

The University of The Gambia's Participation, Experience, and Challenges in the Global Understanding Project

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Abstract

This article reflects on the University of The Gambia's participation, experience, success story, and challenges in the Global Understanding (GU) project initiated by East Carolina University (ECU) in 2003 (Chia, Poe, & Yang, 2011). The University of The Gambia (UTG) has been a member of the GU project since 2004 and their participation has been one of immense benefits, which are worth sharing. This article is based on my practical experience of the GU project and its umbrella organization, Global Partners in Education (GPE) at The UTG and on feedback from UTG students who have participated in the project. Reflecting on our experience in the GU project will bring to the fore the unique nature of UTG being situated in a developing country with few infrastructures. This article will serve as an incentive for improving on their successes and confronting our challenges to create a better participation in the GU project in the near future. The writer argues that to thrive in today's globalized learning environment, students need to complement their academic and career learning with the international skills that will allow them to understand and work in a global community. Globalization of education has become a means to an end (Nayyar, 2011).

Introduction

Globalization and global education have become veritable means through which the world has been compacted into a global village. Today, integrating regional studies into the global perspective is now a recurring issue. In an attempt to teach all places across time, technology and teachers ensure coverage. And in order for students to see a less compartmentalized world that reflects global interaction, as well as later global exchanges, curricular integration is now essential.

To succeed in today's global education environment, students increasingly need to complement their academic and career learning with the international skills that will allow them to understand and work in a global community. This is because globalization

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of education and education of globalization has become both means and ends in themselves. As we forge ahead towards global integration and unity, global education has become an essential exercise.

With improvements in technology, distance education is emerging as a formidable proponent and could potentially even the playing field in terms of educational access. In order to determine the viability of using technology to deliver education, a historical participation of UTG in the GU project, its benefits and challenges is explored. This article provides an introspective analysis of the students' perception of distance learning via the GU project. It also reveals the strengths and challenges, as well as the factors associated with collaborating with international universities through distance learning as a means to increasing access to education in The Gambia.

The GU project is a multicultural programme initiative of ECU for promoting harmony and co-operation among universities in different parts of the world (Chia et al., 2011). The UTG has been an active member of the GU project since 2004. Participating in this project has come with a lot of benefits and challenges which are worth sharing.

Global Partners in Education (GPE), the parent organization to the GU project, has become a medium of establishing international activities, projects and programmes. Since its inception, GU/GPE has witnessed tremendous growth and success in global academic initiatives using internet based technology (through a virtual classroom setting), thereby justifying the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a cost effective way to rapidly set up a global network of education partners. It has thereby facilitated the sharing of curriculum, pedagogy, programmes, projects and administration within its partner Universities.

In the GU course, partner interactions take the form of videoconference and IRC chat where students engage one another in discussions on college life, customs/traditions/culture, religion, meaning of life, prejudice and stereotypes, music, language etc. The outcome is that global education is breaking away from the traditional methods and focusing on critical self-reflection and cultural thoughtfulness that can improve understanding of multinational, social, and cultural issues which make students become well-informed global citizens. In our contemporary times we need to understand how the globe is interrelated and to appreciate its diversity and complexity. This article is based on feedback received through group discussions with UTG students who participated in the GU course over the years.

Participation Process for the GU Virtual Link

The GU course at UTG is not open to all students. Being a developing country with low infrastructure, not all students have basic computer knowledge. As a result, any intending students must undergo basic computer training and orientation organised by the IT department of the university before they can be eligible for the course. In effect, the course is not open to first year students who are expected to undergo basic computing as a prerequisite to taking the GU course.

For the actual GU classes, test links are conducted by the technical directors of the partner institutions before the first session with a view to detecting and correcting any technical error that may affect the actual link.

Prior to the commencement of classes, students are required to attend a meeting where they are familiarized with the videoconferencing system. Some of them have never had class in a virtual format and so, are generally nervous and inquisitive about the whole process; hearing their voices or seeing their faces on the camera. Students are also briefed on the purpose of the Global Understanding Class and expected learning outcomes.

Prior to each link, a forum on the UTG Digital Planet (a course management system) is created for students to discuss their own ethnic cultures and identify the relevant ones to showcase. This brainstorming exercise gets the students ready to answer questions from their fellow students in other countries.

Finally an assignment titled “Examine the place of GU class in the face of globalized education” is given to students at the end of the global link experience. This is an assessment that calls for comprehensive information on the perceived successes and challenges of the programme which are later presented in the form of student presentations. The aim of this activity is to engage all the students in organized work where they share and exchange ideas they have learnt from the programme. Presenting their assignments is considered necessary and appropriate, as Stager (2005) suggests that knowledge is better constructed if shared by participants in a social context.

The GU project is implemented in such a way that each member institution is partnered with three other institutions from different regions of the world. Each institution meets with each of the three partner institutions consecutively so that students from all four countries develop a broader view of the world around them. Typically six consecutive videoconference links are allocated to each of the collaborative partnerships between member institutions. Professors from each institution introduce the course and determine the direction of the class which may be either videoconference or Skype. And when neither works (as may be the case sometimes), all students work in IRC chat. The lead professors constantly keep in touch and jointly make decisions on how they would like to conduct the course within the broad framework of the project bearing in mind the peculiarity of the partner institution. The course is framed in such a way that the lead professors have flexibility to tailor it to suit the needs and resources of their own institutions. The technical support person from each institution maintains a close link with the partner institution’s technical person to ensure a smooth connection.

The GU project started in 2003 and UTG joined a year later which has added a new dimension to UTG’s learning. For example, the project through the classroom link has added an interesting dimension to the curriculum by introducing a new teaching methodology and enhanced international interaction. Virtual classroom interaction before participating in the GU project was only read about in books. More so, many

students at UTG take this course either as a major or minor requirement for their degrees; depending on the degree programs pursued. This proves the importance students attach to the GU programme.

Since UTG's participation in the GU project, more than eighty students have participated and passed through the programme. And it is interesting to note that some of the UTG students who have passed through the programme still attend links during their free periods to refresh and enrich their knowledge more. The GU project has become a household name at UTG particularly amongst many participating schools like ICT and Arts and Sciences. In all, the GU project has been variously described by our students in positive lights.

Benefits emerging out of UTG's participation in the GU Project

The students have unanimously acknowledged that their participation in the GU project has enhanced their various degree programmes. They have gained access to educational opportunities not typically available in The Gambia or in the traditional classroom set-up. Before now, their learning activities were limited to the four walls of the traditional classroom environment where they were only absorbers and listeners. But now they are contributors in the GU setting. Some of their comments in this regard are: "The Global Education project is breaking down the walls of traditional classrooms." "It gives us opportunities to socialize and interact with different international students." "GU takes you from where you are to where you may not have been." "GU is education without borders." "GU is a catalyst which quickens global learning." "GU is a potential pillar for global education growth."

The programme has also contributed in various ways in arousing students' interests on international issues, building global good will, and enhancing their knowledge and perspectives about the partner countries that constitute the GU. Working with these diverse countries no doubt has enhanced their knowledge about the world. Certain myths, prejudices or stereotypes about "the other" have been dispelled.

Similarly, GU virtual links in the era of globalization and technological advancement have achieved the aim of helping to increase understanding and tolerance of other cultures and broadened their social horizon. In a student's words:

With GU, my bias and stereotypes are gone. I learned about diverse cultures which have replaced misconceptions. I had earlier thought that developed countries, especially USA and China have no culture and tradition. But now, I have found that after all these are countries with rich cultures which are preserved and respected.

Greater understanding of other participants in their diversity has been created as well. Students are of the view that the GU project is surely one of the quickest ways of promoting literacy, understanding and inter-cultural exchanges and appreciation of the diversity and complexities of the world. "Through it we can live in harmony, peace and co-operation despite our diversities. I learned to become less critical about others and

realized that there could be different points of view on any issue,” commented one student.

The understanding of issues from different perspectives among the students has been one of the laudable gains of the project. Students are no longer narrow minded; rather they are culturally conscious and sensitive to controversial international issues. A case in point was when a UTG student asked about the issue of Taiwan and Tibet independence. Their partners explained that both Taiwan and Tibet are part of China and that it is not something up for discussion. In the course of virtual classroom links some students expressed culture shock, a kind of re-orientation one experiences when he or she encounters a new culture. For instance, we found out that some countries do not pay bride price in marriages, practice monogamy and do not have extended family systems, as we have them here in The Gambia. As for us, “we were brought up and live in communal and extended family structure – a family group knit together which includes not only parents and children but also uncles, aunts, grandparents etc.” In The Gambia, the tradition is that the groom pays a determined amount as a bride price and a man can marry as many as four wives. We were surprised that this does not happen in some other countries. Nevertheless, we realised that different countries have different cultures. This is a kind of re-orientation for our students.

The GU goodwill has exposed the students to knowledge of other countries and issues on globalization. In this era of globalization, global education has become the main activity that will bring us to the level we want to be. Students have acquired knowledge about other countries that have made them become global citizens. In our contemporary time we live in a globalized society with diverse cultures and traditions, and students understanding of these cultures are often limited to what they see, read and watch on television. And the prospect of living and studying in other countries of the world is treasured but due to financial and other constraints, it is not possible for most students to just do that. Given the situation, it becomes necessary and interesting for students to have that unique experience of meeting other students through the GU virtual classroom links. Represented below are a few quotes of participating students expressing their thoughts: “It has exposed me to the issues and facts about global learning.” “GU gives easy and increased access to information resources.” “GU is like iron sharpening iron.”

The GU programme has facilitated skill and personal development among students. It has achieved the aim of helping to increase students’ language skills and personal development. As some of them are Language students, it is an important opportunity that will enhance their careers. Some of them confided in me their plans in the near future to pursue a course of study in global issues.

The GU programme is inculcating in our students, knowledge, skills, values and changes in behaviour that will make it easier for them to adapt to any new environment around the globe. We have recognised that while the UTG virtual experience is new and has its own attraction, very soon virtual classrooms and video conferencing will be common and permanent learning structure in our University.

UTG students have benefited immensely through the GU programme. For instance, their typing speed and awareness have increased through constant usage and chatting on computers with their partner students. Some of their comments were: “the programme has improved my language and technical skills through interaction.” “The course has made me a better user of the English language.” “My reasoning and critical thinking has been widened.” It has developed my skills of responding to questions and issues.” “Global Understanding project is surely one of the quickest ways of promoting literacy.” “The GU project has helped me to experience international education and language learning.” For example, they have learnt that ‘Ni hao’ is how you are in Chinese language while ‘Laye’ is come.

Their use and application of the latest ICT on the global link have enhanced their technical know-how and global friendliness. As one of the students exclaimed, “GU project has made my years in the university meaningful and rewarding!” As another student said “I can now operate our UTG E-learning gadgets and connect universities without assistance from our technical person when we want to link.” Watching our technical man operate the various ICT equipment has been very beneficial.

This programme has helped students to acquire friendships and develop closer and stronger relationships. GU is all about meeting and interacting with people which creates friendliness and goodwill. To some of our students, the GU project has given them the rare privilege of meeting with students with integrity and value. Not only making friends but elements of trust, credibility and instant rapport were other benefits of video conference. The GU has helped to develop a network of relationships that may prove beneficial for their futures. These were some students’ comments: “GU is a channel of creating rapport and friendliness.” “It provides opportunities for effortless social interaction.” “GU is collegiality in practice.” “Surely through GU, the march towards achieving the vision of making the world really a ‘global village’ is on the track.” “I have many ‘Toubab’ friends (Gambian local name for white men) around the world now.”

The GU project has created the spirit of self-reflection in the minds of our students which is a step towards an independent mind and thinking. Indeed, the GU project calls for a moment of self-reflection and stock taking of the personal self. They are no longer imagining what the rest of the world looks like; rather they have seen and experienced it. For one student; “the GU project has made me to question some of the harmful cultural practices in Africa such as female genital mutilations (FGM), polygamy, belief in witchcraft, re-incarnation, etc.”

In the same vein, our technology person has benefited hugely from the GU project. For instance, through the GU project he has acquired new technical skills, IT knowledge, learned how to set up E-learning, how to trouble shoot networks and the project has kept him abreast with the latest technological equipment/infrastructure. In fact, in the words of our Network Administrator, Pa Sara Drammeh,

The GU project has made me what I am today technologically. Learning from a computer mediated expert like Elmer Poe and a data network and

information security expert, Biwu Yang at East Carolina University has been such a wonderful experience!

His diligence and eagerness to learn these things and work to develop this course in the face of the infrastructure challenges at UTG has, in 2011, fetched him the first ever Annual GPE Technology Personnel Award.

In general, the GU project has broadened students' general knowledge, self-development and awareness to enhanced self-confidence and esteem. It has helped students to work in peaceful and harmonious ways with other students from different nationalities, continents and races; especially when they engage in group assignments and seminars in a school setting where we have students from different countries of the world; having developed awareness of group dynamics and personal sensitivity towards others. The students described their general positive experience in these ways: "GU is really enjoyable!" "The experience is good." "GU is flexible, rewarding, accessible, eye opener." "GU is the place to be." "GU leads and others follow."

Despite the different cultural background amongst the GU students, they tolerate each other's peculiar nature and operate with the principle of "unity in diversity." One student had once said that "the GPE has come to unite us through GU despite our differences. The GU project emphasises those issues that unite rather than separate us through education."

In all, the students perceived and scored the GU project very high. It has transformed and benefitted them in several ways. The students in their direct comments described GU as: "GU has changed the face of education." "GU is a potential source of global education growth." "GU is synonymous with knowledge sharing and dissemination." "GU project introduces us to modernity." "GU is education on wheels."

The GU project in general has achieved the vision of creating a network where students from different countries have the opportunity to become global citizens and to function effectively in a globalized community. The students believe that the GU project has achieved the three fold objective providing global awareness; enhancing positive global attitude; and acquiring real global collaborative experience.

Challenges in The UTG's Participation Experience

Successful virtual classroom links in themselves cannot operate in a vacuum or isolation. It is a function of an inter-related technology and the human factor. These factors are critical in the GU project as it can mar or make it. Despite the success story in our GU project, we are still confronted with some basic challenges. The factors which challenge UTG's participation in the GU project are in the area of infrastructural facilities/equipment and the human factor. Our inability to match our infrastructure/equipment with the developed countries which use the latest facilities in their virtual classes remains a challenge. This explains why sometimes we are not heard or seen clearly by our partner universities during links.

Other similar challenges are inadequate computers, lack of regular access to the Internet, low bandwidth and regular power failure. There are human challenges as well; for instance, the inability to prepare for the virtual class in time and other anomalies prevalent at UTG as a university in a developing country with a poor education budget. In terms of infrastructure/equipment challenges, UTG is at the verge of procuring state of the art equipment that will address these challenges.

It is interesting to note that our partner universities have not abandoned us in the face of these challenging situations. They have always assisted us by making useful suggestions on how we can have successful links. For instance they have suggested to us to use either Skype or IRC when connection through H.323 videoconferencing was not available. At one occasion we were given a web camera by our parent body, ECU, to boost our links. More importantly, our partner universities have always scheduled test links to help us have hitch free links.

The challenges of few computers at UTG are solved by dividing students into groups. Instead of allowing all students to go in the 'chat room' at the same time we divide them into two groups; one group will be in class discussion in videoconference, while the other will be on chat. This has always worked out successfully.

Other challenges are communication issues such as grappling with understanding some unfamiliar English accents during virtual class discussion. To solve this challenge, our students are currently undergoing a course of study in Sociolinguistics/Phonology. Before now, understanding English accents from the original English speakers has been an issue among students; especially when they come in contact with exchange programme students who visit UTG from Europe or America.

Many students at UTG are not subscribers of the GU course as they are not computer literate and are not likely to get some interactions on chat rooms, emails etc. However, UTG is overcoming this challenge with the making of basic computing a compulsory course for all students of the university.

The GU project is a chain of actions. What affects one affects all. Therefore, students' challenges are not in isolation. For instance, when we experience network breakdown it affects all and sundry. Sometimes our students' hope of having a virtual class is dashed either because of power failure or the human factor. Nothing is more challenging than when students are ready to learn and do not have that opportunity due to some factors that can be handled and solved. This remains a daunting issue at UTG. However, sometimes we use the missed link period to reflect on our previous class links and at some other times we brainstorm on how to improve on our links. Most of our challenges are man-made.

However one unique challenge students face is that they do not have access to computers except during the GU class. This makes it impossible for students to have constant contact with partners after the official link hours. Some students said "what may make the GU project meaningful is its regularity." "They should not whet our

appetite and leave it to dry.” “We need more of these links and more access to computers.” “We should not be cut off from our friends overseas.”

Students appreciate the directness of the one–on–one conversation and the spontaneity and holistic interaction that characterised the video conferencing. For one, it has enabled them to have direct and instant feedback which is very essential in the GU project. Funny enough, one student in one of the classes asked, “as we have North and South Carolina, do we also have West Carolina?” But he was answered and told that there are only North and South Carolina.

Some students preferred and rated emails high, as in their view, e-mails had the advantage of helping them interact with their partner students. Others preferred chatting due to its speed of response and enhancement of their computer literacy and typing speed. To most of them, before now, their computer awareness and typing speed were very low; as they do not have constant access to computer usage. Now due to constant interaction via chatting on internet following the opportunity offered by GU project, they are becoming proficient in the use of computers. In the same vein, they felt that communicating via emails provided a better method for orderly and comprehensive information distribution and sharing.

The stress on one-to-one partnering and correspondence between students is indeed an exceptional idea which worked appreciably well. Most UTG students are still in close touch with their partner students from GU member countries. And there are indications of continuing relationship among students.

Although distance learning will not be effective for every student and for every situation, it offers a useful way to increase accessibility to education for many people that may have previously been denied the opportunity to pursue global education.

What then can be improved in the GU course to provide even better benefits? I believe that both the lead teacher in the GU project and the students can benefit from the process of accessing and responding to student pre-course expectations. Teachers can benefit from knowing before the course begins what their students expect of them. They then have the opportunity to adjust their tutoring style or manage the students’ unrealistic expectations to a more appropriate level. The students benefit from sharing their concerns and expectations of service with the teacher who will be directing them and shaping the way in which the service is provided (Stevenson & Sander, 1998). The end result should be greater satisfaction with, and improvement in, the quality of service delivery of GU project for all concerned.

Conclusions

With the help of new technology we have seen increased interaction between and among universities. The introduction of virtual and digital education by GU now transcends not only classrooms but geopolitical borders; thereby challenging the traditions of a system that have been in place since ages (Capalbo, 2012). The use of virtual links in global learning is a potential bright spot in the current GU project. As it

stands today, the number of UTG students who subscribe to GU course is on the rise. The course has made them learn to understand and respect one another's cultures, languages and beliefs and that is what the Global Understanding project is projecting across the globe.

The GU project has revealed some pertinent directions that will help mould our future global leaders. This is through decolonising their mind-set about their perception of other cultures/peoples. The GU project has provided a brilliant occasion for our students to acquire direct information about the cultures of other countries while at the same time showcasing their own cultures.

I argue that to succeed in today's global environment, students increasingly need to complement their academic and career learning with the international skills that allow them to understand and work in a global community. Globalization of education and education of globalization has become both means and ends in themselves (Capalbo, 2012).

We should humanize the GU course by focusing on the students and not the delivery system. After all, technology does not always teach distance learners, but effective lead teachers and technology administrators do (Dzakiria, 2004). In the near future, UTG hopes to build on their acquired experience from the GU project. This, it intends to do by procuring more infrastructure/equipment and improving on our delivery services and other noticeable human lapses.

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