Lessons from a cross cultural online learning community

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the practical, cultural and educational effects of information and communication technology support and the computer mediated communication of doctoral candidates from cross cultural backgrounds in an asynchronous online learning environment. The history of educational development is replete with technology based projects that failed because of high operating costs, problems of adaptation to local conditions, lack of skilled personnel to operate the technologies, and lack of effectiveness. The challenge has been how to facilitate learning contexts that are productive for the individual learner. This investigation provided insights for the managers of the Norwegian Council for Higher Education’s Programme for Development Research and Education (NUFU) Productive Learning Culture project on the challenges of such a project. Four lessons from this research emerged on cross cultural learning communities, and have bearing on technology, project management, online learning communities, and cross cultural issues.

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

A goal of the Norwegian Council for Higher Education’s Programme for Development Research and Education (NUFU) Productive Learning Cultures Program is to further competence in research and higher education in developing countries. Five universities located in Southern Africa, namely University of Namibia, University of Botswana, University of Zimbabwe, University of Zululand, Universidade Pedagogica (Maputo, Mozambique) and University of Pretoria were involved in the Productive Learning Cultures Project, initiated by the
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University of Bergen, Norway. The aim of this project was amongst others, to provide economic support to doctoral candidates, and organise workshops to develop research skills (University of Bergen 2005).

A learning management system (LMS) with an asynchronous discussion forum was introduced to manage learning in the online community. An underlying assumption of the project management was that skills in how to utilise the new technology are vital in order to narrow the digital divide. LUVIT, the selected LMS, was therefore introduced to the project with the vision of connecting supervisors (senior researchers), the doctoral candidates and project coordinators to warrant mutual peer support and the learner mentorship in an online learning community (Cuthell 2002). The aim was that the doctoral candidates and their supervisors from the above-mentioned universities could cooperatively exchange information and ideas on the various doctoral candidates’ research projects; and debate research-related topics. Giving and receiving feedback on the candidates’ research proposals for their Ph.D.-thesis was for instance regarded as a mutual potentially beneficial activity. Information and communication technology (ICT) support was provided to the doctoral candidates by a project member from the Department of Telematic Learning and Educational Innovation at the University of Pretoria.

During the early stages of the project, supervisors posted small-scale assignments on research methodology to LUVIT to elicit academic participation from the members of the online learning community. They constructed their assignment products and posted their endeavours within the set time to the discussion area in LUVIT. Thereafter they were requested to comment on each other’s products and again post their reactions to the discussion area. The aim was to further develop the doctoral candidates’ understanding of research methodology; and to create a reliable dependable online learning environment where it was admissible to make mistakes whilst learning. The words of a member of the steering committee of the project supply more information:

I think there were two reasons. First we saw this as an opportunity to gain knowledge of how it would be to use a LMS in such an international project – to see if it is possible to establish a kind of common ground, despite the cultural differences. Secondly we wanted to give the Ph.D.-students an opportunity to communicate with each other and discuss each others’ pieces of text like Ph.D.-students normally do; at least here in Norway.

Nevertheless, the doctoral candidates did not make optimal use of the CMC facilities:

We experienced very soon that the online activity was very low due to amongst infrastructural problems such as lack of Internet access and poor bandwidth – these all lead to very little activity.
The project leaders initiated a qualitative mini-research project in order to better understand problems encountered by the participants. Findings from this investigation are presented in this article.

**AIM OF THIS ARTICLE**

This article seeks to explore the effect of information and communication technology (ICT) support and the computer mediated communication (CMC) of doctoral candidates from cross-cultural backgrounds in an asynchronous online learning environment.

The preceding quotes hinted at problems associated with the non-participation of the doctoral candidates in the LUVIT asynchronous online learning environment. It was therefore imperative to ascertain more about the perceptions of the doctoral candidates served by the NUFU Productive Learning Cultures project on ICT support and CMC during the project (2000–2005). The purpose of the CMC was to provide a platform for mutual peer support; to monitor the doctoral candidates’ progress of their respective research projects; and to regularly supply affective support to the remote doctoral candidates (Hiltz and Wellman 1997). Had the doctoral candidates not regularly participated in meaningful online discussions, neither mutual support and sustainable development would have been possible, nor would facilitators have been able to track the online activities.

**METHODOLOGY**

To investigate how doctoral candidates perceived the ICT support offered by the CMC interaction during the project, a qualitative approach to research was followed. During the final year, four doctoral candidates were active in the project. The data collection and the content analysis were performed by the first author of this article. Hence, she acknowledges her personal bias in this research due to extended involvement in the project. However, constant cross validation of the data and crystallisation of the findings were performed to limit researcher-effects; and to warrant the trustworthiness of the research (Cresswell 2003).

Data were collected by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews with three doctoral candidates, one supervisor and the member of the steering committee responsible for the management of the LUVIT content. Five interviews were recorded, transcribed and electronically mailed to the participants for verification. In addition, all the electronic mail posted to the member of the steering committee responsible for the ICT technical support was concatenated as a single document after all identification information was removed. However, the messages posted to LUVIT were unfortunately not available for inclusion in the data set due to the expiry of the licence – the agreement was not maintained due to unsatisfactory utilization of the facility. Data analysis was performed according to a content analysis approach with Atlas.ti, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software.
programme (CAQDAS). The comprehensive data set (hermeneutic unit) consisted of six primary documents. The relating text phrases were coded as emerging themes according to a basic method of conceptual analysis (McMillan and Schumacker 2001; Busch, De Maret et al. 2005). This analysis resulted in 27 themes constituting 454 quotes. The next step was to group the themes, and five interrelated categories resulted.

FINDINGS

Four categories relating to hardware and connectivity, project management issues, multi-cultural aspects and online learning communities will be examined in the following sections. The fifth category, suggestions from the doctoral candidates relating to the implementation of ICT support in future projects, will form part of the discussion.

Hardware and connectivity

Five themes relating to the category of hardware and connectivity were identified, namely text phrases referring to access to computers, the internet, basic computer skills, computer-related problems, and the LUVIT learning management system.

The doctoral candidates located at universities in five African countries constituted the unit of analysis of this inquiry. The assumption of the project management was that while the doctoral candidates were all appointed at a university, they would be able to use the basic productivity tools and have access to computers and the Internet. The adequacy of these aspects is often taken for granted in technology-enabled countries (Vinaja 2003) and because no information about the actual situation was given to the project management, the scale of the technological challenges came as a surprise:

Nowadays, we normally don’t have many requests for technical support. The students’ equipment is just up and running, whether it is privately owned computers or university computers. I experienced much more technical problems with the students from Africa.

There was a mismatch between the reality of the African situation and the expectations of the project steering committee in terms of the availability of computers, the amount of network traffic, network compatibility, configuration of computers, Internet connectivity, the doctoral candidates’ basic computer literacy, and their fluency with the basic productivity tools. This project encountered problems commonly experienced by developing countries (Vinaja 2003):

- The internet is so slow on campus. When I try to access the pages, it just gets stuck. I will have to come back over the weekend to see if I can open it then. It is very frustrating. Sometimes when I am almost there after having struggled for about half hour, it just freezes up.
It may surprise you: when the person that taught me the computer, talked about a mouse, I thought it was a small animal! I did not know what he was talking about.

As a part-time lecturer I did not have email and access to the Internet. I could only get assistance from my friends. I could also get access through my supervisor. We worked at the same department and we used to sit and work together.

The doctoral candidates also experienced other computer-related problems, inter alia JAVA compliancy, virus infections and incompatibility of outdated computers – factors that developed into hindrances, compounded the doctoral candidate’s lack of technical knowledge and the support available at their home-based universities:

Hooray, hooray, it worked! The virus was removed without having to reformat the computer, and neither did I lose any data. I got the help of a more computer literate colleague of mine to follow your instructions carefully.

However, the main concern of all the respondents converged on LUVIT – 64 relating text phrases to the LMS were recorded in the comprehensive dataset. The doctoral candidates’ concerns were neither with the rationale of employing an LMS in the project, nor with the efficacy of user interface in general, but rather with the lack of broadband connectivity enabling access to the online communication tool:

- I should not be unfair to them, the idea was not bad. I don’t know how it can be improved because the one crucial problem is access to LUVIT. Something should be done that it can be accessed. Some technical aspect should be addressed.
- Access at my university is OK, but when you get to LUVIT it is very slow and it takes very long and sometimes you just cannot get in and get frustrated. You leave your office and when you come back to it [the computer] was still searching for it. I kept on trying, but at a later stage I just stopped.

In summary, it may seem as if the NUFU project steering committee was not adequately prepared for a situation dissimilar to their own, but they also did not fully comprehend the impact the lack of basic technical knowledge and end-user support would have on the progress of the doctoral candidates:

... the Norwegians, and in a way myself, assumed that people would have access because to us, it is second nature to have access and not to have access in support systems.

Even the richest cooperating universities in the project did not have sufficient bandwidth to access LUVIT. This problem had not been anticipated by the project management, and the users did not consider the problem to be one of bandwidth, but rather ascribed it to LUVIT.

**Project management issues**

Nine themes relating to project management issues were identified, namely text
phrases referring to the doctoral candidates’ perceptions of general managerial issues, funding, technical support, laptops, expectations, misconceptions, type of support, leadership in the online community, and issues related to time management.

During the interviews it became evident that the managers of the NUFU Productive Learning Cultures project had followed a participative model of project management. However, the doctoral candidates expected a directive approach to the management of funding, e.g. the earmarking of funding for each doctoral candidate. They expressed their expectation of direct leadership; especially when funding was considered:

The leaders of the project should check with us whether we have all the stuff and tell us what we need. Make a personal budget for each learner. Everyone should be involved right from the beginning so that we could know about it. Some of the things you may not even know about. Then it is too late to go to the supervisor. We did not know about all the things that we could have.

The project leaders, however, expected the senior researchers to act as local leaders, to take initiative and spend the money allotted in their own budgets in ways that facilitated the research process for their candidates. The funding and support for the project had been planned and managed in the most inclusive way possible to further individual development of doctoral candidates. From this perspective the steering committee expected the doctoral candidates and the supervisors to articulate their financial and support needs:

- I want to say about the Norwegian policy: they do not create pre-requisites and they also do not make promises about how money could be spent. They think around broad philosophies: “what is emerging, and what comes out”. It depended greatly on the planning of each group. Their own initiative was important.
- . . . the money was there to use in any which way to support the Ph.D. student in his or her work. During the first year people did not spend money on connectivity. All of us were really scared because we come from a culture of earmarked money. Students could register with it; buy books, attend conferences, etc. . . . The contract did not stipulate that connectivity was on the table. . . . In the second year, they actually said that the money is available to use to develop the students as far as possible. . . . And that is when the students started buying laptop computers and obtaining access from their homes.

The NUFU Productive Learning Cultures project team had to address a wide variety of technology issues; *inter alia* outdated hardware, lack of broadband connectivity, and unstable and incompatible infrastructure at the various African universities. In an attempt to address the problem of outdated computers, lack of connectivity and inconvenience of doctoral candidates to transport their documents to their supervisors, they were encouraged to acquire laptop computers and broadband connectivity from their research funding:
The first thing I remember that they said is that I could have a laptop computer. It is a new computer. I selected it myself according to my own specifications. I selected it and bought it. I selected it because I am sympathetic to this brand as it is a good computer and has a very good 2 year world wide guarantee.

It is a second-hand one. With the money we had here it was not possible to buy a new one. We bought the laptop with the money supplied . . . one for me and one for my colleague – my senior researcher got a new laptop.

It is very difficult here. The computers are not so many, and there are so many teachers. I can connect this laptop at home and here at the department as well. But sometimes the problem is not the speed, as the network connection is down or slow. For two weeks we had problems and had no internet here. The providing company is not always that reliable. We have hardware and software problems.

The project pays for my broadband connection at home.

After the allocation of laptops to the doctoral candidates, additional management issues emerged, for example the doctoral candidates expected technical support for their laptops, as well as funding of their internet connections:

Sometimes when it gets stuck and then it does not want to open, I don’t know what is happening. The project did not supply money for technical support to fix the laptop or Internet access at home.

From these quotes it is evident that the doctoral candidates were not knowledgeable of the opportunities the project funding offered them. They had not asked, and the supervisors had not informed them. However, they were quite willing to dig into their private pockets to further their research and studies, and were not solely dependent on project funding to cover all their study expenses:

One thing is when you are beggar; let me put it correctly, let me put it in the right way. Like when they said there was not money to go to [the university where he is enrolled], I used my own money several times Sometimes I got money when I had to go to [place name removed], and sometimes not.

Numerous cases of negligible misconceptions relating to the style of management and project funding were encountered. However, these hindrances could have been avoided with unambiguous communication, followed by a more directive approach; especially where financial matters were concerned:

I would like to see the project to have more frequent meetings as such, to know what we can get from the budget and the primary things that you need to immediately buy for the project and prioritise. Someone should take a lead on that. Such a meeting where everybody should be there. More workshops should happen where everybody in involved.

I believe in leadership. The moment you want people to do something, give them leadership. It is true that they can do it by themselves. But keep on encouraging.
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You guys do this and you do this. The students may not be able to do it themselves. Somebody must do the leadership.

In spite of skewed expectations and misconceptions regarding management of the project funding, one doctoral candidate reflected on the value of the ICT and CMC support they received from the NUFU project as follows:

I received LUVIT-training, I could communicate with the other students, I went to conferences with the money. I could go to see my supervisor, and for accommodation to see my supervisor. I understand how the funding works. I talked with my supervisor last week and there are five books that I want to buy. I can buy books from the NUFU money. I can claim the money. My supervisor advises me to buy whatever I need, and then claim back. Get a quotation and submit it. Then I get my stuff much faster.

Not surprisingly, a picture of dependent students and diverse practices within this rather open project structure emerged.

Online learning communities

Seven themes relating to online learning communities were identified, namely text phrases referring to the social context of online learning communities, frustration as well as satisfaction doctoral candidates experienced during online learning communication, the learning of educational research skills via the Internet, non-responsiveness of members of the community, communication in the online community, and the realities of part-time study.

Productive learning is dependent on a social context (Vygotsky 1978), and the learning process becomes even more productive when a supportive facilitator guides the process. This principle holds true in educational settings where participants frequently feel socially isolated and lonely (Cole and Wertsch 2003). In this project, the doctoral candidates were deprived of experiences described by Tapscott (1997) when `kids grow up digital’ – when compared to their Scandinavian counterparts. To bridge this deficiency, training was provided during project workshops for the mastering of web skills, and for learning with an LMS:

We saw this as an opportunity to gain knowledge of how it would be to use a LMS in such an international project. . . . We also wanted to give the Ph.D.-students an opportunity to communicate with each other and discuss each other’s pieces of text like Ph.D.-students normally do (at least here in Norway).

At a very early stage, however, constructive engagement ought to be meticulously structured for online learning to prosper. Social contexts had to be designed in such a way that the doctoral candidates were motivated by communal goals and strove towards incentives:

The idea was to create a community of scholars of Ph.D. students where they would
actually interact with each other, and to share their chapters and to critically work with one another. I said it would never work, because there is not an incentive.

Despite the doctoral candidates’ lack of exposure to digital learning technologies, some appreciated the values of learning together in an online community, but were also let down by the lack of responsiveness from fellow doctoral candidates:

If someone else would put something on LUVIT, I would comment on it. I have actually done so. I think LUVIT is a good way to go, but it has just got to be improved. I believe [communication] is easier with LUVIT, as long as it would be easier to use. The information also stays there – you cannot just delete it as with your own email. You can always go back to it.

Others were of the opinion that they would not benefit from learning educational research skills in a social online context and that the barriers of online participation overshadowed their perceived advantages. Reasons for the non-responsiveness of doctoral candidates in the online discussions were identified. One response is related to the respondent’s perception of what research is:

I did not ever put a question on LUVIT. I do not think it would have helped. LUVIT is an interactive instrument, but it is not good for research.

Another response touches on the fact that not everybody is equally keen on dialogue:

I did not feel the need to speak to everybody. The idea when we were at Bergen the first time was that we can speak to everybody using this LUVIT. But it did not work. We reverted to email.

And a third uses the time constraints in academic communities as an explanation:

I think this people in universities are busy with teaching and other things, we get into our daily routine and loose contact. It is not that I decided not to talk to the group, but we do not have time.

In addition to the demands of their doctoral research, the candidates were overwhelmed by the demands of their careers while working towards their final qualification. Frustration with especially the LUVIT learning management system, alongside the toll of part-time study contributed towards the emotional distress communicated during the interviews:

- We all do it alongside all our other work; it becomes a matter of very full plates – maybe too full plates; and everybody constantly feels guilty for not using LUVIT.
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- Maybe it is because LUVIT frustrated me so much. I am advising to do away with LUVIT.
- Sorry for taking so long to submit to LUVIT. Yes, I am under a lot of pressure. I have to submit my finished thesis by the end of the year in order to avoid paying for the whole year, and also to graduate, after all who doesn’t want to? Much school work as well. I am teaching up to graduate level. Large classes.

On the other hand, a doctoral candidate experienced gratification after managing to log on to the online learning community and anticipated that the online learning community would meet his need for academic support:

Thanks for your help. I am now hooked onto LUVIT. The agony of trying is gone, thanks to you. I will now try to refresh my knowledge of the system and then use it everyday.

Cross-cultural aspects

Four themes relating to multi-cultural learning communication were identified, namely text phrases referring to social contexts of learning, trust and friendship, approaches to time management, and multi-cultural aspects of online communities.

The diverse nature of the NUFU Productive Learning Cultures learning community is owed to a diverse cultural and linguistic context. Vinaja (2003) maintains that the failure to create online communities is closely related to the difficulties of building trust, and the lack of positive relationships across geographical boundaries, and cultural differences among members of the community. Some members realised that this fragile online learning community needed nurturing from both shared learning and technical perspectives:

- We used email to say “How are you?” and “How far did you go?” It was a beginning, but we shared information about ourselves and materials. I very much like to have a learning community.
- We need to do the assignments together. . . . I still have not a firm grip with LUVIT, but we can learn together.

Over time trust developed and friendships blossomed, regardless of distance and cultural diversity:

- This issue touches my roots. I am from a community where everything belongs to everybody. There is a lot of support. These people [students in the project] are like from the same family. You would support your neighbour’s child. I can see the same principle applies here.
- I am looking forward to the conference and especially the people that have become my friends.

However, cultural disparity became evident in discomfort with the way the project was managed. As previously indicated, the management of the project followed a
participative and an inclusive managerial style. Numerous quotes were identified that indicated that the doctoral candidates were accustomed to ‘directed behaviour’ from their superiors that triggered subsequent ‘supportive behaviour’ (Stark 2002):

- Although portable computers or money for computers were given to the student, we experienced that some of the senior researchers bought a new computer for themselves and gave their old one to the student.
- I would like to see the project to have more frequent meetings as such, but to know what we can get from the budget and the primary things that you need to immediately buy for the project and prioritise. Someone should take a lead on that.
- I believe in leadership. The moment you want people to do something, give them leadership. It is true that they can do it by themselves. But keep on encouraging. You guys do this and you do this. The students may not be able to do it themselves. Somebody must do the leadership.

The doctoral candidates articulated consciousness of cultural diversity with reference to the look-and-feel of the LUVIT interface. One candidate expressed his inclination for a more inclusive cultural approach to the project:

The program is very complex and has a very foreign interface – a distinct Europe-centric feel. It would have helped if the program had some information that was more Africa-centric it would have made it easier to understand. Do address more African issues, for example, a glossary of African words to enable us to reach some of the elements. Some words in African languages would have helped – even as little as it may be to introduce you to African literature. One leg of NUFU was about indigenous knowledge – that should have filtered through. Not everything afro-centric, but to accommodate the African way of thinking.

Issues relating to time management become problematic when people who are not in the same place need to synchronise their activities (Vinaja 2003). Although Bergen, Norway and the five African countries involved in the project did not differ significantly in terms of time zones, perceptions of timeliness became a bother:

- I suspect the problem lies with my computer. I will try again next week.
- We will wait for your response till 16h00 today. Can we make an appointment between 15h00 to 16h00 between tomorrow and Thursday so as to be able to chat online and thus get help?
- I have been cut from the internet for two weeks . . . it’s a long story.

Despite the obstacles caused by contradictory cultural perceptions of members from northern and southern universities, the intention to establish a cultural free platform for communication and collaboration was clear:

- First, we saw this as an opportunity to gain knowledge of how it would be to use a LMS in such an international project – to see if it is possible to establish a kind of common ground, despite the cultural differences.
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- But now I can summarize my own work; and I am doing everything myself. PowerPoint I could not use before the NUFU project, but now I can do it all by myself. I just sometimes need a little professional touch and I know where to find it.

**DISCUSSION**

The discussion is consistent with the findings of the four categories that emerged from the content analysis, namely hardware and connectivity, project management issues, online learning communities and multi-cultural aspects.

**Hardware and connectivity**

Challenges relating to online facilitation are widely described by K. P. King (2002). Most agree a disconcerting challenge of online learning is the low retention rate of online courses compared to campus-based tuition. In a literature overview by Nagel, (2005), technological constraints, as a contributing factor of dissatisfaction with online learning and facilitation, is now less frequently reported than during the 90s. For example, in their study Miller, Rainer and Corley (2003) listed poor attendance, procrastination, feelings of isolation, and a general lack of course structure as factors hindering the extent of participation and engagement in online learning. They did not perceive technology as an obstacle to online learning – in fact no mention was made of technical hindrances. On the other hand, Song, Singleton and Hill (2004) described technological issues as one of the major challenges online learning faces – even at well-resourced American universities. F. B. King (2002) similarly established that frustration with technology, isolation, anxiety, and confusion play a part in the low retention rate of online courses.

In their report the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2000) validated benchmarks for success in online distance education published by various entities. They also ascertained the degree to which 40 benchmarks were incorporated in policies, procedures, and practices at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Benchmark number 34 related to the category of student support: ‘Easily accessible technical assistance is available to all students throughout the duration of the course/program’. In addition, this case study sought to determine how important the benchmarks were perceived to be. The benchmark of accessible technical assistance was rated 4.6 on a 5 point Likert-type scale by faculty, administrators, and students from six institutions that participated in the HIEP study. The report concluded that ‘Questions directed to student service personnel must be answered accurately and quickly’ (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2000, 20). In the South African context, Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (2005) endorses this opinion by stating that HEIs should ensure that appropriate ICT literacy and competency are embedded in all HEI programmes. The ultimate goal for educational designers is to design online learning in such a way that the technological aspects will become as unobtrusive as possible (Chen 2003).
Project management issues

Stark (2002) describes two basic academic leadership and management styles, namely directive and supportive managerial models; and how they bring about either a power-driven or a participative style of decision making. He emphasizes that academic leadership and management should be instrumental in the creation of dynamic participatory learning cultures. On the other hand, Stark advocates that academic leadership and management should play a directive role in developmental projects to ensure clear communication and effective management of academic processes. This should be continued until functionality and a culture of collegiality has come about. Thereafter the development of participative decision-making processes should form part of cross-cultural academic development – thus completing a cyclic process of management style.

In spite of the criticism that Hofstede’s (1994) model of cultural dimensions received, his first dimension of power distance corresponds well with problems encountered in the NUFU project on productive learning cultures. Hofstede defines power distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 1994, 28). The power-distance concept reaches beyond the workplace and is also reflected in the hierarchical organisation of academic projects. From the analysed text, it became evident that members of the project from countries with numbers reflecting high power distance expected a directive role from the project’s steering committee that came from Norway – a country reflecting low power distance. The power distance raw scores for Norway is 31; for Namibia 66; and South Africa 50 (Hofstede 2003).

Online learning communities

Howard Rheingold (2002) first coined the term ‘virtual community’ in 1985 after his exhilarating experience of participating in an online community. Although many descriptions of the term exist, Kowch and Schwier’s (1997) definition describes the expected personality traits members and required actions of online learning communities as ‘autonomous, independent, . . . engaged by influencing each other within a learning process’. Looi and Ang (2000), on the other hand, list activities that take place within online learning communities as:

. . . a group of people with common interest and goals, connecting regularly online, communicating, sharing, constructing, learning, playing, working or building. If this community is viewed as a place where people come together to construct knowledge and negotiate meanings together, then this is consistent with recent notions of learning (Looi and Ang 2000, 2).

The advantages of online learning appear numerous and exciting, but the problems associated with successful implementation of an online learning program could detract from the educational experience of even the most motivated student
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(Miller, Rainer et al. 2003). The most cited challenges associated with CMC are that it requires additional facilitation time, administrative and technical support when compared to on campus learning (Andres 2002). For learning in an online learning community to be effective, the mere application of the latest online pedagogical tools do not ensure successful course completion, nor do they fully employ the unique distinguished features of the online learning environment. Effective collaboration requires coordinated scheduling, common communication tools and mutually accepted goals and objectives (Sturm and Mueller 2003). Song, Singleton and Hill (2004) maintain that ‘while information systems and applications promote access to a wide-reaching range of resources, they do not, by design, facilitate learning’. Therefore, before embarking on creating an online learning community, it is important to perform a comprehensive target group analysis and a needs assessment according to course objectives to identify and optimise management strategies employed in the online learning community.

Cross-cultural aspects

Hofstede (1994) defines culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’ (Hofstede 1994:9). Vinyaya (2003) argues that cross-cultural issues in online communities are not always visible, but are definitely always present.

The second dimension proposed by Hofstede is of individualism/collectivism: ‘Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty’ (Hofstede 1994, 51). The individualism/collectivism raw scores for Norway is 69; Namibia 20; and South Africa 64 (Hofstede 2003). These figures could indicate why people from countries reflecting low indices of individualism are not ready to make their own decisions and so accept decisions made on their behalf:

All though portable computers or money for computers were given to the student we experienced that some of the seniors bought new computer to themselves an gave their old one to the student. We made it clear that it was money in the project for a computer for every student. I think this was a matter of culture – a strong senior and a weaker student. The senior decided mostly what should happen and what to do.

Students who learn in an environment where multiple and diverse perspectives are fostered and appreciated, become better critical thinkers, communicators, problem solvers and team players (Goodear 2001). Indeed, to sanitise cultural difference has the potential of limiting educational opportunities. However, most of the time, people accommodate, restrain or ignore different cultures, but only when common ground is found, shared goals and similar interests surface. When people concentrate on similarities, the differences are less noticeable, or at any rate,
less important (Impact Factory s.a.). The use of CMC could provide both solutions, as well as additional challenges in dealing with cross-cultural issues (Australian Flexible Learning Network 2004).

**Suggestions from participants**

The fifth category that emerged from the data analysis was a set of suggestions made by the doctoral candidates grouped into four classes. These could be used for similar future projects. Suggestions regarding the mode of learning facilitation, the integration of postings from the project with their regular email, addressing of basic computer and Internet literacy at the start of the project; and project-management training to enhance exclusivity are presented as a table integrating a brief description and a corresponding quote (Table 1).

**Table 1: Suggestions from doctoral candidates for future development projects**

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<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>Description and quote</th>
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| **Active facilitation**  | Challenges and incentives should be planned from the start to ensure that all learners are obliged to participate in online learning tasks (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2000).  
                          | The LUVIT centre must monitor the process in the beginning; sending tasks to the students, telling them the date to finish this work in such days. |
| **Integrated LMS**       | Additional log ins add to the burden by regularly checking the LMS for new assignments and communication (Hiltz and Wellman 1997).  
                          | I would also like a warning in my email that there is a new task. It would be nice if the things in LUVIT could come to my own email.              |
| **Computer literacy**    | Conduct a baseline evaluation of basic computer literacy and internet access at the start of the project (Song, Singleton et al. 2004).  
                          | Probably by means of getting particular people with expertise to arrange workshops on specific topics, such as using Word, Excel, PowerPoint, how to use LUVIT, to analyse my data, writing skills, how to write in chapters, More workshop and the same material in LUVIT. More contact sessions and more of the same stuff on LUVIT. Advise on how to buy a laptop actually they should supply the laptop. I had to go and seek one and I don't know the specifications and are the specialists in ICT. |
| **Management training**  | Participative management styles ensure effective project management, but people from high power distance countries should be introduced to more inclusive processes (Stark 2002).  
                          | The leaders of the project should check with us whether have all the stuff and tell us what we need. Make a personal budget for each learner. Everyone should be involved right from the beginning so that we could know about it. Some of the things you may not even know about and then it is too late to go to the supervisor. |
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The history of educational development is replete with technology-based projects that failed because of high operating costs, problems of adaptation to local conditions, lack of skilled personnel to operate the technologies, and lack of effectiveness (Bates 1995). This investigation provided insights for the managers of the NUFU Productive Learning Culture project on the types of challenges that may arise. These four patterns of challenges faced by this cross-cultural online learning community (technology, project management, online learning communities and cross-cultural issues) were consistent with the research by Suchan and Hayzak (2001), Vinaja (2003), and Yoong (2001).

**Technology:** The current state of technology enables online teams to ably function in many parts of the world (Vinaja 2003). Sadly, this was not the case for the African countries engaged in this project. The installation of broadband and dedicated services may even overshadow the savings on reduced travel costs. The provision of laptops to the doctoral candidates is an approach that many similar projects shy away from due to the tedious and unproductive managing computer hardware at a distance. However, in this instance, supplying the doctoral candidates with information communication tools became a necessity. Although the general principle is that academic development projects should not become a ‘dealer’ of hardware, timely decisions in this regard should be taken. Yet, the main guideline remains, namely that technology should become as unobtrusive as possible and learning should become as evident as possible (Chen 2003).

**Cross-cultural issues:** Cross-cultural learning teams are characterised by the rich diversity of their members. In the case of the NUFU Productive Learning Culture project, the members resided in countries on both sides of the equator. Such academic development projects can make good use of CMC since the people best suited for the project could be selected on the basis of their proficiency, rather than their location; minimising the burden of extensive travel (Vinaja 2003). The social status within cultures is very important. Although online teams must respect cultural diversity in order to work effectively and efficiently, the Internet could play a significant role in lessening cross-cultural differences and contributing towards members’ understanding of cultural issues.

**Online learning communities:** Cross-cultural teams as reported in this study, are important in terms of development and globalisation of cultures historically marginalised countries (Vinaja 2003). As important as development and globalisation may be; and as much as managers of educational development programs may appreciate the educational value of the Internet, they often overlook the benefits of the ‘people resources’, or more specifically, the benefits of online collaborative learning (Andres 2002). CMC could not only augment the way that people learn to understand and appreciate cultural identities, but also capitalise on commonalities (Chen 2003). After all, it is not about technology, it is about people.

**Project management:** Managing an online learning team is a major task.
Challenges such as cross-cultural issues and non-functional technology add to the mix and complexity of the scenario results. Team leaders must be aware of these particular issues in order to avoid potential problems. The steering committee of the NUFU Productive Learning Cultures were indeed faced with an enormous task. Yet, all was not lost:

I detected strong bonds between the learners. Also, their struggles with the technology caused them to help each other and make progress regardless of heartless seniors. This all proves again that learning with technology is not about technology, but about people. I think the project has created bonds and friendships that will last after the project.

Much was learned about the importance of the socio-constructivist aspects of online learning communities; that technology was less important than people; and that much was gained in terms of development.

REFERENCES


Higher Education South Africa. 2005. HESA’s position on enhancing the contribution of distance higher education in South Africa (Position).


Lessons from a cross cultural online learning community