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Learning for Citizenship Online:

How Can Students Develop Intercultural Awareness and Construct Knowledge Together?

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Abstract

This article evaluates ways in which students on an online master's program are learning about citizenship and developing intercultural awareness in spite of the lack of face-to-face interaction. There is still debate about the effectiveness of online courses and whether they provide an adequate substitute for or even an improvement on classroom-based learning. We employ qualitative research methods and deploy instruments for analysing constructivist learning to evaluate the extent to which students are constructing knowledge through online discussions as well as learning from research-led teaching materials. We also analyse online discussions for evidence of social presence, including the interventions of the course tutor. We conclude that students do feel themselves to be members of an international learning community and that their interactions can promote higher-order learning. We draw attention to some advantages of online courses such as the possibility of crafting a contribution and the availability of discussions as a resource.

Keywords: citizenship education; intercultural awareness; online discussion; social presence; constructivist learning; virtual learning environment (VLE); asynchronous computer-mediated conferencing (ACMC)

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Introduction

Social studies and citizenship education are characterised by debate and discussion about controversial issues. Such exchanges do not merely model formal political processes, but they are intended to enable students to construct and co-construct new knowledge and gain in critical awareness. Constructivism is the theory that learners construct knowledge by reflecting on and drawing meaning out of their experiences (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) and it underpins the design of courses that include an interactive element. The theory posits that students will learn best by actively participating in social activities and exchanges. Social interaction is therefore essential as it is through discussion and collaboration with one another that students are able to co-construct knowledge.

Courses designed on constructivist principles build in opportunities for social interaction during which students articulate their ideas and opinions, alter them in light of feedback from each other, and potentially arrive at new meanings and understandings. This process is known as scaffolding each other's learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Hara, Bonk & Angeli, 2000). In a campus seminar room a constructivist approach ensures at least dialogue between participants and faculty, and in many cases will include opportunities for peer learning, such as group work. If students learn from each other and from the opportunities to articulate their ideas, the essence of such exchanges is engaging with a diversity of opinions. This has both an ideological dimension based on a certain conception of democracy (Dewey, [1916] 2002) and a practical dimension in that without diversity in deliberation 'there is nothing to listen to and no need to talk' (Parker, 2004: 453).

In campus-based courses, discussions are potentially enriched by the presence of students from a range of cultural and professional backgrounds. The seminar room becomes a convivial and challenging forum for debate and for co-constructing knowledge. In online courses, there is potentially even more diversity within the student body, since course members can be situated anywhere in the world. We set out to investigate whether an online course can conceivably provide an intercultural and international learning experience such that students do in fact construct knowledge together. We were granted access to discussion forums within a new online master's program in citizenship education, offered by the University of London. We undertook a modest pilot project to test the hypothesis that online programs can in fact promote co-constructed learning and provide an experience that students recognise as stimulating their reflection.

Assumptions about course design for online programs

Online programs are designed to be able to bring together students from across the world in a single virtual classroom or virtual learning environment (VLE). One common model, adopted by the program studied, encourages students to interact and co-construct knowledge using discussion boards, or what technically is known as asynchronous computer-mediated conferencing (ACMC). We sought to identify empirical evidence to determine whether this online course in citizenship education could provide a valid substitute for the convivial and challenging learning environment that students would expect in a campus-based programme.

Like the campus-based seminar model, ACMC enables student-student and student-tutor online discussion that is intended to promote the social construction of knowledge. Leading academics and practitioners in the field of e-learning stress the importance of interaction for online learning

and maintain that online technologies can facilitate the social construction of knowledge in distance learning courses (Bates, 2005; Jonassen, 1995; Salmon, 2003). However, the literature review we undertook and which provided the impetus for this present study found a lack of empirical evidence for this claim (Hopkins, Gibson, Ros I Solé, Savvides, & Starkey, 2008). This raised questions about whether this technological approach is suited to programmes such as citizenship education where learning experiences include the debating of political issues and the critical examination of academic literature. This could be particularly acute where students come from varied geographical and cultural contexts and have no opportunity to interact face-to-face.

Expectations of the program

Students of the MA in Citizenship Education choose from a range of 6 courses and, since they are studying part time expect to complete one or two per year. A master's degree is awarded on completion of 4 courses and a dissertation. The courses introduce and explore the key concepts that shape teaching and learning about citizenship and history in a globalized world. These include consideration of democracy, human rights, diversity, peace, and social justice. The students on the program are mostly teachers or education professionals. In 2007/08 about half of the 30 students were from the UK and the others from a range of geographical locations including Barbados, Burma, Canada, Cyprus, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Netherlands, Philippines and Saudi Arabia. Since this was the first full year of the program, for most this was their first experience of online study.

Students receive a paper-based course reader of selected academic and policy papers and a study guide, provided as a printed document, but also online. This offers structured tasks to help engage with the readings and commentaries by the course writers. At regular intervals throughout the

course students have the opportunity to contribute to a discussion on the VLE. In this way they can start to create an online community and learn from each other as well as from the tutor and the course materials.

Methodology

We were granted access one discussion from each of three courses. These were entitled: ‘Learning to live together: children rights, identities and citizenship’; ‘Citizenship and history in the curriculum’; ‘Learning, teaching and assessment in citizenship’. Since this was the first full year of the program, the number of students taking each of the three modules was small, namely 5, 12 and 4 students respectively. Students consented to us analysing the discussion task on condition that we anonymised any extracts.

We printed the full discussion for one task from each module. The data in this article is drawn from just two online discussions. One task was chosen because it was an introductory task with all students participating. A second task was chosen because it was near to the end of the course and so students had had some experience of online discussions.

In order to provide further qualitative evidence to triangulate the data and illuminate the issues investigated, we conducted semi-structured interviews with four students either face-to-face or over the telephone. The purpose of these interviews was to explore students’ perceptions of learning about citizenship education through the different components of the program namely: reading, note taking, completing tasks from the study guide, online interaction, written assignments, and examinations.

We also analysed students' written end of year evaluations of the course, with the same aims in mind. The evaluation questionnaire included several questions where students were asked to indicate what components of the course they found most useful and what particularly aided or hindered learning. One of the limitations of an online course is the difficulty of persuading students to complete an evaluation sheet after the course has ended. In fact we received just 6 comprehensive evaluations. Consequently, although we had a useful amount of rich data, the small size of our sample and the limited requirements of the discussions tasks mean that our findings are presented as preliminary and indicative.

The analysis of discussions followed a content analysis approach as applied to online programs (Henri 1992; Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000; Marra, Moore and Klimczak, 2004; De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006; Hopkins et al. 2008). Specifically we applied two well-known instruments to the context of discussions in citizenship education. The first of these focuses on evidence of social presence. We looked for ways in which students 'project themselves socially and affectively' into the online community (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001: 51) and present themselves to the other participants as 'real people' (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2001: 4). We drew on the scales developed by these authors to identify strategies for social presence actually used in the discussions.

In a second phase, we applied to our data Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson's (1997) five-phase interaction analysis model for evaluating the social construction of knowledge. We had identified this as a potentially valuable tool in our earlier literature review (Hopkins et al. 2008). We sought to determine the quality of students' interactions and of their learning experiences [see figure 1].

Figure 1: Interaction Analysis Model for Examining Social Construction of Knowledge

Phase I:	Sharing/comparing of information
Phase II:	Discovery and exploration of dissonance or inconsistency among ideas, concepts, or statements
Phase III:	Negotiation of meaning/co-construction of knowledge
Phase IV:	Testing and modification of proposed synthesis or co-construction
Phase V:	Agreement statement(s)/applications of newly constructed meaning

(Gunawardena Lowe and Anderson 1997: 398-399)

This model provides five descriptors enabling the researcher to situate exchanges amongst participants on a continuum. We looked for evidence that individual participants negotiated understandings and applied new constructions of knowledge as a result of their interactions within the group.

Findings

Social presence

Social presence and a sense of community have been identified as important factors in online discussions, affecting the quantity and frequency of participation in the conference and hence opportunities for constructing knowledge (Rourke et al. 2001). Consequently a number of online tasks in this program are designed to encourage students to reflect on their life experiences and to relate these to analytical and theoretical perspectives provided in the course materials. They may share their personal observations of the world and their understandings. The task from the module on children's rights that we selected asked students to think of an incident that they had

seen personally or read about in the past month that involved one or more young people. They were asked to describe the incident in a few words and link it to children's rights, citizenship and/or identity.

This task is designed so that students reveal something about their experiences and interests, as well as the way they approach issues related to human rights, citizenship and identity. Students contributed examples from their own contexts, providing at least a minimum of local color (the type of school they work in; the media they use for information; where they are in the world or where they have recently been). The online environment enabled students to exchange knowledge from different national contexts, thereby providing the possibility for a comparative international dimension to learning. Providing a personal example enabled students to reveal themselves as real people in a context and hence facilitated online dialogue and discussion as students began to identify with others in the group.

The task is also designed so that students engage with the course materials. By encouraging them to make the connection between an incident and the concept of children's rights, students need to clarify their understandings of the key concepts before making an online contribution that will be read by other students. This requires them to read the course materials and apply their understandings to a real life incident.

We analysed social presence in students' online postings using three categories: affective, interactive and cohesive as identified by Rourke et al. (2001). The affective dimension is created by self-disclosure. Examples included describing the professional context: 'I currently work with children and young people who are in the care of the local authority' (Ross) and providing details

of personal experiences: ‘The story that I am going to select (...) is something that I experienced whilst holidaying in Thailand (...)’ (Mel). There were also expressions of emotion such as ‘I wanted to share her experience with you as I was blown away by it!’ (Mel) or ‘[t]hat was really sad (...) what a shame (...)’ (Ross).

There were also high levels of interaction. The task analysed generated five small conversations, or threads, with students referring to the tutor’s comments and to the contributions of other students. For example, Ross in Conversation Two comments: ‘I think the point [the tutor] raises about education is an important one’. We noted several examples where students complimented others and expressed appreciation. For example, Sorayia thanks Ross for ‘letting me know how to find the report’ and Ross thanks Paulo for contributing ‘quotes like this that remind me why I do my job.’

We also identified examples of cohesive strategies, which helped to build online social relationships. For example, students attempt actively to promote a feeling of group solidarity and purpose by using vocative expressions (directly addressing a person by their name or addressing the group as a whole). Students also used phatics, which are expressions or forms of communicating designed to keep the conversation going rather than to convey information. As an example, Sorayia says to Ross that she has learnt from Marta that they will be taking a module together and looks forward to meeting again later in the year. Other cohesive strategies used by the students include ending conversations with greetings and closures.

In this way the social presence evident in these conversations helped to create a comfortable yet challenging online environment for students to interact in and build knowledge together. It helped

students get to know each other and build a sense of community in which they could explore and apply to their own contexts meanings of citizenship, social justice, and human rights based on universal principles. This is confirmed in the following comment from an anonymous student evaluation:

Amongst the students in this module, I think a collegial sense of camaraderie was built. Quite an achievement when you consider how far flung we all are from one another!

However, the levels of social presence are likely to vary depending on the type of discussion task. Not all tasks are designed to maximise the scope for social presence. In one course the norm was for online tasks to require students to post a short paragraph or a list of bullet points without an expectation of interaction. This generates little sense of community or rapport building and limits opportunities to co-construct knowledge.

Learning from each other

The interview and evaluation data confirmed that reading each others' postings and contributing to discussions online was motivating and enabled students to learn from each other and reach a more sophisticated understanding. One student interviewed explicitly highlighted the value of online discussions in constructing new knowledge:

There's no question that a higher level of learning, if you will, goes on as a result [of online discussion]. You know you can read all that stuff and you can think you understand, feel confident that you understand what's being discussed and sort of what you are meant to gain, but it is only through the interactions with other people that you are sure about that.

We analysed the interactions in the postings by students by applying Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson's model in figure 1 above. The model suggests that knowledge construction requires several phases. Perhaps not surprisingly we found many contributions were sharing and comparing information, corresponding to a Phase I interaction. These contributions included statements of observation or opinion, statements of agreement, asking and answering questions to clarify details of statements, describing, defining, or identifying a problem. However there were also examples of students operating beyond the most basic level.

We analysed a second discussion, this time from a unit comparing transnational and national agendas for history and civics education. The online discussion task required students to read the Recommendation of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on history teaching in twenty-first-century Europe (Council of Europe 2001) and to discuss possible adverse effects of history teaching.

Our analysis shows that the discussion moves through the phases of Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson's model. The first contribution identified an issue (Phase I), namely that British history classes and textbooks focus on war and conflicts rather than the development of peaceful institutions such as the European Union. The student asked: 'why don't we emphasize what positive contribution Europeans have made to our culture [...?]'

Other students noted a dissonance in this contribution, namely that the term 'Europeans' in this posting implies that the British are not Europeans. In a second posting, the student therefore explained that she previously viewed Europe and Britain as two entirely different things and that she has now started using the term 'continental Europe' with her students as she believes that

‘Britain is indeed part of Europe, just not the continental bit of it’. This is a clear example of the student, having recognised the dissonance (Phase II) constructing new understandings building on the observations of her fellow students (Phase III).

In response to her view on the fact that British school textbooks focus on conflicts, another student responded: ‘I note and agree with the commentary about school textbooks and war...’ A further student also agreed and drew on her experience:

I agree with you. When I was in high school, history textbooks tended to focus on conflicts when examining 20th century European History. History textbooks told stories that were uncontroversial. I was told who the enemy was and who the “good guys” were. Everything was black and white.

The student here applies a new shared understanding to personal experience, namely that history textbooks have tended to focus on conflict not peace building. Whilst the insight is not particularly original, it may be important in the development of that particular student’s understanding. The contribution can be seen as evidence that discussions may indeed sometimes follow the phases of the model and reach new understandings characteristic of Phase V.

Another example of the ways in which the model helps us to identify stages of knowledge construction is in this interchange about history education policy. Having established that there is a dissonance between the ideals of the Recommendation of the Council of Europe and the realities of national textbooks (phase II of the model), one student suggests a policy response: ‘Why not make continental languages mandatory from age 6/7!!!! (just an idea but an eccentric one I think – please comment)’. The four exclamation marks indicate that the student considers this to be a very innovative and surprising idea, indeed one that others may consider eccentric.

The student is looking to co-construct meaning with fellow participants, since there is a direct invitation to respond. This operation is at Phase III of the model.

The invitation is successful and another student moves to Phase III by drawing on their experience in an Asian context:

I don't believe that teaching a child a second language is eccentric at all. If anything, it is one of the most practical skills you could give to a child in this day and age. In Korea, for example, students are required to study English.

The discussion continues and finally moves to Phase V as a student acknowledges the learning that has taken place through the discussion and applies it to classroom teaching:

I have become (...) much more sensitive to the international dimension in my classes and realise that I could do more work to put the spotlight on international history (...) it has also made me aware of 'controversial issues'

Although we applied the model to the exchanges in a very few online tasks, we can tentatively suggest that discussions may well build through phases or steps and that students online are, in fact, able to co-construct meanings with other students at least as effectively as they would in a conventional seminar. We did not find examples of interactions at Phase IV and it may be that this phase is redundant since participants are able to move directly from Phase III to Phase V.

The luxury of time

In our literature review, we found that online discussion 'potentially provides opportunities for greater learner reflection and processing of information, leading to a deeper understanding of subject matter that was previously possible in traditional forms of distance education' (Hopkins et al. 2008: 29). Interviews with students revealed that students did indeed feel that this was a

particular advantage of online learning. They explained that they had more time to reflect on the nature of the task or question being asked and to consider their answers before responding. They felt therefore that they had more opportunity to formulate a higher quality answer than might be the case in a face-to-face environment. One student interviewed explained that reading others' postings can contribute to knowledge more than attending a face-to-face class, since in some cases face-to-face classes involve listening to the teacher in a more passive manner and not necessarily contributing to discussion. He elaborated as follows:

[W]hat online communication gives you (...) is time, resources (. . .) [R]esponses are usually sophisticated and informed because the others have the time to think about it (...) [H]aving a response that is informed and sophisticated helps you to build your framework for knowledge, to connect your ideas with others' ideas and improve them.

In other words students are able to synthesise their ideas before sharing them. The awareness of an audience for what they write encourages them to refine their thinking before posting and to be aware that they may be confronted with other perspectives.

Developing intercultural awareness

As the students are based in different countries across the world, they are potentially able to learn from each other about these issues in different national and social contexts. One British student noted that although the course emanates from the U.K. and there are British participants, there were 'also people who were living in other places, so perspectives were different and people engaged over that'.

The interviews and course evaluations from students indicate that many students found the international and intercultural dimension to their course surprising and valuable. They were very interested in learning about other course members' experiences of citizenship education and issues of social justice in different countries. One student based in the UK explained that she recognised this intercultural dimension through the online discussions:

when a discussion would get going (...) it was fascinating because everyone was in a different location (...) I've also just been interested in what's been going on in different places so I'm always wondering you know maybe the Philippines is like us in that degree and maybe that will work and you know different things like that.

The student found similarities in the implementation of programmes of history, citizenship and social studies education between her situation and the Philippines. She learnt that policies that she had previously seen as specific to her own context could well be applied successfully in other contexts. Although she expresses herself simplistically in this interview, the opportunity to engage in dialogue with students from around the world provides concrete examples and evidence that supplement the academically focused course readings.

Given that citizenship education is the focus of the master's program, students are likely to bring a commitment to social justice to the course. The international dimension enables them to learn about social justice issues in a range of contexts. One interviewee found that the course:

provided important insight into different ways one can use curricula to promote interest in social justice issues. It was interesting to me that most, if not all, students were also concerned about the promotion of social justice issues (. . .) [T]he types of issues that might be chosen to focus on could vary dramatically from place to place. (Yasmin)

Again the evidence points to the value of the discussions as another interviewee noted:

During the course I had the opportunity to think about some issues of social justice. These issues were mainly issues to do with people with different ethnic backgrounds. The online discussions were (...) important in this process (Konstantinos)

Similar findings were established in the student end of year evaluations. These were submitted anonymously. One student ‘coming from a non-European and non-Western country’ accepted that the course provided a perspective that ‘does not apply to European and Western countries only, but to other societies as well’. The student ‘gained a new insight into how citizenship education is developed and how (positively or negatively) it is perceived by politicians, policy-makers, and educationalists in different societies’.

Online discussions as a resource

Unlike contributions in face-to-face seminars, postings to the online discussion are not ephemeral, but remain accessible to students throughout their year-long participation on the course. Students found the collection of postings to be a very useful bank of material, which they were able to review in order to reflect and build upon their knowledge of citizenship and social justice issues. They found this to be particularly useful when they had to revise for their examinations at the end of the course. One student emphasised the cumulative collective dimension to learning and understanding:

Going back now and re-reading it, of course all those peoples’ comments have now helped me learn a great deal because I reviewed them at the end of the course.

Another analysed the discussions in terms of a co-construction, not just of new knowledge, but of the course itself:

reading the completed discussions (...) I can look at it in relationship with the aims and the outcomes, it’s a great way of consolidating the learning, it was really helpful to me to read the comments from various people

In other words the course itself is conceived of as a framework for the co-construction of knowledge with the student contributions in the end holding considerable significance in terms of consolidating understandings.

Task types and the tutor's role

The literature suggests a strong link between students' learning outcomes and task type (Jones & Asenio, 2001). The nature of the task and the instructions given on how to complete it is likely to affect the level of collaborative dialogue and knowledge-building (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002). It is also important that students are clear on the purpose of the task and what is expected of them (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005). Our analysis revealed that where tasks involved simply posting a summary of course readings students tended to only post one contribution and in their interviews they recognised that such tasks scarcely encouraged interaction.

Previous studies suggest that it is possible for an enthusiastic or conscientious tutor to encourage greater interaction amongst students by judicious intervention during online discussions (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). The tutor's role becomes that of facilitator, responsible for moderating discussions and directing students towards higher levels of learning rather than merely transmitting knowledge. In the examples we studied the tutors initiated the online discussions by briefly introducing the topic and questions that should be discussed. They assumed that their own interventions should be sparing, so as to provide more opportunities for students to interact between themselves and learn from each other. However, students who were used to regarding their university tutor as an incontrovertible authority asked for more clarity

about the expectations of the discussions. They perhaps hoped for more regular contributions from a voice of authority. In an evaluation one requested: ‘clearer expectations for the student and the tutor and that we know what each others’ expectations are (...) I wasn’t clear on what everyone’s role was supposed to be’.

In a face to face course, the faculty member teaching the course can usually be challenged or at least questioned in a seminar. In an online course, it is the study guide that provides the voice of authority. For example, in the course on children’s rights within the master’s program we studied, the writer of the study guide stresses the perspective that children should be considered as citizens rather than as future citizens. The online discussions are an opportunity to challenge that voice and examine it critically thus meeting the aims of a program at this level. However, students from some backgrounds may be reluctant to challenge what they perceive as an authoritative voice and it may require the moderator of the discussion to encourage consideration of other perspectives by referring to literature or examples beyond those in the course materials.

Students considered that the role of the tutor in encouraging discussion was actually more important than the task itself, since regular feedback and input from the tutor can stimulate discussion irrespective of the nature of the task. One student summarised this perspective:

I think there were certain things that I don’t know that I would have ever clarified on my own if it hadn’t been for [the tutors]. I think that’s part of why I would have liked even more of their involvement.

Arguably, it is never possible to satisfy student demand for tutor contributions to online courses. The students on this course are typical of such programmes as they regularly request ‘more active participation by tutors (to inspire the conversations) during online discussions’. However, the

amount of discussion material generated by well-motivated students requires a considerable amount of time to read and so program managers need to ensure that both tutors and students have clear understandings about how much time is reasonable for a tutor to spend online. There is considerable debate about whether online courses can ever be a cost-saving operation for universities, with much evidence pointing to the long hours potentially worked by online tutors (Salmon 2003).

Conclusion

Citizenship education is associated with exploring controversial issues, engaging in lively debates and applying understandings, awareness and knowledge to political and social situations. It is therefore important to assess whether an online course can provide an adequate environment within which students can engage with the issues and with each other. Our analysis of sample online discussions suggests that students on this program were able to explore issues of citizenship and social justice at least as effectively as in some classroom seminars.

We conclude that online socialisation facilitates discussion which in turn favours the construction of knowledge. Not all online tasks promote discussion and attention needs to be paid both to task design and tutor interventions. The online element provides an international virtual space that enables students in different national locations to come together and engage with each other. However, it is the combination of successfully engaging with the subject matter of the course as well as with each other that enables students to construct new meanings, gain intercultural awareness and engage in serious and productive debate.

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