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Distance learning and human rights education: a contribution to development?

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INTRODUCTION
Human rights education (HRE) represents an emerging and potentially transformative tool for development, complementing rights-based approaches (RBA) to development. Since the mid-to-late 1990s, international organizations (including many UN bodies and the World Bank), national governments, and NGOs have favoured RBAs in the belief that a human rights framework can offer improved development outcomes. Although education is a cornerstone of many development models, an explicit commitment to HRE has remained peripheral to many development approaches, being considered the domain of NGOs and grassroots civil society actors. However, more formal programmes of HRE are now emerging from universities including a new distance learning master's level programme in citizenship education from the University of London, studied by students from the South and the North. This paper suggests how such programmes can promote development and it introduces a new and original methodology for evaluating such online learning experiences.

Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development
Adopting a rights-based approach (RBA) to development entails a conscious shift from the traditional stance of development actors working within needs-based or service-delivery frameworks; approaches which have largely failed to deliver sustainable development (UNICEF, 2007). A definition by Tomas provides a useful framework for examining RBAs further:

A human rights approach may be defined as a framework for the pursuit of human development that is normatively based on, and operationally directed to, the development of capacities to realize human rights (Tomas, 2003, p. 7).

This framework has been applied to poverty reduction, specifically through a 'capabilities' approach outlined by Amayarta Sen, who argues that poverty is the deprivation of basic capabilities or certain basic freedoms such as freedoms to avoid hunger, disease, illiteracy (Sen, 1999) . Under this framework, development solutions to poverty are not limited solely to improving the economic status of the poor. Rather, they are directed toward remedying the non-fulfilment of human rights, particularly "those that correspond to the capabilities considered basic by a given society" and can empower people to have more control over economic resources (Halbmayer and Kühhas, 2007, p. 8).

A key rationale for a rights-based approach to development is that human rights and human development (hereafter development) share a common vision and purpose: to secure "freedom, well-being and dignity of all people everywhere" (UNDP, 2000, p. 20). Uvin (2006) refers to human rights and development as "two communities of principled social change…seeking extremely similar aims of empowerment, dignity, socio-economic progress and the end to various un-freedoms" (pp. 2-3).

Although human rights language has been used to conceptualize development since the 1960s (Starkey, 1994), for many years few connections were made between the aims of development and of human rights respectively, let alone a clear integration of shared principles (Marks, 2003). This has changed considerably in the past decade with the popularization of rights-based approaches, and a survey of the current development landscape yields substantial evidence that rights-based approaches for development are widespread in the 21st century.

According to the United Nation Development Programme's 2000 Human Development report, human rights and development models achieve added value when combined:

Each can bring new energy and strength to the other. …Rights … lend moral legitimacy and the principles of social justice to the objectives of human development. Human development, in turn, brings a dynamic long-term perspective to the fulfilment of rights. It directs attention to the socio-economic context in which rights can be realized – or threatened.
(UNDP, 2000, p. 21)

Conceptually, the domains are mutually beneficial, and endeavours to promote RBAs have gained widespread support. However, there are important and, as of yet, unanswered

questions regarding the challenges of embedding human rights frameworks within development processes. Central to those challenges is the fact that human rights-based approaches to development are, by design, explicitly political. Specifically, they are based upon a legal framework that is likely to challenge existing power structures. Chapman finds that RBAs oppose

a depoliticised interpretation of development which portrays problems "as purely technical matters that can be resolved outside the political arena" without conflict when in fact, they are rooted in differences of power, income and assets (Chapman, 2005, pp. 6-7).

The integration of political considerations of power and participation into a capacity-building development framework distinguish RBAs from traditional development approaches; consequently, a true RBA demands a perspective shift that envisions traditional development actors working with development subjects rather than for them.

By way of example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) has supported a rights-based approach to development and identified as its main aim to "give priority to linking poor people's perspectives with national and international policy processes" (DFID, 2000, p. 24). DFID asserts that RBAs can be an effective means of:

Empowering people to exercise their 'voice', and so acquire immediate benefits but also influence processes of change and social transformation;
Helping the state to clarify its responsibilities towards citizens, in terms of respecting, protecting, promoting or fulfilling rights;
Helping donors to identify how pro-poor political change can be best supported;
Helping to translate the lofty principles of international declarations and conventions into practice (DFID, 2003, p. 1)

This example highlights the degree of change one government hopes to achieve by adopting a RBA, and underscores the enormous challenge that linking a human rights framework to development processes entails. While the argument for linking human rights and development agendas in order to derive a more meaningful development strategy is persuasive on many levels, a number of salient criticisms have challenged the efficacy and possibilities of the conceptual framework offered by RBAs.

Human Rights Education as Development
Participation and empowerment are central aims of RBAs, but the question of how these aims can be achieved using human rights approaches has not been conclusively addressed. If the goal of a rights-based development approach is to empower citizens to build capacity for rights respecting institutions in developing countries, particularly in the area of good governance, human rights education (HRE) has an important role. Mary Robinson, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, highlights the critical need for HRE to create a shared understanding of human rights:

Despite the progress that has been made in recent years in moving human rights to the centre of the international agenda, the reality is that they are still viewed by many merely as rhetoric rather than legal realities which must be taken seriously. Key to changing these views is education
(Robinson, 2002, p. 1).

The next section will consider two distinct ways in which HRE has been linked to development processes in an attempt to highlight the vital role that HRE has to play in development.

HRE in the Millennium Development Goals
Both UNESCO (Tomasevski, 2004) and UNICEF have made the case that HRE supports the fulfilment of Education for All (EFA) aims stipulated by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). UNICEF's report promotes a human rights-based approach to EFA that links the achievement of universal primary education to the right to education contained in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) under article 26.2 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) under article 29 (UNICEF, 2007). The UNICEF report is of

particular importance because it explicitly links a core millennium goal (EFA) with human rights education, therefore presenting a strong argument for considering HRE as development.

HRE is especially applicable to several other millennium goals, as well. For example it directly addresses gender equality (goal 3); it can contribute to reducing prejudice against those with HIV/AIDS (goal 6); it links individuals in developed and developing states in a global partnership (goal 8).

HRE in Rights-Based Development
HRE, when used in community development or participatory action research models, can enhance the capabilities of people at the grassroots level "to facilitate their own social transformation through participation in the decisions that affect development" (Marks, 2003, p. 23). HRE prioritizes the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of human rights instruments, since rights are not rights unless those wishing to claim them are able to articulate them.

Because of this specific focus on learning and internalizing rights, HRE is perhaps the most essential element of any rights-based development framework. HRE in both formal and non-formal educational settings, as well as in political and professional spaces, can have a significant impact on the ability of people to exercise the rights necessary to properly assist in implementing a RBA to development. HRE needs to extend not just to young people in formal education, but also to teachers, educators and officials since detailed awareness of human rights standards has not previously been an integral part of teacher education nor of the training of development experts (Hamm, 2001). This is one of the rationales for ensuring that understanding of human rights instruments underpins the master's programme in citizenship education launched by the Institute of Education in 2006.

Introduction to the online MA in citizenship education
The University of London's distance learning master's programme in citizenship and history education attracts students from the UK and around the world. It is grounded in human rights as explicit principles. Online asynchronous computer-mediated conferencing (ACMC) enables student-student and student-tutor discussions linking North and South that are intended to promote the social construction of knowledge and understandings of human rights.

Our literature review found a general lack of evidence of the achievement of these aims in such conferences. We have therefore developed new tools of analysis to study ACMC in the context of learning about children's rights and human rights (Hopkins et al, 2008).

This paper explores the role and effects of social presence, the tutor's teaching and moderating strategies, and task type on interactive knowledge-building and reports on ways in which ACMC associated with research-led teaching materials generates lively discussions and promotes commitments to and understandings of human rights and their application to education, governance, social justice and development.

In this paper we analyse a single online discussion activity drawn from a module entitled 'learning to live together: children's rights, citizenship and identities' which is explicitly human rights education. In particular, this module emphasises the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which was opened for signature in 1989, and which has now been ratified by virtually every member state of the United Nations.

The learning outcomes for the module anticipate that students will demonstrate critical insights in applying the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to their own context and draw critically on a range of academic literature to develop pedagogical strategies and policies intended to overcome barriers to participation such as racisms, sexism, homophobia and disabilities.

Analysing student responses to the set task
The task we analyse for this paper is as follows:

Think of an incident or report that you have seen personally, or heard or read about in the past month. It could be a news item or something that you saw in the street or at your place of work. It should involve one or more young people. Describe the incident in a few words and link it to children's rights, citizenship and/or identity.

The literature suggests a strong link between students' learning outcomes and task type (Jones & Asenio, 2001). The nature of the task and the instructions given on how to complete it (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002) is likely to affect the level of collaborative dialogue and knowledge-building. It is also important that students are clear on the purpose of the task and what is expected of them (Garrison and Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Consequently we will first consider the task that has been set by the course writer and is initiated by the course tutor. Having repeated the task, the tutor suggests:

You may want to use this opportunity to introduce yourself to the group. I'm sure that other group members would also appreciate some feedback to their postings, so please consider replying to at least one contribution

In response to these instructions, all five students posted messages to complete the set task. These replies to the tutor's thread were posted at different times over a period of approximately 3-4 weeks so that students had the flexibility to complete the task at different times. In addition to their initial responses to the set task, students also posted contributions in response to each others' initial responses indicating that they were involved in collaborative dialogue. The result was the development of five conversations, which were identified by clusters of messages that were linked to and referred to each other.

Construction of knowledge
The examples that students presented were relevant to the set task and their interactions enabled them to learn from each other about human rights. For example, in conversation 2, Mel tells the story of a girl she knew in Thailand whose father beat her and her boyfriend and forced the couple to marry. Mel shared this particular story because there are 'numerous links to children's rights within it'. Following Mel's contribution, the tutor raised the question of what can be done where parents fail to respect children's rights and suggested the need for legislation, campaigning by local pressure groups, and education. Ross also contributed stating that he has heard similar stories from children he works with and that 'violations of children's rights […] have long lasting impacts, often well into adulthood'. Ross also stresses the importance of education suggesting that 'it is always left to the voluntary organisations and agencies to do all the promoting'.

The above example illustrates that the participants have gained an awareness of some of the ways in which children's rights are being violated in Thailand and in the UK and have discussed the importance of campaigning, legislation, and education. There is evidence that students are relating their experiences to the topic of the course task and that they are sharing knowledge amongst themselves and with the tutor.

Social Presence
Since students using ACMC do not see each other or the tutor, there is a need to build a sense of community in order to promote online sociability and interaction, for example the quantity and frequency of participation in the conference. Rourke et al. (2001: 51) define social presence as 'the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry'. Along similar lines, Garrison et al. (2001: 4) define social presence as the extent to which participants are able 'to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as "real people"'.

We analysed the task using Rourke et al.'s (2001) three categories of social presence in ACM conferences: affective, interactive, and cohesive. In the affective domain, there were high levels of self-disclosure as anticipated by the set task. For example:

'I currently work with children and young people who are in the care of the local authority' (Ross).
'I have recently become a member of CRAE [Children's Rights Alliance for England]' (Sally).

We identified high levels of expressions of emotion evident through comments such as 'I think it is a very sad yet inspirational story that touched me deeply' (Mel) and '[t]hat was really sad […] what a shame […]' (Ross).

Students often expressed appreciation. For example, Sally thanks Ross 'for letting me know how to find the report' and Ross thanks Nick for his contribution: 'Out of all the communications, I think yours hits where it's most required […] It's quotes like this that remind me why I do my job […] so thank you.'

We also found examples illustrating the cohesive domain, whereby students use vocatives (i.e. they refer to the other students by name), they address the group as a whole, they use phatics in the form of communicating with each other for purely social reasons and they end conversations with greetings and closures. In this way the social presence evident in these conversations helps to create a comfortable yet challenging online environment for students to interact in and build knowledge together. It has helped students get to know each other and build a sense of community in which they can explore and apply to their own contexts meanings of human rights and development based on universal principles.

There are also some examples of tutor social presence (Anderson et al, 2001; Salmon, 2003). For example, in 3 of the 5 messages posted by the tutor, he refers to students by their names and ensures he closes his posting with an encouraging statement and his name. He uses the reply function to respond directly to some of the students' postings and build on what they have said and often thanks them for their contribution.

Conclusion
Online courses are a potentially powerful vehicle for human rights education and development. Such courses link students, often professionals with extensive experience, with fellow learners in a variety of contexts. It is essential to create a sense of community and common purpose if students are to learn through what is potentially an austere medium. However, with the creation of an online learning community there is a real possibility of students learning from each other.

Our work in progress includes analysis of task types and the interactions of students with each other, with the tutor and with the course materials and readings. We have started to identify instruments that enable us to make detailed analyses of online conversations and thus to help to improve the effectiveness of online human rights education.

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