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*From Indifferent Observers to Interested Participants in a Virtual Learning Environment*

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From Indifferent Observers to Interested Participants in a Virtual Learning Environment

Endrit Kromidha, Simon Foley

Abstract

Virtual learning environments often show a lower level of participation and interaction for learning compared to traditional classrooms. This study contributes by investigating techniques for more collaborative learning and active participation in online distance courses. The online activities’ log recorded by the system and the online seminar posts constitute the data-set for this qualitative research. Findings suggest that a well-planned course structure or the technological aids of the virtual environment are not sufficient to motivate a deep engagement for online distance learning. Using cognitive provocations for more participation in the online learning environment, the tutor could gain insights on what motivated or limited their engagement. A conceptual framework on interest and participation is proposed, highlighting a set of pedagogical steps that may be of value to educators and researchers working with virtual learning communities.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Environments, Cognitive Engagement, Constructivism, Peer-to-Peer Learning

Introduction

Currently the focus in online distance learning has been shifting towards online communities (Palloff, Pratt 2007) and interplays among tutor, students, and the context (Nemanich, Banks & Vera 2009). Although some studies suggest that collaborative learning should be the foundation upon which online courses are designed (Arbaugh, Benbunan-Finch 2006),
cognition in the construction of knowledge as an epistemological element is often neglected. Recent works argue that clear and organised classroom instructions have a positive effect on critical thinking, relating this to the need to improve cognition techniques (Wang et al. 2014). Our research contributes in this direction by first mapping and categorising online distance learning students, and secondly proposing a teaching approach for turning indifferent observers into interested participants.

In the following section, we discuss the extant literature on participation in virtual learning environments, and propose a conceptual and methodological framework, which focuses on the modes of communication, types of engagement and purposes of participation in the online classroom. The empirical evidence is subsequently analysed, suggesting some theoretical constructs that could help our understanding of cognitive engagement between tutors and learners in the virtual environment.

**Literature review and theoretical framework**

In this study we take cognitive engagement as our starting point. Its basic principle is to orientate students’ goals and guide their motivational beliefs for better learning (Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle 1988, Pintrich, Schrauben 1992, Taylor et al. 2003). Many have demonstrated the importance of students’ engagement (Carini, Kuh & Klein 2006, Zhao, Kuh 2004, Guthrie 2004). Earlier studies show that learning is positively correlated with meaningful cognitive engagement referring to the self-regulation of knowledge by the students during the process (Greene, Miller 1996). More current studies on the other hand argue that higher online interaction doesn’t necessarily lead to higher results for students achieving passing grades; however, students who failed interacted less frequently (Davies, Graff 2005). These controversial claims motivate us to explore cognitive engagement in online distance learning in more detail.
In particular, it is suggested that the role of tutors in cognitive engagement is to identify specific features of instruction and to develop self-regulated learners (Corno, Mandinach 1983). However, Garrison (2005) argues that simple cognitive presence is not sufficient without careful design, structure and leadership of the online course. Maor (2003) on the other hand uses the ‘four hats’ metaphor of looking at pedagogical, social, managerial and technical skills exercised by the tutor in developing interaction and reflection in a virtual learning community. Based on the work of McLoughlin and Luca (2000), the role of the tutor can be to promote collaboration, foster self-direction, support articulation of problems and review concepts.

By contrast, from the students’ perspective, self-assessment appears to relate more to their motivation than to their cognitive learning (Sitzmann et al. 2010). Cognitive engagement in this context relates to a constructivist epistemology of instructional systems that can support learning not only in traditional classroom settings but also at a distance (Jonassen et al. 1995). Empirical studies confirm that students’ performance is positively related to the number of on-line forums in which they participated, but negatively related to the average number of postings per forum (Hwang, Francesco 2010).

In this study we explore the level of interest and participation of students so as to understand the range of pedagogical activities employed, and how they may be utilised in designing a virtual course, defining the two terms as follows:

- **Interest:** Receiving, referring to searching for materials, browsing or reading materials.

- **Participation:** Posting and contributing, referring to writing on forums, or even asking clarifying questions.
It should be emphasised, however, that in our view the technology remains secondary for online participation. Arbaugh (2000), identifying the instructor’s effort to create an interactive classroom as the most important factor, concludes that “while some level of technological sophistication may be important, teaching expertise may be the primary criterion for teaching success in the online classroom environment”. The dialectical dimension of cognitive engagement in online learning groups on the other hand has not been sufficiently explored in the literature. As a contribution to knowledge in this area, in the following section we, therefore, propose a conceptual framework and methodology to assist management educators and designers of online courses.

**Conceptual framework and methodology**

The methodology of this study is based on the theoretical principles of cognitive engagement discussed in the previous part. Most studies on asynchronous group discussions in online learning use thematic units, messages, and sometimes sentences as their units of analysis (De Wever et al. 2006). However, if we are to compare interest and participation in online learning communities, we plan to focus more specifically on tutor strategies, online seminar tasks and students. This methodology builds on the work of Hara et al., (2000), which in turn is inspired by Henri (1992), a pioneer in the content analysis of online forums.

This study makes use of Schrire’s (2006) mixed methods approach for a qualitative analysis, applied on asynchronous discussion groups in online distance learning. As mentioned earlier, in the virtual learning environment it is possible to study both interest through recorded activity logs in the system, and participation through posts. To establish rigour in the study findings and assure their validity, a set of guiding principles suggested by Klein and Myers (1999) is applied according to the following table:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of principle</th>
<th>Application on this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. The Fundamental Principle of the Hermeneutic Circle</strong></td>
<td>Content analysis was done through coding. Multiple iterations with the codes and discussions between the two authors were essential to synthesise key findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It suggests that all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. The Principle of Contextualization</strong></td>
<td>Awareness of the multicultural cohort of students and its role on the different participation styles in the virtual learning classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires critical reflection of the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can see how the current situation under investigation emerged.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. The Principle of Interaction Between the Researchers and the Subjects</strong></td>
<td>The first author of this study was at the same time online tutor for the. Interactions with the students were carefully planned for the purpose of this study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires critical reflection on how the research materials (or &quot;data&quot;) were socially constructed through the interaction between the researchers and participants.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. The Principle of Abstraction and Generalization</strong></td>
<td>The analysis of the data from the online forums and the records from the virtual learning environment were informed by the literature and theoretical underpinnings of cognitive provocation in education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires relating the idiographic details revealed by the data interpretation through the application of principles one and two to theoretical, general concepts that describe the nature of human understanding and social action.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning</strong></td>
<td>Dialogue and debate were two of the key cognitive provocation techniques applied to motivate classroom participation among students, but also among the two authors of this paper to reflect on the findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings with subsequent cycles of revision.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. The Principle of Multiple Interpretations</strong></td>
<td>A conscious attempt is made to present a rigorous methodology and rich data that inform the findings according to the authors’ interpretation, but also allow the readers to build their own interpretations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible differences in interpretations among the participants as are typically expressed in multiple narratives or stories of the same sequence of events under study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. The Principle of Suspicion</strong></td>
<td>The limitations of generalisation from a single case study and the potential bias caused by the participatory role of the lead author in the course are recognised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires sensitivity to possible &quot;biases&quot; and systematic &quot;distortions&quot; in the narratives collected from the participants.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As mentioned in the table, qualitative analysis of codes and reflections based on multiple iterations is applied to analyse the asynchronous discourse between the tutor and students in an online class (Gibson 2009). The discourse analysis of online seminar forums will explore how engagement evolves individually and in the virtual group through guided discussions and debates about the given tasks. Finally, we draw conclusions and offer some suggestions based on the pedagogical methods observed in our study, on how educators might improve participation in the virtual learning environment.

**Empirical evidence and use of research methods**

This research was conducted according to the Ethics Committee guidelines of Royal Holloway University of London. The data used in this study is taken from an undergraduate first year course for the BA degree in Business Administration in the University of London International Programme. 539 students had access to the virtual learning environment studied here in April 2012. The majority of the students were young, working full-time, and based outside UK. The Moodle log reports are property of the college so they were analysed quantitatively in an anonymised form by replacing names with numbers. The analysis of 50,641 activity log entries for the first year 2010/11 and 46,861 for the second 2011/12 is visualised for critical interpretation and analysis in Figures 1 and 2.

All students were informed about the study via an email, and asked for their permission to cite their posts in the online forums. 44 students replied positively to this request so our qualitative analysis is based on this sample. A summary of the log report of online activities is available upon request from the first author of this paper who is also the online tutor for this course. Online forum posts and background for in-text citations are given in Appendix 2. Following these rules of transparency and restrictions is necessary to avoid any potential conflict of interest in the work we are reporting here.
A great number of students on the other hand attended the course in host institutions in their countries with local tutors, and therefore didn’t engage much in the virtual learning environment. This is important to know because it explains to a certain degree the low level of engagement by many students in online forums. In this context, it is important to redefine interest and participation introduced earlier for methodological purposes:

**Interest**: The number of student activities in the virtual learning environment.

**Participation**: The number of posts in online forums.

Interest and participation are specifically represented and discussed in Figures 1 and 2. Participants are those who interact with others, while observers are those who don’t. Defining these key terms is important for understanding the next section of findings and analysis. As we are interested on the active cognitive engagement of the students, and not simply on the number of passive activities they perform online, the question we had to answer was the following:

**What is the relationship between students’ interest in online activities and their participation with posts in learning forums?**

To answer this question we first identified those that engaged the most in all online activities. This was based on the number of occurrences for each activity in the log. Then we counted the number of posts for the top 100 students out of 539 who engaged in total throughout the two years, including the tutor and system’s administrators. Finally, a qualitative analysis of the posts from the 44 students who agreed to share them for this study was conducted. Coding analysis was used to categorise quotes from the students and the tutor under different for identifying triggers of cognitive engagement. The analysis of our findings is presented in the following section.
Findings and analysis

The difference between engagement and learning

Students’ participation is recorded automatically in the virtual learning environment for each user, including here students, the tutor, and course administrators. This follows a strict timeline for every event. The first diagram below gives a graphical presentation of the most common activities, listed according to their frequency of appearance in the log, regardless of the time spent on each of them:

![FIGURE 1: Interest on online activities: Comparison of two years](image)

It is clear at a first glance from this diagram that more than 95% of activities are passive, involving viewing something in the system rather than participating or engaging. Students spend most of their time in the VLE viewing their course materials or forums. The activities that follow such as forum views, resource views, assignment views, user views etc. are of the same nature. Only 1.08% of activities for the 1st year and 0.56% of activities for the 2nd year, account for adding a post to the online forums. Regardless of its very small weight in this picture, posting something in forums and discussions is assumed to be the core evidence of
learning evidenced and reported in the virtual class. Only after the students had created such learning content, under the direction of the tutor, was it possible for passive viewers to read it.

This analysis was based on the six seminars for each year, which formed the academic learning forums. This group of 100 students with the highest participation in online learning activities is representative because they account for about 55% of the online participation in all activities presented in the previous figure. The relationship between interest and participation is presented in the following chart:

![FIGURE 2: A map of interest and participation in the VLE](image.png)

Figure 2 reveals that there is **no clear relationship between students’ interest in online activities and their participation with posts in online seminar forums.** This is an important finding of our study. However, this diagram does not capture the changes in participation from one online seminar, following the tutors’ instructions for cognitive engagement mentioned later in this study. This has prompted us to focus more on the qualitative analysis of students’ interest and participation.
A major problem evidenced in Figure 3 is the low level of both interest and participation, with the majority of students concentrated near the matching point of the two axes. There are no cases between 0% and around 0.25% shown in this diagram because only the top 100 participating students are selected as mentioned earlier, but in reality all the remaining 400+ registered students fall in the near 0% group not represented here because of the very low level of participation. Nevertheless, we believe that the huge amount of work and thinking behind the posts of these top participating students compared to the passive interest of many others who simply viewed them deserves a careful qualitative analysis of their contribution. This follows in the next section where we endeavour to understand the nature of debates and triggers to cognitive engagement.

**The value of debates in the virtual learning network**

In Figure 3, drawing on the above observations, we show how the Interest – Participation Framework we are presenting is informed by the research data identified in Figure 3. An outlier from the ‘Interested Participants’ quadrant was removed from this diagram for better visual representation.

![Figure 3: An Interest - Participation Framework for Online Cognitive Engagement](image-url)
This framework emerged from the data after we reviewed students’ interest and participation in the virtual learning environment. However, from the statistical visualisation attempted here it cannot be identified how the students who followed the tutors’ instructions changed their interest and participation behaviour.

We anticipated at the outset, that the students might achieve a higher level of learning by engaging with each other rather than only with the tutor in the seminar forums. To facilitate this interaction according to the cognitive engagement principles of McLoughlin and Luca (2000), the tutor had to foster debate, provoke critical argumentation and encourage students to compare ideas. This is commensurate with the constructivist approach and the purpose was to prompt students to participate in constructive cognitive engagement and self-learning. To do so, the tutor summarised the feedback for every 3-6 students’ answers in a single long post rather than individual ones for each student. Out of the 224 comments posted by the tutor an example of a grouped response are given in Appendix 1, Citation 4.

This grouped feedback by the tutor has individual comments for each student, identifying their strengths and weaknesses in arguments and asking more questions to advance discussions. This example indirectly indicates that the students considered each other’s posts previously in their replies as required. Here they could not only find the feedback to their answers, but also see how the tutor responded to others and learn too from these exchanges. Although many students enjoyed this practice in the beginning, the increased workload from assignments, examinations and other courses lowered their participation towards the end. In the final seminars (4 but more in 5 and 6) students continued to answer questions and participate in the seminars, but spent less time reviewing the posts of others’ posts or including them in their answers.
Triggers of cognitive engagement in online seminar forums

Some students chose not to follow the rule of reading, reflecting and commenting on others’ posts at all, despite the tutor’s constant encouragement. This rule appeared especially challenging to those coming from education systems or cultures where memorisation and reproduction of knowledge is given a higher importance than debates and argumentation. Many of these students remained silent in the seminars although they engaged regularly in passive online activities such as reading the posts of others of different study materials. Those students who did participate from this group limited their responses to the traditional ‘tutor’s question – student’s answer’ format.

To capture what triggers cognitive engagement and how this can evolve in the virtual learning environment, in Figure 5 we propose a more ingrained description of the choices students encounter and how they react to these alternatives. This diagram represents our conceptual interpretation of how we might develop a network of cognitive engagement activities in online learning environments.

![Diagram](image)

**FIGURE 4: A Model of Network Cognitive Provocation in Online Learning**
The main purpose of this diagram in Figure 5 is to demonstrate, according to our understanding and following the goal of this study, how students engage in online distance learning. The motivation for constructing the model comes from our analysis of the online seminar posts. To further explain and illustrate this conceptual framework we would like to bring some examples from these forums. The online seminars were started by the tutor with a task or a question as shown in the following examples:

**Ask (from tutor):**

“Please read The Case Study ‘Banana Time’ thinking of the 3 questions at the end of Topic 1”

“What are the application of Taylorism and Fordism in modern multinational companies?”

Most of the registered students ignored the seminars by not posting anything on them, although many of them read the material posted by others. A few of them answered the questions and engaged in active discussions with each other and the tutor. Their replies consisted of short essays of approximately 300-700 words, which were based strictly on the study materials and the books. For example, a typical response to the seminar questions would progress as follows:

**Answer (from student):**

“Hello everyone,

Here are my answers.”
In case study Fordism in food we can find clear traces of Fordism in marketing and manufacturing practice. The companies concentrated on mass production of few standard products...

Following the instruction to consider others’ posts, most of the students acknowledged previous responses by adding a sentence confirming that they had read and understood the content:

**Confirm (from student):**

“Hi [student A] and [student B], I liked reading your ideas on the topic and especially in regard to Friedman's concepts of control.”

These impartial and superficial remarks complied with the tutor’s requirement to engage, but didn’t delve into the arguments. To provoke deeper engagement the tutor employed additional questions and comments in the feedback to students’ posts. For example:

**Provoke (from tutor):**

“I like your argument that a company can take a rational perspective when looking at the big picture, but adjust to human relationships when breaking it down as you mentioned in your example. However, don’t you think we can have some conflict here and how to deal with it?”

Few students took a critical position towards others’ posts, and for the most part agreed with their peers. However in some, albeit a fewer number of cases, students disagreed with the views of others as the following example shows:

**Provoke (from student):**
‘The product of this organisation, the education it provides, undoubtedly has wide cultural and moral repercussions. To disagree with [student Y], I don’t think that this is an immature view.”

Even in this case, the disagreement is left open for discussions and not directed to student Y personally. Moreover, following a strategy similar to the tutor’s, some students posed individual questions for the whole group. To compensate for this gap in providing critical comments the tutor was obliged to intervene with more searching feedback and provocative questions. We can see from the previous example of a grouped feedback given by the tutor to five students how this was achieved. Furthermore, the tutor had to stress the importance of debate, and to assure students that they were free to criticise and disagree with each other beyond the standard formal essay-type answers. The tutor offered the following guidance during the first seminar after they had started to post their replies:

“Please feel free to disagree, but provide some good logical arguments showing that you are able to defend and support them with evidence from the literature (with references) or real world examples. […] No need to post standard replies anymore. From this point, you can add your ideas to existing replies, highlighting when you agree or disagree and why.”

Furthermore, critique and disagreement needs to be praised not only generally, but also specifically, as the tutor demonstrates in this instance when commenting on a student’s post:

React (from tutor):

“I specifically liked that fact that you do not hesitate to agree or disagree with points of view or others, to make your opinion clear, sustaining it with evidence and logical analysis.”
We observed that students react more to questions or critique than to general or affirmative comments. They follow-up with more attention to the provocations, critiques, disagreements and challenges for debates. In this context, the students’ advancement of knowledge progresses along two different paths. The first path follows an acceptance of a critical suggestion:

**Advance (from student):**

*Hi [Tutor], I found very interesting the points you had highlighted regarding job stability. [...] It can vary from the type of organization, from my own experience.*

The second path reinforces an earlier disagreement without changing opinion based on critical comments or suggestions. This was rarer than the first case. For example, a student whose opinion faced some criticism from his peers, acknowledged the disagreement then qualified their response with a further post as follows:

**React (from student):**

*“I will try to respond later to those who offered their critiques of my views.”*

The communication ethics of the forums were preserved. Disagreements, intended provocations, debates and critiques on the other hand were often appreciated as this statement from a student towards the tutor shows:

*“I understood about the points now and anyway healthy critique doesn't hurt, it is just pushing to do better job in my case.”*

Even after long discussions that sometime became personal, students understood that this was all for the sake of learning through discussions. The following citation from a student’s post replying to another one with whom she had a heated debate shows this:
“No offence! Thank you for sharing your opinion! I think, hopping into the debate is without doubt one of the best ways to learn.”

Many posts were acknowledged with a ‘Thank you!’ throughout the forums by both the tutor for the students’ participation, and also by many students who felt they benefited from it. Both students and the tutor can be either senders or receivers of information depending on the task involved. Easton (2003) identifies that “many communication skills required of the ODL instructor are similar to those needed for effective classroom teaching”. However, following our discussion in this part, a paradigm shift is necessary to accommodate virtual space and time techniques to students’ engagement styles in an online environment.

**Conclusions and directions for further research**

Our preliminary purpose in this paper has been to analyse the relationship between interest and participation in online environments. Whilst our initial results revealed no demonstrable link between these two activities, the finding prompted further inquiry into the importance of debate as a pedagogical tool in online learning environments. However, perhaps, the most important contribution of this study is our attempt to provide a holistic approach of evaluation for online learning engagement, which allows us to research both students’ and tutor’s roles. To do so, we propose, use and analyse a model of network cognitive provocation in online distance learning environments.

This research highlights the importance of peer-to-peer learning and engagement in the online learning process. In this context, we contend that the tutor should not only provide guidance, but encourage students to interact more with each other and reflect on how their individual acquisition of knowledge is contingent on a collective learning experience.
The role of the tutor to provoke online participation is very important. This study identifies debates, critical comments or continuing questions as three powerful tools in this regard. To provoke debate and encourage the student to advance their position, the tutor, as demonstrated here, must reassure in the first instance by affirming the relevance of the student’s contribution to the debate. If used correctly to control and not to block discussions, they can foster constructive discussions for learning in the online students’ group.

We recommend that future research should analyse how students and tutors engage more with different online tools offered by increasingly complex virtual learning environments. Cross-course comparisons should deliver interesting insight on the importance of the socio-technical aspects in the virtual classroom and beyond through online social networks.
References


APPENDIX A: Online forum posts and background for in-text citations

Citation 1a:
Tutor* - Monday, 8 November 2010, 11:26 AM

Please read The Case Study ‘Banana Time’ thinking of the 3 questions at the end of the Topic 1.

You can post here any issues for discussion emerging from this case.

Regards,

[Tutor’s name]

Citation 1b:
Tutor* - Monday, 5 December 2011, 06:38 PM

Research, Think and comment on the following:

What are the application of Taylorism and Fordism in modern multinational companies based on the case “Fordism in food”. Identify & discuss similarities and differences between Taylorism and Fordism in the service sector based on your own examples.

Citation 2:
Student* - Wednesday, 7 December 2011, 06:52 AM

Hello everyone,

Here are my answers.

In case study Fordism in food we can find clear traces of Fordism in marketing and manufacturing practice. The companies concentrated on mass production of few standard products. As for British companies they carried greater product range aiming mass and luxury market. That can be explained with historical background of British nation when even
Taylorism had trouble to spread with their strong craft and general trade unions and underdevelopment of management as social class.

American firms were aiming a single mass market without going into complicated labor-intensive assortments market segment.

I believe that chocolate manufacturing market of USA still keeping the same strategy. Supermarket shelves are full of the same chocolate bars and candy, the same companies names with limited product range.

Tracies of Fordism and Tailorism are present in nowadays business life especially it is visible in service sector. I will not go into Macdonalds analisation as it is being discussed before, lets look at coffee shops, for example Starbucks.

Taylorism present in form of:
1. In low skilled and easy to train labor.
2. Highly divided, specialized, routinized form of labor. Coffee made by one person and cashier handled by the other.
3. Supervision. Workers are told which job tasks to perform by their supervisors and managers. Moreover, they are required to occupy certain job positions and complete tasks assigned to them. Workers are allowed to make occasional requests to switch their positions and tasks. However, the decision is ultimately up to the supervisors and managers.
4. Heavy form of rule structure.

Fordism present in form of
1. Standardized mass oriented homogeneous product and service (flavors of coffee)
2. Adaptation of Tailorism in a way of optimizing work (division of labor, specialization),
3. Interchangeability of workers(even though they do assigned job they can easy switch to other as tasks are simple)
4. Managerial task and supervision is highly present.

Post Fordism present in form of:

5. 1. increase in more customized products (seasonal coffee flavors, toppings)

So we can see some overlapping between Fordism and Tailorism, mostly it is Fordism which include in itself some parts of Tailorism and ignoring others. Overall Ford was aiming to reach mass production with the slick work process and Taylor was concentrated on optimizing the job, breaking it into pieces, timing it. Ford cared about whole company profitability when Taylor concentrated on individual worker productivity. Taylor aimed law wages as a part of system to profit, and Ford concentrated in increasing the wealth of his workers with 5 $day as he believed in creating market to buy his product.

Citation 3:

Student* - Friday, 2 March 2012, 08:33 AM

Hi [Student A] and [Student B],

I liked reading your ideas on the topic and especially in regard to Friedman's concepts of control. Reflecting on Beynon et als ideas of Boundaryless careers, like you both mentioned, this can be seen as autonomous responsibility, with employers, in contrast to say McDonalds, give employees the freedom to make their own career decisions to acquire the skills they need to best perform their job. However, I think this holds an even tighter control over employees. An employee who is aware of the insecurity of their position will maintain all efforts to remain at the maximum employability level to secure some kind of job stability. In this way the employer is using what Edwards described as bureaucratic control, where Employers have policies and procedures in place in order to gain maximum output from employees.
Berlitz language schools, employ teachers via free-lance contracts. The better the teacher, the more lessons given, the more the teacher is paid. Like described in the extract in Topic 12, Berlitz is "not expected to take responsibility for continuity of employment" Guidebook p47, therefore teachers are responsible for maintaining students, and being at the top of their game to achieve a minimum of job stability and economic security.

More evident today is the inequality of the employment relationship. The extract from Beynon et al, implies that employers have the power to absorb as much knowledge and labour power from employees as possible and to put it crudely, can discard of them when their skills and resources have become obsolete. This lack of responsibility for the employer, gives him a further advantage, as it keeps the workforce "on their toes" and can eliminate the major problem of the bounded working relationship "indeterminacy". The inability to determine the amount of effort to be extracted from the employee can be an area of conflict, however in a case where an employee has become stagnant in their position, problems are far easier to resolve in the case of an employer without responsibilities in comparison to one with responsibilities.

Although this unequal employment relationship may seem favourable to employers, it causes significant damage to the population. The labour Market of Italy, which in The last 10 years has made it practically impossible for people to obtain working contracts for longer than 1 year with zero job security, has resulted in a non existent growth rate and a stagnant economy. In these situations in theory the government is the organisation that will stand between the employer and the employee, whether it be for job seekers allowance like in England or other kinds of unemployment support.

Finally, I think that the role between the employer and the employee is most definitely affected by culture. Italians for example tend to remain in the same company throughout
their life as security is regarded as the upmost priority. In The Tavistock Institutes research of Boundaryless careers, Rodrigues and Guest (2010) documented that job tenure was lower in England being around 8 years as opposed to 12 years in Italy, France and Portugal. The research on the whole however, argued that in fact there is little evidence that shows a greater increase in the Boundaryless career, with job tenure remaining the same or in some cases slightly increased over the last 10 years. Personally, in the climate of recent years, employees are exercising all possible means to gain security, whether that means maintaining an undetermined contract within their existing company, or maximising employability in the hopes of achieving a stable work relationship.

Thanks.

Citation 4:
Tutor* - Thursday, 19 January 2012, 11:55 AM
Dear All,
I see there is some interesting discussion going on here so I would like to comment on some of your postings:

[Student A], your discussion on airline policies for disabled people is interesting, but this topic is at the margin of management theories and discussions we are having in this course. You are supposed to think like a management student, not simply a customer. This is not a questionnaire on what you think about the company or a test of your knowledge about it. In your discussion I expected to see how you can use some of the things you have learned from the topics so far to come up with some managerial suggestions.

[Student B], although you focus mainly on motivation, I like your argument that a company can take a rational perspective when looking at the big picture, but adjust to human
relationships when breaking it down as you mentioned in your example. However, don’t you think we can have some conflict here and how to deal with it?

[Student C], you have picked up well on Veronica’s answer with your critical comment. You also take a human perspective, talking about personal and team development, but why do you think some balance is necessary here, what skills need to emerge, leadership maybe...

[Student D], your account on AirAsia is very good and I like your suggestions. However, could you include some of their views in your answer, possibly contradicting or commenting on them? This would have been as valuable as focusing only on the initial question, and I am sure you would have learned more. Also, do you think culture plays any role on AirAsia’s management which is more economic/rational? We will discuss about organisational culture later, but it is good to think about it.

[Student E], your example of United owned by its employees is interesting. You gave a very clear account and some suggestions. The question I would be interested on is the following: Don’t you think there is some conflict between employees owning the company yet often having to work in an economic/rational environment which sometime is not very social and friendly? Obviously this is a managerial decision, so you could think of this question in the context of communication between management and employees, the shortest part in your answer.

[Student F], very interesting account on Redjet, but where are you suggestions and where is your discussion on the scientific or human relations’ approaches of classical management? Describing a case and taking an analytical and managerial perspective is good, but in this course you have to make some use of the theory we have discussed.

[Student G], again, interesting account, but where are your suggestions? The case of a state owned company that you brought could have been a valuable contribution to the discussion
and answering John’s question, in your answer you could have considered whether ownership plays a role in the rational/economic vs. human management as well.

For all of you, can we give some conclusion after all this discussion on what form of management: rational/economic or human is better for airlines in terms of policy, communication, decision-making, structure and motivation? Obviously there is no simple answer if we consider different contexts, but you can try to critically summarize your suggestions.

Kind regards,

[Tutor’s name]

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**Citation 5:**

Tutor* - Thursday, 20 January 2011, 12:46 AM

Dear [Student name],

This is a really good review of the questions. Among other things, I specifically liked that fact that you do not hesitate to agree or disagree with points of view or others, to make your opinion clear, sustaining it with evidence and logical analysis. I would encourage this more in general.

My only question regarding your support of the social responsibility view is the following: Do you think companies take that view only because they are concerned for the society?

Kind regards,

[Tutor’s name]

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**Citation 5:**

Student* - Tuesday, 6 March 2012, 12:28 PM
Hi [Tutor’s name],

I found very interesting the points you had highlighted regarding job stability:

What is the price of job stability for employees these days, so what do they have to do for it?

It can vary from the type of organization, from my own experience, regarding big companies, first of all there exists one career development path for each of the employees what used to happen is that the path is designed based not on the interests or even remarkable abilities of the employee but on the projections of the company in terms of human resources planning; from my viewpoint this can affect motivation depending on the professional objectives of each employee. Going back to the point what is needed to have job stability, for the employee this implies to accept the career path designed for him/her, extend working hours, do not limit his/her responsibilities to those stipulated in the job description, if you are in one of these international companies it could also mean that you should have mobility.

In some way I see that there are a lot of sacrifices in many aspects, i.e professional development aspirations, personal goals. Some people due to the responsibilities acquired take the option of paying the price that job stability demands these days, others will find the way to get out of the system and move towards their aspirations.

[Student’s name]

Citation 6:

Student* - Tuesday, 8 November 2011, 06:35 PM

Mr [Tutor’s name],

While there will be a cost associated with increased supervision we would have to determine if the increased productivity will justify the cost.
What cost would you put on worker safety? Ike has tinkered with Sammy's tool once before, suppose the next time he does it and Sammy it hurt or killed on the job? While some may not agree with my views, this "horseplay" could turn ugly.

I will try to respond later to those who offered their critiques of my views.

Citation 7:
Student* - Sunday, 15 January 2012, 11:33 AM
Dear [Tutor’s name],
I understood about points now and anyway healthy critique doesn't hurt, it is just pushing to do better job in my case.
Thank you
[Student’s name]

Citation 8:
Student* - Sunday, 19 December 2010, 06:20 PM
Hi [Student A]!
No offence! Thank you for sharing your opinion! I think, hopping into the debate is without doubt one of the best ways to learn.
Next time let’s try to stick to the topic.
With all good wishes,
[Student’s name]