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**Making the invisible visible.
On participation and communication in
a global, web-based master's programme**

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Abstract

This study focuses on the discourse of an intercontinental on-line Master's programme in adult learning, using English as the lingua franca of the programme and involving four collaborating universities in Sweden, South Africa, Canada and Australia. The programme highly interactive, emphasising communication between students. Taking the variation in participation as the point of departure, a discourse analysis aiming at analysing the contingencies contributing to the pattern of communication in the programme. Data consist of a variety of texts, such as on-line web-documents, written notes, and other documents, such as narratives that participants wrote about their life and its relation to participation in the programme. The results of this study show that the official discourse of the programme as a text, with its emphasis on equity, change and development gets subordinated the discourses produced and reproduced by the students in the programme as a discursive practice and social practice. The use of English as the lingua franca contributed to a mistake anxiety, which for some students was hampering their communication in the programme. Aspects of the material world such as the vast differences in the efforts and costs for participating in the programme were also highly interrelated to the shaping of socio-culturally situated identities among the students and thereby contributing to the variation in frequency in participation. The students' accounts reveal that there are fragments of an alternative discourse emerging, based on mutual concern and friendship, which might suggest a potential for changing the communicative pattern in the programme.

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Key words: discourse, intercontinental master's programme, on-line learning, qualitative analysis

Introduction

This paper looks at aspects contributing to the patterns of communication and participation in the context of a web-based Masters' programme in adult learning. The programme in question spans over four continents and engages students with varied languages, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, enrolled at four different universities in Sweden, South Africa, Australia, and Canada. The planning of the programme started in 1998 and the first group of students, which comprised of a majority of Swedish and South African students, started in 2001.

Our course statistics for the first two courses of the programme revealed a great variation among students regarding the frequency of participation in the discussions, where some students were very active and other students who remained more or less silent. The aim of this paper is to analyse representations of what can be understood as the discourse of the programme in order to explore dimensions not immediately visible in the statistics that is related to the variation in participation among the students.

The background and history of the programme

The basic idea behind the development of the programme was to achieve an alternative model of delivering international online education that challenges an export model of on-line higher education. The development of the information and communication technology has created a situation of time-space compression where both time and physical space can be transcended (Edwards & Usher 2000). From an educational perspective, this means that the new techniques for teaching and learning on line may provide opportunities for access and

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collaboration for people geographically dispersed. Little is, however, hitherto known about how this really functions and it remains an important question that need to be addressed (Edwards, 2002). The new technology also contributes to a global marketing and commodification of higher education. In an appraisal of the globalisation of higher education, Sadlak (1998) noted that more than 1 million students are enrolled in online courses. Castells (1996) as well as Edwards (2002) describes an emerging network society, where economic and cultural domination is related to the power of global networks. Forms of open and distance learning offered around the world by institutions in English-speaking developed nations might then, as Edwards and Usher (2000) claim, constitute an invasion that colonises and denies local culture and knowledge and underestimates learners. There are now many examples of universities providing ‘packaged’ courses in other countries, which, even when delivered by local personnel, take little account of the context in which they operate.

The case here described involves four universities collaborating to offer an online Intercontinental Master’s in Adult Learning and Global Change that challenges such a model of delivery. The partner institutions are The University of Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa, Linköping University (LiU) in Sweden, University of British Columbia (UBC) in Canada and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in Australia. Development of the program has been based on the principle of deliberations amongst equal partners. The construction of the program has taken place by the planning team—the authors of this paper—through face-to-face meetings every six months rotated among the participating continents. Courses are taught in collaboration amongst staff from the partner universities in the field of adult education. Students are admitted through each of the four partner universities which means that each cohort represents a complex four-continent network. The program is offered part-time over two years. It is structured so that students move through a sequence of required courses with the same international group of students. This means that

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students from at least four different continents constitute the class—a “world-class. One key feature of the whole programme is that interaction and communication between students is emphasised as an important working method, even though there are no face-to-face meetings between the students and between students and teachers. The nature of the programme could be described as highly text based, putting high demands on students’ language skills. The high demands on language skills are particularly evident for many of the South African and Swedish students, who do not have English as their mother tongue. All course information is written and available on the course web site, all communication between students and between students and teachers occurs through writing. The nature of the programme itself could thus be seen as discourse, as a text that is available on the web, as a discursive practice where texts are being produced and consumed by the participating students and teachers, as well as a particular social practice, producing a new and particular genre of communication. In this study, we have been inspired by discourse analysis as analytical framework to enhance our understanding of what discourses are produced in the programme and how contingent factors contribute to the pattern of communication developed during the first semester of the course. Discourse analysis could be understood and adopted in many ways. In this study, we are drawing on a combination of the structure and concepts of discourse analysis as outlined by Gee (1999) and Fairclough (1992;1995) that we find particularly useful for our purposes.

Discourse analysis as an inspirational framework for interpretation

Gee's (1999) definition of discourse analysis is 'the analysis of language as it is used to enact activities, perspectives and identities' (p4-5). According to this definition, discourse analysis seeks to balance talk about the mind, talk about interaction and activities, and talk about society and institutions. Gee claims that discourse analysis could also be seen as a theory about the nature of language in use that helps to explain how and why language works the

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way it does when it is put into action. A central feature is the notion that language has meaning only in and through practices. Through our use of language and our ways of acting and interacting, with different symbols, tools and technologies we recognise ourselves and others as meaningful in certain ways as we produce, reproduce, sustain and transform a certain discourse. When we talk or write, we form our talk to fit the situation in which we are communicating. But at the same time, how we talk or write creates that very situation or context (p.11).

According to Fairclough, the concept of discourse has two meanings. Discourse could be defined as the use of language as a social practice that is both constituted and constituting. Discourse is also a way of talking, rendering meaning to experiences from a certain perspective (Fairclough 1992, Fairclough 1995, cited in Winter Jørgensen & Philips 1998). Every case of language use can be seen as a communicative event, comprising three dimensions. The language use can be seen as *text*, as a *discursive practice*, meaning production and consumption of text, and as broader *socio-cultural practice*. These three levels should be addressed in a concrete discourse analysis..

According to Gee, situations when they involve communicative social interaction always involve the following inextricably connected components or aspects, that also could be seen as building blocks in the construction of meaning. Firstly, the *activity* aspect that refers to the specific social activity that the subject is engaged in, this is in turn built up by a sequence of actions. Secondly there is a *semiotic* aspect, that is the 'sign systems' such as language, gestures, images or other symbolic systems available in the situation. Thirdly, the *material* aspect, refers to meaning and value of aspects of the material world like the place, time, bodies and objects present during action and interaction. Fourthly, the *political* aspect refers to the distribution of social goods, such as power and status or anything else experienced by the participants as social goods. The participants' also make *connections* to what they

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previously have communicated in different ways. The sixth aspect that is involved is the *socio-cultural* aspect, referring to the personal, social and cultural knowledge, feelings, values, identities and relationships relevant in the interaction. Gee talks about a socially-situated identity, the kind of person one is seeking to be and enact here and now. Essentially, a discourse analysis involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to construe the situation according to these aspects.

In the present paper, we will focus on representations of the programme as a text available on the web, but the main emphasis is put on how the participants talk and write about their experiences of taking part and communicating in the programme. Framing the study inspired by a discourse analytical perspective means that the programme Adult learning and Global change is viewed as a communicative event in which the students and tutors are participating. The analysis focuses on the three dimensions as described by Fairclough,(1992; 1995) combined with a particular interest in the aspects described by Gee (1999).

The research questions to be addressed are

- What discourses can be identified in the programme as a text?
- What discourses can be identified in the programme as a discursive practice as represented in the talk of participating students?
- How are these discourses related to each other and to the broader socio-cultural practice?

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The empirical study

Data consist of a variety of texts, such as on-line web-documents about the programme, published on the programme website, written notes taken from two face-to-face group discussions with the students. The face-to-face group discussions were held during a research workshop in December 2001, where students and teachers from South Africa and Sweden participated. Other written document produced during the research workshop, such as narratives that participants wrote about their life and its relation to participation in the programme, were also used as data in the study. The research workshop was held in Linköping, Sweden and was the first in a series of three face-to-face meetings, aiming at researching the processes and outcomes of the programme. The research project is funded by SIDA. (Swedish International Development Agency) and has a particular interest in the Swedish/South African part of the collaboration in the programme.

Findings

The programme as text

Positioning oneself in the web-based classroom

When analysing the programme as text, one aspect of interest is what *sign systems* are relevant and irrelevant in the situation. Other aspects are how and in what ways the sign systems are made relevant..The environment of the programme is clearly different from a traditional face-to-face encounter in an ordinary classroom. In a regular face-to-face situation, this process is to a large extent functioning tacitly, cues are picked up from history and cultural traditions, verbal and non-verbal communication like positioning in the room, gestures, etc., are helping us to orient ourselves. The process works two ways,

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simultaneously as we are adjusting to the situation, how we speak and write creates the situation (Gee 1999). When entering a virtual classroom, the signs are not that obvious and the participants have to construe meaning to the situation. History and culture might provide the participants with models for expectations on a teacher and on a student that may not be valid in the virtual environment.

In the web-based classroom, the students have to actively look for the signs of how to behave and communicate as they browse the course platform. Net-based learning environments are sometimes described as operating under mono-semiotic conditions since the dominating way of communicating is through written text only. In this particular case, the course platform has a page containing the course documents, which gives an overview of the aims and scope of the programme. The following quotation from the course outline gives a flavour of the discourse that the course developers would like to convey through the programme:

"The program encourages critical perspectives on globalization and reflective and strategic practices. The aims of the program are to teach students

- to learn and teach globally and use global technologies
- to understand knowledge-based societies and the implications for learning
- to develop an understanding of globalization discourses, and develop cultural sensibilities and sensitivities
- to develop equity perspectives on learning, and engage in reframing their own professional practices
- to establish a global community of adult learning practitioners, and challenge orthodoxies in adult education practice. "

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Other signs that give information about the rules of the web-classroom is a specific document containing expectations on the students and 'netiquette rules'; recommendations for how to use language on the web. Further, there is a page with photos and descriptions of who the teachers in the programme are, some of them mostly including a record of the teacher's academic merits and research interests, others also containing a few lines of more personal character, like family and personal interests. There are also pages where students are to present themselves with a personal home page. Another page shows a description of the assignments and the criteria for assessment, a third page gives an overview of and links to the literature to be studied in the course.

The aims portray a positive perspective on change and development, on humans and on the potential inherent in education. The discourses '*Development through education*' and '*Equity between people*' come through clearly in the way the objectives and scopes of the programme is presented. There is also a positive perspective on the students, including an expectation on students of taking the responsibility of being active and participative and considerate towards each other in the programme. The text also makes the assumption that knowledge-based societies exist as entities and that professional practices are key arenas needed to be changed in order to enhance equity.

Another semiotic aspect, according to Gee (1999), is what *systems of knowledge* and ways of knowing that are relevant in the situation and how are they made relevant. The assessment system is one aspect of the programme that indicates what knowledge and ways of knowing are demanded in the programme.

The assignments in the programme often contain parts in which the students are asked to analyse and reflect on their personal contexts, but there are also explicit demands on the

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analysis and application of theories. There is also an expectation on the students to participate in scholarly discussions on the Discussion Board regarding theoretical issues, which puts a clear emphasis on academic knowledge and skills. The expectation of keeping the scholarly discussion separate from chit-chat also indicates what social languages are relevant. This made clear through the use of a separate forum, the Global Café, where students are asked to have their informal talk with each other. The discourse of the 'Academy' thus comes through as the dominating official language in the programme.

These aspects could be seen as portraying parts of the official discourse of the programme, the signs that students have to interpret to find their way how to position themselves and communicate in the programme.

The programme as a discursive practice

Participation equals communication

When analysing the programme as a discursive practice, one dimension is the *main activity* that is going on in the situation and what sub-activities compose this activity

The series of actions to be able to take part is totally different from the series of actions a student normally take to participate in a university programme. The main activity that constitutes the situation the students are talking about is their participation in a web-based masters' programme in adult learning, using Blackboard as its common web-platform. Participation in this case means to actually communicate by writing. Participation without communication would only be visible to the teachers as numbers in the course statistics, but would not be visible to peer students, since writing is the only way for the students to indicate their presence to each other..

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There are no regular face-to-face meetings in the course, the sub-activities that build up the studies is mainly written communication with fellow students and teachers through postings on the Discussion Board and through course papers, written individually or in groups. The actions students have to take to be able to participate and communicate in the course are very much related to the access and handling of computers and connecting to the Internet.

Identities and relationships

The students' discussion and written narratives also revealed issues of importance for building *relationships* and *identities* in terms of what roles and positions they take. As regards these aspects, we could discern two major topics; the students' beliefs and positioning towards 'the other' students and the students' positioning in relationship to the teachers.

Cultural stereotyping

During the group discussion, it became clear that the students' views also included the conception that simply more money or better technology would not be the whole solution or single key to higher activity and communication in the Discussion board. It is also a matter of how students envisage themselves and their fellow students, the preconceptions they hold on 'the other' and the conceived audience they are presenting themselves to. The socio-cultural situated identity, i. e. the kind of person one is seeking to be and enact in this situation becomes crucial to make oneself understood.

Inherent in the cultural stereotyping is also the different cultural models and beliefs that the participants hold, like presupposed conceptions of e. g. efficiency,. What does it mean to be efficient as a participant in the course? How important is it to keep deadlines and submit assignments on time? The image of the prevailing culture in 'the other' country might differ and affect the conception of 'the other' student. The talk about the Swedes being too

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conscious about time limits implies the reproduction of the broader discourse '*Time is money*'. At the same time it reproduces the discourse '*The late African*', implying that Africans have a culturally situated concept of time that does not take into account the importance of keeping deadlines. Two utterances from Swedish students illustrate this

"As Swedes, we might be too conscious about the time limits"

"It is important to be careful about time, to be effective when you are working in a group"

From the perspective of the single course participant, a key aspect of experiencing the other students and teachers enrolled in the course, are the *number of postings*, or the *absence of postings* that are visible on the Discussion Board. The degree of *responsiveness*, i. e. to what extent a posting is recognised by the other participants appear to be a crucial factor for the feeling of being part of a community.

"You start to wonder, where are people? It would be good to get some information of why they are away, have they left the course? It would be easier to accept their absence if you know the reason for it"

"It creates a feeling of meaninglessness when the communication doesn't work. If some participants are not active, it will paralyse the whole group"

Mistake anxiety

The course language is English, and since a majority of the students do not have English as their first language, this creates an anxiety of making typos and other linguistic mistakes.. The

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group discussion revealed some frustration about taking part in the web discussions, and posting messages that might contain spelling or grammar mistakes. Students do not want their teachers and peers to envisage them as a person who always makes mistakes. This is particularly evident when it comes to posting assignments to the teachers, and more specifically when the personal relationship is not yet established.

"The spelling mistakes does not matter if you know the person you are communicating with, but you don't want to submit an assignment that is full of errors"

The aspects of cultural stereotyping and mistake anxiety are closely related also to the technological and social factors. When technology fails repeatedly, the students end up refraining from connecting and communicating.

"I feel stupid to ask my colleagues again what to do now - so I just leave it alone"

Another dimension that is put to the fore is the difficulties in formulating oneself in text in a way that clearly conveys the message and is readable to the fellow course participants and teachers.

"Speaking to one another is totally different from writing to one another. How do I communicate in short pieces? How do I condense a broad idea to a short message?"

"Putting my thoughts in writing seems so final, unlike when you have a discussion in a forum you can easily rectify whatever you perceived to be done wrong, and also participants tend to forget things being said. It is very hard to convince my self that this is not true".

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The mistake anxiety was more common among the South African students than among Swedish students. This could also be seen as reproducing the discourse '*The Superior Teacher*' and '*The Inferior Student*' reflecting power relationships within the educational system, where the construction of 'the other' as inferior is clearly discernible. In such a view, the production of immaculate texts that proves your competence as a student becomes an important instrument for change. In a sense, this might also reflect broader processes of change in the South African society after the fall of the apartheid-system.

The mistake anxiety could also be related to the novelty of the genre of web-communication, there are no familiar patterns that help setting the agenda for how the discussions should be performed. The separation of arenas for 'scholarly talk' and informal talk could possibly also have contributed to the mistake anxiety experienced by the students, illustrating the difficulties in finding out how to co-operate with the new communicative genre.

Language skills as power

Shaping the content

What was obvious from the number of postings and the pattern of communication on the web was that those few students who had the advantage of having English as their mother tongue or were more fluent in English also were more influential in the communicative process and the work with the assignments. They thereby exerted *power* in shaping the content of the course. Shaping the content through superior language skills could also be seen to have contributed to the 'Mistake anxiety' and affected the power balance in the course in a similar sense as the relationships to the teachers described above.

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"I try to keep my English as correct as possible. I am sure we'll all raise our English standards after these two years of communication"

"Eventually we were all able to put together the joint assignment, which I thought was a huge achievement. My only concern was the low level of participation of some of the group members. Some members tended to dominate while others played a very small role. This created a power balance in the group, which I am not very comfortable with. A few people decided on structure, content and direction, while others played no role at all"

The power of language is also related to the aspect of 'Cultural stereotyping'. The single student who is trying to enhance the activity in the discussion group by posting suggestions for how an assignment could be structured and carried out, not receiving any comments from the group peers, starts to wonder how the others envisage her. This might have become a negative spiral for the overall communication pattern in the group with decreasing number of postings.

Shaping the climate

What instead was shown as being influential for increasing the communication was the use of language skills in creating relationships. One of the students was extremely active in all possible discussion forums, within and outside the discussion groups he was allocated to, which could thereby be seen as exerting power through occupying space. Through this communicative pattern, this particular student obtained a particular knowledge about all the other students' presence or absence from the discussions, which lead him to e-mail his peers individually to try and bring them into the discussion. During the discussion it became obvious that this social presence and caring was decisive for several students decision to

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overcome their difficulties and to stay in the programme. The expression used to describe this was the 'Mother Goose' metaphor, which indicates the emerging of a network building based on a concern for individuals and personal relationships.

Bringing in – or leaving out – the material world

The situated meanings and values that seem to be attached to *material aspects* such as places, times, bodies, objects, artefacts and institutions come through clearly when analysing the participants' discussion. Four major aspects of the material world are pointed out as important for participation and communication in programme that were not discernible or brought in to the regular communicative pattern in the course. These aspects are *technology and regional infrastructure, costs, time and space, and conflicting priorities*. Clearly, these four aspects are related in a complex, but relatively distinct way. They concern the possibilities to use computers in a more concrete sense, but at the same time, they have different situated meanings for the South African and Swedish students and are related to the material conditions that students find themselves in.

The *technological problems* the South African students face are due to the limited bandwidth in South Africa, the connection to Internet is often unreliable and students have difficulties in logging on. Two of the South African students illustrate how severe these problems can be:

"Now recently (for about a month) I have experienced problems to log on. The internet provider suggested I change the modem which I did and then tested on a phone line other than my own where I found it to work, but I still have no luck on mine"

"The connection is so slow that I normally make two cups of coffee before I go online. When I submit something, I could really go for a long walk"

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The technological aspect is also related to the aspect of *costs*. The South African students often have to pay high private telephone bills in order to be able to log on to the course, which have an impact on the personal economy of the students. In addition, the unreliability of the connection will create extra costs, since students have to pay for the phone-calls even when connection to the Internet failed. As the infrastructure supporting communication on the Internet obviously is poor, the South African students had to use other ways of communicating, i. e. through ordinary phone calls to their course peers, which also generated extra costs. The Swedish students found themselves in a generally different situation, where costs played a less important role for participation in the course, and where access to public computers were more frequent. An illustration of the differences in resources on the regional level between the two countries is that one of the Swedish students was able to follow the course from the start without any other costs than for transporting himself to a facility that provided access to the Internet. He used the computers in the public library and in the Labour Market Agency. For several of the South African students who did not have access to computers at home, they could not go to a public Internet provider simply for the reason that there was no safe transport system available.

The third material aspect that was important for the participation and communication in the course was the matter of *time and space*. Clearly, the relatively undeveloped ICT-infrastructure in South Africa brings consequences for a lot of the students as regards their choice of working hours and where the work is carried out. Due to the limited band-width traffic jams are frequent, which forces the students to use inconvenient working hours during the night.

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“Madly hours like 03h00 in the morning still surfing the web was scary to the point where assignment deadlines need to be met”

The choice of working hours is also related to the aspect of costs. Working during the night is a way to reduce costs, since the rates are lower at night time. The aspect of time had a different situated meaning for the Swedish students, who pointed at the convenience and flexibility in participating in a web-based course to fit with the time-constraints in ordinary life. A Swedish participant expresses her view on the choice of working hours:

"Having the course on the web makes it more convenient to enter when one has time than to find time to enroll in fixed schedules at the university”

Some of the students had generous employers in the sense that they supported the participation in the programme in that the students could spend some of the office hours for participating in the course. Many did not have this possibility. One Swede could spend one day per weekly work-hours on the course work. One of the South Africans had a good situation as a consultant:

“As a self-employed consultant a web-based course seemed to offer me some flexibility in my learning as I tend to have very busy periods interspersed with quieter periods”

The *space* where students could carry out the communication in the course also had different situated meanings for different students. Some students could use the computers at work for communication, while in other cases employers’ attitudes were not supportive.

Some students who have no computer at home, but have to use one at the university or an Internet café will spend a lot of time and cost on transportation. Others have access to

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computers as well at home as at their work and will have a very short step from decision to realisation of communicating in the course. Time on task seems in these cases to be high, i. e. little time is spent on things that have to be done in order to be able to start and leave work with the task.

The fourth material aspect that the students brought forward as impacting on their activity and communication in the course were *conflicting priorities* as regards their personal and social conditions. The students' family circumstances were crucial for some of the participants. Personal crises in the family would naturally set a totally different order of priorities, which changes the participants' pattern and frequency of communicating in the course. Conflicting priorities could also be related to the work situation, whether the relationship with the employer is good or not. The basic need and feeling of being secure, to have the possibilities to travel safely to public facilities that provides Internet access versus accomplishing higher academic studies are other conflicting priorities that impacts on participation.

Almost all these circumstances that we have so far pointed at operate as a force to reduce many of the South African students communication on the Discussion Board in the course. To summarise, the costs are too high, it is more time consuming and inconvenient or exhausting to participate in the course for them than it is for the majority of the Swedish students and a few of the SA students. There is also a reluctance to bring these aspects into the discussion in the course, which is related to the shaping of socio-cultural identities and the reluctance to positioning oneself as inferior.

The material aspects put forward as relevant for participation in the program also reveal that the historical discourse point to differences between the Swedish and the South African

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societies that in turn influence the outcome. The apartheid system has created an extremely unequal society with all the insecurity that has emerged. It creates a life-situation that is different from that of the Swedes, who live in a relatively peaceful welfare state. This difference becomes visible in workplaces, in families and in the streets. We can also see how this discourse is reproduced in the participants' reflections about the communication and participation in the programme. The discourse that seems to be reproduced is the classic North/South divide, '*The Poor South*' and '*Rich North*'. Within this divide, there are dichotomies between cultural models of the society such as violent vs peaceful, 'manage-on your own' vs. 'welfare-for-all' that become visible in the students discussion.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The relationship between the programme as a text and a social practice is mediated through discursive practice. The discursive practice is in this case the text produced and consumed on the web by the participants. The findings point to the fact that discourse is shaped not only by the visible communication and number of postings on the Discussion Board, but also by the material aspects, the cultural models, the identity as a student as well as fantasies and beliefs about 'the other' that are put to play through the absence of communication.

Edwards and Usher claim that globalisation is not only reconfiguring the semiotic building of education as a modernist institution, but also challenging the bounded sense of identity associated with being a student (2000). The focus shifts from being a member of an institution to being an individualised, flexible and life long learner engaging in learning practices. The choices available and the conditions under which they are exercised thereby create situations of less certainty and a more unstable sense of identity, they argue (ibid).

The 'Mistake anxiety' revealed among the South African students as an instance of a broader project of proving to be a competent student and thereby overcoming the subordination by 'the other'. This could be interpreted as an example of how socio-culturally situated identities, i.e. the the kind of person one is seeking to be and enact here and now (Gee 1999) is about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being (Hall 1996). Identities are not what we are or where we came from, Hall argues, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves (p.4). A common claim in descriptions

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and definitions of flexible colleges and flexible learning programmes is often that the processes of teaching and learning can be liberated from the 'normal' constraints of time and place, which means greater flexibility for the teachers and students. The access to a fast and relatively low-cost means of communication makes it easy to maintain contact between teachers and students (Curran, 2001). It has also been questioned whether such liberation or displacement is apparent or even desired by those who work and study in these settings. (Clarke, et al, accepted for publication). The results of this study show that time and place are definitely decisive conditions for participation and communication in the programme for many of the students.

What we started out to penetrate was something that was visible in the course statistics: the relatively large variation in participation frequency in the web-communication. It may be that this simple quantitative aspect of participation is considered to be not important. Many signs tell, however, that it turned out to be very important. Students own stories and conversations were very much focussed on this aspect, both from the perspective of those, who had a low participation and those who had a high one. In the latter cases it was the frustration of not seeing the other and in the former it was the frustration of being aware of not being participative enough. Frequency of participation therefore emerged as a key sign, more than the actual content of the conversation on the Discussion board.

The course statistics also show some stable patterns indicating that a low rate of participation in the communication areas of the course, visible already early in the programme, is associated with study failures and dropping out from the programme later on.

When we were able to investigate what was not visible on the web, through the students' representations of the conditions for participating in the programme, we became aware of the great differences in the effort and cost that different students were faced with. The pattern was

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very striking and convincing. We can relate this to a discussion about equality in education and to the official discourse of the programme, building on the notion of equity.

The programme is thought to give all students, irrespective of geographical and socio-cultural location an opportunity to take part in this Master programme on equal terms. The programme has been constructed by negotiations between all four universities that are partners in collaboration in a complex, sometimes painstaking process of understanding the conditions for working across the continents to create a fair program. A fundamental idea has been that the co-operation of four universities, representing very different contexts, has the potential to surpass the frames of the local resources.

This means access to a broader range of academic staff through the ‘global pool’ of experienced academics involved in the programme. It also has the consequence of transcending the limitations in curriculum development framed by local/national traditions and structures. In doing this, the intercontinental collaboration creates some new frames for teaching and learning online, producing other possibilities and constraints, than do locally constructed programs.

The results of this study gives, when taking on the students’ perspectives, an insight into what these new possibilities and constraints of the new techniques could be, and that the requirements for participation varies widely between participating students. To participate in a web-based programme can be very convenient and easy for some, but what we have seen is that it can be very hard and exhausting, resulting in low levels of visible participation. The results can also be interpreted as related to conflicting discourses. The analysis of the programme as a text is in this study focusing on the discourse that the students encounter when embarking on the programme. The results reveal nothing about whether there are ambivalences or conflicting discourses between the different courses in the programme that were not immediately visible from the outset.

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After six months of the programme, the official discourse of the ICM-programme as a text, with its emphasis on equity, change and development is still subordinated the discourses produced in the programme as a discursive practice and social practice where traditional dichotomies portraying the traditional North/South divide is reproduced. There are fragments of an alternative discourse emerging, based on mutual concern and friendship which might bear a potential for changing the communicative pattern in the programme and the social practices. In what direction and to what extent is a question that remains to be investigated further in coming studies.

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