Teaching And Learning Citizenship In An Online Learning Environment
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Abstract

Andragogy has permeated the field of adult education despite the ongoing debate regarding its usefulness and application. Many educators in various settings utilise the assumptions of andragogy in their educational efforts, albeit fully or in part. Educators in online learning are no exception. Electronic or online andragogy is not merely simple course conversion. It is about community building among a group of adult learners, so that they benefit optimally from online courses. Online instructional strategies, by taking into cognizance special needs and requirements of adults as learners, can promote learner-centred and self-directed learning. The learning theories provide ideas to help instructors create learner-centered and collaborative learning environments that support critical reflection and experiential processes. This paper, through the case of the certificate course on International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability, highlights the strategies of PRIA International Academy for Lifelong Learning (PIALL) towards developing an online course for adult learning communities and analyses the validity of andragogical assumptions related to adult learning.

I. Introduction

Open Distance Learning (ODL) in an online learning environment as an instructional strategy allows the adult learners to engage in interactive and collaborative activities with their peers and instructors without being physically present in the same location as the instructor or peers. (Johnson & Aragon, 2003: 31)

Adult learners can arrange their learning around their everyday lives without being constrained by time and place. ODL also assumes that the learner is autonomous and capable of self-direction. That the instructor is a facilitator rather than a teacher and must involve the adult learner in the learning process is consistent with the precepts of andragogy and lifelong learning.

ODL recognises that each individual has a wealth of life experiences and knowledge, the relevant aspects of which must be tapped to enhance and give value to the learning. Other elements of ODL give importance to the fact that adults are goal oriented, relevancy oriented, practical and must be respected as equals in the process of learning creation.

Adult professionals from the development sector are in a category, which is rather unique. They are practitioners with a strong field experience and a history of informal learning; they are also adult learners keen to develop an academic base to complement their practical experience, or wanting to make a career shift or move upward within an
organisation and even new actors wishing to explore a career in the arena of development. The need of the sector is to keep pace with ever changing knowledge in the development sector and accordingly develop cognitive, affective and skill based competencies.

This paper, through the example of the certificate course on International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability, highlights the strategies of PRIA International Academy for Lifelong Learning (PIALL) towards developing an online course for adult learning communities. The focus is on the ways electronic andragogy can promote adult focused, self-directed learning. It has four broad Sections. The first Section introduces the theme of the paper. The second Section draws conceptual insights from the existing learning theories within the Online Learning Environment. The third Section describes the certificate course on International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability. It focuses on PIALL's initiative to develop a robust online course for the adult learning community comprising of professional practitioners. The fourth Section reviews elements critical to online teaching. The last Section is the conclusion.

II. Rethinking Learning Theories within the Online Learning Environment

An Online Learning Environment (OLE) is computer-mediated environment designed to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to a student. In general, OLE includes synchronous and/or asynchronous communication, web-based instruction, web search, online resources, and technical support.

As adult learners bring their unique learning characteristics to the learning situation, it is essential that certain conditions be created to facilitate effective andragogy (the process of adult learning). Course designers and the faculty need to focus on learning theories in the design of online instructional technology to enable them to create lessons that are not only technology effective, but are also meaningful from the learners’ standpoint. (Fidishun cited in Pallof and Pratt, 2003: xiv) This Section draws conceptual insights from learning theories viz., andragogy and constructivism.

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1 In synchronous communication learners log on to a course site at once and interact with each other in real time. Asynchronous communication allows the learners to read and comment on the topic under discussion at their leisure and post comments to a discussion area on a website.
1. Andragogy and Online Teaching

Knowles proposed a theory of adult learning, pedagogy for adults, called andragogy. He asserted that adults require certain conditions to learn. He suggested the following conditions to facilitate effective andragogy (the process of adult learning). There are six principles of andragogy for adults. The first principle is need-based learning. Learners need to know why something is important to learn, “how learning will be conducted; what learning will occur; and why learning is important”. The second principle is autonomous and self-directed learning. Learners need to have the capacity to direct themselves for learning. Self-directed learning focuses on the process by which adults take control of their learning. They set up their learning goals; look for appropriate resources; decide on their learning styles and evaluate their progress. The third principle is experiential learning. Learning needs to be related to the learners’ experiences. The learner’s prior experiences impact the learning in creating individual differences, providing rich resources, creating biases and providing the adults’ self-identity. The fourth principle is readiness to learning. Adults become ready to learn when their life situations create a need to learn. The fifth principle is problem solving learning. Adults prefer a problem solving orientation in learning. They learn best when knowledge is presented in a real life context. Finally, the sixth principle is motivational learning. People will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. Adults have high motivation to learn when the learner can gain new knowledge to help them to solve important problems in their life. (Huang, 2002: 29).

In today’s world and context, technology is a powerful tool for instruction. Technology can be used as a cognitive tool to help adult learners elaborate on what they are thinking; to articulate what they know; reflect on what they have learned; and engage in meaningful learning. Many commonly used technologies that provide support to adult learners for online learning are the World Wide Web mechanisms, email (voice mail), listserv, and the Bulletin Board System (BBS). The learner can search actively and discover rich resource to solve problems or construct his or her own knowledge via the Internet. Synchronous and asynchronous online discussions develop knowledge-building communities where learners share information and reflect on the knowledge that they have constructed. (Huang, 2002: 30) Besides, in many cases the ability to manoeuvre through the range of technologies is in itself a tool to inspire the adult learner with a sense of confidence to face the challenge of negotiating new areas and levels of achievement.

2. The Constructivism and Online Teaching

Constructivism is founded on the premise that by reflecting on our experiences we construct our own understanding of the world we live in, we construct our meaning.
Constructivists suggest that learners construct their own meaning by building on previous knowledge and experience. Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner have proposed that learners learn actively and construct new knowledge based on their prior knowledge. According to Dewey, interaction takes place between the learner and her or his environment. Therefore, knowledge is based on active experience. Piaget believed that knowledge is dynamic and is built around the process of discovery. Therefore, the methods of constructivism emphasise the development of the learners’ ability in solving their real life problems. Vygotsky placed more emphasis on the social context of learning. The Vygotskian theory emphasised the importance of the socio-cultural contexts in which learning takes place and the impact of contexts on what is learned. Since Vygotsky emphasised the critical importance of interaction with people, including other learners and teachers, in cognitive development, his theory is called “social constructivism” (Huang: 2002, 28-29). Constructivism also suggests that adults may also have to “reconstruct” their earlier learning and view their previous knowledge from the vantage point of their new learning. For example, the realisation that women as citizens have had far less access to basic facilities than their male counterparts helps learners to view their own social processes and the impact it has had on their status, position and negotiating ability.

Deriving from constructivism, the instructional principles that guide the practice of teaching and the design of online learning are discussed below.

**Interactive learning**

Adult learners do not learn in isolation from others. They naturally learn and work collaboratively and therefore, interaction provides them a way to motivate and stimulate each other. Online discussion technologies make learners consider and reflect on the content and process of learning. As all learners do not equally engage, amongst each other, instructors assist them to identify and build up active and participative group discussions. Alternatively, they can also ask learners to reflect and respond to learning contents at regular intervals through asynchronous communication tools such as Listserv, threaded discussions or emails. After adults come to recognise and organise the perspective of their learning, critical responses and feedback emerge. Interactions between instructors, other learners and content are a very crucial function in distance learning. This process provides a safe space for learners to put forth their views either as a starting point for a discussion or as comments on another person’s point of view. There can be many advantages of not having to respond immediately, as would happen in a face-to-face context, but reflecting on the perspectives of other learners and then offering one’s own point of view.
Collaborative learning

Learning involves interaction with other people or environments, which fosters potential development through the instructors' guidance or in collaboration with more experienced peers. Advanced online learning technologies help overcome some of the barriers to learners' interaction and support collaborative work to synthesis shared knowledge. Though learners only meet each other in a virtual space their personal details and their professional experiences help to create an awareness of each other. Many times learners themselves offer insights and clarifications from varied perspectives and contexts on issues that colleagues may rise on the Bulletin Board and this interaction creates a rich and holistic conceptualisation of common issues like citizenship.

Facilitating learning

Constructivism offers learners the freedom to select and arrange their learning processes with other learners, while the teacher’s role changes into a process facilitator. Instructors in constructivist approaches have a responsibility to build in sufficient support directions and guidelines for online learners.

Authentic learning

The Constructivist theory emphasises that learning should be authentic, and that learning needs to meet real life experiences. Adult learners want to learn skills related to their real life or work experience. Thus, the teaching should be grounded in adults' experiences, and these experiences represent a valuable resource. The learning environment should provide real-world, case-based environments for meaningful and authentic knowledge. When the learning experience is translated into real life situations, it is only then that the knowledge for adult learners becomes relevant to their learning objectives and adds meaning to their contexts.

Learner-centered learning

Constructivism like andragogy emphasises ownership of the learning process by learners, experiential learning and a problem-solving approach to learning. Generally speaking, some assumptions set for adult open distance learners are that they are highly autonomous, self-directed, motivated and individually different. Each learner works towards his or her own objectives though they are still a part of the collective learning process.
High quality learning

Constructivism focuses on the learner’s control of learning processes. The online learning environments give much greater freedom of control to the user. Learners actively absorb external inputs and construct meaningful knowledge from their prior individual experience. (Huang, 2000: 32-33)

The adults learn best ‘when knowledge is presented in a real-life context’. They tend to look for problem solving skills and criticality in any course that they take up, which acts as a professional aid. At this point, the principles of andragogy and Constructivist theory are akin to each other. While the former emphasises that learning is authentic only when it meets real life experiences, the latter borrows from real life experiences drawn from different socio-economic contexts to modify otherwise universal notions. Constructivist learning principles provide ideas to create learner-centered and collaborative learning environments that support critical reflection and experiential processes. Therefore, knowledge so created through constructivism goes hand in glove with the adult learners’ requirement.

III. Towards Building an Effective Online Course: A Case Study of Certificate Course on International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability

1. The Context

Universally, people are increasingly becoming dissatisfied with a democracy that permits them only a proxy voice and limited or no participation on issues of governance. There is a demand for inclusive governance, where they can participate meaningfully as makers and shapers of public policies that affect their very lives. Participation extends citizenship and deepens democracy through participatory governance. However, simply creating spaces for participation does not necessarily assume that they will be filled with new voices; that citizens will be empowered to act as monitors and watchdogs of public services. Citizenship and rights can be attained through actor-based action and participatory citizenship requires educating and organising citizens and their organisations for playing active citizenship roles.

Recognising the need for continuous exploration of complex yet essential issues of citizenship, the Citizenship Development Research Centre(CDRC) based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex enabled organisations/research
institutions worldwide to research and analyse these issues in varied contexts. It also mooted the need for the development of curriculum and pedagogies using research materials and case studies to communicate the lessons to reach wider sections of people such as practitioners, government officials, and staff of bilateral and multilateral institutions, policy makers and academia. PIAL the academic wing of PRIA, one of the core team members of CDRC took the initiative to develop and facilitate the theme of citizenship, democracy and accountability through the distance-learning mode.

PIALL launched a Certificate Course in International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability in collaboration with the Citizenship Teaching and Learning Group (CTLG) of CDRC through the open distance learning (ODL) mode. The underlying rationale was that CSOs, with ‘commitment to praxis’, could break the one-dimensional construct of knowledge and recreate it by bringing in diverse experiences of grassroots voices. It was envisaged that CSOs could also organise and disperse the pedagogical content across the range of learners in varied contexts. Further, it was understood that unless the practitioners’ learning became a part of the academic discourse, there was little hope of realising inclusive citizenship.

2. **Objectives and Outcomes**

Development of any online course begins with the end objective. What do we want the learners to imbibe through the course material? What skills and abilities should they develop after they complete the course? An online course’s objectives are generally broadly defined to allow the learners to take the course in unanticipated directions based on their interests and needs; and develop new ideas, exercise critical thinking, skills and competencies. (Palloff & Pratt, 1999:88)

PIALL’s intent to start an online postgraduate certificate course on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability was manifold. It aimed to reach the learners from multi-disciplinary backgrounds such as practitioners (CSOs); government officials; staff of bilateral and multilateral donor institutions; policy makers, educators and scholars in countries of both North and South regions. The course encompassed a range of conceptual and practical issues faced by practitioners, adult educators, researchers, resource providers and policy makers in strengthening citizenship, democracy and accountability. It aimed to facilitate critical analysis and develop new perspectives on these themes and encourage the development of innovative practices in the field. It was assumed that on completion of this certificate course, the learners would gain an understanding of the concepts of citizenship, democracy and accountability, along with practical approaches for strengthening inclusive citizenship. The international exemplars provided as an integral component of learning material would equip them to apply their learning in diverse national settings.
3. The Curriculum

An online curriculum tends to be more open, allowing the learners the scope for exploration. It includes broad topic headings for discussion, expectations for participation and the ways in which the classroom will be evaluated. Broad topic headings give the learners an idea of what will be considered and discussed in the course.

Central to citizenship teaching and learning is the principle of participation: participation as an active learner with opinions, thoughts and beliefs and participation as a citizen actively working to make a difference. Teaching of citizenship engages with the goal of social inclusion in a critical manner. The central tenet is that citizens need knowledge, values and skills to participate effectively in a democratic society and make their own contribution to that society by observing and practicing critical agency. The instructional strategies should, therefore, focus not just on competencies (knowledge, values, and skills) to participate, but also on developing the self-confidence and sense of agency necessary for reflexive and participatory citizenship. (Lister, 2008:3)

PIALL developed a curriculum following intensive research on DRC research materials, brainstorming and discussion with experts from the T&L Citizenship Group. An advisory committee with international representation went over the curriculum in great detail, envisaging multiple dimensions of learning. All forms of DRC materials ranging from brief case summaries to in-depth case studies to published as well as unpublished DRC study materials were used for developing the course content.

Given the 'global' character of the course, two or three core readings were prepared, which outlined key issues and debates around selected concepts to give the learners a sense of the diversity of meanings and approaches to concepts like ‘rights’, ‘democracy’, ‘inclusive citizenship’ and ‘accountability’. The selected case studies were also used to explore the core concepts and debates, allowing learners to engage with the conceptual material through empirically grounded work.

Case studies from DRC’s Zed book series were used, but the PIALL course designers and instructors felt that the complexity of arguments and methodological variety in these books was pitched at a level too high for the learners in the course. Comprehension of material in these books required prior foundation, which could be lacking in many of the learners, who were practitioners and not academics. Thus, there was a need to develop more simple reading material. As a result, specific course material was developed by the instructors to facilitate understanding of the issues.

The course content was divided into six Units. Each Unit had specific learning objectives. The Units were also interlinked. The discussion of the subject begun in earlier units was picked up and extended in the following Units. For instance, Unit 1, Understanding
Citizenship, focused on issues of citizenship. It is a status that is conferred, along with certain accompanying rights and responsibilities. It is also claimed through people’s actions to secure and practice their identity, inclusion and rights in society. This Unit made learners look at the ways people act to create citizenship and claim the rights associated with it.

Unit 2, Claiming Citizenship: Influences and Practices, viewed the role played by the State, market and civil society in shaping the practice of citizenship. It also highlighted the ways in which citizenship was claimed and practised through practical examples from South and Central America, Asia and Africa.

Unit 3, Participatory Democracy and Governance, highlighted the fact that the concepts and practice of citizenship both as an individual and collective set of experiences in the context of a struggle for rights and the concept of democracy as a set of societal processes and institutions wherein citizens use their rights and exercise their responsibilities (such as voting) were intimately connected. Different forms of democracy, its effectiveness and appropriateness and approaches to strengthening and deepening democracy were linked to the issues of claiming citizenship.

In Unit 4, Practical Applications of Participatory Democracy and Governance, provides the case studies of diverse initiatives that embody some of the features of deepening democracy. Through such processes of participatory democracy and governance, people became partners of the State rather than mere clients or beneficiaries of it. The ways in which civil society and other organisations facilitated and supported the process of participation were also discussed in this unit.

In Unit 5, Accountability, a third form of action was discussed, i.e., how citizens ensure that the state is accountable for and transparent about what it does.

In Unit 6, Challenges and Strategies, the critical challenges in widening the notion of citizenship and how to deepen the practice of democracy or strengthen the accountabilities of the State, the market and civil society were taken up.

The course materials for each Unit were developed in the form of printed booklets. The booklets were self-instructional in nature and included various techniques to provide a wider perspective of the different aspects of the citizenship issues. For instance, Think Tank comprised of statements and questions to reinforce the pivotal issues of inclusive citizenship. Note Bank or learning exercises guided the learners to reflect and jot down their thoughts as they proceeded with studying each unit. Required readings comprised of selected chapters from the textbook and other articles or Chapters reproduced specifically for the Units in this course. The textbook for this course was Participatory Citizenship: Identity, Exclusion, Inclusion (2006) edited by R. Mohanty, and R. Tandon. A CD-ROM featuring a talk by John Gaventa delivered in PRIA brought alive the issue of power,
participation, democracy and citizenship. The multimedia format of the course allowed learners to develop new ideas, exercise critical thinking skills as well as agency to act out active citizenship roles.

4. Course Delivery

The course adopted the distance learning mode to reach geographically dispersed groups of learners, both nationally and internationally who participated at a time and location of their own convenience. Course delivery included self-instructional printed materials comprising instructional guidelines for navigating through each step of the course, and six booklets, the textbook, a CD-ROM featuring a talk by John Gaventa, guest faculty of the course, and web-enabled Bulletin Board Services (BBS) for online participation in the course.

5. Assignments and Evaluation

The efficacy of the course material and the instructors were best highlighted in the assignments that the learners were expected to participate in as a prerequisite for the successful completion of the course. Their performance was evaluated on the basis of written assignments, the quality of content and frequency of online participation with the guest faculty and course instructor.

The assignments in this course included (a) a reflection paper to measure the learners' existing understanding of the topic; and (b) designing a project to assess the application of concepts and methods in a project or organisational context. These assignments aimed at encouraging learners to reflect on the issues of exclusion/inclusion and analyse the relationships between social, economic and political issues on the praxis of citizenship, democracy and accountability. Each student raised issues, explored and analysed diverse issues in their contexts and also reflected on/suggested strategies for overcoming problems in their local settings. The challenge was to ensure that both the learners and course instructors demonstrated a critical approach so as not to reproduce inequitable global hierarchies. Students were assessed on their views and perspectives on each assignment and their online participation.

6. Online Course Site

An online course site provides an organisational structure through which the learners engage with the course material and with course instructors, guest faculty and fellow learners. The better the organisation of the course site, the easier the use of technology for the learners.
Bulletin Board Services (BBS), a customised online course site of PIALL, enabled virtual interaction between subject experts and learners. The BBS provided learners the opportunity to post their questions, as well as review the questions and perspectives of other students participating in the course. The course instructors and guest faculty answered queries, provided clarifications, additional information and addressed the learner's specific needs. It also generated interesting conversations and dialogue amongst the students themselves, who expressed their opinions as well as sought additional information for a specific posting.

The BBS screen displayed a list of subject headings, called forums. A forum was essentially the division of various conversations that took place on the BBS throughout the duration of the course. There were a number of forums.

Announcements: This forum updated the learners with essential information about the course such as due dates for submission of assignments, interactions with guest faculty and other pertinent course related issues. This was a read only forum.

Introductions: Both learners and the course instructors posted a brief description of themselves in this forum. Introductions included any information, including professional background, deemed relevant and important for the class to know about each other.

Queries regarding the course: In this forum students posted questions, comments and concerns about the course. All students were allowed to respond/comment on questions raised in this forum.

Units I-VI were the forums where learners posted their queries, and responded to the questions or any discussion points. They were encouraged to read all of the postings in these forums to understand the underlying issues emerging from their fellow learners' queries/discussion points. They were also encouraged to respond to the queries/discussion points/responses put forward by fellow learners/course instructors/guest faculty, to clarify or present their perspective.

Conversations with Guest Faculty: The guest faculty, selected from the T&L Citizenship Group, logged on to the bulletin board to field queries, observations, concerns and discussion points in a separate forum. The guest faculty could also review the learners' postings in other forums to understand the flow of debate on issues of inclusive citizenship.

There was no forum for assignments. Learners directly e-mailed their assignments to their course instructors on the specified dates mentioned in the time plan in the instructional guidelines.
7. Online Teaching

Tasks and roles demanded of online instructors could be categorised into four general areas, pedagogical, social, managerial and technical. The pedagogical function revolved around educational facilitation. The social function was the promotion of a friendly social environment essential to online learning. The managerial function involved norms in agenda setting, rule making and decision-making. The technical function depended first on the instructor becoming comfortable and proficient with the technology being used and then being able to transfer that level of comfort to the learners (Palloff & Pratt, 1999: 73). The course instructors in this course played multidimensional roles.

Educational facilitation: Pedagogical role

The course instructors were facilitators enhancing students' learning by encouraging their participation in discussions. They were also subject experts providing core ideas and concepts and stimulating discussions. The following pieces of dialogue from one of our classes on the issues of citizenship demonstrate this function.

Course instructor for the course responds to learners' postings as follows:

Dear Friends

The example of civil society activism for improved governance and state building as provided by Lisa emphasizes agency and citizenship as a practice... This a classic example of how people develop their horizontal relationships with each as fellow citizens in order to make common demands from the State, thereby emphasizing on their vertical relationship or lack of it with the State. Citizenship as you rightly pointed out can go beyond caste and ethnicity; it is a demand for common needs that certain groups expect the State to fulfil – in the case of the Somalis, the need for peace and stability....

Martha and Mandakini (course instructors)

Community building: Social role

The course instructor encourages community building in open community spaces in the discussion forums. In this course, a space was created in BBS as the forum on Introduction where students and course instructors could begin to know each other and be comfortable throughout the course. The following piece of dialogue is an example of how the course instructor created a community space.
Dear Friends

We have three persons who have introduced themselves, though I also see that many of you are viewing the page. So please share a bit of who you are with all of us, as we really want to know you all better.

Warm Regards

Martha (course instructor)

Hello!

I’m Andrés Hueso González from Valencia, Spain!

I’m energetic engineering and master student on development process and politics at the Technical University of Valencia. I made (in 2009) the practical stage of that master in an Angolan ONG called ADRA (Oι Cambuta!), taking part in a research on a new experience on local councils for participatory planning. This is related with the contents of this course, and that’s why I decided to participate, trying to deep my understanding on this issue... About my personal life, I like music, practicing any sport (if there’s a ball), reading and travelling!

I hope we have a great time together, learning a lot from each other! Best wishes!

Hi Charlene!

Great to see a compatriot on board... I worked with DAR-UNDP and some NGOs back home before I left for Yemen in 2006... I hope to go back home one day and work in the same field, the call of the times — good governance!!!

mabuhay! Lisa

The dialogue presented above helped the group to become well acquainted. This type of effort is critical to the development of learning community in the classroom.

**Administration: Managerial role**

The course instructors in this course also exerted their authority by establishing boundaries of teaching and learning including acceptable conduct in the virtual classroom, participation in discussions, dates of submission of assignments, etc.

Dear Friends,

I am sure by now all of you have had a chance of browsing over the Instructional Guidelines. If not then may I request you to kindly do so. The Instructional Guidelines will guide your learning process and our
interactions effectively... Feel free to raise any queries regarding the same in the Queries regarding the course section...

Wishing you the very best. With warm wishes
Mandakini (course instructor)

As in any classroom setting, they sometimes had to call some students “out of the classroom” and tell them to participate in the learning, and other students not to overcrowd the learning space by posting long and verbose discussion. This was done through separate e-mails to the students rather than directly in the virtual classroom. The personal e-mail ID of each student was distinct from his or her bulletin login.

Co-creation of knowledge: Technical role

The learners who pursued this course were by and large development practitioners working on different development issues across the world. Their experiences, perspectives and participation had implications for teaching the course. At times learners gave international examples or cited information, which was new to the instructors. This required the course instructors to do some research and get additional information to understand the specific aspect the student was discussing and link it to the learning. Thus, the course instructors became co-investigators and co-creators of knowledge along with the learners.

The sharing of thoughts on Somalia and Somaliland, by a learner was quite new to us. The learner spoke about the de facto state in Somalia, located in the northern part called Republic of Somaliland and the related issue of non-recognition of the north in the international system. We searched for information on the Internet to understand the issue and gave our feedback accordingly. There was also a discussion on this issue amongst the students. One student with a background in international law, gave the legal aspects to why it Somaliland could not be recognised as a country in the international system. This was a great learning for all of us...The student’s reference to theoretical perspectives on citizenship led us to read in-depth the literature on theory of citizenship. We intend to add some additional reading material on this specific aspect of the course in our next offering.

Martha & Mandakini (Course Instructors).
8. Online Learning

The successful learner in online learning is active and engaged in knowledge generation. Learners in this course were actively seeking solutions to the issues. They were viewing issues from a number of perspectives, including the perspectives of other learners and guest faculty. The following example of dialogue with guest faculty substantiates this point.

Dear Colleagues

On the first question, on how global factors affect how people see themselves as citizens, many of you had a lot to say. I was particularly interested in how some of you talked about how global forces can open and close spaces for engagement at the national and local levels. This points to the importance of understanding that in today’s world all of these levels are highly interrelated. The challenge is how to work across levels, by building links and coalitions with others. No single organisation can do it by themselves. However, when such coalitions are built, global actors often dominate them, so the second challenge is how to build more equitable links across vertical spaces for participation.

I was also interested in the key learnings, which many of you have developed from this course, and how you hope to put this learning into practice. The purpose of such learning is not for its own sake, but in order to help to bring about change. So, I am very pleased that many of you have found ways that the learnings can be useful in your own work in development or in deepening democracy in your own societies. I wish you luck in this process, and please contribute what you learn from it to others as well.

John Gaventa
Institute of Development Studies

In doing so, they were generating envisaged learning outcomes from the course and developing new perspectives on the themes of citizenship, democracy and accountability. They were learning as well as gaining research and critical thinking skills. Learners were collaborating with each other at deeper levels of understanding of the materials under study.
9. Challenges

Self-directed learning in an online environment is based on the core belief that instructors do not teach but facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. Yet, online course teaching is not an easy task. The International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability course was fraught with many challenges, which can be categorised as related to course development, teaching, evaluation, language and retention of students. Detailed descriptions of each challenge are given below.

Course Development

Developing an interactive online course was full of challenges. The curriculum of the course was developed from DRC case materials. DRC has case studies of citizen mobilisation, participation, and engagement in the form of books e.g.; Zed series on Claiming Citizenship, downloadable working papers and short case studies. While the core issues emerging from DRC case study materials were touched upon during the development of the course curriculum, not all case studies could be discussed. Also, the students would have benefited more if they had access to the complete case studies rather than being given highlighted portions of the case studies. Given the difficulties in accessing ZED books and also DRC case study materials online, one of the challenges before the course instructors was how best to provoke classroom discussions and debate from all available DRC case study materials. This could come before the teaching process.

Online teaching

While the BBS increased the sense of community among the learners and provided a shared environment for reflection, the difficulties in online communication were apparent. Some participated and voiced their concerns rather actively; some did not despite prompting from instructors. It was impossible to understand why some students were silent, as there was no means of judging the core issue for their lack of interaction. It was difficult to judge whether the lack of response was due to occupational commitments, or simply an oversight or act of negligence, lack of self-confidence, language, indifference or any other reason.

One of the main advantages with the face-to-face environment is the existence of a human relationship, not only between students, but also primarily with the instructors. They are often able to gauge the learner's problems and also devise ways of handling the same. For instructors, the options of drawing students into the classroom are very limited in a virtual setting and cannot go beyond contacting them directly by phone or email.
Another challenge faced by instructors was that there was a lower level of seriousness and commitment to schedules and deadlines as compared to regular learning programmes. Assignments were submitted well after the deadline, without any prior communication or reason for the delay. Learners who did not submit all of the assignments still demanded certification based on their incomplete submissions. They did not appear to comprehend that even open distance learning has a start and a finish and could not perceive that all learning cannot always be based on an individual’s needs. In fact, their motivation affected attrition and completion rates.

Evaluation of assignments

The evaluation of the assignments proved to be a challenging task. There was a case where the assignment was interpreted incorrectly. Assignment 1 aimed to assess the students’ understanding of inclusion and exclusion in the practices of citizenship. A student chose to analyse the issues of inclusion and exclusion within the membership of an international civil society organisation. However, as the thrust of the course revolved around claiming rights and demanding accountability by critiquing the state for its non-performance, indifference and injustice to marginalised citizens, the assignment could not be accepted as an example of citizenship. This created a difference of opinion between the learner and the course instructors.

There was also the issue of evaluating the late assignments. Late submissions after the declaration of the results were not accepted and these students were not given the certificate.

Language Barriers

The integration of students from diverse backgrounds meant that they ranged in age, education levels, English language abilities and country of origin. As course content highlighted complex issues, difficulties in communication became apparent. Students not well versed in the English language had difficulty in putting across their ideas. Their messages were likely to be misinterpreted and therefore needed a lot of clarifications in order to ensure that discussions were meaningful and provided useful insights to all.

Dropouts

Retaining the students in the course was another challenging issue. A few students dropped out due to some genuine reasons of their own. Instructors’ counsel could not check their withdrawal from the course.
IV. Lesson Learnt

The case study on International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability has highlighted elements critical to the success of distance learning in an online environment. A brief description of each lesson follows.

1. Responsiveness

An online learning community cannot exist unless learners and instructor are responsive to each other. By posting discussion questions, the instructors set the ball rolling for all the learners to participate in group discussions. When adult learners come to recognise and organise the perspective of their learning, critical responses and feedback emerge promptly. The prompt responsiveness in online discussions enabled the learners in this course to reflect on the content and process of learning. They were actively interacting with the group and collaboratively achieving learning outcomes of the course.

2. Relevance

Learners understand the content well when it is relevant to them. Relating the subject matter to their life experiences and being encouraged to share real life examples will help in achieving the envisaged learning outcomes.

3. Respect

The online learning community members need to feel that they are respected. This begins with the welcome to the group; respectful receipt of the post and feedback on the material they submit. Learners need to feel that they are equal partners in the learning process.

4. Openness

It is in an atmosphere of openness, safety and trust that the learners feel free to share their thoughts and feelings.

5. Empowerment

In the online learning environment learners take responsibility for their own learning. Learners gain a new view of themselves and a sense of confidence in their ability to interact with new knowledge.
The learners' feedback to the International Perspectives on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability course reveals that they benefited immensely from the course. The concepts sharpened their knowledge and consequently their articulation skills. They have learnt to apply their knowledge in a community setting. The online discussion board provided an effective learning strategy for the students. Some excerpts of learners' feedback to the course are given below.

Recently, I have been involved in paper presentations on civil society and its correlates- accountability, democracy, state and the market. Knowledge acquired has sharpened my articulation skills. In addition, my analytical skills have been sharpened. I now understand people of the world within the nexus of citizenship identities, power matrix, spaces etc towards realizing their values. And that to be responsive to the people in decision-making, their voices in terms of participation in the process, must be given a prime place. (Fidelis Nchewi Ekom)

Best aspect for me has been the logical sequence in which each module follow after the other and the case studies provided in each module to help in providing clarity. The liberty we had as students in commenting on issues what we felt without being interrupted or restricted was another aspect I thoroughly enjoyed. (Nsikan George Emana)
V. Conclusion

Learning for professional development is based on purposes linked to a broader vision of growth in the profession. ODL in online learning environment has the potential to promote empowered learners who are able to meet the demands of ever changing knowledge in society.

It offers them an opportunity to interact with the instructor and fellow learners as they apply new knowledge in authentic contexts. Such a collaborative and transformative learning has the potential to contribute to better learning outcomes including the development of critical thinking and competencies.

Online teaching about citizenship enabled learners to develop a broad knowledge base and critical consciousness essential for full citizenship. They were able to form opinions and express them, revise opinions on the basis of new information and work together towards influencing the decisions that affect their lives.

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About PRIA

Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is a global participatory research and training centre. PRIA’s professional expertise and practical insights are utilised by other civil society groups, NGOs, governments, donors, trade unions, private business and academic institutions around the world.

Since its inception in 1982, PRIA has embarked on a set of initiatives focusing on empowerment of the poor and excluded. PRIA has consistently worked on issues of citizens’ access to rights and entitlements, such as basic services in health, education and water in rural and urban areas; women’s literacy and livelihood; forest rights of tribals; prevention of land alienation and displacement; and workers’ occupational health and safety. In all its interventions, PRIA emphasises gender mainstreaming institutionally and programmatically. Its perspectives on participatory research generate innovative participatory methodologies.

The intensive field programmes of PRIA are currently located in the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. In addition, through its network of partners, these interventions extend throughout India. PRIA is also involved in programmes in countries like Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka.