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**Open Collaborative Learning by NGOs:
Issues and Challenges in the Teaching of
'Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability'**

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Introduction

There is a huge reservoir of knowledge created by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) owing to their work in the field. They work at various levels, especially at the grassroots, and have an insight in those corners of human society that theoreticians often fail to reach. This generates the potential to create learning through partnership, known as collaborative learning (CL). However, the watertight compartments created between theory and practice often does not allow these experiences to flow into mainstream knowledge.

Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), an NGO working in India for the past three decades, has been working towards breaching this rigid wall. PRIA Continuing Education (PCE), the academic wing of PRIA, strives to expand knowledge and skills, and update professional expertise of learners. Synthesising and packaging the vast body of knowledge and learning into a social development-based continuing education programme is PCE's goal. PCE developed a course, 'Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability', taught in distance education mode, that was based on the research findings of the DRC research project.¹ The content of the research was collated by PCE to create this course into which PRIA's experience, learning and competencies from the field on various development themes such as participatory research, participatory development, civil society building, governance, participatory monitoring and evaluation, gender mainstreaming, citizenship and accountability was synthesised. In this chapter, the development and teaching of this course is used as a case study to understand CL, its meaning and scope, and the issues and challenges of course development.

PCE for over five years has been striving to provide courses to help the professional practitioners upgrade their skills and thereby contribute to adult education. The course on Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability, a postgraduate certificate course was developed for the same audience. The course was designed to particularly enable the learners from multi-disciplinary backgrounds to enhance their skills and critical thinking; this was specifically helpful for the practitioners-CSO, government officials, staff of bilateral and multilateral institutions, policy makers and academia located in countries of both North and South regions to understand conceptual and practical issues in

¹ DRC is a research partnership based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex, UK, which brings together research institutions and practice-based civil society groups from India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico and Nigeria from the south and UK from the North. DRC explores the issues of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation within the framework of rights and citizenship. It also aims at making rights real for people through research, dissemination, policy influence and capacity building. PRIA was a part of this research initiative.

strengthening citizenship, democracy and accountability. Hsiu-Mei Huang said, for the adults, they learn best 'when knowledge is presented in real-life context' (2002). They tend to look for problem solving skills and criticality in any course that they take up, which acts as a professional aid. At this point, the principles of Androgogy and Constructivist theory are akin to each other. While the former emphasises that learning is authentic only when it meets the real life experiences, the latter borrows from real life experiences drawn from different socio-economic contexts to modify otherwise universal notions. As Jonassen (1994: 35 cited in Hsiu-Mei Huang, 2002) states 'Constructivists emphasize the design of learning environments rather than instructional sequences'. Therefore knowledge so created through constructivism goes hands and gloves with the adult learners' requirement. Efforts of the DRC gave rise to a wide range of brief case summaries to in-depth case studies, including published and unpublished DRC study materials, which proved to be valuable resource in developing the course. Thus the learning material developed catered to the need of adult learners whose motive in joining the course was to reach into a world, of learning which was based on real cases and experiences lending to the development of meaningful and authentic knowledge. Practical learning such as case studies and field exposure is the key feature of adult education (Brookfield, 1995) and this is the differentia of PCE courses.

The chapter is divided in five sections:

- Locating Collaborative Learning in Theories of Learning
- Collaborative Learning Makes the Content Different
- Case Study: Teaching and Learning 'Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability'
- Issues and Challenges
- Conclusion

The first section discusses various kinds of learning and locates CL within that framework. The second section discusses how CL requires the development of different content, as opposed to mainstream teaching. A course taught by PCE is used as a case study to elaborate and illustrate this in the third section. The fourth section reveals the challenges and issues faced in developing and teaching CL course content, while the final section talks about the role of NGOs in taking CL forward.

I. Locating Collaborative Learning in Theories of Learning

When we think of learning, the first impression is of notions and concepts, largely western that are described and explained to us. In this scenario, learners are viewed as passive receivers and teachers are the givers. Typically what teachers teach is borrowed knowledge (i.e., knowledge written by scholars and thinkers) and not their own perception of that knowledge or information created by them. Teachers have learnt through a similar method. Thus, there is one source from which knowledge originates and teaching and learning is all about disseminating that fixed knowledge, with no right to alter it.

Teaching is modeled upon primarily two theories—behaviouralism and constructivism. Behaviouralism emerged in the twentieth century in America in an attempt to apply scientific methods to social sciences (Dahl cited in Chakrabarti, 1976). Thus it tended to minimize values since science claims to have absolute neutrality. The other characteristic is its emphasis on micro-analysis, taking into account only one or two variables. It is also the most commonly used approach in teaching; the knower's presence does not affect the object of study at all and has no role to play in the same. This paves the path for a kind of universalism since the object under study is immune to any influence from the knower (here it is the student), who is external to the object. Commonly, thus in teaching, subjects consist of universal things which are one and unaffected by the knower or the context of knowing. Thus ideas of democracy, freedom, rights have single denotations and that is merely replicated when taught. Universality is borrowed from the fact that all these definitions are drawn from the region and culture where it was emerged and then it starts circulating through the world as the standard to be applicable worldwide. Each of these notions knows the phenomenon, as it exists. So for them research is like an excavation process.

In constructivism, on the other hand, the researcher is like a sculptor 'where the imagination (or the theory-base) of the artist interacts with the medium of phenomena to create a model of reality which we call knowledge' ((Mir and Watson, 2000, p.943). The object does not exist earlier and is created by the knower through interaction with the object. Thus the knower is a participant in the formation of the subject under study. Constructivism as a method of learning had roots in the constructivist movement of cognitive psychology, which held that understanding of the world is developed through experience. Thus, the learner becomes an active processor of information.

Adult education theory (Andragogy) assumes that the learner is capable of self-direction. The adult learners strive towards transformative learning through change in their cognitive and affective structures. Their professional development needs to be seen as related to continuing professional development to keep pace with the emerging knowledge base of the profession and its conceptual and craft skill.

The principles of Andragogy and Constructivism complement each other. While the former emphasizes that learning is authentic only when it meets the real life experiences, the latter borrows from real life experiences drawn from different socio-economic contexts to modify otherwise universal notions. Constructivists emphasize the design of learning environments to address adult learners' requirement.

The Collaborative learning (CL) principle effectively guides the practice of teaching and learning of citizenship. It operates at two levels: it is derived from diverse experiences and is modified, through student interaction, while being taught. Proponents of CL claim that the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking. As a result, cooperative teams achieve higher levels of thought and retain information longer than learners who work quietly as individuals. The shared learning gives learners an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning and thus become critical thinkers.

A common mode of disbursing CL over the last two decades is the Internet, thus giving rise to online collaborative learning (OCL).² Stephen Downe writes that from a mere radical idea OCL has become a part of the mainstream over the last decade (www.elearnmag.org). Globalisation has made exchange of knowledge among people spatially located far away absolutely necessary and this has brought distance education centre-stage. E learning is a term that has been coined to connote learning over the web.

II. Collaborative Learning Makes the Content Different

PRIA is a non-profit voluntary organisation rooted in practice in India since 1982 and has been striving to actualise the goals of democracy to make it work for all citizens. The commonly used modes are campaigns, research, education and policy advocacy interventions. PCE synthesises the resources acquired through field research into social development-based education programmes, mostly for practitioners or those already working in the social sector. In this chapter, one of the courses taught by PCE has been used to understand the cross-project sharing, evolution and operation of OCL and the challenges in reaching learners.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are witness to the visible exclusion of the poor and marginalised from development processes. There is a growing disillusionment among

² Technology plays an important role in OCL. The student does not have to physically be in the place where the teaching is taking place. Access to the instructor is gained through technology such as the Internet, interactive videoconferencing and satellite. (<http://www.netnet.org>)

citizens with their governments, given the governments' lack of responsiveness to their needs. This has brought attention to deepening citizen participation to create demos, an active public, the most crucial component of a real democracy. A need has also been felt to understand the relation between participation and accountability to reach the goal stated above. Studies by PRIA have repeatedly shown that government tends to leave out the voices of marginalised sections and the reasons are lack of education, organisation, mobilisation and mobility in these groups. This is the space in which CSOs step in to build capacity among marginalised groups so that they can become active citizenry.

PRIA works with three objectives:

- Knowledge creation
- Information dissemination
- Skill generation

It has taken up training of women leaders at the grassroots, youth leadership and reforms to make governmental institutions accountable to citizens' needs. Many NGOs are addressing these issues to ensure meaningful governance – not just in government institutions but in all institutions which occupy public space.

From July 2000, Citizenship DRC in its two phases, of five-year each, conducted research on the issue of rights, citizenship, participation and accountability in the context of development. It explored a number of themes related to how people in different countries understand their roles and identities as citizens; the spaces and dynamics through which they engage and participate to articulate their concerns; the new relationships of accountability that emerge between non-state actors, the state and the market as citizens mobilise to claim their rights; the relationship of citizenship to the issues of science, technology and policy; deepening democracy in states and localities; violence, participation and citizenship; and local-global citizenship engagements.

The study brought out a variety of dimensions of the concept of citizenship opposed to the standard liberal notion. Commonly, liberal theory (western socio-political concepts) is taught in classrooms. It positions citizenship as a status, which entitles individuals to specific sets of universal rights granted by the state. Liberalism places formal rights at the centre of its discourse. The state accords rights to each individual. It further holds that granting formal rights to all leads to equality. Citizens act rationally to advance their own interests and the state's role is to protect the citizens in the exercise of their rights, implying that exercising rights is the choice of the citizens. But facts found in the DRC project revealed that citizenship is not a static, universal notion. Rather, it varies greatly

according to cultural context and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the same, it is necessary to filter these findings.

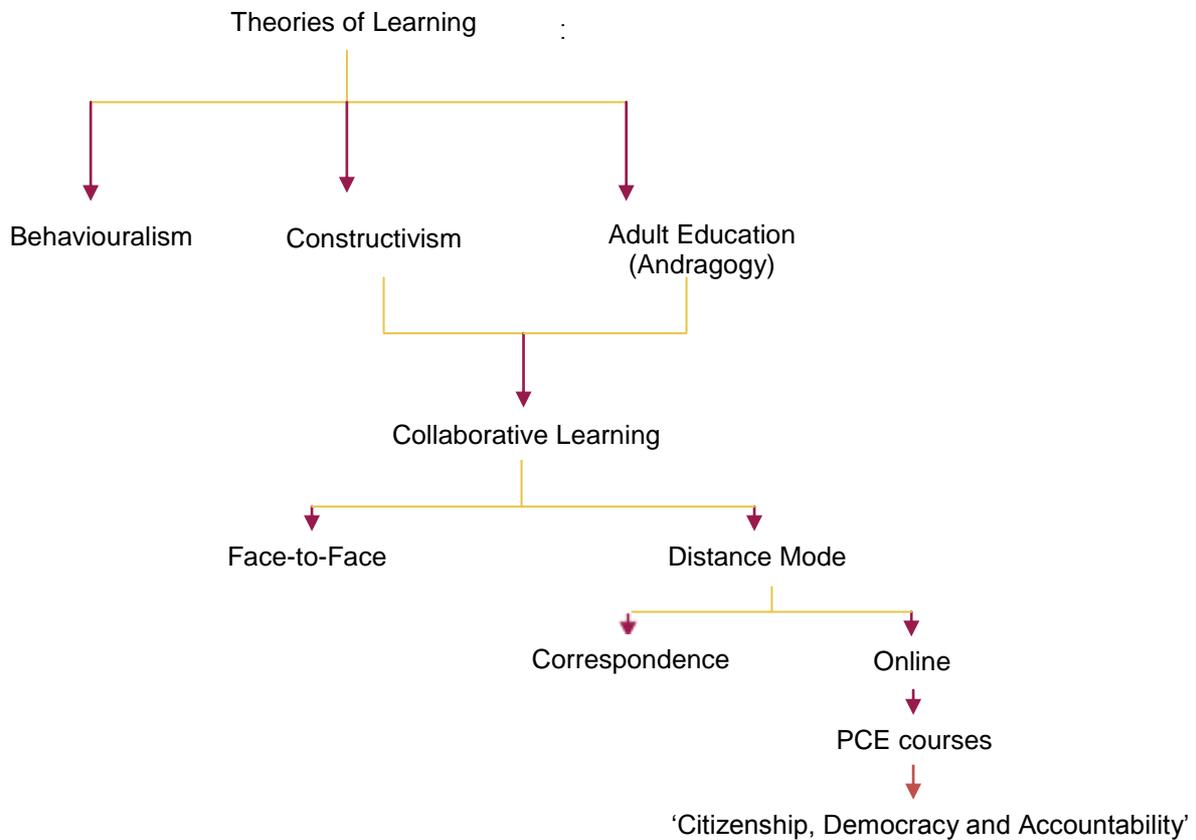
A study of people's perceptions of citizenship in Nigeria revealed that people prioritised their ethnic identity over that of their nation (Mohanty and Tandon, 2006). The following story from the Nigerian research team of DRC elucidates the cultural context within which the notion of citizenship is exercised. It was later adopted as part of the module created for the course.

Sunday Ogbaka was born in Otukpo about 30 years ago. His father was from the Igala ethnic group and his mother from the local Idowa ethnic group. Sunday has lived all his life in Otukpo and married an Idowa woman from the same town... He is an active member of his local community and is in fact an adviser to the chief. Given the length of time he has lived here, his involvement in community activities and the fact that he is married to an Idowa woman from the community in which they live, one would regard Sunday as a truly bonafide member of the community.

A part of the DRC project was to produce course materials to contest the prevailing universal issues on citizenship by taking in varied responses of the state. Pedagogies were to be developed using research materials and case studies to communicate the lessons of citizenship to higher education and training institutions. A Citizenship Teaching and Learning Project (CTLTP) group with DRC research partners was formulated in October 2007. Members of this group were invited to co-instruct specific courses or units within the programme. Two guest faculties were drawn from the DRC CTLTP Group in order to provide diverse subject expertise and international perspective.

The course, 'Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability', which was developed as part of the CTLTP group, illustrates collaborative learning at many levels. First, at the level of design, IDS and PRIA collaborated to develop the content. PRIA's field experience gathered for years was integrated with academic material into the course, which was used to set the context and give a broad understanding of the syllabus. While the notion of conferred citizenship was borrowed from literature taught in any institution, PCE developed the course innovatively by integrating learners from across the globe through discussion and debate. The figure 1 locates the course taught by PCE in the larger scheme of teaching, classified on the basis of approaches to teaching.

Figure 1: Locating Collaborative Learning in Different Methods of Teaching



The course was also collaborative in the amount of discussions that were held among teachers and learners and among learners themselves. The mode of education for this course was the Internet. The online networks made possible opening of the collaborative framework to distributed communities providing remote access to these spaces as well as computer-mediated communication to support interpersonal exchange and debate (Barros and Verdejo, 2000). The sharing of the learners' views from different socio-cultural contexts added to the knowledge base, further enriching the content. This perhaps is the component, which made the process truly collaborative. As evident from the BBS (see Annexure 1), Martha Farrell and Dr Mandakini Pant³ initiated the course with broad understanding of the concepts. The most unique aspect of citizenship, which had emerged from the DRC research, was the conferred and claimed notions of citizenship. This kick-started a discussion since the students started applying it to their national contexts and identified both aberrations and similarities; they tried highlighting the same in the discussion. Lisa spoke at length about how there was an absence of state, yet the citizens held the fort; in this context, the gravest concern

³ They were the key course instructors.

that arose was if they were citizens at all? The course instructors clarified that this kind of horizontal connection among citizens is what makes civil society so important; also that citizenship was not the most crucial debate here since the state was not recognised by the international organisation. There was a posting from Andres,⁴ who identified a similarity between India and Spain in the treatment of the states' nomad population. A world of examples made the understanding of both the instructors and learners stronger. Abstract notions, as taught in classrooms, could never have provided this kind of clarity.

The web board exchange among Dr. Tandon,⁵ Phoebe, Julie and Ahmadu⁶ reflect a similar attempt from learners to move beyond the course. The course material helped them raise questions on the socio-political situation of their nations. There was a conscious effort from the learners to apply what they had learnt. What is even more fascinating is the national contexts in which these applications were made. Antonio Carlos Cambuta, an Angolan, wanted to change the social discriminations and for this he used his learning in the course. Phoebe wanted to learn about issues of inclusion, exclusion and agency in citizenship, especially as they relate to vulnerable groups like children and women whom she felt were most often left out of citizenship debates. Fidelis from Nigeria wanted to learn the current trends on issues of democracy and good governance; he wanted to use this knowledge to energise the Nigerian citizens to hold their government accountable. Through the process of introspection, a new level of learning was arrived at.

Critical reflection is thus an essential component in these loops, borrowed from the idea of learning being dynamic with the learners constantly reflecting upon their actions and thereby changing their behaviour. Eventually one reaches 'transformative learning' defined by Mezirow (2000: 8) as 'the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning, perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinion that will prove more true or justified to guide action.'

In this process of learning, the instructors play the role of facilitators helping learners find new perspectives on the topic under consideration.

⁴ Lisa and Andres are learners. Lisa from the Philippines and was working in a CSO in the Republic of Yemen. Andrés is from Valencia, Spain and is an engineering and master's student on development process and politics.

⁵ He was a guest faculty for the course.

⁶ Phoebe, Julie and Ahmadu are among the learners who participated frequently on the web board.

III. Case Study: Teaching and Learning ‘Citizenship, Democracy and Accountability’

In a face-to-face course, the students are rooted in the same socio-cultural context. In the distance education mode, there is space to create a diverse student body. In PCE’s attempt to start the course, its central intent was to reach educators, development workers, activists, NGO staff and scholars in any part of the world. The course thus admitted learners from all over the globe to enhance understanding on the themes of the course through discussion and debate among the learners. The course encompassed a range of conceptual and practical issues faced by practitioners, adult educators, researchers, resource providers and policy makers in strengthening citizenship, democracy and accountability. It aimed to facilitate critical analysis and develop new perspectives on the themes and encourage the development of innovative practices in the field. It was assumed that on completion of the programme the learners would gain an understanding of the concepts of citizenship, democracy and accountability, along with practical approaches for strengthening inclusive citizenship and international exemplars which would equip them to apply their learning in diverse national settings.

The goals of the course were determined at the outset through discussion between PCE and other members of the CTLG⁷. The aims of the course were:

- To strengthen the understanding and practice of inclusive citizenship, participatory democracy and accountability.
- To disseminate DRC’s research work on these themes to international audiences in a consolidated framework.
- To provide a platform for DRC CTLG partners to work together in a collaborative manner, using the materials developed by different members.
- To involve learners from across the globe in discussion and debate on universal issue of citizenship and varied responses of the state from their specific contexts.

The first offering of the course had 19 learners from Angola, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Yemen and UK. Majority of the learners were development professionals. The overwhelming interest and enthusiasm created demand for the course.

⁷ It consisted of individuals from the University of Sussex, Angola, Brazil, South America, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria who were all part of the DRC project. This was a mix of university faculties, civil-society organisations and individual researchers.

Developing effective curriculum and evaluation methods

The curriculum was developed following intensive research, brainstorming and discussion with experts from the CTLP group. The advisory board members⁸ made specific suggestions to prepare the course with available DRC reading materials. It was important that case studies explicitly illustrate the context. Without that learners would have had difficulty in relating to the cases. Multiple forms of DRC materials ranging from brief case summaries to in-depth case studies to published as well as unpublished DRC study materials were used for developing course content.

Given the 'global' character of the course, two or three core readings were prepared, which outlined key issues and debates around selected concepts to give the learners a sense of the diversity of meanings and approaches to concepts like 'rights' 'democracy', 'inclusive citizenship' and 'accountability'. The selected case studies were also used to explore the core concepts and debates, allowing learners to engage with the conceptual material through empirically grounded work. Case studies from DRC's ZED book series were used. But the course instructors felt that the complexity of arguments and methodological variety in these books was high for the learners in the course. Comprehension of material in these books required prior foundation, which was absent in many of the learners, who were practitioners and not academics. Thus there was a need to develop more simple reading material. As a result, specific course material was developed by the instructors to facilitate understanding of the issues.

The course content was divided into six units. Each unit had specific learning objectives. The units were also interlinked. The discussion of the subject, begun in earlier units, was picked up and extended in following units.

Unit 1 focused on issues of citizenship. It is a status that is conferred, along with certain accompanying rights and responsibilities. It is also claimed through people's actions to secure and practice their identity, inclusion and rights in society. This unit made learners look at the ways people act to create citizenship and claim the rights associated with it.

Unit 2 viewed the role played by the state, market and civil society in shaping the practice of citizenship. It also highlighted the ways in which citizenship was claimed and practised through practical examples from South and Central America, Asia and Africa.

Unit 3 highlighted the fact that the concepts and practice of citizenship both as an individual and collective set of experiences in the context of a struggle for rights and the concept of democracy as a set of societal processes and institutions wherein citizens use their rights and exercise their responsibilities (such as voting) were intimately connected. Different forms of democracy, its effectiveness and appropriateness and

⁸ PCE formed a group of subject experts from CTLG, some PCE members and their partner organisation, Unnati to advise on development of the course.

approaches to strengthening and deepening democracy were linked to the issues of claiming citizenship.

In Unit 4 the ways in which citizens take initiative, sometimes given by the state, the opportunity and right to participate more fully in democracy and democratic governance were tied together. Through such processes of participation, people become partners of the state rather than mere clients or beneficiaries of it. Ways in which civil society and other organisations facilitate and support the process of participation were also discussed in this module.

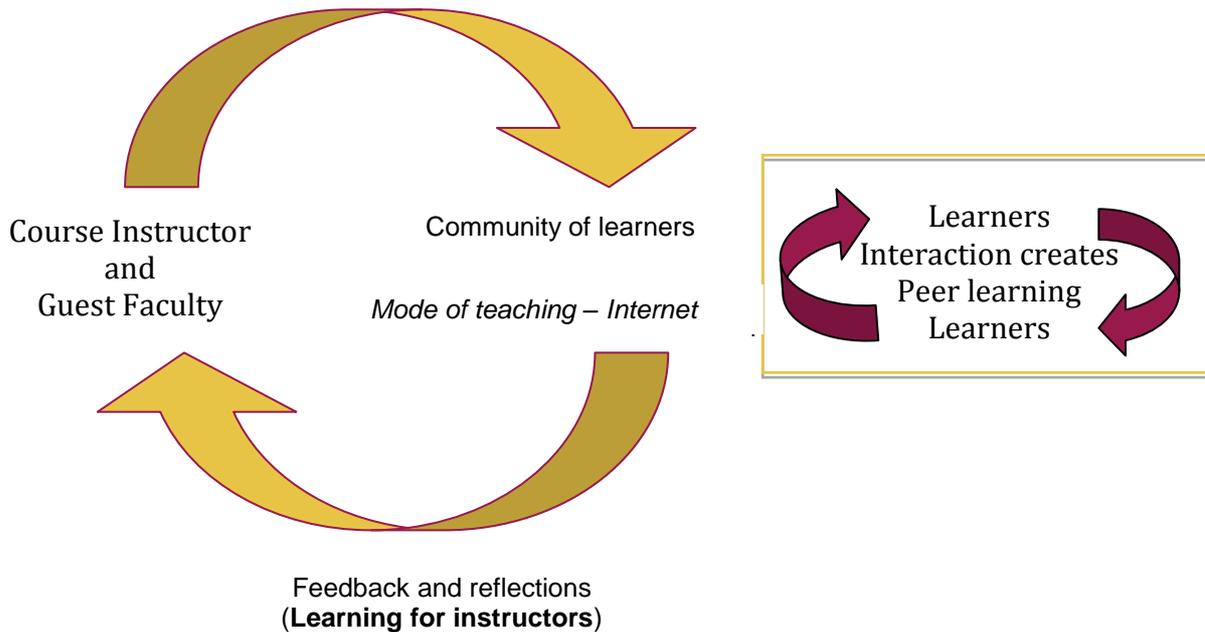
In Unit 5 a third form of action was discussed, i.e., how citizens ensure that the state is accountable for and transparent about what it does.

In Unit 6 the critical challenges in widening the notion of citizenship and how to deepen the practice of democracy or strengthen the accountabilities of the state, the market and civil society was taken up. Thus, the course deliberately allowed learners to develop new ideas, exercise critical thinking skills and develop research skills.

The differentia of this course was the cultural specificities of the concepts that it gathered from DRC research in different countries. The scope of the course expanded massively by such inclusion. Further readings were mentioned at the end of each unit to help learners develop a better understanding of issues and give them international perspectives on the course content.

A formative system of evaluation was adopted for the assignments, which were an integral part of the teaching process. The assignments included (a) a reflection paper to measure learners' existing understanding of the topic; and (b) designing a project to assess the application of concepts and methods in a project or organisational context. The online participation of the learners through the web board was also monitored as part of the evaluation process. It needs to be noted that the process of education is not uni-directional, but circular; there is exchange among the learners (community of learners) who further enrich knowledge. This then comes back to the instructor. This has been illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: Creating Learning Materials for Learners



Building an effective delivery system

The entire programme was delivered through distance learning mode in order to provide education to geographically dispersed groups of learners who could participate as per their convenience. Distance delivery includes print material (a self-instructional manual) and CD-ROMs containing lectures by faculty members, video clippings, films, etc., enhanced with web-conferencing activities and discussion facilitated by course instructors and guest faculty.

Virtual interaction of experts and learners took place through web-enabled Bulletin Board Services (BBS). This provided learners the opportunity to post their questions on the BBS as well as review the questions and perspectives of other colleagues participating in the course. The course instructors and guest faculty answered queries, provided clarifications, additional information and addressed specific needs.

To make the online class interactive, PCE customised the virtual classroom. The BBS screen displays a list of subject headings, which is termed the forum. A forum is essentially a way to divide various conversations that takes place on the BBS throughout the duration of the course. Each forum consists of:

Announcements: To keep learners informed about important updates about the course such as due dates of assignments, submissions, interactions with guest faculty and other pertinent course-related issues. This was a read only option.

Introductions: Both learners and the course instructor posted a brief description of themselves. Introductions included their professional backgrounds and any information deemed relevant and important for the class to know each other.

Queries regarding the course: In this forum learners posted questions, comments and concerns about the course. The questions as well as the responses were made public, i.e., all learners were able to see this information. The rationale was that all learners could respond to issues which they may not have considered or overlooked.

Units 1-6: The course material was taught through six modules. In this forum queries, responses to the questions or any discussion points to the course guide were raised by the learners. Learners were encouraged to read all the postings in this section to understand the underlying issues emerging from the queries/discussion points of other learners. Learners were also encouraged to respond to the queries/discussion points/responses put forward by other learners/the course instructor/guest faculty, and to clarify or argue their perspective.

Conversation with Guest Faculty: The two guest faculties, selected from the CTLP group, logged on to the BBS to field queries/observations/concerns and discussion points in a separate forum. Learners were asked to post questions in this forum. The guest faculty also had the freedom to review learners' postings in other forums.

There was no forum for assignments. This meant that learners had to e-mail their assignments to their course instructor directly on the specified dates mentioned in the time plan.

IV. Issues and Challenges

Developing online curriculum and course material and its teaching is not the easiest of tasks. The material needs to be comprehensive yet exhaustive. The teaching has to become interactive in a virtual world capable of holding the learners together. The issues and challenges faced create problems in fostering personal construction of knowledge, the first aim of OCL. Some of the issues and challenges faced in the teaching of the course are discussed in this section.

Intercultural learning

Rich repertoires of intercultural instructional examples have to be used to teach ethnically diverse students. As Gay (cited in Johnson and Jumani, 2009, p, 26) points out, this is not something that happens automatically or simply because we want it to. There is a role played by the instructional process, knowing the cultures and experiences of different ethnic groups, and harvesting teaching examples from these sources (Johnson and Jumani, 2009, pp, 17-27).

Given the barriers of accessing ZED books and also DRC case study materials online, one of the challenges the instructors and course designers experienced was how best to provoke classroom discussions and debate from all available DRC case

study materials. Keeping the amount of course material to be studied to a manageable level was also a challenge. Only the core issues emerging from the DRC case study materials could be included, but not all case studies could be discussed. Also, only a portion of case studies was made available; the learners would have benefited more if they had access to the complete document.

Building a body of online pedagogy

This was the most challenging. A range of different techniques was used to make the process of learning comprehensive and interactive. Learning kits comprised instructional guidelines for navigating each step of the course and self-instructional print material in the form of six booklets. Each booklet consisting of Think Tank, which were statements and questions to reinforce the pivotal issues covered in each unit, and Note Bank or learning exercises to guide the learners to reflect and jot down their thoughts as they proceeded with studying the units. The performance on these exercises was not graded. A CD-ROM featuring a talk by John Gaventa delivered in PRIA brought the issue of power, participation, democracy and citizenship alive. For each unit, learners were expected to read the unit overview and the required readings. Required readings comprised selected chapters from the textbook⁹ and other articles or chapters reproduced specifically for this course.

Multiple roles of instructors

Given that learners were working in an environment of 'distance' from one another, one of the key challenges for the instructors was to make the online class interactive. The course instructors were required to play multidimensional roles. They were facilitators enhancing learners' learning by encouraging their participation in discussions. They were also subject experts providing core ideas and concepts. There was an element of exerting authority by establishing boundaries of teaching and learning including acceptable conduct in the virtual classroom, participation in discussions, dates of submission of assignments, etc. As in any classroom setting, instructors sometimes also had to call learners 'out of the classroom' and ask them to participate in the learning and for some learners not to overcrowd the learning space with long and verbose postings. This was done in separate e-mails to the learners rather than in the virtual classroom (the personal email ID of each student was distinct from their bulletin log-in).

The learners who pursued this course were by and large development practitioners working on different development issues across the world. Their experiences, perspectives and participation had implications for teaching the course. At times learners gave international examples or cited information, which was new to the

⁹ The textbook for this course was: Mohanty, R and R. Tandon (eds) (2006) *Participatory Citizenship: Identity, Exclusion, Inclusion*.

instructors. This required them to do some research to get additional information to understand the specific aspect the student was discussing and link it to the learning.

The course instructors in this way became co-investigators and co-creators of knowledge with the learners. Online classroom participation with course instructors and guest faculties reveals that though issues raised were rooted in the specific political contexts yet they conveyed relevant messages to all. As with regular learning, the instructors also discussed issues and queries raised by the learners with other colleagues in order to make their responses lucid and relevant to the question (sometimes the questions themselves were a little convoluted and unclear due to language barriers).

Online communication

While the BBS increased the sense of community among the learners and provided a shared environment for reflection, there were difficulties in online communication. Some learners participated and voiced their concerns rather actively; some remained unspoken despite prompts from instructors. It was impossible to understand the core issue for the silence of these learners. The instructors could not judge whether the lack of response was due to occupational commitments, indifference or oversight, an act of negligence, lack of self-confidence or language barriers.

One of the main advantages in face-to-face interaction is the existence of a human relationship, not only between learners but also principally with the instructor. Witnessing the behaviour of a learner in a regular classroom allows the instructor to gauge a learner's problems and devise ways of handling it. In a virtual setting, the options of drawing learners into the classroom are very limited and cannot go beyond contacting them directly by phone or e-mail. The instructors were deeply concerned about the varying levels of engagement and attention, among the students to online discussions; especially since these had implications for teaching the skills of engagement and reflection, an essential component that the instructors wished to imbibe in the learners to use these skills in their capacity as researchers and practitioners¹⁰.

Another challenge faced by instructors was that there tends to be a lower level of seriousness and commitment to schedules and deadlines as compared to regular learning programmes. Assignments were submitted well after the deadline, without any prior communication or assigning a reason for the delay. Learners who could not submit all of the assignments still demanded certification based on their incomplete submissions. Learners did not appear to comprehend that all learning in distance education mode cannot be based entirely on an individual's needs. Retention of

¹⁰ See Alavi 1994 to understand the importance of critical thinking in CL.

learners in the course was another challenging issue. In fact, student motivation has a powerful affect on attrition and completion rates. Student behaviour is influenced by a combination of their needs and their personal situation and characteristics.

Ensuring critical approaches

The efficacy of the course material and the instructors was best highlighted in the two compulsory assignments—reflection paper and project work. These assignments were meant to encourage learners to reflect on the issues of exclusion/inclusion and analyse the relationships between social, economic and political issues on the praxis of citizenship, democracy and accountability. Each student raised issues, explored and analyzed diverse issues in their contexts and also reflected on/suggested strategies for overcoming problems in their local settings. The challenge was to ensure that both the learners and course instructors demonstrated a critical approach so as not to reproduce inequitable global hierarchies. The box below reveals the themes and contexts of each assignment.

Assignment1 Theme: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Practices of Citizenship Reflection on Issues

- Eunuchs in India
- Issues of exclusion & inclusion with emphasis on the market
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Communities in India
- The Case of Indigene / Settler Dichotomy in Jos, Nigeria
- Situation of the gypsies in the city of Valencia, Spain
- The case of stateless people of Indian origin Tamils in Sri Lanka
- Minorities in Nigeria
- Exclusion of children with disabilities in social life
- The Sumilao Farmers' Walk for Land, Walk for Justice, Philippines
- Citizenship questions amongst poor citizens, in particular women, Bangladesh
- Citizenship questions in Yemen
- Issues of inclusion and exclusion within the membership of an international civil society organization, Amnesty International USA (AIUSA)

To make the learning process more effective, the instructors changed the methodology of teaching. Written assignments being essentially an individual effort did not serve the purpose of CL. To stimulate online discussion, problem solving and effective learning, two new components were introduced in the course assessment—a quiz and group discussion on a case study.

For the group discussion, learners were divided into specific learning groups consisting of four to five members. These small groups participated in an e-discussion based on the case study. Each group was provided with an e-mail ID on

which they had to post their comments and reflections on the case study, as well as responses to what their peers had posted. The discussion forum was open for almost a month, which was considered more than sufficient time for each student to

post at least one comment, reflection and thought on the case study. Instructors monitored learners' participation as well as the quality of their responses. Marking was on the basis of group performance. This implies that all the team members got the same grade.

In OCL, the collaborative translates into having an environment in which learners are not isolated learners. Rather, learning is a discursive process. Therefore, in terms of creating an effective learning environment, four attributes surface as being paramount:

Providing opportunities to foster personal construction of knowledge; by setting an appropriate context for the learning; and facilitating collaboration amongst learners; through the use of Conversation.¹¹

The integration of diverse learners meant that they ranged in age, education, English-language abilities and cultural contexts. These variations contributed to power dynamics, stemming especially from use of online technology. Some learners were more familiar with the technology than others and used this skill to participate more frequently and engage with the course. Those lacking these skills were limited participants in the course.

Given that in OCL there is no classroom, a space where a sense of collective is born, the isolation of the learners is a challenge. Design of a new technology like the BBS contributed to lessening this sense of isolation. Through online postings, queries and exchanging of views, a sense of collective was formed.

As the course progressed, difficulties in communication became apparent. English was the medium of instruction. The English language abilities of the learners were varied. Learners not well versed in the English language had difficulty in expressing their ideas. Their messages were likely to be misinterpreted and therefore needed a lot of clarifications to ensure meaningful discussions and useful insights. Thus there emerged a variation in the level of participation of learners, with some becoming silent observers.

An essential part of our communication is paralinguage.¹² In online communication, these elements are missing contributing to the complexity of the communication

¹¹ See <http://ausweb.scu.edu.au/proceedings/agostinho/paper.html>.

¹² Paralinguage refers to the [non-verbal](#) elements of [communication](#) used to modify meaning and convey emotion. Paralinguage may be expressed [consciously](#) or [unconsciously](#), and it includes the [pitch](#), [volume](#), and, in some cases, [intonation](#) of [speech](#). Sometimes the definition is restricted to [vocally-produced sounds](#) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paralinguage>, accessed on 28.01.2010).

environment. The written form of communication was the only way of ascertaining what a student wanted to communicate. Thus, unless the learners posted their views, the instructor had no way of ascertaining what the learners felt or how they were interpreting the other postings. Often the lack of English language skills interfered with the learners' desire to express themselves or take part in the interactions.

For learners with limited language skills, understanding the assignments also became an issue. It even resulted in a student submitting an incorrect assignment. One assignment aimed to assess learners' understanding of inclusion and exclusion in the practice of citizenship. A student chose to analyse the issues of inclusion and exclusion within the membership of an international civil society organisation. She described how the processes within the organisation excluded persons from participating in spaces where they could engage in debate and discussion for public good. She raised questions about representation and accountability of internal governance and leadership within INGOs. By describing the exclusion of the least and marginalised members in the decision-making processes about setting the future agenda of action within the organisation, she raised an important issue that the principles and structures of domination and exclusion, the characteristic features of any hierarchical society, were also practiced within CSOs. Theoretically the assignment was correct. However, as the thrust of the course revolved around claiming rights and demanding accountability by critiquing the state for its non-performance, its indifference and injustice to marginalised citizens, her assignment could not be accepted as an example of citizenship since her case study was of an organization. This created a difference of opinion with the student.

Language thus comes in the way of conversation. Is there a way out of these barriers? Is the solution to take learners who speak one language? Would that not defeat the very purpose behind online collaborative learning? These questions remain unresolved.

V. Conclusion

NGOs work with 'commitment to praxis'. They work at the field level and have close interaction with people and gather knowledge about their politico-socio-economic situation which otherwise do not form part of our pedagogy. Knowledge most often emerges from one source or system and becomes dominant. It reflects those who dominate the political and economic domain. There is a need to reconstruct knowledge by bringing in the diversity of experiences in countries, races, classes and gender.

According to Paulo Freire, education should raise the awareness of the learners so that they become subjects, rather than objects, of the world. They should be taught to think democratically and continually question and make meaning from (critically view) everything they learn. They must construct knowledge from knowledge they already possess. Critical pedagogy involves questioning, reflecting, analyzing and collectively acting in the world. It is a democratic process that takes place in community of learners and forms the basis of transformation. It is founded on conscientisation, the process of becoming critically aware of structural forces of power that shapes our lives and leads to actions for change.

NGOs who can break the one-dimensional system of knowledge by organising and dispersing the pedagogical content they have access to can be the vehicles through which knowledge is reformulated. Marx once said that 'the point is to change the world', and unless the learning of practitioners becomes a part of academic discourse, there is little hope of realising this change.

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Annexure 1

Bulletin Board Services (BBS) is a web board where both the instructor and the learner can post their opinion on the issues being discussed and it is accessible to all the others to reflect, respond and post their views on the same. It becomes the main mode of exchange, acting as a classroom.

About PRIA

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) is a global participatory research and training centre. PRIA's professional expertise and practical insights are utilised by other civil society groups, NGOs, governments, donors, trade unions, private business and academic institutions around the world.

Since its inception in 1982, PRIA has embarked on a set of initiatives focusing on empowerment of the poor and excluded. PRIA has consistently worked on issues of citizens' access to rights and entitlements, such as basic services in health, education and water in rural and urban areas; women's literacy and livelihood; forest rights of tribals; prevention of land alienation and displacement; and workers' occupational health and safety. In all its interventions, PRIA emphasises gender mainstreaming institutionally and programmatically. Its perspectives on participatory research generate innovative participatory methodologies.

The intensive field programmes of PRIA are currently located in the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. In addition, through its network of partners, these interventions extend throughout India. PRIA is also involved in programmes in countries like Afghanistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka.



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