



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

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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 a 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,
politics,
and management.

Issues discussed and viewed by faculty (2005-2008)

Politics	Student culture	Religion/morality
<p>The absence of the history of apartheid in the curriculum: 22 replies, 1298 times viewed</p> <p>Is Apartheid's demise to blame for all SA's social ills? :</p> <p>17 replies, 1285 times viewed</p>	<p>“Christian” gathering at Veritas last night: 33 replies, 2488 times viewed</p>	<p>Does NWU Potch campus make condoms available to students?: 14 replies, 1646 times viewed</p>

Issues discussed and viewed by faculty (2005-2008)

Choice of language as medium of instruction	Management	Racism
Get in the ring for bilingualism at NWU, Potch campus: 44 replies, 2237 views	... thought police 40 replies, 2132 views	Culture and race 26 replies, 1247 views

- Summer is here again, with our students walking hand in hand in the street and singing dumb anthems for the glory of their residences and being bullied by revenge-thirsty seniors. Am I the only one to find this glorious tradition grotesque?

The university wants good students. We'd get much better results if the first years were left alone and not forced to comply with a strict initiation programme that makes them zombies in the classroom. Is this an institution for higher education or a boot camp? I thought this was a "value-driven" institution? How about the horror stories from Hombre, Veritas and other very homophobic residences???

“Residence songs, etc.”

Where the hell are the residence fathers and mothers when students are driven out of their residences if they don't want to participate in the initiation paraphernalia? Who's here when students come crashing in our offices, not even daring to talk about what's happening in their residences? Do the people in charge really approve of this?

Olivier

PS: I've had the "cultural differences" speech already, thank you very much.

“Culture and race”

- this is the second year that I have heard from students in residence that there are virtually no people sharing rooms with somebody classified as belonging to a different racial category under the apartheid system of categorisation. The explanation of the students I spoke to was that to their knowledge there was no sharing across racial 'lines' and the reasons they have been given is that it is better for them (and all of us in general - by implication) to be with people from 'their'/'our' own 'culture'.

Whoever though this up (if the accounts of the students, this year and last, are to be believed) is an absolute idiot that knows nothing about the culture concept, and who is guilty of confusing race with culture.

- 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.

Sources of evidence: Habermas and Vygotsky

- 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.

Habermas's discourse ethics focuses on the emancipatory power of reason

Burrell and Morgan's radical humanist paradigm envisages change at the individual level, with enlightenment and emancipation as the path

To achieve emancipatory rationality, it is necessary to diagnose distorting tendencies in communication

Revealing such distortions can improve the rationality of communications ...

(Cukier *et al.*, 2004 :237,238)

Habermas maintains that reason may be applied to undistort communication and improve the human condition

Habermas offers a strong and unique conceptual framework that can be applied not only to analyze the distortions in discourse which reflect the dominant ideology and power structures but also to undistort communications, thereby improving practice.

(Cukier *et al.*, 2004 :237,238)

“For critical social theorists, the responsibility of a researcher in a social situation does not end with the development of sound explanations and understanding of it, but must extend to a critique of unjust and inequitable conditions of the situation from which the people require emancipation.”

Ngwenyama & Lee (1997:151)

“Inquiry into social activity should focus on understanding their meanings from within the social context and lifeworld of actors.”

Ngwenyama & Lee (1997:152-154)

- 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 possibility of emancipation could be seen to happen in two ways in the context of discussion forums:

Textually / internally (the ways of argumentation, distortions, etc.)

and

Contextually / externally (the context of the participant, e.g. academic and professional status, relationship with management, etc.)

- 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.

- The application of the collaborative mind tool is investigated in a situation where people voice their convictions and argue about it
- The visual display of argument and evidence can possibly reveal distortions and could eventually be empowering for higher education professionals to receive this kind of intervention in the discussion forum



THANK YOU