

Online discussion forum: A tool to support learning in business management education

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The introduction of online-supported teaching and learning in education calls for a better understanding of how online support is experienced by South African students (many of whom encounter this technology for the very first time at university) and how their experiences of online support may influence their learning. The mixed-methods approach used in the study reported on here incorporated a qualitative component that drew on the principles of phenomenography. From 156 students enrolled in a business management education module that forms part of the Bachelor of Education curriculum, 15 participants were selected using phenomenographic sampling. A sequential-exploratory quantitative investigation was then undertaken to test qualitative findings. Qualitative data sources included personal reflective journals, focus group discussions and individual interviews; quantitative data were generated from questionnaires administered to the respondents. In the principal findings participants indicated that the online discussion forum offered them a context for learning through social interaction in qualitatively different ways, and this offers insights into how developing nations might address the need to engage with pedagogical practices in the online space.

Keywords: blended education methods; business management education; e-learning; learning management system; online discussion forum; online-supported teaching and learning

Introduction

Although higher education in South Africa has changed remarkably since 1994, especially with regard to the admission of students from the historically deprived majority, leading to more equitable access and a more representative student population (Higher Education South Africa [HESA], 2014), it will take time to undo the effects of past apartheid policies as the use of technology to enable teaching and learning remains a challenge (Maboe, 2016). One sign of this is the incapacity of the higher education sector to accommodate an equitable quota of students from previously deprived communities despite all reasonable attempts the sector makes towards this (HESA, 2014). The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (Ministry of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2001) identified massification of higher education as an alternative for addressing inadequate access to higher education institutions in South Africa, but widening the diversity of student abilities that higher education teachers must somehow accommodate, results to large classes (Mashau, Mutshaeni & Maphosa, 2014).

Among the social changes which Nguyen (2015) note as likely to arise with the steady proliferation of internet resources and possibilities has been what Perello-Marín, Ribes-Giner and Díaz (2018) refer to as establishing the sustainability of learning for the future through the co-creation of knowledge by students, and rapid change brought about by technological development and internationalisation is now a familiar dimension of teaching and assessment in higher education worldwide (Adapa, 2015). Inquiry into the social changes that the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) give rise to in education has tended to focus on what Nguyen (2015) regards as an overgeneralised notion of the perceived relationship between technologies and social change. Adapa (2015) points to numerous changes in the way teaching and learning is conducted in the tertiary education sector where technology has an undoubted influence, compelling contemporary higher education (HE) institutions to embrace its possibilities.

Modern economies need an educated labour force that can continuously develop new competences and learn new skills through lifelong learning (Perello-Marín et al., 2018). Online modes of teaching and learning using network technologies, also known as e-learning, are a particularly valuable way to develop these competencies and thereby meeting the increasing need for new skills (Krasnova & Ananjev, 2015). More particularly, online instruction in support of face-to-face lectures by enhancing collaboration and students' cognitive experiences as well as the social environment has become a popular choice for augmenting classroom learning (Sun, Lin, Wu, Zhou & Luo, 2018). The online discussion forum is one example of an asynchronous online learning context that encourages enrolment in online courses in that learners can log on to an online learning environment whenever and wherever they choose (Alzahrani, 2017).

In reviewing research articles for a literature survey, Gaur (2015) noted a wide gap in literature on e-learning between developed and developing countries, indicating that more research is being conducted on e-learning in developed countries than in developing countries. Similarly, Basak, Wotto and Bélanger (2017) note that in Africa not only is there a dearth of research into e-learning but implementation of e-learning is also lacking. They suggest that if e-learning is to develop as an option in both formal and informal education in Africa, further research needs to be conducted to spread and implement this new mode of learning; hence the need for this study.

The research question we accordingly set out to investigate was: “What are students’ experiences of learning using the online discussion forum in business management education?” This article therefore contributes to the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating that an online discussion forum can be used to mediate student-lecturer consultations, promote participation by students who are normally less articulate in face-to-face lectures and enable students to learn from each other. The problem we seek to address in this article relates to the idea that not all students can learn and adequately interact with content through face-to-face lectures in the classroom. The advent of technology has brought about new modes through which learning can be negotiated in ways that enhance the potential to maximise the achievement of learning outcomes. One of these ways is online learning via the medium of an online discussion forum.

Literature Review

Communication and participation are two crucial determinants in the quality of teaching and learning (Durairaj & Umar, 2015). One of the drivers in the increasing utilisation of the internet for teaching and learning is the way text communications enable people to interact more deeply with live information (Kent, M 2013). Online education thus widens the ways in which adaptable, suitable and collaborative instructional techniques make it possible to share ideas, make inquiries and present individual discoveries as they happen, and at the convenience of the students (Taye, 2014). One element in computer-mediated communication has been the evolution of the online discussion forum, which is a web-based application widely used to bring together people with a shared interest, making it a useful tool for facilitating communication in large student classes (Biriya & Emmah, 2014). The benefit it provides is effective consultation and collaboration between instructors and students, and among the students themselves (Biriya & Emmah, 2014; Harris, Mahmud & Wong, 2014).

Online discussion forums enable asynchronous communication that supports social interaction and teamwork without confining learners to set communication times in the way that online chats do (Alzahrani, 2017). The fact that students can participate in the forum whenever it suits them is a strong drawcard for those who think of signing up for an online module (DeNoyelles, Zydne & Chen, 2014). Harris et al. (2014:98) define asynchronous online communication as “a text-based human-to-human communication via computer networks that provides a platform for the participants to interact with one another to exchange ideas, insights and personal experiences.”

According to Durairaj and Umar (2015), social and cognitive development is rooted in social

interactions among participants in the learning context of the online discussion forum. These interactions facilitate the movement, exchange and joint creation of knowledge, and also the sharing of experiences in instructor-learner and learner-learner relationships (Tan, 2017). This sharing of experiences indicates that social interactions in the online discussion forum, where theoretical course content is linked to events that occur in the real world, bring about improved learner engagement and learning outcomes while also ensuring continuous interactivity between students and lecturers (Alzahrani, 2017; Redmond, Devine & Basson, 2014). While interactivity is a feature of all learning environments, it has been identified as a particularly important aspect of students’ learning experiences in an online learning context (Wei, Peng & Chou, 2015).

Social interaction between students and instructors in an asynchronous online forum and with the content that features in the forum has the capacity to enhance individual learning experiences beyond surface learning and take it to a level of applying content to real-world cases (deeper level), and of creating new knowledge (Durairaj & Umar, 2015). According to Wei et al. (2015), increased interactivity nurtured by the online discussion forum stimulates deep learning by actively engaging students in the learning process. This deep learning, facilitated in the online discussion forum, happens when the student actively searches for and finds information, utilises it to create knowledge, and integrates the information for his or her own cognitive development (Redmond et al., 2014). Online discussion forums offer a useful way to engage with course content and create knowledge via extended dialogue (Redmond et al., 2014). Consequently, deep and meaningful learning through social interactions will be experienced in every situation where one of the three forms of interaction is present: student to instructor, student to student, or student with content (Durairaj & Umar, 2015).

Thor, Xiao, Zheng, Ma and Yu (2017) indicate that an online discussion forum is less intimidating for students who are reluctant to speak in lectures as it is less likely to be dominated by participants who are outspoken in face-to-face contexts. The virtual context of the online discussion forum has greater benefits for less assertive students than for extrovert students as it offers all participants extended time to think about and respond to others’ inputs (Kent, C, Laslo & Rafaeli, 2016). The context for communication between or among participants that this kind of forum for student-lecturer interaction thus presents is more conducive to student participation, since individuals can make known their opinions on an issue of learning without being shy or intimidated by the presence of others (Biriya & Emmah, 2014). For

Haris et al. (2014:102), this confirms that asynchronous online discussion can be of immense advantage to students who find it difficult to participate in face-to-face lectures because they lack confidence.

Alzahrani (2017) suggests that the online discussion forum encourages students to work together and share learning experiences as they learn from each other through social interaction in the forum. Maboe (2016) cites a case in which students who had problems directing questions to the lecturer instead published their questions in a forum where they were able to help one another. This confirms how the asynchronous online discussion forum inspires students to engage in discussions on course content and gives students a chance to share, question and construct knowledge through interactive communication and varied understandings (Redmond et al., 2014). Oztok, Zingaro, Brett and Hewitt (2013) argue that asynchronous communication enhances cohesion and structure when used in online discussion learning domains centred on course content.

According to Dexter and Tucker (2009) case methods of teaching have long been used as the signature pedagogy in business schools. Nowadays, these instructional methods have been extended to also include the field of education. Faculties that offer business and/or marketing education modules are undoubtedly most likely to combine research, group work and discussion-based knowledge acquisition and online activities in their courses (Fletcher, 2013).

Literature also suggests that there is some uncertainty about how actively students engage with learning in online discussion forums due to a lack of empirical evidence, prompting a proposal that further research should be conducted on engagement in online discussion forums (Petty & Farinde, 2013). It has been suggested that mixed-methods research that includes interviews to investigate students' engagement with learning in online discussion forums could usefully extend findings from existing research (Durairaj & Umar, 2015). The empirical, mixed-methods study reported on in this article is an attempt to respond to these concerns and it is hoped that its findings will help to dispel this uncertainty and bridge the existing gap in literature.

Method

To enhance the validity of the research reported on in this article, the questionnaire was first piloted with 15 participants who were interviewed to detect areas of ambiguity. The questionnaire was then checked by a statistician using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for inter-item and test-retest reliability. It was then edited where necessary and piloted with the student cohort of the previous year before being administered with the

intended population of 156 students, almost twice as many as the proposed minimum of 82 suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007:288). A mock face-to-face interview and focus group discussion was conducted with students from the cohort of the previous year to ascertain the level of clarity of the questions in both the interview and focus group discussion schedules. Member checking was used to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Design

In the study reported on here we used a mixed-methods, sequential exploratory design in which the collection and analysis of quantitative data happened after the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Qualitative investigation predominated, being the focus for three out of four data collection methods in the study. The combination of methods was adopted so that the findings that emerged from qualitative data could be substantiated through quantitative data.

In the qualitative component of the study we used phenomenography as a theoretical approach. This approach, located in an interpretive paradigm and defined in the following paragraph on sampling, guided the process according to which qualitative sampling was conducted and qualitative data were collected and analysed.

Sampling

Selecting the sample and collecting and analysing the qualitative data were guided by a phenomenographic approach in an interpretive paradigm which Marton (1986:31) defines as "a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them." Phenomenography as an approach to qualitative research is used to explore experiences of learning and was chosen because the study reported on here explored students' experiences of e-learning.

Fifteen participants were selected as a sample from the population of 156 students in the second-year business management education (BME) cohort who had exposure to an online discussion forum as online support in a mixed-mode course taught through a combination of conventional lectures and online components. This sampling is consistent with the phenomenographic approach which proposes that a sample size between 15 and 20 is adequate to bring to light aspects of the phenomenon with less clumsiness (Emerson, 2015). This sample was then varied to capture important aspects that were typical of the group intended for research.

For the quantitative component of the study, sampling was non-random and purposeful, since we sought to make sense of the phenomenon being studied and did not intend to generalise the findings

to a wider population (Patton, 1990). We accordingly circulated the questionnaire to the whole group of 156 students that were registered for the BME course.

Collection and Analysis of Data

Quantitative data were collected through circulation of the questionnaire to 156 students as noted above. As a quantitative method in analysis of the 156 questionnaires, the services of a specialist statistician who used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, SPSS statistical software version 14.0, were secured. The first qualitative instrument in collection and analysis of qualitative data was a set of personal reflective journals completed by all students in the BME class, and analysed using the inductive analysis to develop categories of description. Next came a focus group discussion in which responses from 15 participants (selected from the group of 156 students according to the frequency of their immersion with online learning) were analysed using the inductive analysis, followed by interviews conducted with the same 15 participants. All qualitative data collection transcripts were analysed using an inductive approach that required of us to remain true to the data, which is standard practice in phenomenographic research.

Findings

Results were generated from the use of the inductive approach to the analysis of qualitative data for the development of categories of description. These categories of descriptions are in essence themes from which qualitative findings are developed in phenomenographic research. Through the analysis of questionnaires and the development of quantitative findings, qualitative findings were justified or validated. Proposals could only be made on the basis of this justification. Participants' responses give an indication of the qualitatively different ways in which they experienced the use of the online discussion forum in BME. Social interaction was the main finding that emerged from the three categories of description, namely, online discussion forum as a channel for consulting with the lecturer, online discussion forum enabling communication by students who are less articulate in face-to-face lectures, and online discussion forum enabling students to learn from each other.

Research

The study reported on in this article explored students' experiences of online-supported learning in BME and was conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), where rapidly increasing student numbers have led to increasingly large classes. BME is offered by this university as part of the Bachelor of Education degree programme that qualifies students to become teachers on successful

completion. Permission to conduct this study was sought from the university's registrar and ethical clearance was solicited from the university's research ethics committee. Consent letters were issued to students seeking their participation in the study and a copy of the consent letter was also submitted on the ethical clearance application. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the research subjects.

Having experienced difficulties with facilitation of one-on-one consultations with individual students, one of the authors developed an interest in the use of the Moodle learning management system (LMS) for improving consultation with a large class of students enrolled in a BME course offering. Moodle has been formally adopted as an LMS at UKZN, and when additional training was offered to academics on the use of Moodle for teaching, the LMS became more than just a communication tool and began to serve in the BME course as a form of e-learning for more comprehensive negotiation of teaching and learning. In the online learning component of the course, one of the requirements for students was to conduct analysis of case studies that were related to course content via the medium of the online discussion forum.

While the survey was conducted for the purpose of evaluating the use of a web-based discussion forum based on the experiences of students engaging in a blended face-to-face and online course, the idea was to establish whether the quantitative findings supported or opposed qualitative themes.

Social interaction

One of the points mentioned by participants was that the online discussion forum made it possible for them to approach the lecturer without having to wait, either when scheduled face-to-face consultation hours were not practicable for them or when the lecturer was not on campus. Participants also felt that the online discussion forum eased anxieties that came with having to express oneself in English via the spoken word, as this was a problem for some of them in face-to-face discussions. Furthermore, participants noted that the web-based discussion forum gave them a platform to learn from each other through social interaction.

Online discussion forum as a channel for consulting with the lecturer

Participants gave various indications of the ways in which they used the forum space to engage in learning, one of which was identified as communicating with the lecturer. The extracts below from participants' reflective journals (J) and focus group discussion illustrate this point: "*Online support can be good sometimes because if no consultation is scheduled for the day when I need the lecturer's*

help, I can post my concern on that day” (J42).

Another participant stated that “[f]orums offer more lecturer approachability as I no longer have to worry if I cannot make a lecturer’s consultation time as I still have the ability to submit inquiries via forums at any time” (J39).

The above comments suggest that in addition to being able to reach the lecturer outside of scheduled consultation times, those who found it daunting to approach him face-to-face found the discussion forum to be a convenient way to communicate.

“In this site the lecturer does not have to know who you are and you can just speak to the lecturer and this make it easier for us as learners to be able to approach you as the lecturer” (Focus group discussion [FGD]). The respondent who made the aforementioned extract observed that the site offered the anonymity that shielded their identity from the lecturer, suggesting that face-to-face contact could be intimidating for them, but not with communication via the medium of the online discussion forum.

Table 1 Students who could consult with the lecturer online

<i>If I missed lectures due to absenteeism, I could consult with the lecturer online</i>					
		<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid %</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
Valid	Strongly disagree	5	5.38	5.38	5.38
	Disagree	1	1.08	1.08	6.46
	Neutral	12	12.90	12.90	19.36
	Agree	32	34.40	34.40	53.76
	Strongly agree	43	46.24	46.24	100.00
	Total	93	100.00	100.00	

Seventy-five of 93 participants (80.65%) who completed the questionnaire indicated that they could use the online space for referring to lecture notes and for consulting with the lecturer. Online forum consultation became a viable option for students who missed lectures and had to catch up on what was done during their absence.

Online discussion forum enabling communication by students who are less articulate in face-to-face lectures

Participants indicated in qualitative data sets that expressing their ideas in English could be difficult in face-to-face lectures, especially where English was a second language for the student, and that they found it more convenient to communicate via the medium of the online discussion forum. This suggests that the forum created a convenient space for social interaction for students who were reluctant to speak in English but could use English more adequately in writing. This was confirmed from participants’ research journals that needed to be updated throughout the semester:

“Face-to-face is good to some students because we are not the same other students are shy and do not participate in class but when it comes to online support it where they get freedom and they even ask questions” (J38).

A participant responding in an interview to the question, “Why did you have to consult through online forums with your teacher?” indicated that he used the forum to consult with the lecturer to avoid disruptions that might otherwise occur:

I felt that sometimes it’s better to ask questions though online forums ... if there are disruptions I don’t have to stress because I know that this option of online consultation is available to me and I can direct questions to my lecturer and get feedback at the same time.

Another participant responded: “... it is difficult to have a face-to-face consultation with a lecturer because there are many students who are queuing for the very same opportunity” (Shakes).

The participants considered the discussion forum to be a suitable space for engaging with the lecturer when disruptions on campus, or long queues to the lecturer’s office make it difficult to meet face-to-face with the lecturer.

Descriptive statistics from analysis of the questionnaire were consistent with findings from qualitative data sets (see Table 1).

“Everyone is different... . And because we are such unique individuals, we all speak separate languages ... use learning methods that best help us through our educational searches” (J39).

The above extracts propose the idea that since each person is unique, each person has a unique way of negotiating understanding. Some learn best through the medium of the spoken word while others learn well through the medium of the written word.

This issue was also highlighted in the focus group discussions when one participant responded as follows to the question: “Why don’t you learn from each other in a face-to-face, classroom lecture?”

Other people are more comfortable with speaking while others enjoy writing, so interacting online is whereby people like me who cannot express themselves during the lecture, maybe because I am worried about my English and there are those who are speaking English very well When it comes to discussing case studies by writing in the discussion forum I feel free to express myself (FGD).

Another participant had this to say: “... online support helps shy students to get the opportunity to say something because ... some students are reluctant, they cannot say their answers in class” (FGD).

The above statements suggest that the spoken word does not appeal to all students in face-to-face

lectures, as there are students who, for unique reasons, are inspired to learn when learning is transacted in writing via the medium of the discussion forum. Similar points were made by other students in interviews, as in this response to the question: "Some of you indicated in the online reflective journals that they did not participate in lectures; tell me, what causes this?"

Eh, you find that as students we are not the same. Some students are afraid because they doubt maybe that, eh, my English is poor, eh, some other students, eh, may not participate until they log into the discussion forum. (S'the)

Another participant responded as follows:

... I was, I can say during our lecture I was quite shy to answer the questions even though I knew the answer, but I wouldn't ... I was shy you know. But using online support I was keen to participate. (Sihle)

The above extracts from the interviews point to the unique ways in which individuals learn, as some regard the spoken word in English as their preferred medium of expression while others, due to being not articulate in English or due to being shy, view the written word in the discussion forum as the best medium for expressing ideas.

This issue was also reflected in the descriptive statistics (see Table 2).

Table 2 Students whose level of English competency discouraged them from participating in lectures
My level of English competence discourages me from participating in the lectures

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid %</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
Valid Strongly disagree	17	18.28	18.28	18.28
Disagree	15	16.13	16.13	34.41
Neutral	18	19.35	19.35	53.76
Agree	21	22.58	22.58	76.34
Strongly agree	22	23.66	23.66	100.00
Total	93	100.0	100.00	

Forty-three of 93 respondents (46.3%) who responded to the question regarded their capacity to speak English fluently as hindering them from taking part in the lectures. Only 32 respondents (34.4%) regarded the ability to communicate in English as insignificant to their participation in the lectures.

Online discussion forum enabling students to learn from each other

Qualitative data indicated that students could learn from each other through the medium of the online discussion forum. This was evident in consistent references to having learned from forum responses by their counterparts (outputs) to the lecturer's questions, where these responses provided hints (inputs) from which the expected answers could be generated. Similar inferences were suggested in the online reflective journals, as in the following statements:

"We share our own ideas on a given topic or question in the discussion forum" (J29).

"Discussion forum gives an opportunity to share learning experiences and ideas as well as listening to others' views and thoughts on the case being studied" (J6).

The above statements suggest that the discussion forum is considered a tool that enhances social learning where learners share their ideas and experiences in relation to a particular topic or case. The next extract from the focus group discussion was in response to the question: "Right, some of you in their reflective journals cited that the discussion forum was a space that enabled them or you to learn from each other. Tell me, how does this space allow you to learn from one another?"

It does because if you look at the discussion forum there will be some concepts that I may not understand while other students are able to understand these concepts, and through interactions with other students in this forum, I get to understand meanings of these concepts so. (FGD)

Another participant responded as follows:

... the lecturer gives us time, he just poses a question and then waits until we all respond, eh ... and there is a time when I realise that my answer was not correct because of the right answer that was given by my other colleagues. (FGD)

The statement above describes how students among themselves used the discussion forum as a platform for making meaning of concepts that would otherwise have not been understood if this forum was not used. Responses made during the interviews also indicated that students learned from each other through the discussion forum, as indicated in response to the question: "Why would you say you have benefitted or not benefitted from discussing tasks online in BME?"

Erm! I can say I ... I did benefit from discussing cases that were studied since you know in the discussion forum, if you get wrong or your answer is not sufficient, other students will correct you so you will know that this is wrong or this is right. (S'the)

Another participant responded as follows: "I am encouraged to switch to online discussion where I can express myself and see what other students say so it helps me learn in that way ..." (Suria).

The above extract suggests that students who got their answers wrong benefitted from the use of the discussion forum as they got their answers corrected by fellow students during the study of the case.

Descriptive statistics from analysis of the questionnaire confirm that students saw the discussion forum as enabling them to learn from each other (see Table 3).

Seventy-one of 93 respondents (76.3%) who responded to the question indicated that participants assisted one another by way of mutual com-

munication in the discussion forum. Recognising the forum as a space for negotiating learning, the students' objective in helping each other through social interaction was obviously to learn, and their interaction was thus an example of the way interplay between online support and social factors can promote learning.

Table 3 Students who learned from each other in the discussion forum
As students we learned from each other by way of interacting with one another in the forum

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid %</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
Valid Strongly disagree	7	7.53	7.53	7.53
Disagree	3	3.23	3.23	10.76
Neutral	12	12.90	12.90	23.66
Agree	44	47.31	47.31	70.97
Strongly agree	27	29.03	29.03	100.00
Total	93	100.00	100.00	

Discussion

The discussion forum as a channel for communicating with the lecturer made the lecturer much more accessible, since the communication was no longer confined to face-to-face consultation. This corresponds with the observation by Thor et al. (2017) that the online discussion forum is less daunting for students who are reluctant to speak in face-to-face lectures. In these circumstances the online discussion forum thus offers more diffident students a protective screen behind which they can remain unseen in communicating their thoughts to the lecturer. Survey results also confirm the idea that online forum consultation became a viable option for students who missed lectures and had to catch up on what was done during their absence. This proposes that the discussion forum should be used to increase levels of learner participation in learning in addition to face-to-face lectures.

The results show that the discussion forum enabled communication by students who were less articulate in English. The opportunity provided by the online discussion forum to make written input instead of spoken input was welcomed in participant responses that cited a lack of confidence in spoken English as a deterrent. One such comment confirmed a participant's anxiety of face-to-face expression of ideas in English due to a lack of fluency in this language, while communication through the written word in the discussion forum was favoured. This corresponds with findings from a Taiwanese and Chinese study (Chiu, 2014) where Chinese learners who were initially reluctant to participate in face-to-face discussions in an English first language class showed increasing interest in participation in asynchronous online discussions. Survey results tend to confirm this as inferred from the descriptive statistics. This proposes that students should be encouraged to engage with discussions in the online forum as these can accommodate students according to their personalities.

The idea about the online forum enabling students to learn from each other emerged from the

analysis of qualitative data. This was corroborated by quantitative results that indicate that participants' interaction was an example of the way interplay between online support and social factors can promote learning. In mutual sharing of experiences on questions asked by the teacher on a particular case being studied in BME, the online discussion forum made it possible for students to develop their own thoughts in response to comments and ideas already posted by others and in that way arrive at the appropriate answers. Learning in this space would thus be inspired by a wish for a deep exploration of the context of a particular case that the lecturer's questions related to; the deeper the context, the more complex the concepts turn out to be while a better understanding of these concepts is facilitated in the process. One participant noted that complex concepts one may not comprehend become the subject of social interaction among students in this forum such that those who are familiar with these concepts share meaning with others. This corroborates the point made by Alzahrani (2017) that the online discussion forum stimulates students' capacity to work together and share learning experiences, indicating a shift from surface to deeper learning as they interact in the forum. Based on this point, it is proposed that e-learning be considered a likely solution to challenges facing emerging economies in preparing students to meet the demands of the modern market (Gaur, 2015).

Conclusion

The article reports on a study of participants' experiences of engaging in a course that blends face-to-face and online learning, where learning was implemented through a web-based discussion forum. Research findings show how the online discussion forum promoted learning that enhanced a conceptual understanding of knowledge by discussing cases and inciting social interaction between the lecturer and students, and students alone in BME. This led us to recommend that there should be further research to explore the relationship between

students' experiences of this forum and the substance of their actual learning in BME. The subsequent research question would then be: "How do students' experiences of the online discussion forum relate to their learning in business management education?"

The research reported on in this article contributes to existing literature by indicating how continuing interactions that occur in the online discussion forum, both between the lecturer and students and among students on their own, promote case study pedagogy in BME. The findings show that instead of social interaction being confined to face-to-face lectures, the extended context provided by the online discussion forum enables learning to continue beyond normal face-to-face lectures and gives students added time to engage with case-based learning in BME. Findings reported on in this article have implications for both the national and international context, as they offer insights into how developing nations (like South Africa) might address the crucial aspect of engaging with pedagogical practices in the online space. In particular, it points to how instructors might create safe spaces for technologically less-ready students to harness communal online spaces for enhancing learning.

Authors' Contributions

MAM wrote the manuscript with SMS coordinating the presentation of qualitative data and DWG coordinating the presentation of quantitative data. All three authors were responsible for conceptualising the paper and addressing all of the reviewers' comments. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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