THE CONTINUING PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF DISCUSSION FORUMS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AND FACE-TO-FACE CONTEXTS

R. Pillay
Department of Social Work
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
e-mail: roshini.pillay@wits.ac.za

L. Alexander
School of Public Health
University of the Western Cape
Cape Town, South Africa
e-mail: alexan054@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Two educators at separate higher education institutions − University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa jointly evaluated the use of asynchronous discussion forums in their courses, offered respectively as part of face-to-face and distance mode courses. These very different discussion forums were evaluated using two existing frameworks: Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb's (2000) Communicative Model of Collaborative Learning (CMCL), which is based on Habermas's concept of the ideal language act, and Walker and McLean's (2010) Educational Arrangements for Educating Human Development Public Good Professionals. The evaluation focused on whether the dominant purposes and content of interaction resulted in critical intellectual debate focused on learning, and encouraged *social good professionalism.* Findings showed that more than half the discussion posts in both courses were focused on learning through debate, argumentation and reflection, and that the Social Work course showed significant evidence of developing *public good professionals.* It was concluded that discussion forums offer valuable pedagogical potential for both

distance and face-to-face students in higher education. Recommendations are made that other educators, especially in the open and distance learning space, consider engaging in joint evaluative reflection for improving practice.

Keywords: discussion forums, evaluation, social work, public health, public good professionalism

1. BACKGROUND

Post-apartheid South Africa remains highly unequal with multiple social inequities (Badat and Sayed 2014); in this context, higher educators in both open and distance learning (ODL) and residential institutions face the triple challenge of developing disciplinary knowledge, nurturing professional competency, and engaging future professionals in critical discourses of social awareness. In the *caring* professions across disciplines, efforts to embed graduate attributes in programmes speak to this vision for developing *public good* professionals (Walker and McLean 2010; Treleaven and Voola 2008; Leibowitz 2012; University of the Western Cape 2009).

This article postulates that distance and face-to-face education environments derive significant benefit from using asynchronous discussion forums (or groups) as an adjunct teaching medium in Social Work and Public Health, and that this medium furthered the development of critical intellectual dialogue and a *public good* discourse amongst students. Through reflective dialogue, students' discussion posts were explored using two analytical frameworks − one from the field of technology-mediated learning [TML] (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb 2000), the other from *capabilities theory* (Walker and McLean 2010). This article is the result of reflection, an accepted strategy in our professions and dialogue on our praxis (Kember, McNaught, Chong, Lam and Cheng 2010).

2. THE CONVERGENCE OF DISTANCE AND FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING THROUGH TML

Our dialogue is located in the South African Higher Education environment, where TML has created ongoing opportunities for pedagogical examination. Furthermore, it is in part TML that is driving Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and face-to-face or 'conventional' education towards a shared pedagogical discourse of how such technologies can be optimised to enhance the quality of learning (Harry 1999).

In 2011, both educators explored the use of discussion forums, thus involving students in iterative written expression in response to directed questions and probing. An additional benefit for Social Work students was the potential for forging professional identity and competency, since the discussion forum served to model one of their course's key competencies. Comparison of our *work in progress* provided the means to

deepen our understanding of the value of discussion forums and what they were adding to our teaching.

3. BENEFITS OF DISCUSSION FORUMS IN THE LITERATURE

Many of the well-documented affordances of discussion forums are practical, such as offering flexible learning which is especially suited for distance education, making it possible for students, peers, educators and outside experts to communicate, interact or collaborate without being in the same space at the same time (Department of Higher Education and Training 2012; Treleaven 2004; De Laat and Lally 2003). For both teaching programmes, the open and flexible learning environment offered by discussion forums motivated our choice to use them. Since the University of the Western Cape's (UWC's) Public Health distance-learning students were working health professionals based in nine African countries, flexible times for learning were essential, enabling them to continue working in the health system while studying at times that suited their schedules; for the Wits Social Work undergraduate students, this flexibility extended group learning periods without constraints of time and place. Flexibility is also an important issue in the South African conventional university context, where students' study and living environments are often *far apart* and the inefficiency of transport systems and safety issues after daylight make extended tutorial periods difficult. Being able to extend opportunities for interactive (and Constructivist) modes of learning with peers, from wherever they are, when they can, is also a decided advantage for students in face-to-face university contexts.

In both distance and face-to-face teaching, discussion forums foster better communication between the educator and student, a factor that has potential for student adjustment in higher education (Mazzolini and Maddison 2007). Furthermore, online asynchronous communication has helped some second-language English students who appeared to feel less inhibited in contributing in technology-mediated learning (TML) environments than in face-to-face classes (Bozalek 2007). Furthermore, since asynchronous communication is undertaken in written form, deeper cognitive complexity can potentially be engaged than in face-to-face discussion (Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter 2002). Discussion forums (DFs) can also be used to enable some of the more conceptual aspects of higher education learning, including critical conceptual debate, reflective writing and testing assumptions and assertions with others (Salas-Morera, Arauzo-Azofra and García-Hernández 2011; Anderson and Kanuka 1997). Importantly, discussion forums offer the opportunity for collaborative learning which, it is argued, serves to embed learning more deeply, by allowing members to collaborate, absorb social nuances, experience intellectual conflict and cooperation (Rust and Gibbs 1997; Topping and Ehly 1998) and provide each other with 'mutual aid' (Shulman 2006).

In general terms, TML is also argued to be better than face-to-face learning for developing generic workplace skills (Donaldson and Topping 1996) and has the potential to build understanding of professional practices (Van Breda and Agherdien 2012).

Lave and Wenger (2003) note the value of discussion forum engagements that are structured to ensure that all perspectives are advanced in a safe environment, where students work cooperatively and collaboratively, so that they can engage intentionally around the social conditions encountered in the real world. In addition, the use of reflection can compel deeper thinking and transform student experiences into usable knowledge for the real world (Herrington, Reeves and Oliver 2010; Schön 1987). Reflection is a process of critically thinking about what we do, to understand what we have learnt, how we have learnt and what we still have to learn (Gibbs 1981); it can be built into discussion forum posts, and while reflection can be undertaken without writing, the writing process enhances reflection and higher order cognitive learning, because writing requires more considered activity (Applebee 1984; Fulwiler 1987).

4. STUDY FOCUS: WHAT WAS ACHIEVED IN OUR DISCUSSION FORUMS?

Most of the reviewed literature focused on the practical advantages of discussion forums; this study addresses the paucity of literature on discussion forums' contribution to conceptual competencies, critical thinking, and strengthening key values of our professions. An important aspect of these values is capacitating graduates as *public good professionals,* which Walker and Mclean (2010, 847) focus upon in their work on the role of higher education institutions. They argue that all higher education graduates should play a part in '... serv[ing] and strengthen[ing] the society of which they are part', suggesting that graduates, '[b]y virtue of their professional education at university ought to emerge as *public good* professionals who: "... (i) recognise the full dignity of every human being; (ii) act for social transformation and to reduce injustice; (iii) make sound, knowledgeable, thoughtful, imaginative professional judgments; and (iv) work/act with others to expand the comprehensive capabilities (*fully human lives*) of people living in poverty"'. Walker and Mclean (2010) have developed a *public good* professional education index of capabilities that they argue could serve to underpin this vision, and a table of educational arrangements to achieve this. Selected criteria from the table have been adapted as part of our method, as the basis to scrutinise the nature of learning in our discussion forums. This was appropriate since both of these higher education programmes are professionally oriented, with Social Work explicitly defined as a discipline '... that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' (International Federation of Social Work 2014). Similarly, Public Health has a population-wide focus and is defined as '... collective action taken by society to protect and promote the health of entire populations' [in contrast to clinical medicine, which deals with individual problems] (Beaglehole and Bonita 2001, xiii). The UWC programme seeks to emphasise equity in addition to human rights issues in

population health. In common, both courses are lodged within curricula for the *helping professions* and in broad terms share the aim of cultivating *public good professionals* following principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity (Nicholas, Rautenbach and Maistry 2011; London 2008).

4.1. Study objectives

Table 1:   Key features of the two higher education courses

Institution and Programme	University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) Bachelor of Social Work	University of the Western Cape (UWC) Postgraduate Diploma in Public Health,
Course/ module	Meso Practice (or Groupwork)	Introduction to Public Health: Its Basis and Scope (introductory module)
Students	6 of 35 undergraduate students between the ages of 19−35 (at 2nd year level) formed the core group, however other students in the class could and did include posts.	23 employed postgraduate health and allied health professionals (majority nurses) in their 1st year. 11 were resident in South Africa, 3 in Namibia, 3 in Zambia, and one each in Angola, Malawi, Nigeria, Swaziland, Uganda and Zimbabwe.
Learning environment	Blended face-to-face learning: 21 face-to-face lectures, in-class closed groups for role play, WebCT learning management system (LMS) with daily integrated discussion forums x 6, announcements and distribution of multi-media content	Blended distance learning: optional 3-day introductory course face-to-face, printed module guide (with reader) made up of 12 tutorials in print and free-standing Google discussion groups used for announcements and online tutorials
Support media	Course outline, a reading pack, handouts, Twitter communication driven by the educator	Multimedia on DVD with three 10-day discussion forum tutorials, one per study unit
Educators	One	Two
Timing	Face-to-face lectures of 45 minutes each delivered over 11 weeks	Course held over 14 weeks; discussion forum tutorials: 2 x 10 days including two weekends
Metadata	WebCT platform provides comprehensive metadata, showing that students spent 234 hours collectively on the platform. The number of posts for this group was 123 (educator and student posts). The average user session was 15 minutes on weekdays between the hours of 15h00 to 16h00. The most active student − 45 posts and least active student − 1post.	Google Group metadata is limited but showed a total of 100 messages, 68 of which were by students, with no available report of hours spent in the discussion forums. Most active periods were 3rd, 4th and 5th months of the six month period. Most active student − 22 posts; most active lecturer − 22 posts; least active student − 5 posts.

The Social Work course aimed to equip students with skills to plan, execute and evaluate Meso Practice interventions and learning; this was achieved through role play in class and the discussion forum, providing students with the opportunity to become familiar with these skills and rehearse in a safe environment before working with clients (Levine 2013). Students in their roles as co-leaders and facilitators in the groups, closely replicated 'real world' scenarios and formed a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 2003). The groups were developed around specific social conditions such as substance abuse, gambling, HIV and Aids, and single parenting. The interaction in the discussion forums extended teaching and learning beyond the physical space and increased interaction between educator and students.

In contrast, UWC's *Introduction to Public Health: Its Basis and Scope* aimed to orientate new Postgraduate Diploma students to the field of Public Health (for which there is no undergraduate training), to introduce key concepts and frameworks and engage them in exploring sources of Public Health information. Conceptually, the course sought to engage students in a fundamental shift of orientation, from a predominantly clinical view of disease causation to a Social Determinants perspective, from a concern with individual clinical treatment to a population-wide health consideration; furthermore a key role of this module was to develop knowledge and understanding of health systems in resource-poor countries, and to nurture intervention in a pro-people and pro-poor way when prioritising Public Health problems.

In the *Introduction to Public Health* course, discussion forums played a three-fold role – firstly, for course announcements, communication and problem-solving, secondly, to build social presence of lecturer and group members and, most importantly, to serve as a forum for debate and exploration of key course concepts during three 'tutorial periods'; the discussion topics had some tangential relevance to the two assignments, thereby heightening motivation to participate.

5. STUDY METHOD

The study method was a form of qualitative Framework Analysis using a sample of discussion posts as data; Framework Analysis enables case-based analysis using a pre-designed matrix, and allows comprehensive and transparent data analysis (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston 2013). However, the tool chosen for the first analysis (the Computer-Mediated Collaborative Learning Framework or CMCL) clusters data into categories of 'intention' and 'predominant orientation' and enumerates these as a proportion of the total number of posts, by way of evaluating the density of focus on conceptual aspects of learning (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb 2000). These simple counts or quasi statistics helped to make sense of the data and allowed observation of patterns that complemented the qualitative thematic content analysis (Maxwell 2010; Sandelowski 2001).

Our study method was formulated after exploring several methods for evaluating DFs such as SNAPP (*Social Networks Adapting Pedagogical Practice)* and descriptive analysis. Our choice was informed by the unique way in which discussion forums provide readymade data in the form of residual forum posts, which are described by Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000, 8) as '... a footprint of the collaborative learning process, a footprint which is not so visible when the interactions occur face-to-face'.

The UWC sample was comprised of the full set of 99 posts from 2011; lecturer's communications were then excluded, leaving 68 posts. The Wits discussion forum posts were purposively sampled: one of five groups, who had named their group *The Addicted*, was selected, comprising 123 posts; the group was chosen for the diversity and range of posts.

In evaluating the discussion forum posts, we selected two tools for analysis, administering them sequentially. First we analysed our sample posts using Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb's (2000) Computer-mediated Collaborative Learning (CMCL) model, which is designed to offer insight into the qualitative aspects of 'the communicative practices of learners' in discussion forums. The model is premised on Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action, which advances that there exists an 'ideal language act' or ideal form of collaborative discussion, which entails 'inclusive critical discussion, free of social and economic pressures, in which interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern' (Bohman and Rehg 2009; Ross and Chiasson 2011).

The CMCL model seeks to characterise the discourse of the discussion forum by systematically analysing forum texts to understand two aspects − the intentions behind the post, and how students' engaged with the domain of knowledge. The model, however, recognises that social interaction may serve purposes other than learning, such as achieving ends, for example, gathering information for an assignment.

Using the approach of Treleaven and Cecez-Kemanovicz (2001), each post was analysed, first in terms of its intention or purpose, and then in terms of its dominant orientation to learning. In each case, the primary allocation of the two-part code was made in terms of its purpose, since knowledge orientation could shift in relation to its purpose. Each dimension is divided into three categories (see Table 2) and posts are assigned to one of these categories in each dimension.

Table 2:   The CMCL framework (re-drawn from Treleaven 2004, 171, based on Cecez-Kemanovic and Webb 2000)

The CMCL Framework			
Linguistic acts ...	**Knowledge Domains** ➡		
Dominant Orientation ... ⬇	**SUBJECT MATTER (1)**	**NORMS AND RULES(2)**	**PERSONAL EXPERIENCES , DESIRES AND FEELINGS (3)**
(A): TO LEARNING	... about subject to share beliefs, argue, develop understanding and create knowledge (A1)	... to establish norms regarding interaction and collaboration; co-operative assessment of social acceptability (A2)	... to express personal views and feelings aimed at increasing mutual understanding (A3)
(B): TO ACHIEVING ENDS	... to dispute knowledge claims about subject, provide arguments, aimed at influencing others and achieving goals (B1)	... to change norms to suit own interest and goals (potentially at expense of others) (B2)	... to express personal experiences in a way that influences other learners and instructors to help achieve goals, e.g. emphasising personal success (B3)
(C): TO SELF-PRESENTATION AND PROMOTION	Disputes claims as performance to promote self; neglects argumentation (C1)	Disputes claims about norms to attract attention as authority or leader (C2)	Expresses personal experiences to project own importance in a group (C3)

The model suggests that language acts engage with knowledge in different ways. Some participants aim mainly to 'raise claims related to' a topic, testing and disputing them and arguing for the better claim based on evidence; these are classified as A1 in this 3x3 matrix, and are regarded as closest to the *ideal language act*. Within the knowledge domain, others focus on the norms and rules that predominate in that domain (categorised A2), while some make personal linkages to that knowledge to enhance their own or mutual understanding, or to recognise others' opinions, views and values; these are classified as A3. The A1, A2 and A3 categories are all regarded as part of 'a dominant orientation to learning' (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb 2000), and positively regarded in terms of the 'ideal language act'. Once categorised, posts per category are calculated as a percentage of the total number of posts, giving a sense of how densely students' engagements are distributed. The model, it is argued, makes it possible to assess the tendency of the discussion forum towards critical intellectual engagement, free of other functional motivations, and therefore, its proximity to an ideal language act (Treleaven 2004). The second category, row 2 of the matrix, is classified B1-B3 and is used to exclude language acts with a dominant orientation towards achieving more practical goals, while the third category (C1-C3) focuses on posts aimed at 'self-presentation and promotion'. Both educators classified posts from their samples separately and then reviewed and discussed each other's classification to harmonise interpretation of the categories and improve validity.

Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000, 77) note that in '... web-mediated learning environments, we cannot directly affect learning but rather learning conditions, seeking to get closer to an ideal learning situation'. To some extent, therefore, using CMCL is an act of self-reflective evaluation, using the students' written engagements as the data for judgement.

The posts classified as pre-dominantly focused on learning, (those categorised as A1-A3), were then subjected to a further process of analysis in relation to elements of a second framework. In this instance, we asked whether posts provided evidence of 'moulding' students' professional identity towards *public good professionalism*. For this we used Walker and McLean's (2010) framework suggesting 'educational arrangements', which signify evidence of *public good professionalism*. The framework includes curriculum choices (theme 1), pedagogical practices (theme 2) and strategies to develop professional identity (theme 3). Column 4 of their framework (a 'supportive departmental culture') has not been applied, since it does not apply to student 'language acts'. In analysing the posts, we used the exact wording of their framework and scrutinised each post for its 'fit' within that criterion.

For the curriculum theme, we estimated the number of posts that could be legitimately classified under it, to derive a sense of the theme's density; we present selected illustrative examples as evidence of our classification and findings. Halfway through our analysis, we engaged in peer analysis and debriefing to check and refine our interpretation of the themes.

Permission for the study and to make use of the data was sought from the UWC Higher Degrees Committee, while all students' names were anonymised. Informed consent was obtained from the students from Wits.

6. FINDINGS

In the Wits Meso Practice group, the CMCL analysis (Table 3) shows that the dominant orientation of the posts was to learning (A1) 'Raising claims related to subject matter in order to establish mutual beliefs'. A high proportion of these linguistic acts (72%) was grounded in the topic of substance abuse. In the discussion forum, students were able to share their points of view, debate and impart knowledge. The following post is evidence of this:

> Addiction is a powerful thing and it not only affects the individual but the sub-systems within which the individual resides. We need to take into consideration the different systems which [e]ffect the individual and their addiction such as the environmental context and social context. (Wits 9).

Table 3:   CMCL results for Meso Practice course (UWits 2011 (Total = 123 posts)>

	Knowledge domains			Total
Dominant orientation	Subject matter	Norms and rules	Personal experiences	
Learning	(A1) 72%	(A2) 11%	(A3) 17%	100%
Achieving ends	(B1) 0	(B2) 0	(B3) 0	0
Self-presentation and promotion	(C1) 0	(C2) 0	(C3) 0	0

A relatively low percentage of posts (17%) were concentrated around learning that was 'express[ed through] personal views ... aiming at mutual understanding' (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb 2000, 81). However, this category of post (A3) is illustrated by the following,

> nice one X, :-) adding to that i [I] think as students we grow ourselves, from learning from peoples experiences and stories. think it'll be valuable in years to come. (Wits 13).

The above quotation captures the student's reflection on the knowledge obtained and its value for their personal and professional life. In addition, the student compliments another student for collaborating and sharing information.

Furthermore, since the Meso Practice course sets out to teach some of the norms and codes of conduct that govern and direct Social Work, it is to be expected that some of the posts (11%) show students reflecting on how they managed the group norms as part of their learning (A2). In other words, specific to this course is a strong emphasis on some of the professional norms of Meso Practice or groupwork.

> I believe that there is a large amount of trust between us because all conflict that may occur within the group is solved by the group ... the way we act out our respect and trust to others plays a vital role in our group culture. (Wits33).

The Social Work students had the advantage of also being able to interact with their group members face-to-face and were able to interpret rich verbal and non-verbal interactions in combination with collaboration and learning in the online environment. Thus a multitude of factors facilitated good group cohesion and a sense of belonging. This allowed members to engage critically within a supportive group culture, which permitted members to take risks and try out new skills: for example, conflict was deliberately introduced into the group to encourage members to understand the discomfort that may occur when there is disagreement between members. While it was apparent that some conflict arose in the face-to-face interactions, as is noted in the next comment, students were able to address the miscommunication and staged conflict.

> ... there was a bit of tension between members. ... I thin(k) the group did an outstanding performance on trying to resolve the conflict and allowing the group leaders to solve it, there

was also a good deal of perticpation [participation, sic] in trying not to hide that conflict existed. (Wits 88).

None of the Meso Practice posts were coded as orientated towards *Achieving ends* (B1-B3) and *Self-presentation* (C1-C3).This may have been because Social Work students would have been made acutely aware of the need to develop group cohesion, and of the ethic of respect for the opinions and views of others. There was indeed a conscious strategy for the students to model ethical practice behaviours throughout the course. Furthermore, any attempts at self-promotion in class or in the discussion forum would have been discouraged by the group leader in setting up group norms.

The CMCL findings for the Public Health group suggest that the dominant orientation of students was learning, with the focus on the subject matter (63%), rather than achieving other course-specific ends or promoting themselves. Of these, 50 per cent of the posts focused on the discussion topics themselves, which is a relatively positive outcome in the first discussion forum, where much was unfamiliar to the group: the first topic − the impact of an institution's definition of health on the service they provide − was usually approached from the perspective of the participant's workplace experience as requested, but the discussions were then expected to move into a topic-specific discussion. In many cases, responses to the primary posts deviated from the topic and were coded A3 (learning focused on personal experiences), as peers picked up on interesting aspects of an individual's health setting or projects in which they were engaged. In other words, argumentation was not always sustained: this may have required redirection from the facilitator, although these interactions also served to build social presence, as intended.

Table 4: CMCL results for Introduction to Public Health course (UWC 2011) (Total = 68 posts)

	Knowledge domains			Total
Dominant orientation	**Subject matter**	**Norms and rules**	**Personal experiences**	
Learning	(A1) 50%	(A2) 3%	(A3) 10%	63%
Achieving ends	(B1) 1%	(B2) 4%	(B3) 32%	37%
Self-presentation and promotion	(C1) 0	(C2) 0	(C3) 0	0

The stronger UWC posts engage in further argumentation: for example, this participant, working in a rural hospital in South Africa, interviewed the pharmacy manager, two community service doctors, two registered nurses in charge of outpatients, and one social worker on their definitions of *health*. The participant notes the disjuncture between belief and practice:

The results were interesting! They all had a personal definition of health very similar to that of WHO, the word 'holistic' was often used to describe health. But in practice, they could not implement their meaning of health. Health, in practice at this facility, is clearing the waiting patients by diagnosis and pharmaceuticals. (UWC21).

6.1. Similarly UWC9 describes the work context and explains:

I often get the impression that healthcare workers get frustrated by the realization that there is so little that is happening at the political level to address the social determinants of health, that although they are aware how these issues contribute to the burden of disease they see in their facility, they have lost the motivation to deal with them or to lobby for solutions. (UWC9).

One participant takes this argument further by picking up a key point of the course, that to achieve health, more public sectors than health departments (e.g. water and sanitation) should be involved; he points out, however, that the way health is defined in other sectors is also critical to achieving a more holistic state of health in society:

But I also think that there's different schools of thought between various sectors (public works, water and sanitation, social services etc). ... perhaps an attempt [should be] made to outline the relationships between disciplines of study, e.g. environmental health and business as well as health. (UWC25).

This level of dialogue exemplifies what could be achieved through critical argumentation in a discussion forum − one participant can build on the argument of another, shifting the focus to a broader social context, asking a critical question, in effect, carrying the debate further. Yet this sort of iterative engagement is relatively rare within this forum, suggesting that the use of personal workplace experience as the vehicle for the discussion, although helpful in introducing the students to one another and starting the conversation, may have disadvantages in that it often diverted more abstract debate into finding out more about concrete personal experiences. For example, UWC4 poses a follow-up question, which disconnects the dialogue from the topic of debate:

It is an interesting experience. But first I would like to find out if the malnutrition or the malnourished children had any underlying causes such as HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria etc. Were these underlying causes treated or managed at the clinics? (UWC4).

The third topic in this forum, the impact of globalisation on TB and HIV drew more discursive academic dialogue, and once students had grasped the possible scope of the topic, they engaged enthusiastically. There is, however, some evidence of relatively *off the cuff* conceptual understandings, and minimal reading:

To me globalization is the activities that affects the whole world. This may be trading, movement of people, distribution of funds and policymaking. (UWC59).

Other participants shift into more complex and sophisticated explorations of neoliberalism and globalisation, which suggests a deeper level of reading and engagement:

> In addition, globalization has mainly been driven by neo-liberal economic systems that promote market driven demand for goods and services, in which access to these services is determined by market forces with the government playing a facilitatory role. ... Neoliberalism has been associated with widening of inequalities which actually assaults the comprehensive primary health care approach efforts. (UWC62).

In this part of the discussion, the level of complexity seems to be accretive, and although there is little direct engagement between participants, they seem to acknowledge what has been said and add to it. From scrutinising the density of posts, and the sequences of posts, there is confirmation of how influential the educator's task instructions are to the quality of the interaction; students moving alone from personal experience to argumentation seemed less likely to draw sustained intellectual interaction, although it served other purposes, which were appropriate at the outset of the forum. However, regular further instructions from the educator or a peer, guiding participants to respond in relation to the original critical question, might have sustained a deeper level of debate.

A small percentage (10%) of posts were categorised as A3, in which participants, rather than discussing the topic, focused on elaborating or comparing their situation with that of another participant, in an act of support or solidarity.

> Y sounds like the town where I work in, X [province], SA. Poverty and unemployment is rife. People cannot help themselves if they wanted to, as there is no money. ... The town seems forgotten and neglected by the municipality and local govt. (UWC28).

Posts classified as aimed at 'achieving ends' (the B category), were coded mainly as B3, which signifies expressing personal experiences to help achieve goals; as this constitutes a fairly large proportion of posts (32%), it should be explained that most communications aimed to resolve individual difficulties of understanding or uncertainty, although some affirmed either the work of another participant, or thanked the lecturer for a particular piece of feedback or support. Once again, the C category of the matrix (self-promotion) did not seem relevant to the culture of this group of students.

Having explored the discussion forums using the CMCL matrix, both researchers then explored the A1-A3 posts for evidence of public good professionalism, using the second framework (Walker and McLean 2010) to assess whether the forum showed evidence of facilitating the development of *public good professionals*.

7. FINDINGS REGARDING *PUBLIC GOOD PROFESSIONALISM*

Walker and Mclean (2010) describe public good professionals as critical, creative and striving for the betterment of society (Walker and McLean 2010). They argue that higher

education institutions that espouse these values should proactively seek to develop these attributes in their students through 'mission, culture and practices' both inside and outside the university. Factors such as participatory parity, the ethic of care, sensitivity to social class, race, gender and able-bodiedness are just some of the factors that are included in the definition of *public good professionalism* (Bozalek and Leibowitz 2012).

It is argued that students who have an appreciation of the wider social issues are better able to strive towards becoming 'critical, transformative thinkers and agents' (Osman and Petersen 2010, 411). This implies that educators need to provide students with content and opportunities to engage with the material in a 'critical manner via interactive and supportive teaching methods' (Bozalek and Leibowitz 2012, 62). Through our analysis, we explored whether discussion forums were a way to offer students these opportunities.

The framework includes criteria for 'curriculum, pedagogies, and encouraging professional ways of being [as well as] departmental cultures' (Walker and McLean 2010, 858). Since some of these criteria pertain to the educator's actions, which are not part of this study, we have selected criteria from the first three clusters and used them as a basis for analysing our discussion posts. The first criterion is that curriculum should extend professional practice and allow engagement 'locally and globally; [it should also address] historical, political, socio-economic [issues] including professional ethics' (Walker and McLean 2010, 858).

Analysing the posts from both courses revealed the presence of a number of these educational arrangements as well as student identification with issues of care, considerations of power, and social justice ethics. Almost half the Meso Practice course posts, and a quarter of the Public Health discussion forum posts included social justice or pro-poor orientation issues. Examples are as follows:

> ... addiction is a disease. that is why people need to be treated proffesionally [professionally] when they are addicted. I think as a persecpective [prospective] social worker it is important to have an open mind while dealing with addicts ... (Wits23).

> We experience a lot of re-admissions at our hospital, as many patients who have recovered during their stay here, return home and often relapse. This could be due to poor economical status, social stresses and other community or personal factors. (UWC10)

Walker and McLean (2010) also suggest that such curricula should address professional ethics: this issue was strongly foregrounded in the Meso Practice course, as a value underpinning professional behaviour; in addition, the Meso Practice themes addressed in the forums, such as addiction, were underpinned by an ethical awareness:

> we as outsiders are quick to judge people who have an addiction even though they try to turn their lives around. (Wits14).

The issue of ethics was less overt in this introductory module in the Public Health curriculum, although recognition of the impact of social determinants on health could be read as furthering equity and, therefore, part of a human rights stance.

In terms of pedagogy, Walker and McLean's framework (2010) suggests that a course should strive to develop curiosity and independent thinking, so that students can consider situations from multiple perspectives within a safe collaborative space. Both course posts showed evidence of many of these qualities, in this instance an independent stance on a topic:

> ... drugs dont solve problems neither does sitting down and doing nothing about it. people always say 'alcohol is not the answer', well coffee or tea are not the answer too. *thinking*. (Wits31).

However, it is evident that more facilitator intervention in directing the students to consider contesting stances would be valuable in furthering such growth, and to invite reconsideration of relatively conservative positions like this one from the Public Health discussion forum:

> I feel that globalization increased the spread of HIV/AIDS and TB. People are crossing the borders of different countries looking for jobs. This lead to urbanization and overcrowding and increased poverty in certain areas, which then in turn pose as a health risk for the spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS and TB. (UWC59).

There is other evidence of pedagogical arrangements which, in terms of this framework, further *public good professionalism:* engendering respect and valuing diversity is a strong feature of the pedagogies of both courses. This was evident in the Public Health group, which was in itself highly diverse; their task of sharing how health is defined in their work contexts generated interest amongst peers and further discussion about conditions in their working contexts as is evident in this quotation:

> I have been interested by your project and the efforts its making in achieving health in the Kibera slums. From your discussion i have been able to learn ... (UWC17).

In evaluating the Meso Practice course, one participant shows recognition of the issue of the 'group's culture' which seems to suggest that issues of diversity have been addressed:

> ... there is a high level of respect amongst members ... members are tolerant and non-judgemental to others ideas and opinions ... (Wits 59).

Another of Walker and McLean's (2010) pedagogical recommendations, fostering '*opportunities to imagine "what might be" in social arrangements'* was evident in the Meso Practice posts, which suggests the use of stress management techniques as a way of addressing addiction:

> Reliance on drugs is not the solution! There are effective ways of solving problems, for e.g, exercise or yoga! Exercising or yoga cannot solve your problems, but can help you to be calm,

so that you may somehow think of another way of solving your problems ...! So, no to drugs!! We always have some idea of how we can solve our problems. Think! (Wits34).

In the Public Health course, there is also evidence of imaginative problem solving:

> This is a poor rural community where some have no access to running water and sanitation. Malnutrition is rife; diarrhoea in children is rampant. Is this facility addressing the social determinants of health − not at all. Is there time and resources − not really. ... CAN we make a difference? Of course, limited resources can be put to effective use if the people on top sanction it and drive it. If we priorit[i]se what issues we want to address and work together on a common strategy (e.g. how to address the childhood diarrhoea) we can accomplish so much more. (UWC21).

The third area of Walker and McLean's (2010) index is nurturing professional development, which is described as learning that develops professional identity and 'judgement, ethical behaviour, and evaluation of personal strengths and weaknesses' (Walker and McLean 2010, 858).

The Meso Practice course was inherently strongly directed to encouraging professional ways of being, such as self-awareness and the practice of reflection, as is illustrated here:

> I completely agree with you that social workers need to have an open ... but most importantly as it has been said a million times during the lectures that self awareness is very important. (Wits42).

Students from the Public Health course were also encouraged to reflect on how health was defined in their own workplaces and how this might affect the kinds of services provided. Sharing written communications had the effect of generating self-reflection according to students' own style, which would then be affirmed through peer commentary. This generated further reflections from the student.

> Very few colleagues describe health according to WHO: state of complete well being (socially, physically and psychologically) and not merely the absence of disease. ... I assume if you would pose the question to those that access care (what is' health'), the response would be focused on the physical well being, literally meaning not being sick. But I also think for those in a public health environment, associates a stressfull environment as one that is unhealthy, therefore, the absence of stressors would be an indication of health. (UWC8).

It should be reiterated that the educator's design of learning activities is critical, and if reflection on *public good professional* roles was to be strengthened in the Public Health course, activities would need to be developed that engage students in further and more self-reflexive engagements. This sort of engagement has been required in students' end-of-course e-learning portfolio, but is more strongly highlighted across the whole Meso Practice course.

8. DISCUSSION

During this evaluative reflection process, we explored the 'footprint' of our sampled discussion forums to understand how effective they have been as sites of learning, whether they facilitated critical intellectual debate and contributed to moulding professional identity towards *public good professionalism*. Although many of the benefits discussed in the literature were enjoyed by both courses (such as extended time for group work), our study has concentrated on the evidence of discussion posts rather than the educators' intentions or the broader range of learning inputs. Treleaven and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2001) argue for the analysis of discussion forum posts as a better basis for improving the learning environment than self-reported reflections of learners; exploring the discussion posts and discussing our praxis has heightened our understanding of the quality of interaction and its potential to further intellectual argument, and to promote collaborative development of professional skills and attributes. It has also drawn attention to the critical role played by the educator in designing appropriate activities, and prompting, redirecting and extending discussions while in progress.

Although the courses differed substantially, the discussion groups demonstrated some common trends: at least half of both courses' posts were concentrated on argument and debate on the designated topics, achieving, at a relatively novice level, some qualities of the ideal language act, free of other purposes. This suggests that the discussion forum medium, as well as the educational tasks that guided them, were at least in part appropriate to furthering critical debate and constituted 'fertile soil for establishing an ideal learning situation' (Cecez-Kemanovicz and Webb 2000, 84). In addition, the Meso Practice discussion forum had the distinct purpose of not only teaching the content of the topic of addiction, but also of modelling the technique, ethics and practices of Meso Practice. This in itself was instrumental in developing students' understanding of the necessary professional norms, but also demonstrated many ethical considerations which future social workers should espouse as part of the *social good professional's* capability. The Public Health course, on the other hand, served more as a forum for conceptual debate and mutual learning, inducting students into the vocabulary and some of the critical debates of the Public Health field; it also played an important role in setting out the foundations of a *social good professional* perspective through the questions posed, and through exposure to other students' diverse work contexts.

In its application, the CMCL evaluative tool (Cecez-Kemanovicz and Webb 2000) was not without challenges: in the process of classifying the posts in relation to the matrix, the educators checked and re-checked each other's interpretations, returning frequently to the originators' definitions for clarification; the Meso Practice course was particularly difficult to classify, because content and process are so intertwined, which led to several rounds of classification before we were satisfied. Considering posts in terms of Habermas's 'ideal language act' was a particularly interesting process, and challenged us to scrutinise the interactions in a way that we had not done before.

This suggests the care with which potential tasks or discussion questions should be developed, to generate critical argumentation in discussion forums, as well as the value of post-factum analysis of the posts by educators.

In addition, the Public Health forum also raised the question of whether initiating discussions with the classic adult learning strategy of the learner referencing his or her own familiar work setting did not serve to derail some argumentation; unless the facilitator was alert to redirecting students when necessary, and prompting further debate, this 'starting with the familiar' strategy might reduce the potential for pure argumentation, although this was not the sole purpose of this activity. A clear difference was seen between the two courses in the CMCL's second domain of purpose (B) (Achieving ends): since the Public Health discussion forum played a secondary but critical role in communicating with students at a distance for the sake of directing and guiding their studies, it was essential to learning even though it did not further argumentation. These posts had a certain distracting quality, requiring students to navigate between critical debate and announcements within the Google Group forum: this problem could be alleviated with the use of a more sophisticated platform that allows announcements to be separated from intellectual debate, (as in a learning management system). The third domain of purpose (self-representation and promotion) was not noted in the forums, leading us to conclude that in the African higher education context, students often need to be motivated, supported and coaxed to expose themselves at all in discussion forums. Generally they showed awareness of the needs of others in their groups and recognised that self-promotion was counter to the norms of Meso Practice. Level C was, therefore, a largely irrelevant dimension of the matrix in our contexts.

The second process of framework analysis using Walker and McLean's (2010) Educational Arrangements matrix was equally valuable, also serving to heighten our awareness of the curriculum, and the pedagogical and professional 'moves' that an educator could consider in strengthening the potential for developing *public good professionals*. Although we recognise that these values are inherent in the disciplines of Social Work and Public Health, we concur on the value of undertaking a systematic process of indexing these criteria in the discussion forum, and thereby reflecting on possible improvements; such a strategy has the potential to strengthen the achievement of *public good professionalism*, and to ensure that it also becomes part of disciplines where these values are less present. In both courses, many of the attributes proposed by Walker and McLean (2010) were evident in discussion posts, which suggests that at least in the Social Work course, and in a more limited way in the Public Health course, a *social good* perspective was being developed.

Finally, the evaluation process undertaken in this study is evidence of convergence of the two modes of higher education delivery − distance and face-to-face. The discourse of pedagogical improvement in both contexts offers space for mutual learning and consideration of how TML can best be harnessed to contribute a more flexible,

pedagogically effective and intellectually challenging learning environment. There appears to be room for fruitful institutional exchange in both directions.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

In retrospect, discussion forums allowed us to develop a professional community of practice in our courses, which allowed communication and debate underpinned by social values and principles. The opportunity for extending student access (in time and space) to this community of practice is considered instrumental in developing the value base and professional identity of future professionals, who are aligned with the *social good* perspective. However, it is notable that although the design of activities and the choice of topics drove student engagement, an enabling environment (such as a well-facilitated discussion forum) sustained over time, was also necessary.

The discussion forum itself cannot be under-estimated for its effectiveness in facilitating student-centred collaboration, cooperation and independent learning. Carefully designed discussion forums that have the right amount of educator input provide are an excellent vehicle for critical intellectual development. Furthermore, the residual footprint created by the discussion forum posts offers a highly reflexive tool for educators, students and researchers to develop greater insight into learning practices in the ODL and face-to-face environments.

10. CONCLUSION

The practice of reflecting jointly on our discussion forums was valuable in extending our knowledge and skills in relation to our own pedagogy and course design. The tools used to evaluate the discussion forum posts elucidated the extent to which the course objectives we set were achieved, and the efficacy of the evaluation tools themselves. Further research and application of the tools in other disciplines, with a greater number of posts using other learning management systems would better confirm their effectiveness.

Other variables may also have affected the effectiveness of our discussion forums, such as student familiarity with the medium, ease of using the interface and being at a distance; these warrant further exploration. Nevertheless students and educators collaboratively learning and working on issues related to the real world in discussion forums can potentially make learning more effective, while strengthening and nurturing a *social good* perspective. Acts of self-reflective evaluation (such as CMCL analysis) or applying Walker and McLean's (2010) index to evaluate students' written engagements from discussion forums can help, and has helped us as educators, to modify our courses to improve learning: doing so as a reflexive partnership has been particularly helpful in the process.

REFERENCES

Anderson, T. and H. Kanuka. 1997. On-line forums: New platforms for professional development and group collaboration. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication.* Available at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00078.x/full (accessed 20 August 2014).

Applebee, A. N. 1984. Writing and reasoning. *Review of Educational Research* 54: 577−596.

Badat, S. and Y. Sayed. 2014. Post-1994 South African education: The challenge of social justice. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 652(127): 127−148.

Beaglehole, R. and R. Bonita. 2001. *Public health at the crossroads: Achievements and prospects*. Auckland, New Zealand: Cambridge University Press.

Bohman, J. and W. Rehg. 2009. Jurgen Habermas: Theory of communicative competence. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/archives/fall2009/entries/habermas/#TheComAct (accessed 20 August 2014).

Bozalek, V. 2007. The potential of e-learning for the social work curriculum. *The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher* 19(3): 77−93.

Bozalek, V. and B. Leibowitz. 2012. An evaluative framework for a socially just institution In *Higher Education for the public good: Views from the south,* ed. B. Leibowitz, 59−86. Stellenbosch, SA: Sun Media.

Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. and C. Webb. 2000. Towards a communicative model of collaborative web-mediated learning. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology* 16(1): 73−85.

Coppola, N. W., S. R. Hiltz and N. G. Rotter. 2002. Becoming a virtual professor: Pedagogical roles and asynchronous learning practices. *Journal of Management Information Systems* 18(4): 169−189.

De Laat, M. and V. Lally. 2003. Complexity, theory and praxis: Researching collaborative learning and tutoring processes in networked learning community. *Instructional Science* 31: 7−39.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2012. Draft policy framework for the provision of distance education in South African Universities. Pretoria: DHET.

Donaldson, A. J. and K. J. Topping. 1996. *The peer tutor training handbook for higher and further education*. Dundee: Centre for Paired Learning, University of Dundee.

Fulwiler, T. 1987. *Teaching with writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gibbs, G. 1981. *Teaching students to learn: A student-centred approach.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Harry, K. 1999. *Higher education through open and distance learning: World Review of Distance Education and Open Learning* (Vol. 1). London: Routledge/Commonwealth of Learning.

Herrington, J. T., C. Reeves and R. Oliver. 2010. *A guide to authentic e-learning. Connecting with e-learning series*. New York: Routledge.

International Federation of Social Workers. 2014. Review: global definition of work. Available at http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/ (accessed 3 June 2014).

Kember, D., C. McNaught, F. C. Y. Chong, P. Lam and K. F. Cheng. 2010. Understanding the ways in which design features of educational websites impact upon student learning outcomes in blended learning environments. *Computers in Education* 55(3): 1183−1192.

Lave, J. and E. Wenger. 2003. *Situated learning − legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leibowitz, B., ed. 2012. *Higher Education for the public good: Views from the south*. Stellenbosch, SA: Sun Press.

Levine, J. 2013. Teaching groupwork at a distance using an asynchronous online role play. *Groupwork* 23(1): 56−72.

London, L. 2008. What is a human-rights based approach to health and does it matter? *Health and Human Rights* 10(1): 65−80.

Maxwell, J. A. 2010. Using numbers in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16 (475).

Mazzolini, M. and S. Maddison. 2007. When to jump in: The role of the instructor in online discussion forums. *Computer and Education* (49): 193−213.

Nicholas, L., J. Rautenbach and M. Maistry. 2011. *Introduction to Social Work*. Claremont: Juta and Company.

Osman, R. and N. Petersen. 2010. Students' engagement with engagement: The case of teacher education students in higher education in South Africa. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 58(4): 407−419.

Ritchie, J., J. Lewis, C. Nicholls and R. Ormston. 2013. *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: SAGE.

Ross, A. and M. Chiasson. 2011. Habermas and information systems research: New directions. *Information and Organization* 21: 123−141.

Rust, C. and G. Gibbs, eds. 1997. *Improving student learning through course design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Salas-Morera, L., A. Arauzo-Azofra and L. García-Hernández. 2011. *Collaborative e-learning by means of asynchronous discussion forums and group tutorials combination*. Noordwijkerhout.

Sandelowski, M. 2001. Focus on research methods: Real qualitative researchers do not count: The use of numbers in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health* 24: 230−240.

Schön, D. A. 1987. *Educating the reflective practitioner. The Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Shulman, L. 2006. *The skills of helping: Individuals, families,groups and communities*. Belmont: Thomson Brooks.

Topping, K. and S. Ehly, eds. 1998. *Peer assisted learning*. London: Lawrence Erlaum Associates.

Treleaven, L. 2004. Chapter VII A new taxonomy for evaluation studies of online collaborative learning . In *Online Collaborative Learning: Theory and practice,* ed. T. S. Roberts, 160−178. London: Information Science Publishing.

Treleaven, L. and D. Cecez-Kecmanovic. 2001. Collaborative learning in a web-mediated environment: A study of communicative practices. *Studies in Continuing Education* 23(2): 169−183.

Treleaven, L. and R. Voola. 2008. Integrating the development of graduate attributes through constructive alignment. *Journal of Marketing Education* 30: 160−173.

University of the Western Cape (UWC). 2009. *Charter of graduate attributes*. UWC: Directorate of Teaching and Learning, Cape Town.

Van Breda, A. D. and N. Agherdien. 2012. Promoting deep learning through personal reflective e-journalling: A case study. *Social Work/ Maatskaplike Werk* 48(2): 126−141.

Walker, M. and M. McLean. 2010. Making lives go better: University education and 'professional capabilities'. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(5): 847−869.