.html)

Qualitative Research 1: Retrieved January 31, 2007, from:
http://wilderdom.com/OEcourses/PROFLIT/Class6Qualitative1.htm)