



PTAS Project Report (for SMALL PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: Exploring online distance learning: interdisciplinary collaboration and student experiences in international development studies (Date awarded: October 2012)

Principal Investigator : Dr. Sam Spiegel

School / Department : School of Social and Political Science / Centre of African Studies

Team members:

- Sam Spiegel, Lecturer in International Development, Centre of African Studies, School of Social and Political Science (SSPS) Email: sam.spiegel@ed.ac.uk
- Kevin Bardosh, PhD Student, Centre of African Studies
- Barbara Bompani, Lecturer in African Development, Centre of African Studies, SSPS, and Deputy Director of the Global Development Academy
- James Smith, Professor of African and Development Studies, Centre of African Studies, SSPS, and Director of the Global Development Academy

For further information, please contact:

Grant recipients are expected to submit a brief report at the conclusion of their project which outlines briefly the following : nature of work completed; outcomes; benefits to student learning/student experience; dissemination activity (where relevant – actual and planned) and how the activity could inform future work or be transferred to other subject areas in the University. The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Brief Report (maximum 500 words)

What did you do?

This project examined interactive group learning and individual learning with students abroad, exploring experiences in international development courses. The need for this project was identified while piloting new online distance learning courses at the Centre of African Studies during the 2011-2012 year. The project involved 25 interviews with students from across five continents, with funds supporting a PhD student to conduct the interviews to explore distance learning in the Global Challenges MSc programme. This programme offers interdisciplinary online courses addressing global development, environmental and health inequalities. Experiences of students and approaches for group learning, independent learning and “activity-focused course design” were explored; after the 25 interviews, the analysis identified key trends as well as particular experiences and stories; themes were then coded. This included how many of the students combine academic work with part-time or full-time jobs with non-governmental organizations. Some students were re-interviewed to gather in-depth background on relevant experiences, particularly related to student learning and academic/practitioner synergy in Africa.

What did you find out?

The findings highlighted adaptation by individual learners and collective learning communities, with insights on three major areas:

-Theme 1 – decolonising barriers to entry: whose notion of development ‘qualification’? Whose notion of language proficiency?



-Theme 2 – Decolonising access, re-imagining technologies of participation

-Theme 3 – Decolonising the curriculum content: merging critical development theory and practitioner-oriented pedagogy

These three themes, described in a published article (please see link below), highlight voices and measures taken by students, administration and teaching faculty to counter colonial legacies and influences that shape inequalities in education, and to cultivate counter-colonial pedagogies. As a pilot project on learning in an MSc programme in its earliest years, it offered a unique window into how pedagogic techniques, goals, technologies and institutional practices interrelate.

How did you disseminate your findings?

Dissemination included:

-Multiple meetings with university colleagues and administrators

- A full-length (22-page) article published in a leading journal (*Third World Quarterly*) by a team composed of the PI, the PhD student, and the other CAS faculty team members:

Spiegel, S., Gray, H., Bompani, B., Bardosh, K., & Smith, J. (2017). Decolonising online development studies? Emancipatory aspirations and critical reflections—a case study. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(2), 270-290. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2016.1256767>

- Presentation at an international conference:

Sam Spiegel and Hazel Gray, “Decolonizing Online Distance Learning for International Development” – Pedagogies and Curriculum Panel of the 2016 University of Edinburgh Decolonizing the Academy Conference, Hosted by the UoE Centre of African Studies, 20-22 April 2016. <https://decolonizingtheacademy.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/draft-programme1.pdf>

What have been the benefits to student learning?

The project helped shape subsequent adaptations to pedagogic techniques and student learning, informing curriculum developments to prioritise critical and creative student assignments and mixtures of individual and collective online learning activities. Students have been equipped with ways of creatively reflecting on their practitioner work in various African contexts and elsewhere, merging critical, anti-colonial and creative learning strategies to shape approaches in practice-based engagement.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

In addition to supporting creative online pedagogies for working with social justice-oriented students internationally, the project feeds into university processes in improving efforts to widen participation with international students, including addressing barriers to access in language testing systems in African countries, and improving online learning course design and delivery.

Who can be contacted for further details?

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Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.