Cases on Technological Adaptability and Transnational Learning: Issues and Challenges

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Chapter 6

- Transnational Postgraduate Study for Development Workers: Using Technology
to Bridge the Gap 103

Elizabeth A. Beckmann, The Australian National University, Australia

Patrick Kilby, The Australian National University, Australia

Chapter 7

- Learning Patterns of Learner's Interaction in the Learning Management Systems:
A Comparative Study of China and Malaysia..... 123

Wu Bing, The University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China

Teoh Ai Ping, Wawasan Open University, Malaysia

Ye Chun Ming, The University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China

Chapter 8

- EPICT: Transnational Teacher Development through Blended Learning 147

Katalin Csoma, Embassy of Canada in Budapest, Hungary

Chapter 9

- Japanese Students' Digitally Enabled Futures Images: A Synergistic Approach
to Developing Academic Competencies 162

Michael Vallance, Future University Hakodate, Japan

David L. Wright, Future University Hakodate, Japan

Chapter 10

- Development of a Transnational Framework for E-Learning Technologies..... 187

Deryn Graham, University of Greenwich, UK

Chapter 11

- Second Life Brought to Life: A Case of Usability In-World 203

Kevin Yee, University of Central Florida, USA

Jace Hargis, University of the Pacific, USA

Chapter 12

- Perspectives on the Influences of Social Capital upon Internet Usage
of Rural Guatemalan Teachers..... 218

Douglas Tedford, Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Guatemala

Chapter 13

- Interactive Hypermedia-Based Learning Environment: Models of Making
Sense of Dynamic Visualization 244

Billie Eilam, University of Haifa, Israel

Ofir Gortler, University of Haifa, Israel

18 chapters

ITIONS

Chapter 6

Transnational Postgraduate Study for Development Workers: Using Technology to Bridge the Gap

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ABSTRACT

This case describes social, technological, economic and political factors impacting on transnational learning in the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development program at the Australian National University. Using the experiences of students working in areas of conflict, poverty and injustice across the world, this case shows how flexible delivery of postgraduate education not only allows development workers to continue their career progression while remaining fully active in the field, but also enables them to engage in stimulating high-level discourse with their development practitioner peers as they apply theory to practice. Giving development workers the opportunity to engage in advanced study in a stimulating and peer-supported learning environment without leaving home both enriches their career functionality and long-term prospects, and enhances their day-to-day work activities. As a bonus, host communities benefit from a development worker with greater access to expertise, experience and support, and a reduced sense of professional and/or cultural isolation.

ORGANISATION BACKGROUND

The Australian National University (ANU) was established uniquely in Canberra by a Federal Act of Parliament in 1946. Consistently ranked highly internationally (Center for World-Class Universities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings), the

ANU is one of Australia's most research-intensive universities, with a focus on research-led teaching in both its undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Currently the University has about 14,000 students, including some 3,000 international students from 106 countries. As with all Australian higher education, tuition fees are charged for both domestic and international students. The ANU is essentially a single-campus university with a primary focus on face-to-face teaching, and—with notable exceptions

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such as the Migration Law and Practice program; involvement in the Australia Global Development Learning Network; and the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development, which is the focus of this case—has only recently started to engage more widely with issues of flexible delivery and open learning.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Masters in Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development: Advanced Study for Development Professionals

Australia's geographic and sociopolitical context has given rise to a strong relationship with countries of the Asia-Pacific region. This includes a major focus on supporting development in many of those countries. ANU's teaching in development studies dates back to the establishment of the National Centre for Development Studies under the vision of Sir John Crawford, one of the leading development experts of the 1960s, and a strong advocate for high level teaching and research in development.

One of the foremost programs in ANU's development studies stable is the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD, <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/maapd/>). Established in 2002, this program focuses on the application of critical social inquiry and participatory processes to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development activities. It helps students explore how to combine social perspectives and participatory practices with other forms of technical expertise in development work. The MAAPD draws on the significant regional and conceptual expertise that contributes to ANU's world-class reputation in anthropological studies and development policy, with lecturers coming from specialist areas such as the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Research

School of Pacific and Asian Studies, and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. All eleven lecturers are active practitioners in the development field, so the MAAPD's practical focus on current issues is paramount.

The one year full-time-equivalent program—which offers a range of fifteen different courses—offers both a general program and optional specializations in 'gender and development', 'conflict and development', 'society and environment' and 'indigenous policy'. All students undertake core courses in social mapping and social impact, at least one advanced course in their specialization, and several electives. In educational terms, the program takes a strongly constructivist approach; students are encouraged and enabled to negotiate meaning in the context of their own experiences, and assessment is focused on real-life development problems (Cunningham, 1992; Mishra, 2002). The program's success is evidenced by testimonials from its alumni (MAAPD, 2009).

Cookson (2002) noted that the fastest-growing market sector in higher education is postgraduate education delivered online to people already working in the field of study. Professionals working on aid and development projects are among those who seek the benefits of postgraduate opportunities to engage in structured, critical reflection on their work, and to learn from their peers and specialists. Yet the dilemma of pursuing such study is clear: high quality programs in development studies are generally only available on-campus in universities in developed countries, so professional development generally comes at a high economic cost. Perhaps more important for many would-be students, however, and especially those working for non-government organizations, is the social and political cost of abandoning a specific development project and its associated community in order to study, a choice many aid workers are unwilling or unable to make.

Moreover, there are political and pedagogical tensions inherent in out-of-context teaching. Oxenham (1980, p.31) noted that institutions that teach

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development studies in developed countries prefer students who already have working experience in relevant contexts, and focus on issues pertinent to developing countries, yet actually teach those students in 'places quite divorced from the situations of their concern'. In Oxenham's (1980) controversial view, such institutions are thus 'promoting useless learning ... deny[ing] their students the full potential benefit of what they purport to be offering.' (p.31) Two possible defences—that students can 'use their remembrances of things past as satisfactory surrogates for immediate dialectic with reality' and/or 'adapt what has been learned to particular circumstances, when they get home'—are dismissed summarily: memories, Oxenham argues, are neither comprehensive nor reliable, and the harsh reality of students returning to a position as development worker gives them little opportunity for reflection, so 'the likelihood of their being able to incorporate a substantial proportion of their learning into their practice is severely curtailed.' (Oxenham, 1980, p.31).

These concerns are 'worth revisiting by anyone teaching or studying development studies today' (Devereux and Knowles, 2009). For institutions such as ANU, any development studies program must provide authenticity of both content and context. The MAAPD program certainly capitalizes on ANU's many highly regarded development studies practitioners and researchers, and the richness of cultural and linguistic diversity on its Canberra campus, which attracts many students. However, while many current or would-be development workers are grateful to have an opportunity to immerse themselves in full-time study on-campus, or at least to attend intensive on-campus anchor courses, this is clearly not a possibility for many. In designing and reviewing the MAAPD, therefore, lecturers have been mindful of these interacting social, political, economic and pedagogical factors—prospective students' needs; Oxenham's caveats for those teaching development studies out of context; and the potential learning opportunities

available by having at least some students 'on-site' in real development settings.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Transnational Online Learning

In recent years, the MAAPD has taken advantage of new teaching technologies and online learning platforms, and the increasing ubiquity of the internet, to offer its professional study opportunities in blended mode on-campus and fully online off-campus. As a result of this opportunity, about half the MAAPD's 120 currently enrolled students are development workers based in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Colombia, East Timor, Indonesia, Madagascar, Nepal, Panama, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu and Vietnam, as well as in remote Australian indigenous communities. There are also off-campus students living in other Australian cities, and in countries such as Britain, Canada and the United States, who are planning future careers in development. The benefits of this option are clear:

[After] 18 years of professional and volunteer work in the field of development, it was a dream come true to have such an opportunity [to study] amid the very busy schedule of fulltime work and the absence of similar options in Egypt. (Off-campus student, 2008)

... flexible delivery of the MAAPD enabled me to apply the learning directly to my work. Had I taken time off to attend full-time study in Canberra, I would not have had this opportunity to apply principles and practices from the coursework. (Off-campus student in Papua New Guinea, 2008)

... the inevitable infrastructure issues that come with living in a developing country ... make things even more challenging for those studying overseas [but] I'm very glad the course is offered

by distance or I probably would never have had the chance to take it. (Off-campus student in Vanuatu, 2009)

Unequivocally FANTASTIC! I am doing three courses (and working as well) so I can really testify how great it is to be able to do some self-paced online work. (Off-campus student in Australia, 2008)

Of course, in a demanding academic program at the postgraduate level, isolation from one's lecturers, fellow students and resources can be a significant disadvantage. It is therefore essential that the intended learning outcomes of MAAPD courses are as attainable by students off-campus as by those on-campus, and that the learning experiences of both groups are as rich as possible. Central to this has been the requirement to use effective and accessible learning technology (Volery and Lord, 2000), with the aim of facilitating deep learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Ramsden, 1992) that encourages adaptive and conceptual change (Trigwell, Prosser and Lyons, 1999).

Using Educational Technology

The MAAPD has been very successful since its inception. As transnational enrolments increased, more thought was given to ensuring the program met the needs of off-campus students. In 2008, therefore, the program's educational design was reviewed in the context of the ANU's Flexible Learning Project. We considered the likely technological constraints and realities for students in developing countries; the need to emphasize asynchronous interactions (given the many time zones of students' locations); the technologies available on secure online platforms at ANU, including the capabilities of our learning management systems (LMS); and the way in which these technologies could be used effectively to replicate the highly participatory on-campus teaching.

We aimed for 'instruction-related elements [that] enable interaction with and among students and between students and the content to be learned' (Cookson, 2002), with a focus on engaging learners 'in more meaningful learning activities rather than on the distance learning technology itself' (Kimball, 2001). As few MAAPD courses are presented solely online or solely on-campus, we recognized that supporting combined on- and off-campus learning communities effectively would require lecturers to adopt new approaches to managing teaching and learning processes, and to seek out the qualitative advantages of the technologies (Kimball, 2001).

Teaching activities were redesigned to provide as far as possible, authentic and equivalent learning experiences for both on- and off-campus students, through a more flexible and student-focused use of educational technologies available at ANU. This saw the introduction, or more effective use, of:

- course-specific password-protected websites on ANU's LMS (WebCT 4.1 from 2004 to 2008, Moodle 1.9 for 2009) providing all resources (e.g. lectures, readings) online;
- resources available in various formats (e.g. streamed and downloadable audio and narrated slide presentations for lectures; readings as pdf files or via URLs, online or on CD-ROMs) to meet students' needs under different technology and access constraints;
- small- or large-group asynchronous online discussion forums—in 2008 these were hosted on group-specific password-protected websites on ANU's online collaboration environment Alliance (Sakai), using the 'Forums' tool; in 2009 these were in group-specific formats on course sites hosted within ANU's LMS Wattle (Moodle), using the 'Discussion' tool; and
- assessment strategies that provided engaging tasks (constructively aligned with

Table 1. Survey 2008 and 2009: response rates and enrolment status

	Survey May 2008	Survey May 2009
	38 (32% of all enrolled MAAPD students)	59 (approx 40% of all MAAPD students and alumni who had experienced online learning)
Enrolled in the same semester	38 (100%)	39 (66%)
Enrolled in a different semester	n/a	20 (34%)
Enrolled in two or more courses in different delivery modes in the same semester	16 (42%)	25 (42%)
Enrolled in one course in different delivery modes in the same semester	22 (58%)	33 (56%)
Enrolled in no courses in different delivery modes in the same semester	0	1 (2%)
Enrolled in one course in the same delivery mode in the same semester	26 (68%)	34 (58%)
Enrolled in two or more courses in the same delivery mode in the same semester	11 (29%)	24 (41%)
Enrolled in no courses in the same delivery mode in the same semester	1 (3%)	0

Enrolled in two or more courses in different delivery modes in the same semester

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and weighted towards online rather
in-class participation.

at all times was not only to provide an
that provided richness of content and
as much for those off-campus as for
on-campus, but also to maximise the benefits
flowed between these two groups.

Collecting Feedback from Students

The redesigned courses were first taught in Semester 1 (February to June) 2008. We adopted an action research approach to investigate staff and student responses. Informal feedback was collected throughout the semester, with immediate action taken if an identified problem had a simple technological solution. We ran a more formal feedback process in May 2008 (i.e. near the end of semester, when most online discussion tasks were complete) through an anonymous online survey of students enrolled in that semester's courses. Wherever possible, this feedback—reported in depth by Kilby and Beckmann (2008) and Beckmann and Kilby (2008)—was taken into account in the redesign of courses presented in second semester

(July to November) 2008. More informal review occurred in early 2009, when an additional driver for restructure was the move onto ANU's new LMS (Moodle 1.9), which allowed integration of teaching resources and discussion forums onto a single platform. Some innovations occurred: for example, one course used Web 2.0 tools to put online a role-play previously only available on-campus (S. Mahanty, pers.comm., April 2009). Finally, in May 2009, we conducted a second online survey—this time aimed at both currently enrolled and recently graduated MAAPD students (i.e. students and alumni)—to collect feedback on three semesters of the specific online focus.

Both surveys comprised mostly open-ended questions, although the second also collected attitude data. In the first, 38 students responded, including students from all MAAPD courses active in that semester, while 59 students and alumni responded to the second survey, with good representation of both on- and off-campus students (Table 1).

Using feedback to inform necessary change requires careful attention to detail, and an ability to discriminate between issues pertaining to specific individuals and those likely to be representative. As the student voice is so important, respondent quotes are used extensively to illustrate the kinds

of feedback obtained. Analysis of the 2008 data has already been reported in the context specifically of peer learning (Beckmann & Kilby, 2008) and open learning in conflict and justice (Kilby and Beckmann, 2008), so this case focuses on the 2009 data and the bigger picture.

Technology Concerns

Students need affordable, reliable access to high quality and appropriate hardware and software, and especially to the higher broadband speeds necessary to make full use of online technological opportunities and provisions. To provide off-campus students in developing countries with online resources available where and when the students need them depends on the availability of cost-effective and reliable technology and internet access. Despite rapid rates of change, across the Asia-Pacific region—where most of our off-shore students are located—download capacity still places significant limits on the effectiveness of online education (Marginson, 2004):

It was often hard enough getting an Internet line but keeping it open long enough to download large parcels of information, such as audio files, or to engage in meaningful chat was difficult, if not impossible. (Papua New Guinea)

It takes several hours to download the lecture. I only have internet access at work: one dial-up line for 25 people. I don't even have a phone line at home [so] I can only use the Internet for study purposes on weekends. (East Timor)

The lectures take ages to download and I often have power cuts. It often happens that I have downloaded 80% of the lecture (sometimes 4-5 hours of downloading) when I get a power cut and then I have to start again. (Indonesia)

It takes me well over an hour just to download the recordings which is very frustrating. The files from

the [narrated presentation] recordings are just too big to download ... Ideally I'd love to watch a video recording of the lecture. I can download these more easily (Uzbekistan)

The audio recordings are great when you can actually download them! Lack of consistent internet means I need to download and save and sometimes that is not even possible. I was back in Australia for a week and was amazed at how well it worked streaming live there. (Cambodia)

My internet access here is often very good, but inconsistent. At the same time, we've had ongoing problems with our electricity ... if either the electricity or the internet got much worse I'd have a lot of trouble. (Vanuatu)

Most technological issues are addressed as far as possible when first identified, but the diversity of students' locations and needs, and especially the shift to a new university LMS in 2009, has brought to light new (largely solvable) difficulties:

... the options for listening to lectures were better on the old system. I used to stream lectures rather than download ... I could listen while [it] was still downloading and ... if my internet or electricity cut out in the middle of the download, I was still able to listen to the recording to that point. Because [the new LMS] only allows downloading, if the internet connection is terminated for any reason, I lose everything ... downloaded to that point and haven't heard anything. This can be very frustrating. (Vanuatu)

I would have liked to have been able to save the narrated slides/recordings to listen to later, rather than have to be online. (Thailand, Cambodia)

Technological limitations are not the preserve of developing countries. A London-based student complained of internet connections often timing out, and different operating systems confounded

an Australian comes:

I found down and quick. At ing system A) which I was 1 unsuccessful ..., I finally m else's [operat the downloa travelling an difficulties I e. this and I wa: the lectures w (remote Austr

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Unlike universities that focus extensively
 ...distance/open learning, and therefore invest
 ...ly in state-of-the-art technological infrastruc-
 ...the ANU uses fairly straightforward online
 ...forms and technological interfaces. Yet any
 ...tution entering the open learning market in
 ...a limited way knows that today's students
 ...stantly compare their online experiences
 ...ross all providers—educational, government,
 ...mercial and private. Students may therefore
 ...ave high technological expectations of online
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...when I download audio files from the Australian
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For people sitting in a well-resourced uni-
 ...versity office or classroom in Australia, it is
 ...ometimes hard to think through the most basic
 ...of technological concerns that may affect students
 ...with constrained access to materials or quality
 ...technology:

Some people ... need to print [scanned] documents.
 The more black in the non-text scanned areas, the
 more ink is required. For some documents [in
 this course] up to 1/3 of the scanned area was
 black. This caused a lot of wastage (and expense)
 replacing ink cartridges.

Would be nice to be able to download and print
 all the readings at once, rather than having to
 download each one and print separately. Even
 better, it would be great if the readings could be
 accessed at the beginning of semester by way of
 USB stick, to save having to spend lots of time
 getting them off the online server.

Although it is the quality of the education
 being provided that is the real test, and MAAPD
 students are of course advised of the technology
 required to make best use of online learning, it
 still behoves all providers to think carefully about
 how technology will be used, and what we can do
 to make students' lives and learning easier:

I was and still am very impressed with the website
 for the MAAPD courses. I wish all my courses
 had such a wonderfully developed and detailed
 course website.

Choosing Online Discussions as a Teaching Tool

Online forums were considered an effective way
 to try to recreate the 'immediacy and energy' of
 face-to-face engagement (Meyer, 2003) experi-
 enced by on-campus students. McLeod, Dawson
 and Berg (2002) found that synchronous online
 chat incorporated into clinical field placements
 could 'negate the tyranny of distance and the
 associated feeling of isolation'. Most MAAPD
 courses had previously used email, recorded
 lectures and the LMS discussion tools to support
 off-campus students. However, online dialogue
 arising from a classroom discussion sometimes

simply reinforced the feeling of isolation of off-campus students. In the review process, therefore, we chose to formalize the casual discussion formats of the classroom into more focused online forums, integrating the opportunities for peer and supportive learning more securely within the learning/assessment process.

Our redesign was guided by evidence from the literature. We addressed the major pedagogical attributes—learner centricity, asynchronous interaction, communication effectiveness and assessment facilitation (Sahu, 2008)—and noted that learning via these tools is influenced most by the extent to which the latter are effectively integrated into the teaching/learning process (Funaro and Montell, 1999). We were also aware that ‘threaded’ discussions increase the amount of time students spend on course objectives and on reflection (Meyer, 2003), and that meaningful discourse is improved by facilitator guidelines, evaluation rubrics and posting protocols (Gilbert and Dabbagh, 2005). Our redesign included all these features, with one of us (EB) working as educational designer one-on-one with individual MAAPD lecturers (including PK) to develop online discussion formats, assessment tasks and marking criteria/rubrics.

Notably, the formats of the online discussions for each course were often quite different, based on individual course and lecturer needs: for example, some were highly structured with groups of four to six students and specific assessment-focused objectives—often led by students—while others were guided conversation opportunities open to all 60 or so enrolled students. In all cases, however, the emphasis was on students being knowledgeable and influential in starting and steering discussion processes.

We sought to provide a differentiated learning environment, equally relevant to both on- and off-campus students, where the focus was clearly on exchanges among students rather than information flow from lecturers. Concerned that the relevant tools in ANU’s LMS (then WebCT 4)

were inadequate, we hosted these new forums on the more user-friendly Alliance (Sakai) platform. In early 2009, as a result of the ANU’s move to a new LMS (Moodle 1.9) and the feedback received previously, the first semester MAAPD courses were slightly restructured and presented in a second iteration.

The 2008 survey found that most students—and especially transnational students—were very satisfied with the way online discussions had been incorporated into the teaching, and their impact on learning (Beckmann and Kilby, 2008; Kilby and Beckmann, 2008).

The online discussion is a really good place for topic discussion, especially for off-campus students. It also provides a space for both on- and off-campus students to exchange ideas, case studies, extra reading materials, news and personal experiences, which I consider as essential for our learning. The online forum created a virtual community for students to extend their participation and take their knowledge beyond general classroom activities and I think it is fantastic. (2008)

The 2009 survey confirmed this, with many students responding very positively:

... online discussions are great for those of us who work full-time or live in a different time zone, because they allow us to fit study more easily into our lives. (Off-campus student, East Timor, 2009)

Learning Opportunities from Online Discussions

In their teaching, MAAPD lecturers generally focus on comparing practice with theory, considering theoretical paradigms in different cultural contexts, and looking at evidence-based research. Students have many opportunities to engage in structured, critical reflection on their learning

and to share their experiences. Beckmann and Kilby (2008) discuss how the use of online discussion opportunities for use of teaching students learn within the immediate context of the course. Cohen and Sam (2008) also discuss the importance of online discussion in the learning process.

In the 2009 survey, students agreed that online discussions with additional support felt they benefited more than they expected.

... Some of the most very committed students have a lot of interest in the course (and also a lot of time to spend on it).

Online discussion and learning makes one learn to comprehend; it allows one to share experiences (Vietnam)

I was able to extend my learning and learn the theory and practice in the field. Supportive acquisition of experience outside of the classroom is essential for the development of their human capital.

Of course, the most natural way to learn is through professional development in the workplace. The MAAPD program provides a supportive environment for the development of their human capital.

ese new forums on
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Huckmann and Kilby (2008) described specifi-
cally how the 2008 student feedback showed
that online discussions significantly facilitated
opportunities for peer learning (defined as 'the
use of teaching and learning strategies in which
students learn with and from each other without
the immediate intervention of a teacher'; Boud,
Collen and Sampson, 1999, p.413).

In the 2009 survey, some 59% of respondents
agreed that online discussions had provided them
with additional learning opportunities, and 49%
felt they benefitted more from online discussions
than they expected:

*... Some of the groups I participated in were ...
very committed and eager and there was always
a lot of interesting and challenging discussion
(and also a lot of work!).*

*Online discussion facilitates broader understand-
ing and learning. Many ideas are presented,
makes one learn ideas that sometimes we failed
to comprehend from our independent reading. It
allows one to share ideas from ... other sources
.... (Vietnam)*

*I was able to email a participant in my course
and learn the troubles they were having with their
work in the field. This developed into a mutually
supportive acquaintanceship, as we shared per-
sonal experiences that helped each other in areas
'outside' of the course. ... Contacts are always
beneficial for those in rural or remote areas who
need that human contact. (Remote Australia)*

Of course, the nature of the MAAPD student
cohort naturally supports peer learning: most
students are Australian or international mature-
age professionals either already working in the
development field or keen to increase their range of
skills pertinent to such work. Many students—both
on- and off-campus—have first-hand experience
of developing country contexts, which enables

them to contribute to discussions in a highly
critically-informed way.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the 2009
survey, 70% of respondents agreed that 'online
discussions are especially valuable in the context
of development studies, as we can communicate
at first-hand with fellow students working in
development roles':

*It is interesting obtaining views from other stu-
dents. Many of them have a wealth of experience in
other countries which provides alternate insights
to the discussions.*

*[Online discussions] facilitate sharing between
students working in development overseas and
those living in Canberra. (East Timor)*

*Overseas students related their experiences on
issues which you can never get in Australia.*

*[Online discussions] facilitate sharing between
students working in development overseas and
those living in Canberra.*

*When the questions regarded personal field
experience—that was the most intriguing.*

*It was definitely particularly useful to be able
to interact with the off-campus students. ... they
were generally older and more experienced than
some of my classmates on-campus which made the
discussions even richer, and made the Masters as
a whole more challenging and full-encompassing.
Also the fact that many of these students are at the
time working on specific issues we are studying
is fascinating!*

*... when students contribute multiple times and
actually refer to others students' responses then
it makes you reconsider your original posting.
(Uzbekistan)*

Many students described times where ideas or comments expressed by another student online enhanced their learning and encouraged deeper critical reflection. Transnational students both contributed to this enhancement—through the immediacy of their ability to apply theory to practice in their working situations—and gained from others' input, feeling less isolated in their thinking:

I drew my analysis from other comments expressed by other students. It helped me reflect on my own positions on particular readings and resources.

I learned a lot from reading other students' experiences with participatory wealth ranking. Working in a post-conflict setting in Timor-Leste, this struck me at first as something which would be very divisive. But I was interested to learn that in less fragile settings, this can be a valuable tool.

Some students commented on the opportunity to explore topics of direct relevance to their home country and/or work:

I particularly enjoy the freedom [of assessment tasks]... I've been able to do a lot of work on Madagascar, and even the Sahel. (Madagascar, 2009)

I am particularly interested to hear from students who work in reproductive health, [which] is related to my own field of experience in refugee protection, particularly for women and girls, but is an area I have had little exposure to. (Vanuatu)

There was clear strong that the flow of ideas and support was by no means one-way, neither solely from the lecturer to the student, nor always from the developed country or community to the less developed:

For me, as someone who works in a different country and culture, some of the most interest-

ing contributions have come from people working with Indigenous communities in Australia. (Indonesia)

... when students contribute multiple times and actually refer to others students' responses then it makes you reconsider your original posting. (Uzbekistan)

One reading mentions an NGO in India who forced women to participate in committees, and in reality these women acted as proxies for their husbands or brothers (posts allocated to women were still controlled by men ...). I mentioned a program I worked on in Cambodia, where women said participating in committees gave them practice to speak in public, which in turn gave them confidence not only to speak but to engage in community affairs ... three women (out of 30) went on to be village and deputy chiefs. Someone in the forum responded that it was a good example that context does really matter: an activity in one context may have opposite results to those of the same activity somewhere else. I think exchanging experiences is an important way of learning, and those who have worked should be encouraged to use their experience more. (Madagascar)

It was interesting viewing contrasting perspectives of people in private sector in Australia, full-time university students, people working in Australia, Australians working overseas and developing country nationals working in their home country. It displayed more clearly than any journal article could the divergence of opinion in development. It also highlighted a very real difference between some academic opinions and opinions in the field. (Cambodia)

I remember someone in Indonesia talking about experiences doing focus groups discussions which were quite different from my own experiences ... helpful both for learning and work. (Madagascar)

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from people who are actually experiencing the ways in which... play a crucial part in knowledge creation... (McFarlane, 2006) is a value-added... for development workers, who need... of innovative practices to engage the... of learning at both community and... level (Roper and Pettit, 2002).

INDIA WHO FORMERLY... CHALLENGES

Technological Factors

... regardless of the quality of content or... the success of off-campus study is... dependent on the reliability of technology... of the technological problems our students... are not within ANU's power to solve... (e.g. speed and reliability of internet ac... while others are (e.g. downloadable files... and format; care in recording and scanning... design of assessment tasks involving... components; creating online databases of... resources). The key responsibilities for... staff are thus to collect student feedback... technology problems early and regularly;... respond quickly to identified technological... problems; and to keep a realistic view of student... technological contexts and settings.

Of course, doing all this requires a significant... and constant effort. In designing technology... facilitated learning, it is common to underestimate... the time and effort needed by both lecturers and... students to understand the practicalities, and to... incorporate time for these into course design:

There is an initial steep learning curve associated with beginning the on-line program. Lecturers seemed to be aware of this but perhaps not to the extent that students actually experienced. Finding your way around the web sites took considerable time before gaining confidence that all was under control. (Off-campus student, Australia, 2009)

An assumption that I was going to be online and able to interact at least several times a week was difficult. Field trips, dodgy internet connections, busyness at work made this often impossible. Many distance students do their work in big 'bursts' when they can (e.g. when they have a couple of weeks leave or have a month of great internet connection) and the course did not sufficiently accommodate that. (Off-campus student moving between Afghanistan, East Timor and Cambodia, 2009)

Providing effective 'help' tools can reduce the time students to understand how to use the tools. Although we provided a written manual as well as a dedicated website, available to students in all courses, with clear audiovisual presentations on how to use the technology, usage records suggested few students accessed these support resources, even though they actually requested them:

I am reasonably computer-literate but would have appreciated clearer instructions on how to use all the site resources, including how to download and save the lecture recordings. Perhaps these instructions could also be given as an audio file, for those of us who are not 100% visual learners. And maybe a diagram for those who are! (Off-campus student, Australia, 2009)

Building familiarity and exploration exercises into assessment, giving students specific technology-related tasks, or asking for students to complete a checklist of competencies in the first weeks of teaching are all ways to consider addressing this issue in future.

Students' Workloads

Most (64%) 2009 respondents agreed that 'an assessable online discussion generally involves more work than most other forms of assessment'. In addition, a notable minority (32%) agreed that, for an on-campus student, it is more difficult to

contribute to an online discussion than to a classroom discussion:

The use of online discussion was very useful in terms of getting my head around some of the issues and new topics encountered within the course. However the workload associated with participating ... substantially added to my semester workload i.e. having to attend on-campus tutorials and ... do [the online discussions] was too much ... working full time and doing [online discussions] equals no life! (On-campus student, 2008)

I really enjoyed the forum in general, but reading and updating opinions every second week while doing the online simulation game took a lot of time and effort. Sometimes I feel I focus so much on 'getting things done' for online forums and getting a bit nervous about the game (while trying to write essays), I feel I did not have enough time to build depth in my field as a postgraduate student. (On-campus student, 2009)

Although frequent engagement with the learning tasks in this courses probably supports conceptual change more effectively than widely-spaced efforts, reviewing the workload needed to meet the assessment requirements on a course by course basis will be useful in this context.

Access to Scholarly and Field-Based Resources

Although each course suggests many resources from the published literature, the development field is notorious for its 'grey literature' (Posnett and Baulkwill, 1982). Transnational students must often rely almost exclusively on online resources:

I don't have access to a library, so I am limited to what is available to download (i.e. generally not books). (Indonesia)

Difficulty in finding additional academic resources. Materials available online from the library are inadequate. (Afghanistan, East Timor, Cambodia)

The only constraint with being a transnational student is access to library resources. (Vietnam)

MAAPD lecturers have therefore tried to create online repositories of project reports and similar 'grey' material as well as published papers; to make full use of the ANU's capacity to provide other online library resources; and to ensure students were aware of the university's online information literacy training (for example, helping students use databases and search engines more effectively). The online discussions clearly facilitate the sharing of additional resources among students:

What I have found most valuable has been when other students have posted links to additional resources, such as articles, tool kits or websites. (on-campus student)

I've often read new materials mentioned by classmates. (on-campus student)

[A fellow student] added links to ecological demography and behavioural ecology papers which in some ways contradicted the class readings—we had a 'give and take' (we had different interpretations so it was good) and it pushed me to go to the logical ends of the arguments. (Madagascar)

However, this raises the issue of professional integrity. As with any relatively casual discussion among professionals when outcomes may be reported more widely (in this case in the form of submitted assignments or professional reports), issues of attribution and academic honesty are important considerations:

There are questions over how and to what degree other students' ideas should be cited in one's own

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...the question of whether a student's idea is ... in him or her is a factor.

... can obviously model appropriate ... behaviour in this context, by ensuring that ... know how to cite unpublished material ... reference a fellow student's individual ideas ... as 'personal communication'.

...ional Design of the ... Discussion Activities

... explained earlier, while there is uniformity ... presentation and course structure, ... lecturer developed his or her own learning ... related to the online components. With ... campus students doing up to four courses each ... (off-campus students usually do only ... two), such individuality is very valuable ... ensuring that students do not become bored ... any one approach, and also that the design ... more closely suited to the content. However, ... means that full-time on-campus students may ... comparing discussion designs and developing ... references, and hence responding to superficially ... similar formats quite differently:

... found that it is great to have one discussion ... leader and then the leader facilitate the week forum. I learned a lot that way. Also, it's great that ... everyone updates their opinions using 'reply' ... in the [course A] forum. However, for [course B] everyone updated their opinions separately ... to the discussion wasn't happening as much as ... everyone expected...

... in my group often people posted their own thoughts, rather than responses to other's questioning. So I ... didn't feel it was a particularly healthy debate. But ... in every forum I got valuable ideas and different perspectives from others that helped increase my understanding.

Constantly thinking through the design of online learning environments is crucial in a field that is changing so rapidly. For example, MAAPD lecturers may need to consider how to establish a 'social presence' and create a greater 'sense of place', especially for on-campus students, in the online learning environment, as advocated by Northcote (2008). More evaluation at the course level, instead of at the current program level, will be useful.

Equality of On- and Off-Campus Experience: an Appreciated Goal?

A driving force in creating a more flexible and online presence for the MAAPD's teaching activities was our desire to provide an equality of experience to on- and off-campus students, especially those studying transnationally. Technological constraints excepted, student feedback suggests we are generally achieving that goal:

With the current technology I see almost no difference to being an overseas off-campus student. I think the key difference is more as being an off-campus as compared to an on-campus student. (Vietnam)

[There are] time delays with being able to download materials to participate by given dates but I knew this when I signed up. I think you've done a fantastic job with clearly outlining dates etc prior to the beginning of the course. (Uzbekistan)

Yet some on-campus students are less sure of equity of experience as a goal:

I think requiring on-campus students to participate online as well [as in class] is a classic case of mistaking novelty for progress. (on-campus student, 2008)

... too much attention is being made to make everything equally accessible and equally framed

so that in essence the on-campus and off-campus student get the same exact experience. Some may argue that this is indeed favourable, since both students pay the same fees and hence should get the same education. However I think the whole point of being on-campus is to get a closer experience, get more dialogue going with professors in class and with students. A lot of us have left jobs and careers to study, and with everything being online there seems very little benefit in having done that instead of continuing a job (perhaps part-time or 80% of the time) and undertaking the Masters from long-distance. I may be old-fashioned in my views, but I think face-to-face learning should still be the preferred method when possible and that, as such, as on-campus students we should benefit from more 'live' discussions with professors and classmates, feedback and the like. ... I don't see there is that much value (at least at this point) to be on-campus rather than off. You pretty much get the same experience and I think this should not be the case. (on-campus student, 2009)

[Online discussions] tend to be boring, hard work and not particularly beneficial for on-campus students. For off-campus students, they are an important way to interact and for lecturers to assess interaction ..., but I think the same issues still exist. (on-campus student, 2009, previously off-campus)

A particular concern voiced by these few troubled on-campus students centres on having the same online assessment tasks—and especially the online discussions—for all students:

I enrolled in Masters Coursework specifically for on-campus interaction with students and teaching staff, and feel that [the online discussions] compromises this. ... I value in-class discussions more. (on-campus student, 2009)

I can see absolutely no connection between my learning and the online discussions. I appreciate

that online discussions may be useful to external students, as it presents perhaps the only opportunity to interact with other students and the lecturer. However, the situation of on-campus students is very different: we attend lectures, have active discussions in class and we can talk to the lecturer. Conversely, the lecturer can and does talk to us: so probably has a good sense of whether or not we have done the reading, and whether we are grasping the material. To me, the online discussions feel very forced (i.e. they are undertaken because they are assessable), time-consuming (it is much more time consuming to write and post a response than to ask a question in class), for little educational value. (on-campus student, 2008)

Some responses from on-campus students suggest a primary concern with the loss of face-to-face contact:

Expressions and gestures are important ... [but] not possible with online discussions.

I find face-to-face discussions more worthwhile due to immediacy of exchange and scope for debate ... often student contributions [online] amount to not much more than a summary of a reading or a non-insightful 'blog'.

However, this view is countered by others:

I think online discussions are terrific—much better ... than most of the face-to-face tutorials I attended during my undergraduate degree at ANU.... when people know they are assessed, and they can't 'waffle' so easily as they can when speaking, their input tends to be of a much higher quality. This goes for me as much as anyone else!

I personally prefer face to face interaction in the classes but I do appreciate that the online forums

allow us to interact working abroad

The only real benefit compared to face-to-face is to build friendships

Some on-campus students with a perception of online:

I often find group work in sharing ideas together to contribute to be a good collaborative experience

I find the discussion trying to improve assessable, so spontaneous.

Participants in formalised modules to the reading assignments related to discussion group not contribute previously off-campus

These responses from people simply and participate simply illustrate the educational have very definite expectations, for own learning, blended learning of very high quality lecturers (all named by different names) make online learning

useful to ... interact with those who are currently ...

... and have with online discussions as com- ... face tutorials is that we don't get ... relationships with other students.

... on-campus students were dissatisfied ... poorer quality of interaction

... group work in class to be a useful tool ... ideas and experiences and working ... complete the task. The [online] forums

... a general conversation more than a ... effort as it is in class.

... discussions very forced—people are ... impress because [the discussions] are ... so they are rarely free-flowing and

... important ...

... in online discussions either write ... and mini-essays which respond directly

... readings or [contribute] general discus- ... related to philosophies or principles. ...

... groups 'are tiresome and generally do ... contribute to learning. (on-campus student, ... off-campus)

... responses may seem surprising coming ... people specifically studying issues of equity

... participatory involvement. However, they ... illustrate both the complexity of meeting

... educational needs of professional adults who ... very defined personal goals, assumptions,

... expectations, preferences and intentions for their ... learning, and the 'hard act to follow' in

... learning when the face-to-face element is ... very high quality. Ironically, having excellent

... lecturers (all of whom were complimented by ... by different students in both surveys) can

... make online elements appear to offer less:

I am torn in my assessment of the value of online discussions. On the one hand they did at times give me new things to think about, [which] enhanced my learning. However, I don't think that would be different from what I would gain in a class discussion or in reading an online blog. ... If (at least for the on-campus students) we had more class time, where lecturers had more time for discussions, we could reach even better outcomes than in the online forums. Moreover we would be able to receive more pointed feedback from teachers, and incorrect assumptions could be corrected or further discussed, something that does not happen in the online forums. (on-campus student, 2009)

Despite the strength with which some of these concerns were expressed, they represent just a few on-campus students. Only 26% of the 2009 on-campus respondents (18% of all respondents) agreed with the statement that 'online discussions are really only beneficial for off-campus students'. Most of our students' feedback both in 2008 and 2009 is rather in keeping with others' findings, for example that online discussions significantly improve learners' critical thinking skills (Yang, Newby and Bill 2008) and are more likely than face-to-face encounters to elicit a critically thought-out response to a disagreement between two other parties (Chen and Chiu 2008).

Indeed, our 2008 data suggested that online discussions actually enhanced the interactions of some on-campus peers, with thoughtful interactions online often spilling over into face-to-face engagement in class tea-breaks (Beckmann and Kilby 2008):

In class [after online contact] I hear comments like 'Hey, I enjoyed reading your posting last week', 'Thanks for your comments on the discussions'. I would say the same thing to others. (on-campus student, 2008)

Moreover, less confident on-campus students sometimes found the online discussions provided a sheltered entry-point into the world of debate (Beckmann and Kilby, 2008):

[With] English as second language, I'm shy to speak up in tutorials or lectures. But with online discussions, it's more comfortable for me to express my point of view. (on-campus student, 2008)

Nevertheless, in today's free market world of higher education, understanding, and preferably meeting, the needs of students is fundamental to the economic survival of a graduate coursework program. For the MAAPD, awareness of the concerns identified above will not mean any change in our policy of seeking to provide equitable experiences for both on- and off-campus students, but it may require more careful promotion, differentiation and explanation of the two kinds of educational 'products'.

CONCLUSION

In the global education context, Australia has a vibrant focus on the education of international students (Access Economics, 2009), as well as an active engagement in the provision of aid to the Asia-Pacific region (AusAID, 2009). ANU's MAAPD is successfully taking postgraduate development studies off-campus, especially to those who are practitioners in the field, through the use of relatively simple but highly functional educational technology. The political and economic contexts of developing countries undoubtedly impose technological constraints on transnational students' access to all the educational resources on offer. Nevertheless, off-campus students are generally very satisfied with the quality of the online learning opportunities being provided:

I have been an off-campus student for my whole academic career. In comparison to my previous

experience, I find the MAAPD to be quite effective at providing online learning. (Indonesia)

... thank you for your efforts in producing these [lecture audio/visual] files as I feel I can better access the learning through these rather than just being isolated and doing the readings. (Uzbekistan)

Once technological issues are addressed, educational design comes to the fore. The opportunities for democratization offered by peer interaction in online learning are well known: 'there is a multiplicity of voices or perspectives, and students are exposed to a variety of possible interpretations or solutions rather than just the 'right' or textbook' answer' (Harasim, 2000). We believe that by offering online opportunities to student professionals working in developing countries, we have introduced an exciting new dimension to the teaching of participatory development.

Our off-campus students are encouraged to engage in structured and supported reflection as they attempt to interpret and apply high-level theory in the context of their day-to-day practice. They can access ANU's research community and fellow practitioners in Canberra, ask their student peers elsewhere in the world about similar situations, and, in real time, consider and discuss the potential outcomes of different strategies to help them deal with their day-to-day work situation. Most importantly, any insights gained from the professional study and debate can be incorporated into active projects with an immediacy that directly benefits the communities with which these development worker students are working:

The online discussions give me the precious opportunity of directly discussing with my classmates [my work] activities ... in the framework of the current debates and thinking, and therefore gaining from someone else's experiences. (2009, Nepal)

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Although we use of educational course design, that providing of opportunities to A developing countries students and the and Beckmann, 2

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MAAPD changed the whole way I did my work at
the time and... it certainly changed the way [my
development workers] looked on the impacts of their work.
[2008, Papua New Guinea]

Although we can continue to fine-tune our
use of educational technology and online/blended
course design, the evidence so far clearly shows
that providing off-campus development studies
opportunities to Australian and local aid workers in
developing countries benefits both the individual
students and the communities they serve (Kilby
and Beckmann, 2008):

I studied by distance and was 'hooked' from
the very first week—engaging lectures, thought
provoking readings, and a great online space to
develop, test and exchange ideas. Although juggling
studies with a full-time development job, I
was addicted enough to study right into the early
hours. The excellent academic support is a real
hallmark of the MAAPD experience, as is the
opportunity to engage with other practitioners
working in challenging real-life development situ-
ations. It's already been a stepping-stone for me
to move into a management position. (Off-campus
student testimonial; MAAPD, 2009)

It has allowed me to study a degree that is relevant
to my job at a prestigious university. I would not
have the financial means to stop working totally
to be a fulltime on-campus student. Given the
everyday relevance of the degree to my job I con-
sider that my work enhances my MAAPD learning
and that doing the MAAPD is enhancing my work
performance. It allows the opportunity to network
with people in other countries and causes me to
put an academic critical perspective lens over
some of the work I am doing (Off-campus student,
Cambodia, 2009)

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Development Studies: A multidisciplinary branch of social science which addresses issues of concern to community development, and specifically developing countries.

Development Workers: A person who works to help a community achieve its development goals and objectives, often through formalized aid projects.

Off-Campus Study: Any form of study where the student does not have to attend campus to obtain any learning materials.

Online Discussion: A set of related postings made in an online setting that allows participants to post messages and comment on other messages of community development through which stakeholders influence and share control of development initiatives and associated decision-making.

Postgraduate Study: Formal study at an institution of higher education that is designed for students who have already completed a bachelor degree, often leading to a coursework Master degree (equivalent to 'graduate study' in North America).

Transnational Study: A form of distance learning where the institution of study is in one country and the student is located in another country for all or part of the duration of study.

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