

Analysis of a Higher Education Virtual Learning Community in South Africa for the Emancipation of Faculty

Louise Postma
North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, Potchefstroom, South Africa
Louise.Postma@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

A professional online discussion group at a higher education institution in South Africa serves as the unit of analysis for the proposed study. The debates and discussions on the forum capture this online learning community's reaction to and negotiation of change on institutional, political and national levels. The university has recently merged with a former black university and a teacher training college and the new situation demands the change of former white, privileged faculty to become more inclusive. Discussion topics include *inter alia*: learning and student culture, the character of the university, language of instruction, religion, racism, human rights and management.

The objective of the analysis will be to explore and explain the elements within the discourse that lead to possible personal, professional and political emancipation. Social critical theory, with Habermas's (1989) knowledge interests and the respective levels of empowerment (technical, communicative, discursive and emancipatory) serves as the main theoretical framework. This will be augmented by *inter alia* the learning theory of Vygotsky, which demands the free exchange of ideas for the creation of meaning in an optimal learning space.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) offers the opportunity and space for equal contribution of ideas that could lead to the strategic empowerment of inhabitants of the virtual learning community. They can freely identify and discuss issues that facilitate personal, professional or political emancipation. I question this assumption of information euphoria and communicative idealism. The empirical study will therefore focus on the levels of empowerment and the emancipatory value of the forum.

The use of a computer supported collaborative mind tool, developed at the University of Joensuu, could assist in revealing the semantic links in discussions. This tool, together with content data analysis, generates visualizations of contributions in terms of concept mapping that can lead to a more meaningful analysis of the value of the discussion forum.