ELearning A Peace Building Initiative

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ELearning A Peace Building Initiative

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ABSTRACT

ELearning has created a chance for a large yet busy group of working learners to go back to class from the comfort of their 'homes' and 'offices' (De Beer & Mason, 2009). By adopting this mode of learning, Maseno is fulfilling the global demand for lifelong learning (UN, 2013). ELearning in Maseno University has attracted international students from Iraq, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, Rwanda, Nigeria and Belgium: a fact that has brought an international feel to the university. Moreover the university has three face to face campuses (approximately 150km apart), manned by the same pool of lecturers. The eCampus serves as a central point of communication for lecturers and learners across all the three universities. The university capitalizes on the affordances of a virtual learning environment through the eCampus to build an interactive and collaborative learning environment for students to interact with faculty and peers to share, support, encourage and learn from each other (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice, 2004; De Beer & Mason, 2009). The LMS has the advantage of not only closing physical space and bringing everyone closer through the new ICTs but also keeps a record of activities and interactions. The wide range of interaction modes that ELearning students have creates a medium of communication and an avenue for peace building and conflict resolution given the fact that eLearning transcends across political, religious, racial, social and geographical borders. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of eLearning as an avenue for peace building and conflict resolution. The specific objectives of the study were to investigate the impact of eLearning communication tools as agents of behavior change; empowerment tools; and an alternative infrastructure towards peace building and conflict resolution. The study used a critical case study design. Data was collected from 180 postgraduate eLearning students sampled from a population of 516 students using a questionnaire and a documentary analysis guide of the archived communication tools available in the learning management system while analysis was done using descriptive statistics (Mainly percentages) and content analysis based on thematic areas of communication. Results indicated that students discuss socio-economic and political issues outside their learning time. For such discussions, 100% of the students use social media, 80% email, 60% private messaging system, 40% social discussion forum in the LMS. It further noted that 70% of the learners interacted at close range for the first time with people from a different race, religion and country on joining the eLearning programme. The results from further analysis of learners' social presence showed that they all started by observing netiquette as a rule at eCampus but later adopted them for use in all online communication; met new online communication tools during the course. The study concluded that eLearning is perceived by learners as a safe platform for conflict resolution and an attitude change agent among ELearning Students.

Key Terms: Communication; Conflict resolution; ELearning; Interactions; Peace building

Background information

ELearning has created a chance for a large yet busy group of working learners to go back to class from the comfort of their 'homes' and 'offices' (De Beer & Mason, 2009). By adopting this mode of learning, Maseno is fulfilling the global demand for lifelong learning (UN, 2013). ELearning in Maseno University has attracted international students from Iraq, Uganda, Tanzania, Somalia, Rwanda, Nigeria and Belgium: a fact that has brought an international feel to the university. Moreover the university has three face to face campuses (approximately 150km apart), manned by the same pool of lecturers. The eCampus therefore serves as a focal point of communication for lecturers and learners

across all the three campuses of the university. Therefore it is an important communication arena for students and lecturers in a multi-ethnic setting.

The university capitalizes on the affordances of the virtual learning environment through the eCampus to build an interactive and collaborative learning environment for students to interact with faculty and peers to share, support, encourage and learn from each other (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice, 2004; De Beer & Mason, 2009). The eCampus is modeled around a web-based learning management system (LMS), electronic community and administrative centers for students and faculty. All programmes offered at the eCampus are primarily delivered through the internet, with students taking sit-in on- campus examinations at the end of each Semester. Besides learning and teaching activities, therefore, the eCampus framework facilitates interaction and collaboration between and among students, academic, administrative and technical staff (eCampus Evaluative Report, 2012). The LMS has the advantage of not only closing physical space and bringing everyone closer through the new ICTs but also keeps a record of activities and interactions. The wide range of interaction modes that eLearning students have, creates an avenue for peace building and conflict resolution given the fact that eLearning transcends across political, religious, racial, social and geographical borders. The world over, technology has become a very powerful communication tool, especially, the social media. A good example is reported by Lopez & Dickover (2015) in Myanmar that "In Myanmar today, even if we are not shooting each other with guns, we are shooting each other with words," Nay Phone Latt, a Burmese blogger and activist, told participants as the PeaceTech Exchange kicked off. "We are all here today because we want peace." Moreover, The Roundtable on Technology, Science and Peacebuilding is an alliance of government agencies, corporations, international organization, NGOs, and academic leaders pursuing technology applications that support the peacebuilding agenda: preventing deadly conflicts; rehabilitating societies torn by such conflicts; building communities, cultures and institutions that foster inclusive societies and the peaceful resolution of conflicts (National Academy of Engineering, 2015). Again, Technology could serve both as an evaluation tool and as a peacebuilding tool, in that it could lead to more relevant information and serve to enhance accountability for peacebuilding activities. The two key issues are how to motivate participation in technology and encourage responsible evaluation and adaptation of technological tools based on information filtered via the internet (Campbell, Findley & Welch, 2014).

Kenya is increasingly vulnerable to violence as attested by the Post-Election crisis in 2008 (UNDP, 2015), the ethnic conflict being fuelled by the increasing new use of the social media. In fact a number of bloggers and social media users have gotten into trouble with the law over careless utterances in the social media that were perceived to fuel ethnic tensions and a law has been enacted to deal with this emerging trend. All is not lost though, as captured by Madzima-Bosha (2013) when he noted that 'Social media can help spread peace and encouraging dialogue among people from different ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. It can affect perception on ethnicity, change attitudes, and promote tolerance and mutual understanding'. This study views eLearning as a possible avenue for peace building; training ground on netiquette that would empower and equip learners with responsible online communication skills (eCampus Evaluative Report, 2012). This view is supported by Kawano-Chiu (2014) when she states that a new generation of peace builders, funders, and policymakers bring a comfort and familiarity with an increasing use of technology responsibly and an ever-increasing human interconnectedness.

The main methods used in conflict resolution are interpersonal, intergroup, and intercommunal communication according to Peace Operations Training Institute (2013), skill that are nurtured in eLearning. Larrauri (2014) noted that 'Too often, communities in conflict know very little about each other. There is fear in the unknown and peace builders work hard to share stories across conflict divides. Yet persuading people to reach across to those they fear can be difficult. Can local peace builders use social media as a first step to bridge this divide?' This is one of the key questions that this research seeks to answer using the communication and interactions nurtured in eLearning using the students from the eCampus of Maseno University.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of eLearning as an avenue for peace building and conflict resolution. The specific objectives of the study were to investigate the impact of eLearning communication tools as agents of

behavior change; empowerment tools; and an alternative infrastructure towards peace building and conflict resolution. A constructivist based interaction model was used in the conceptual framework of this study. Constructivism is an approach to teaching and learning where learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences. Constructivism acknowledges the learner's active role in the personal creation of knowledge and the importance of experience (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). It involves a shift from traditional pedagogy premised on the transfer of information to outcomes-based, learner-centred learning.

The study used a critical case study design. A critical case study research involves critical reflection on current practices, questions taken-for-granted assumptions, and critiques the status quo based on the theories of one or more critical theorists (Yin 2009). Critical case study research involves critical reflection on current practices, questions taken-for-granted assumptions, and critiques the status quo based on the theories of one or more critical theorists (Yin 2003). It allows the researcher to explore individuals or organizations, simple through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs (Yin, 2003) and supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena. This approach is valuable for health science research to develop theory, evaluate programs, and develop interventions because of its flexibility and rigor.

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The 516 students forming the study population were from the following 5 schools, taking the courses indicated: School of Mathematics, Applied Statistics and Actuarial Science taking Master of Science in Quantitative Research Methods (78 students); School of Arts and Social Science had 2 programmes: Master of Arts in Social Development and Management (45 students), Master of Arts in Social Policy (12 students) ; School of Public Health and Community Development having Master of Public Health (207 students); School of Planning and Architecture which had 2 programmes: Master of Arts in Project Planning and Management (47 students) and Master of Arts in Monitoring and Evaluation (118) and the School of Education with Master of Education in Educational Administration (9 students).

Stratified random sampling was used to select 180 students representing 36% of the population, the stratum being determined by the type of course the student is enrolled in. A combination of purposive and simple random sampling was then used to select participating students proportionately within each programme resulting in a sample consisting of 27 students of Master of Science in Quantitative Research Methods; 16 students of Master of Arts in Social Development and Management; 4 students of Master of Arts in Social Policy; 72 students of Master of Public Health; 16 students of Master of Arts in Project Planning and Management; 41 students of Master of Arts in Monitoring and Evaluation; and 3 students of Educational Administration. In this case, purposive sampling was to ensure the 9 international students become part of the sample.

Data was collected from the 180 postgraduate eLearning students in the sample using documentary analysis of the archived communication tools available in the learning management system; mainly the social forum, administrative forum and compliments and complaints and the eCampus programme coordinators forum. Except for the last forum that is course specific, the other three forums are general and as a result allows inter-programme interactions and communication. A questionnaire was also administered to the students as a way of investigation other modes of communication learners use amongst themselves for out of class interactions and the content of such communication.

Data Analysis

Information from the questionnaires were analyzed using percentages. The results indicated that for out of class interactions and discussions, 100% of the students use social media, 80% email, 60% private messaging system, 40% used interactive forums within the LMS. It was further noted that 70% of the learners interacted at close range for the first time with people from a different race, religion and country on joining the eLearning programme.

Analysis of the interactive forums was done using content analysis. Social presence in such interactive forums was measured using a scheme from Rourke et al (1999) using 1720 conversations from 180 students forming the sample by assessing Social Presence in Asynchronous Text-Based Communication forums. This paper laid out three categories that formed the basis of social presence used in judging peacebuilding and conflict resolution: affective, interactive and cohesive. There were 9 indicators used in this study to generate these three categories: expression of emotions, use of humor, self-disclosure, referring explicitly to others' messages, asking questions, complimenting and expressing appreciation, expressing agreement, addressing or referring to the group using inclusive pronouns, and phatic or salutations. Coding results for these indicators are reported in the table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of occurrence of the particular codes making up social presence

Codes	Posts containing the code (n=1720)	Percentage of posts containing the code
Expressing Agreement	375	42
Expressing Positive Emotion	370	41
Complimenting	244	27
Self-disclosure	219	24
Asking questions	156	17
Salutation	141	16
Referring to others' messages	149	14
Using inclusive pronouns	86	09

The codes above describe communication skills that can be used to judge a person's ability to contribute positively towards peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The results implied that eLearning succeeded as an empowerment tool leading people to learn to be civil to one another e.g. ability to express agreement, compliment and express positive emotion. This is because in online communication people want to give their best to the other party. The other coded issues are skills that ascribe to the netiquette that eLearning inculcates on learners. On probing further, the students admitted that at first netiquette was just a rule they felt forced to ascribe to. But as learning continued, they realized they were shocked at bad online communication they met on the social media and that many times, they corrected colleagues whom they felt were out of line in their communication.

Each participating student's communication content in the 4 forums under investigation were further traced and analyzed thematically based on broad subject line categories of general social; family social; ethnic social; personal social; general economic; general academic; general administrative; and general political. Communication from all participants were judged based on these themes and percentages worked out for each theme. The results are presented in the table that follows:

Table 2: Communication themes

Communication Theme	Total counts per theme	Percentage Rating
general and social	344	20
Social and family based	86	05
Social and ethnic based	18	01
social and personal	34	02
general and economic based	36	02
general and academic based	863	50
general and administrative	258	15
general and political	87	05
Total	1720	100

The dominating theme in such discussions rotated around their academic programmes (50%) but even within the academic programmes, it was noted that students assisted each other civilly. This was a clear indicator that eLearning nurtures netiquette and good skills that move students towards development of good social and communication skills

which are key requirements in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The students further admitted that before taking eLearning, the only communication tools they were familiar with were social media and email. Through eLearning, they were exposed a wide range of online communication tools that widens their scope and ability to be peace ambassadors across the world. They no longer feared communicating across the globe and became very conscious about their subject of communication. This is confirmed by the fact that most students stuck to academic theme since this was an academic forum and had very little personal, family, economic, ethnic and political discussions.

Conclusion

The data collected from this paper points to the following conclusions on the role of eLearning on peacebuilding and conflict resolution:

ELearning students develop good online communication skills, observed netiquette, at first as a rule at the eCampus, but later adapted it as a lifestyle making them choice ambassadors for peacebuilding. They do this mainly through email and social media communication at personal level.

Most students had only known about social media and email as online communication tools but through eLearning they were exposed to a wide range of online communication tools. This made them comfortable to communicate across the globe through instant messaging, teleconferencing, synchronous chats and others. As a result eLearning empowered them as possible agents of change and transformation in the world.

Besides empowerment, this exposure opened them up to a wide range of usage that one can make through the internet. In their opinion, eLearning is an alternative infrastructure for such issues as peacebuilding and conflict resolution it exposes one to people from different races, religions and ethnic communities without shouting about it.

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