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Building Intercultural Discussions among Global Classmates Across Three Countries - Malaysia, Australia and Denmark

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Welcome to Learning Across Latitudes - a trans-national collaborative learning project that links teacher education students in Malaysia, Denmark and Australia. In a world where students have access to virtual connected communities new opportunities exist to explore what it means to teach in a world now that is global. This website facilitates students working in groups to communicate across Europe, Asia and Australia.

Students will be organised into groups where they will discuss and respond to questions. This means that learning in one part of the world is informed through other students' responses elsewhere representing a global community of students.

We hope you will enjoy Learning Across Latitudes.

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Learning across Latitudes
Abstract

This paper reports on a study which compared how pre-service teachers in three countries Malaysia, Australia, and Denmark viewed their choice of the teaching profession and the qualities of a good teacher. The study is located in a project named “Learning Across Latitudes”. It was conducted by using an online learning management system developed by Deakin University. 116 students from three countries were divided into 7 groups with each group consisting of about 14 students. These groups were given two weeks to carry out an asynchronous discussion on the reasons for their choice of the teaching profession and qualities of a good teacher. Using content analysis, the researchers discovered students’ reasons for their choice of the teaching profession and their views on effective teaching. The study highlights how teacher education is using technology to build intercultural understandings about motives for becoming a teacher.

Introduction

With rapid and continuing advances in information and communication technologies changing the way we share, use, develop and process information and technology, education systems need to respond to embed technologies into learning contexts. In Thomas Friedman's book “The World is Flat”, information and communication technologies is changing the way people live, work and learn. As a result of this, it is also transforming the nature of teaching. Educators nowadays utilize internet technologies to communicate and collaborate with students and peers in an educational contexts. The teacher, instructor, and tutor are all operating in an electronic environment along with his students (Salmon, 2004).

For learners, information and communication technologies provide access to a democratic environment that allow learners choice over when to participate, allows time for reflection and shifts authority and control from the teacher to the student. The growth of online teaching and learning has shifted not only the institution and the learner but also pedagogies and teachers. New pedagogies are called to be re-conceptualized and implemented (Brennan, 2003) in order to respond to these changing times.

Online learning is the emerging paradigms for education in the 21st century (Harasim et al, 1997) and this paradigm involves a shift from teacher centred to student centred. It is a
learner-centred environment characterised by active and interactive learning and sharing among the students. Online learning allows students to learn across boundaries and cultures, forming relationships in an online environment and sharing of experiences and knowledge. In this environment, students can develop a deeper understanding of the thinking, motivations and actions of different cultures and countries. This contributes to promoting understanding, tolerance and acceptance of ethnic, cultural, religious and personal differences. It can also help people understand and solve complexities of different opinions that can come from different parts of the world.

**Literature Review**

The learning opportunities for asynchronous online discussion were noted by (Topcu, 2008) to provide a “virtual conversational learning environment in which students are likely to learn as much from one another as from course materials and lectures” (p. 901). However Topcu, (2008) stresses the importance of meaningful discourse as critical to understanding and engagement for students in such a learning environment.

Learning communities are formed when groups of people support one another in meeting their learning agendas, learning from one another as well as from their environment, and engaging in a collective socio cultural experience in which participation is transformed into a new experience or new learning, learning communities are formed (Wilson & Ryder, 1998). These communities allow students to learn in more authentic and challenging ways and represents social network or infrastructure that brings people together to share and pursue knowledge.

When the common aim is learning, learning communities are also known as communities of practice (CoPs). In online learning environments, CoPs include learners and instructors interacting with one another and other experts by means of online learning technologies to build reciprocal interchange of ideas, data and opinions. The main purpose of a CoP is to develop members’ abilities and skills to build and exchange knowledge in a relevant and meaningful context and a supporting learning environment (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). The instructional characteristics of CoPs are:
i. Control of learning is distributed among the participants in the community and is not in the hands of a single instructor or expert

ii. Participants are committed to the generation and sharing of new knowledge

iii. Participants exhibit high levels of dialogue, interaction, collaboration and social negotiation.

iv. A shared goal, problem or project binds the participants and provides a common focus and an incentive to work together as a community.

v. Diversity, multiple perspectives and epistemic issues are appreciated.

vi. Traditional disciplinary and conceptual boundaries are crossed.

vii. Innovation and creativity are encouraged and supported. (p176)

“Learning Across Latitudes” project conferred with the Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, (2005) theoretical framework. The discussion was carried out by the students themselves with no interference from the lecturers or moderator. There was active peer interaction through sharing and generation of views, knowledge and experiences. Students were all teacher education students. This development is in line with the Vygotsky’s constructivist view of social learning and scaffolding that individuals learn and develop in social or group settings.

**Background of Study**

“Learning Across Latitudes” evolved from an existing partnership between Ministry of Education, Malaysia and Deakin University, Australia to deliver a four year Bachelor of Education (Primary) from 2006-2009. An Australian colleague invited Malaysian teacher education students to be part of the “Learning Across Latitudes” The third partner Denmark evolved from a visiting delegation from University College Sealand, Denmark to Deakin University.

The project was designed to increase students’ knowledge and understanding of teaching in global world from a local classroom. The central intent is described below:

“Teachers are increasingly being called to work in increasingly globalised, intercultural and international work contexts. This unit provides opportunities for students to develop cross cultural and intercultural understandings, skills,
knowledge and will explore appropriate pedagogy and curriculum.” (Deakin University, p.5)

The central feature of “Learning Across Latitudes” is a trans-national collaborative learning project that links teacher education students in Malaysia, Denmark and Australia. The project was made possible through a Deakin Institute of Teaching and Learning supported social software – Druple. This software allows for non-Deakin students to access a site hosted by Deakin University. A total of 26 students from one Teacher Education Institute of Malaysia, 50 students from Deakin University and 24 students from University College Sealand, Denmark took part in this project. Students were organised into 7 groups where they discussed and respond to questions posted by a moderator. There were seven groups and students were allocated a group which include students from each country.

The aims of this project are to allow students working in groups to communicate with connected communities and this means that learning in one part of the world is informed through other students’ responses elsewhere thus representing a global community of learners. Secondly, through this way it is hoped that inter-cultural understanding and cultural competence can be enhanced. This form of online discussion is to enhance and enrich existing teaching pedagogies in the world of teacher education and research. And lastly this project engaged students in their learning.

Evaluating online discussion forums
Approaches to evaluate online discussion include analysing learner’s feedback; another approach is based on content analysis which includes thread lengths, number of postings, interaction patterns and quality of interaction. Fahy (2003) used Transcript Analysis Tool to classify online interactions while Blignault & Trollip (2003) proposed a taxonomy that includes instructor postings. Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives has also been used to capture levels of thinking while King and Kitchener’s seven-stage reflective judgment model has been used to understand students’ development of reasoning skills (Meyer, 2004). Salmon (2000) used content analysis to analyse online discussion groups
at the Open University of United Kingdom. His model consists of five stages which include:

i. access and motivation
   This stage is to check that learners access discussion forum and posted their first message. Tutors are expected to solve access problems and encourage and motivate participation.

ii. online socialisation
   At this stage learners introduced themselves and ‘share a little of themselves’. Here tutors are to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and defuse differences of opinion.

iii. information exchange
   There is evidence of exchanges of information related to course content and the tutor is expected to organise productive discussion.

iv. knowledge construction
   This stage will see a formulation of ideas through discussion and collaboration. Tutors are to build and sustain in the group learning process.

v. Development
   Here learners are to be responsible for own their own learning and its construction. Tutors support and respond as required (p22)

**Methodology**

This paper will only focus on the first week discussion. During the first week, students introduced themselves, stated why they chose to become teachers and three qualities of a good teacher. For the second week, students discussed about global citizenship. This online discussion was solely conducted by the students with no input from the moderators. There was nothing to stop students from posting beyond this time frame. The data for this paper was taken after a month’s discussion by the students. A total of 89 topics were introduced by the students and for the first week discussion there were a total of 365 posts. At the end of four weeks, a short questionnaire was administered to the students to check for their perception towards this project.
Data Collection and Analysis
Data in the form of online discussion forum transcripts were collected after four weeks of discussion. Students carried out discussion on their own initiative. The data comprised online discussion on the choice of teaching profession and qualities of an effective teacher were collected, printed out and read over repetitively. The content of the discussion was analysed to establish categories and then counting the number of instances when those categories are used. Using this approach the researcher was immersed in the massive and confusing jungle of text, identifying ‘chunks’ of text so as to facilitate data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Categories are constructed and used to locate patterns in the data. Unexpected patterns were also accepted by developing new categories. A total of 365 posts were collected and there were 89 topics discussed during the four weeks period.

Findings
Discussion of findings are divided into two parts; first, qualities of an effective/good teacher and secondly, the key reasons influencing their choice of the teaching profession.

I. Qualities of an Effective/Good teacher.
The qualities of an effective teacher are deduced by referring to the conceptual model for teacher education used by three current teacher education policy documents. These documents are the Malaysia’s Teacher Education Division, Ministry of Education (2003), Malaysia Teachers Standard; Victoria Institute of Teaching Standards for graduating Teachers and United Kingdom’s Highland Council of Learning and Teaching. These policy documents capture education authorities’ view of ‘good teaching’.

The conceptual model for teachers by the Teachers Education Division of Malaysia is used to develop teacher training curriculum and it emphasises three fundamental aspects, that is God, self and society. The concept of God forms the basis for three other aspects; namely knowledge, skills and values. For knowledge, a teacher needs to have good general knowledge, subject knowledge and the teaching professional knowledge. Professional skills like communication skills, study skills, thinking skills, computer
literacy and pedagogical skills are also equally important for teachers to be effective. Teachers are also expected to practise noble values and portray positive personalities such as caring, patriotic, innovative, creative and competent. All these three fundamental aspects are also reflected in Malaysia’s Teachers Standard (2007), that is Standard 1 – Practice of Professional Teaching Values, Standard 2 – Knowledge and Understanding and Standard 3 – Noble Values.

In Australia, the Victoria Institute of Teaching has standards for graduating teachers and it incorporates three broad themes like professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement. Under these three themes, there are eight standards which describe the essential elements of teaching. For the first theme Professional Knowledge, teachers should know how students learn and how to teach effectively, teachers should know the content they teach and know their students. For Professional Practice, teachers are expected to plan and assess for effective learning, create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments and use a range of teaching practices and resources. As for Professional Engagement, teachers are to reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice. They are also expected to be active members of their profession.

The United Kingdom’s Highland Council of Learning and Teaching website has listed four key elements of what makes a good teacher. They are subject matter knowledge, teachers’ repertoires of best practices, personal qualities and teacher competencies. These three models of teacher standards share many common grounds. Hence based on these three models, the students’ discussion was categorised according to the following categories:

a. Subject Matter Knowledge

Malaysian students expect teachers to be educated, knowledgeable and always update their knowledge and skills.

Students from Australia expect a good teacher to know the subject well and always upgrade for continual learning.
b. Teachers’ Repertoire of Best Practices

Malaysian students want a good teacher to be able to use a range of teaching strategies and methods. No specific method was given.

Australian students meanwhile want a good teacher to be able to scaffold activities to maximize learning and a good teacher should be able to challenge students to learn.

One student from Denmark wants a good teacher to be able to make lessons funny and different.

To summarize a good teacher is expected to use a variety of teaching strategies and methods, be able to scaffold activities and provide challenging and fun tasks to maximize learning.

c. Personal Qualities

Positive personal qualities of teachers are found in the Malaysian and United Kingdom’s teacher standards. Malaysian students expect good teachers to be patient, creative, active in co-curricular activities, disciplined and well mannered, love children (2), respect, enthusiastic, understand children’s needs and must love teaching.

Australian students expect good teacher to be in order of responses. Patient (8), Caring, Understanding (3), Inspire/motivating & encourage (3) Treat each child as an individual/with respect (3), Organized (2), Love the job, Creativity (2), Humour, Persistence, optimistic, Not prejudice/bias Hardworking, Enjoy working with children, Show interest in every child & believe in them (2), Passionate (2), Flexible (2) and discipline. (Numbers denote the number of students).
The common qualities mentioned by students from the two countries are patience, love and respect children, creative and must love the job.

d. Teacher skills
Malaysian students prefer teachers to possess skills like managing the classroom. Meanwhile Australian students prefer teachers to have a good understanding of the curriculum, excellent organisational skills, ability to adapt to change, ability to relate to & engage students interests and the ability to meet their emotional needs.

e. Ethos within the Classroom.
Santrock (2008) emphasizes that a positive classroom environment supports learning. It is an essential component of a productive learning environment. Positive teacher-student relationships affect classroom management and students’ motivation, emotional well-being and achievement.

Students from Malaysia expect a good teacher to have a high level of respect, interest in and acceptance of the pupils. The same was expected from Australian students whereas Denmark students expect teachers to develop good relationship with children, be creative with classroom activities to make school interesting and fun.

Students from three different countries emphasized on a positive and conducive climate in the classroom. Eggen & Kauchak (2007) stressed that when the climate is positive, both teacher and students demonstrate mutual respect and courtesy, and positive teacher-student relationships affect students’ motivation, emotional well-being and achievement.

II. Key Reasons for Choosing Teaching Profession

a. Personal Reasons
Malaysian students expressed their interest to be a teacher as they love to see children in school. From Australia, there were more diverse reasons given. Three students wanted to
be teachers since small. One even mentioned that she imagined herself teaching children. Others said that they enjoy and have a passion working with children, like to be around children and love interacting with them. They were also excited to be able to have an influence on the betterment of the children’s education and be able to make an impact on children’s lives.

There were very few comments from Denmark. One student likes to be around children and another student was proud to be able to play an important role in the children’s life. Hence it can be seen that students from three countries chose the teaching profession because of their love for the job and children.

b. Family Reasons.

One Malaysian student mentioned that she was forced by parents to enter the teacher education course and has finally grown to love it. A number of the students chose the teaching profession because their parents were teachers and one person said that it’s her parents that made her realised that being a teacher is a noble career.

Student X: “Mum applied this course for me and I just went for it!”

Only one student from Australia chose this profession because her parents are teachers.

c. Prior Experience – In Malaysia, one student chose the teaching profession because she has worked as a temporary teacher. Many Australian students had working experiences such as being teacher aides/assistant and it’s their working experiences that helped them to decide to become teachers.

d. Monetary reward

One student from Malaysia commented that she chose teaching because teaching is a safe career with many holidays and students are given allowances to become teachers. An Australian student chose this teaching profession because there are travel opportunities.

e. Inspired by teachers

Student X from Malaysia: "Teachers in primary school inspired me"
Three students from Australia shared that their interest in the teaching profession was sparked from their own teachers.

Student Y from Australia: “Love to give students the same educational opportunities and support that I received as a student”

f. Noble Aims
Malaysian students chose this profession because they can instil moral values, pass on knowledge to students and can be a good role model to students. From Australia, students want to instil good values and help children to learn so that they can have a bright future.

g. Others
Other reasons given were two students were not sure whether the teaching profession was good for them, and one chose this profession because teachers can yield power to control the children.

There were a few who did not interconnect topics and didn’t answer questions posed by students from another country. Many students did not focus their discussion around the two main topics given (choice of the teaching profession and qualities of an effective teacher). For further studies, it is recommended that tutors or moderators closely monitor online discussions and probably appoint students as facilitators to promote richer discussions. A stronger focus on tasks through perhaps greater collaboration could keep students on task. This will help to promote leadership and other social roles related to collaborative learning skills necessary for successful online learning experiences.

Limitations and Challenges
As an exploratory study, there were many limitations to this study and also many challenges faced by the students.

1. Language: The participation rates across the three countries differed. Australian students were the most active. This could be explained by the fact that students from Australia were given class time to contribute to the project and had to an
assessments task based on this project. In both Malaysia and Denmark the project was not an integral to class learning. English as a second language could also explain a lower participation.

2. **Heterogeneous** sample in terms of age and number. Students from Malaysia and Denmark are from around the same age group whereas students from Australia range from generally were in the age group 22 – 25, with a small number of older students.

3. **Digressing**, Moderators do not interfere in the discussion and as such students talk about other things instead of focusing on the topics given.

4. **Excitement** in getting to know new friends and neglected to give their views on the topics specified.

5. **Time and Time Zones** was another factor. Students were busy with their own assignments and in the questionnaire, they requested more time. One factor in the setting up was liaising with the northern hemisphere schools with different school years.

6. **Technical support**. A few students faced difficulty with internet connection and did not have easy access to the website.

**Student Responses**

These responses were from Australian students.

Students were immersed in learning beyond the classroom through authentic engagement with other teacher education students. One student summed up their learning as:

Through this project we were able to discover about aspects of each country and being to gain a glimpse of each culture. The opportunity to question and discuss issue with real people added both depth and breadth and meaning to the background reading. The variety of experiences and opinions within the group served to both broaden our own minds and to help us appreciate and accept diversity. (Australian student)

Students learnt first-hand about educational issues in each country, as well as furthered their understanding and new knowledge of that country. Many Deakin students speaking about Malaysia and Denmark revealed little first-hand knowledge of these countries. At the end of the project an Australian student observed:
As a result of communicating with students from Denmark and Malaysia, I have discovered that methods for teaching differ greatly in comparison with Australia. In Malaysia, exams and tests form a significant basis for learning style for students both at primary and secondary school level, as opposed to Australia where although standardised testing holds an important place within the classroom setting, formal testing does not take up a significant part of every day school life. (Australian student)

In spite of the limitations and challenges, one student mentioned in his questionnaire that he has learnt more about other countries’ culture and education system. “Through online forum, I was able to learn about other countries easily and it seem like ‘no gap’ among each other”. Other students found this Learning Across Latitudes project very interactive because they can post their questions and managed to obtain feedback in a very short time.

**Ongoing Collaboration – Ways Forward**

Most students in their questionnaire expressed eagerness to be involved in other similar projects. Hence the last unit of the Deakin Bachelor of Education unit titled *EME 430 Beginning Teachers and Research*, has incorporated an online forum among students from three teacher training institutes that is Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia (IPGM)- campus Tuanku Bainun, IPGM-campus Pulau Pinang and IPGM – campus Tun Abdul Razak, Sarawak. Learning across latitudes will continue into 2009 with Australia and Denmark partners.

**Conclusion**

Given that technical advances and innovations are likely to change existing face to face pedagogies towards more of online learning and discussion among learners. There will be a major switch from selection and delivery of content by teacher in the classroom to selection, processing and adaptation of materials online by the learner.

As one the challenges for teacher education is to help students develop understanding of cross cultural issues then this project responded to enable students to learn in an online cross cultural classroom. In conclusion Learning across Latitudes uses new technologies to explore and construct new forms of teacher identities which are ‘global’ in outlook and
orientation; furthers regional and international partnerships; engaged teacher education students; enriched the student experience through new technologies; facilitated a connected community of learners; fostered intercultural understandings and cultural competence; extended existing teaching and learning pedagogies for staff and students; and give opportunities for a teaching beyond the classroom walls. Opportunities for networking and collaboration between individual students or communities of learners will be an important learning activity and will extend globally.

If teacher education is going to respond to challenges of a global connected world then new forms of learning will strengthen students’ capacities to engage in and build teaching for a global world.
References


