Servant-leadership: the Online Way! E-learning where community building is key

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Abstract

The digitalisation of educational communities has increased rapidly in the last decade. Modern technologies transform the way educational leaders such as teachers, tutors, deans and supervisors view and manage their educational communities. More often, educational leaders offer a variety of gateways, guiding the e-learners in their search for finding and understanding information. A new type of leader is required for understanding the needs and requirements of geographically dispersed e-learners. This calls for a compassioned kind of leader, able to reconcile the dilemma of high-tech versus hi-touch in the online classroom. This article examines servant-leadership and its implications for e-learning in the 24/7 classroom where community building is key.

Keywords: e-learning, online servant-leadership, awareness raising, community building.

Servant-leadership: Introduction

Before looking at the specifics of e-learning and the supportive role of servant-leadership in the online learning community, we will first introduce and discuss servant-leadership in general. Over the centuries, world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and philosophies such as those of the Romans and Greeks adopted the idea of servant-leadership in their own way. Thus, for example, within Islamic tradition, Sultan and Weir (2010) state how the Prophet Mohammad about 1400 years ago made his stance clear on what he thought of a leader. He said (in an authenticated hadith, i.e., a saying or statement): "The leader of the people is their servant" (in Arabic: Sayyidu Al-koam Khadimohum).

In recent decades, an international knowledge network on servant-leadership has developed. In the 1970s Robert K. Greenleaf (1977, 1991) helped a great deal in the enhancement of the servant-leadership movement and strengthened the connection with the world of business and academia. Nowadays servant-leadership in its various dimensions is a growing movement across cultures and national borders. At the same time, in the business world, public organizations and academia a number of leadership developments or perceptions occurred that are not explicitly labelled "servant-leadership" but have a lot in common with the principles of servant-leadership e.g., authentic leadership, natural leadership, responsible leadership, and intercultural leadership. However, so far, less attention has been paid on servant-leadership and e-learning. This is remarkable because, especially in virtual learning communities where you do not meet face-to-face, the meaning of trust, talent nurturing and commitment are very much at stake. In understanding and serving a wide range of culturally diverse learners, the stewardship role of the teacher is an asset.

What is servant-leadership? Servant-leadership is multi-dimensional and enhances more than ever before the human, ethical and talent factors in organizations. Traditional leaders tend to be focused on tasks, control and processes in organizations. Servant-leaders focus more on the people who are their followers. They are connected with people, reconciling dilemmas and empowering them as team members, employees, customers, students or citizens. The servant-leader is keen to contribute value to others (e.g., pupils, students, trainees) in order to let their talents grow. The term "servant leader" is defined by Greenleaf (1991) as someone who is servant first... "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature."

The served people become healthier and more autonomous. The served people or followers are more likely to develop a sense of responsibility to others. Servant-leadership is not a static concept. Servant leadership may include qualities like described above. In literature (amongst others Greenleaf, 1977 and 1991; Keith, 2011; Nuijten, 2009; Trompenaars and Voerman, 2009; Sarayrah, 2004; Vargas and Hanlon, 2007 and Spears, 2000) servant-leadership qualities can be found like listening, forgiveness, empathy, humility, care

for people and the organization, healing of relationships, awareness, persuasion, courage, giving feedback, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, authenticity, commitment to the growth and empowerment of others and building community. Teachers with some or more of these servant-leadership (high-touch) qualities can make the difference in the e-learning environment. In the (high-tech) online classroom the teacher, more than ever before, needs to be qualified to amongst others listen, care for the e-learners, encourage awareness raising, give feedback and, last but not least, build a vivid learning community. This calls for a compassioned kind of educational leader, able to connect high-tech (technology mediated learning, multimedia infrastructure) opportunities with hi-touch (contact, human interaction, commitment to the growth of others, etc.) opportunities in the online classroom.

Dilemma reconciliation

The concept of servant-leadership includes astonishing dilemmas. Servant-leaders serve their followers with compassion. At the same time servant-leaders are accountable for the performance of their organization, e.g., a company, school (in our case an e-learning environment), church, or even a nation. Each investment of the servant-leader in the well being of the others is at the same time an investment for the benefit of the common good. The leader's skills can be found in bridging the contrasting dilemmas of leading and serving, control and compassion, high-tech and high touch, power over and trust/commitment to others (Trompenaars, 2007). This article will explore how servant-leaders in the e-learning community are able to reconcile these dilemmas, and can provide the inspiration and motivation for cultural change in 21st century learning organizations.

Trompenaars and Voerman (2009) show that servant-leadership can be found across not only modern cultures but also in ancient cultures such as in China, India and Greece. Aristotle stated that the essence of life is to serve others and do well. Within the concept of servant-leadership, leading and serving are two sides of the same coin. Despite the diversity among people, there is a common basis, namely, being human. According to Trompenaars and Voerman, servant-leaders are not tempted into making a choice between two opposite (cross-cultural and/or ethical) values. In other words, servant-leaders avoid choosing an unsatisfactory compromise. The servant-leader will choose a solution where both opposing value sets – like control and compassion in a virtual team– are combined in a dialectic process. Through thesis and antithesis, the servant-leader may reach a synthesis of the opposing value sets. This reconciliation process enriches the intercultural context of the common good, in our case the e-learning environment.

High-tech versus high touch

As far as trust and commitment in virtual teams is concerned, Trompenaars (2007) argues that the distant high-tech extreme can lead to disruption whereas the diffuse hi-touch extreme can lead to a lack of perspective. A collision between hi-tech and hi-touch results in paralysis. The interplay of the two extremes is the most fruitful for a virtual team. In a virtual team recognition of privacy is necessary. However, complete separation of private life leads to alienation and superficiality. Business is business, but stable and deep relationships mean strong affiliations, according to Trompenaars. King (2011) exemplifies dilemma reconciliation in online transnational education. How can quality standards be imposed and tested in a highly flexible online learning environment across national borders? To serve students better, it's important to know how learning standards can be reconciled with different rates of student progress and attainment. Furthermore, learning standards need to be reconciled with diverse cultural contexts, languages, legislation and accountancy standards, according to King (2011).

E-learning: a permanent visitor in the school curriculum

E-learning comprises all forms of computer-enabled learning activities, like web-based learning, virtual team collaboration and content exchange via the Internet. The roles of instructors/teachers, tutors (ideally they are educational servant-leaders) and pupils are changing; the e-learning process can take place in a diverse range of self-paced learning or led by the instructor. E-learners may have access to information and learning material everywhere, both in formal and informal settings.

Recent developments

Mobile applications and social media enhance e-learning. Online collaboration goes beyond academic and traditional educational boundaries. New teaching and learning communities occur. Traditional pedagogical/didactical principles are challenged and need (re)shaping. Modern technologies transform the way teachers, tutors, and supervisors view and manage their educational infrastructures and if/how they can serve the e-learners community.

Multimedia access

In the current digital age learners can access information more easily than ever before, at any time and

place. The traditional role of the school recently reshaped and transformed to the 24/7 classroom where e-learning takes place. The e-learning environment, its timing, pace and intensity has multiple faces. E-learners may interact with their peers and/or with their teachers, using various media to access and generate information. Schools use software and content provided by (national) authorities, or developed in more informal settings. The inter linkages/cross-overs of blogs, video, audio, phone, online communities c.q. Social media provide new opportunities in the e-learning environment, beyond the boundaries of the traditional school infrastructure.

Boundaryless online communities c.q. social media

In particular the role of online communities in the e-learning process is emerging and may serve learning with a boundaryless horizon. What are the origins of online communities in the educational environment? Actually some social media originated from a campus oriented e-learning environment. Facebook was launched in 2004 as a service for Harvard University students. Initially, only users with a Harvard.edu –email address could join the Harvard network, but nobody else could. It expanded by giving access to students of other colleges and schools. In 2005 high schools and companies were included in the Facebook social/regional network as well. In 2006 Facebook became accessible to the public (Boyd and Hargittai, 2010). Only in 2009 Facebook removed the importance of (regional) networks. The case of Facebook illustrates how the boundaries between the official school system, e-learning and the outside world diminished during the last decade, and new horizons emerged. Some other social communities are Youtube (about 20% of al Internet traffic), Twitter (the most popular micro-blogging service worldwide), and Google+. Google+ started in 2011, a mixture of Facebook and Twitter. Within a few weeks time the social platform Google+ had 25 million followers (Jüngling, 2011).

Some attributes of e-learning:

1. E-learning allows e-learners to be *more self-sufficient*, which creates new opportunities for learners with special needs, not able to attend regular classes, depending on the skilful guidance of online servant-leaders (compare empathy quality of servant-leadership).
2. e-learning is enabled via *the Internet, a fundamental e-learning requirement*. This also implies that learners who have no access to the Internet (community) for technical, economic or social reasons, are educationally disadvantaged as far as e-learning is concerned. E-inclusion is one of the priorities of online servant-leaders (compare community building quality of servant-leadership).
3. *Information literacy skills are needed* to distinct/judge/verify on the quality of sources available. Online servant-leaders can help to create awareness in this respect (compare awareness raising quality of servant-leadership).
4. Internet technologies have created *new opportunities for e-learners to share knowledge*, to communicate and to create information in social networks (compare community building quality of servant-leadership).
5. *e-learning is challenged and supported by the availability of open source software*. Creating content in an online community of peers is illustrated by open source software (OSS) like Wikipedia, Youtube and Sourceforge (Shen and Monge, 2011). Sourceforge (www.sourceforge.net) is the largest OSS community on the web, with more than 230.000 projects and over two million registered developers. Sourceforge is an important e-learning community and provides amongst others server logs to the academic community.
6. *organizational forms of e-learning vary enormously*. In the one extreme it may involve a structured online curriculum just embedded in the formal school system. The other extreme is the learning that takes place in informal networks in online communities. Informal e-learning and communities become equally or even more important compared to formal ones. More often a mixture of formal and informal e-learning will happen. An interesting study on the variety of media and the inherent literacy levels was undertaken by Koltay (2011). According to Koltay new media are not supportive to critical thinking. Differentiation is needed between amateur and professional contents produced in new media. Glaser (2011, translated) underlines the easy and informal way of clicking through programmes "it can simply feel good, to sit in front of your screen perceiving it like a home-altar, a cockpit or personal war room, and every now and then you click a small program and surf the web, or something alike, without any big pretentions"
7. *informality, reputation of e-learners and group dynamics*. Group dynamics in the (in)formal e-learning environment may differ from the traditional classroom. In informal e-learning environments, credentials of the online peers acquainted in the real world are hardly verifiable. It seems that formal degrees and certificates to primarily classify people become less important (compare *achieving* cultures where people value others according to their performance, and *ascribing* cultures emphasizing a person's position in the organization and the society, Trompenaars and Woolliams, 2011). Though, technology and social networks will become more intelligent to know the background of –learners in informal networks. According to Shen and Monge (2011) the reputation of peers in the real world (compare achieving or ascribing cultures) does not matter. Peers in the online community (like blogsphere, expertise network, multiplayer online games) value e.g. what software a developer writes, and this counts to his/her reputation. The social drivers that structure the collaboration may include the knowledge of the peers, the seniority and similar attitudes, beliefs and personal characteristics (Shen and Monge, 2011). For group dynamics, culture and shared language use in online communities see also Huffaker (2011).

Community building

The servant-leadership attribute of 'community building' means that the leader (in our case the instructor, the e-teacher or the online facilitator) helps building a community among those who work and learn within a given organization. With the rise of the Internet, the impact of leaders on followers, their communication and community building can be enormous. In the 21st Century followers may be linked primarily in an informal way to their leaders. Thus, for example, in January 2011 the opinion of an informal leader three-doubled the price per share of H&H Imports on the Stock Exchange. Rapper Curtis James Jackson III alias 50 Cent recommended his 3,8 million followers on Twitter to buy shares of a headphone company H&H Imports (Het Financieele Dagblad, 2011). Opinion leaders in other branches e.g. Barack Obama during the presidential elections, or DJs influence the communities of 21st C generations. What lessons can be learned for community building in e-learning?

Below we give some more examples of community-building in the 24/7 classroom. First, by creating a Charity Community Service course, and encourage a sense of belonging through transformative learning, shepherd leadership and furthermore by digital storytelling. Finally, we demonstrate how multilingual competences and better communication in online communities may enhance the inspiration and motivation of e-learners.

Community Service Learning

Levitt and Schreihans (2009) show how the instructional dimension of online community service learning (a pilot course in charity service learning) can help enhance the building of a strong e-learning community. The authors investigated how a pilot course in service-learning to help people in need (in this case elderly people) impacts e-learning students. They developed a creative online learning program allowing community service and charity events to university stakeholders. They found that community service and serving people in need motivates online students to engage in more interactive communication within the online classroom. Students showed more interest in businesses ICT after their fundraising assignments and assisting elderly people. The community service course opened a window on real-world experience, a sense of belonging and a sense of social responsibility among the e-learners. This online community service course has provided an opportunity for students to look upon online courses in a different way. They were strongly engaged in active human participation by putting their skills, knowledge, and abilities to work for charity and the betterment of society. Students learned how their education could indeed benefit the lives of others, in this case elderly people. The pilot course in serving others brought people together. The e-learners became more aware of how to apply their academic skills to business and society. Last but not least, the charity community service organizations involved tended to be more engaged in the life of the university.

Sense of belonging through transformative learning

E-learning can be a very innovative and personally transformative experience when it occurs within an e-learning community (Ryman, Hardham and Roos, 2009; see also the aforementioned experience of the Charity Community Service project). An e-learning community can be characterized by a sense of connection, belonging, and comfort among its members. The sense of connectivity develops over time among its group members who share commitment to a common goal. Servant-leaders in an e-learning environment are challenged to help design a social community environment to inspire and motivate their followers and learners. Ideally, it is a learning environment of mutual trust that makes e-learners reflect and raise awareness on their daily practice. According to Ryman, Hardham and Roos (2009) transformative learning is where e-learners are critically aware of their own assumptions. E-learners are enabled to assess the relevance of their assumptions to the other members of the e-learning community. All participants are -through dialogue in their community- part of building new knowledge. This knowledge, or content (see also the servant-leader's quality of 'awareness' in this article), creates a solid foundation of shared meaning and values. Transformative learning includes environmental factors such as social presence, authentic learning and interdependency. Such a social environment is necessary for real learning. It is a social network community through which knowledge will flow, and inspiration and motivation is enhanced. Social interaction among e-learners needs to be nurtured by good leadership. Learning engagement is accelerated by interdependency and reciprocity in the learning community, according to Ryman, Hardham and Roos (2009). But what does interdependency and reciprocity mean in e-learning practice? E-learners are enabled to identify their knowledge gaps and are motivated to ask for help of the other community members. The teacher's role is less of an expert and more often happens to be supportive, an empowering peer/coach in the learning process. This interdependent learning dialogue is characterized by reciprocity in communication. Reciprocity binds e-learners together, in both process and spirit. In this dialogue personal goals become interrelated around a common purpose. Servant-leaders are challenged to design such an e-learning community. The community members are enabled to share knowledge, content and experiences in weblogs and/or social networks. Examples from business school practice are presented by Bolt (2011). Teaching Australian tax law by video presentations and discussion for a helped overcome the isolation usually felt by 'off-campus' students diminished significantly. Bruhn-Suhr (2011) exemplifies cross-border collaborative learning in clinical pharmacy. Online teamwork and exchange

of hospital pharmacists and community pharmacists was enriching and opened new inspiring paths of learning. After completion of the course, about 80% of the students still stay in touch to further build this learning community.

Sense of belonging through shepherd leadership

The online learning community has its limitations, e.g. in how to communicate and make decisions across cultures. In the online classroom the communicative and servant skills of the leader are essential. In an action research study Chiu (2007) used the metaphor of the shepherd to describe cross-cultural boundaries in online classroom communities. The case study is about online interactions of third year college students with a Confucius heritage culture (CHC) in Taiwan. A form of shepherd leadership emerged in those discussions. Some students were addressing other e-learning students by their first names, directing their paths and exercising discipline. Most importantly, shepherd leaders were calling out to silent students to participate in the online community. Shepherds search for the lost sheep and invite non-participants in the online forum. It requires long-term care, patience and pedagogy to build this sense of belonging. Shepherds lead sheep to green pastures and still waters to nourish them and supply their needs. Chiu (2007) action research shows the importance of addressing e-learners with divergent talents and cultures in their own familiar ways in order to enhance their engagement in the learning community.

Community building by digital storytelling

The Sharjah Higher Colleges of Technology (SHCT) in the United Arab Emerates (UAE) apply digital storytelling to build a sense of national identity and understanding amongst Emirati students (Raven and O'Donnell, 2010). The project was entitled Mosaic 2009: *Proudly Emirati* to communicate beliefs, in still values and preserve culture. By using image, video, text, Twitter microblogs, Google Maps geo-stories and audio local traditions can be showcased. For example, a movie about Al Yolla, a local dance performed by men on special occasions. And the digital flipbooks where students talk to their (grand)parents about artifacts from the past like *Machaba*, a wicker food cover. Another entry was about students spending a few nights in the desert, living the life their (grand)parents had experienced. And a visual story of one of the oldest market places in UAE the Souk Al Arsa. A female student from Sharjah narrates the story. She is proudly explaining about the cultural heritage of the building, a source of livelihood for the Sharjah people. Sheik Zayed Al Nahyan, the Founding President of UAE, inspired this digital storytelling competition. With his following statement he serves the cultural history of the UAE community: "He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn"(UAE Yearbook, 2007).

Multilingual competences to enhance community building

A 21st century e-learning community is more often composed of group members with different nationalities and mother languages. A servant teacher, lecturer, etc. needs the e-competence to interact with e-learners in different language groups. A good practice example of building multilingual communities of practice is the B@bel Initiative of UNESCO (www.unesco.org). Within the framework of its Endangered Languages Programme, UNESCO produces a series of short-form programmes on various endangered languages throughout the world. These UNESCO programmes serve awareness rising among a global community. These programmes are launched in collaboration with Discovery Communications Inc. and the UN Works Programme. Endangered languages include, amongst others, Scots Gaelic, Sami in Nordic countries, Karaim in Lithuania, Istro-Romanian in Croatia, Haida in Canada, Kadazandusun in Sabah Malaysia and Baka in Gabon. The short-term programmes will be broadcasted to over 100 million viewers worldwide and has – because of its global outreach – an enormous talent potential among e-learners. Another example is the Lexical project of Sarai (www.sarai.net) to safeguard and serve the further development of Hindi in the Internet age. *Sancharkosh* is a Sarai project on lexical resources to build an electronic dictionary of Hindi keywords in old and new media, and the humanities. *Sancharkosh* tries to include common Hindi words while also introducing unfamiliar terms from the world of new media. This project generates a discussion and awareness around contexts and usage of the Hindi keywords. Sancharkosh invites contributions from readers, for Hindi language can only grow through participation of a community of speakers and writers. Interesting links in this respect are the ones for serving machine translation techniques (www.ncst.ernet.in), for Hindi language fonts (www.cdac.in). Furthermore, the Anusaarak system of machine translation is helpful across Indian languages with language tools (see www.iiit.net). Shusha and other Hindi fonts can be found on www.rastrabhasha.com. The AU-KBC Centre for Internet and telecom technologies is committed to help in the popularization of technology in economic and social sectors (see www.au-kbc.org). Finally useful sources are the English-Hindi and Hindi-English-dictionaries (see www.dict.org). For the impact of language on online communication see also: Hwang, Piazz, Pierce & Bryce. 2011.

Online communication and community building

The communication culture in the e-learning environment influences the level of motivation and inspiration of the e-learners. In this article we have seen that e-learning is challenging, in particular in a

multicultural and multilingual virtual campus. Technical tools that are appropriate and culture-proof for various international groups of e-learners are not yet available. For example, communication software to enable cross-cultural communication is not yet available and implemented, or it may still be at an early experimental stage of development, see Intercultural-crosscultural-communication.com. Groupware technologies and the Internet may help to over-bridge cross-cultural differences along dimensions of values, language, and behaviour, as illustrated in the US-China case, (see Jin, Mason and Yim, 1998). Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche and Chase (2004) identify some of the hidden barriers inherent in intercultural communication, which can adversely and negatively affect the digital competence and subsequently the motivation of e-learners to participate in the online community. Technical features such as different power supplies, varying keyboards or non-matching plugs are often considered major barriers to online communication. However, these are relatively minor problems compared to the cultural barriers. Cultural barriers touch on the very essence of the way e-learners construct their worlds and the level of professionalism and motivation they can reach. Thus, for example, the 'bulletin board' in the virtual classroom is built on the basic assumption that e-learners like to publish their thoughts or initial ideas. However, this e-tool for communication is not popular among some cultural groups on the virtual campus. For example, in Asian countries the fear of loss of face may influence the online behaviour of learners. Furthermore, e-learning platforms such as WebCT and Blackboard, which are based on a western style of efficiency, may not necessarily be appropriate serving tools for all intercultural e-learners across the universe. Some tools lack crucial communication elements that may hinder, for example, more senior e-learners in their professionalism from engaging and performing well. Chat, for instance, is of a distinctly oral nature. At the same time, chat lacks important features of verbal communication, and is predominantly rooted in literacy. Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche and Chase (2004) found missing elements in electronically- mediated communication such as context perception, parallel visual channels, and direct eye contact. All kinds of gestural information, side talk, dynamic real-time repair mechanisms and avoidance mechanisms may be more important for some e-learners than others. In general the dynamics and flexibility evident in face-to-face conversational partners is missing in online communication. These factors may hinder the level of motivation and professionalism of e-learners with various cultural backgrounds.

Cultural attitudes, expectations and behaviour norms

In the context of e-learning and servant-leadership, it is important to understand how attitudes, expectations and behaviour norms (compare empathy, humility and courage qualities of a servant-leader) may vary across cultures. Thus, for example, in the Arab World dignity is an important communication clue, which may be missed out in the online classroom. Criticism of an individual in front of the group may need to be avoided in order to protect the dignity and to avoid loss-of-face of the criticized person. In the online learning environment this implies that critical comments and student assessments may need to be kept private in order to avoid humiliating the individual. Furthermore, in the Arab communication silence plays an important role. Silence in communication may also convey implicit judgment in this culture. What to a Western e-learner may appear as a wilful unwillingness to proffer a straight answer may represent a significant transmission of information to a closer colleague. The power of silence in face-to-face communication in the Arab World might be missed out in the online learning environment. In the more traditional Arab classroom we might also find cultural communication clues with more emphasis on the oral tradition, on story telling and on poetic expression. Poetic expression in the Arab language is a kind of art form that is a desirable accomplishment of leaders and teachers alike. The regular keyboard of a computer cannot support the depth, sensibility and ambiguity of the Arab writing and artistic expression. Educational activities like storytelling and oral communication are not that easily supported in the online learning environment, where face-to-face communication is often missing. Arabs, especially, value verbal fluency and elegant expression and relish the cultural music of words. Communication is almost an art. Compare Japanese and Chinese calligraphy art of writing. The high-tech use of visual media may help to fill this barrier in online communication, and strengthen the connection of high tech and high touch opportunities in e-learning.

E-inclusion of African learners

In particular for developing countries e-inclusion is a hot issue. Einhorn (2007) describes how Intel wants to bridge the digital gap and pioneer a whole new talent market by filling classrooms in developing countries with low-cost computers for kids. Is getting computers to poor kids charity or big business? These and other ethical questions arise, relevant to deal with by servant-leaders. Because, these African e-learners should be included and given opportunities too in the digital age. The impact of the digital gap and possible solutions will be illustrated by some practices in the African higher education sector. In line with the above findings, Keats and Schmidt (2007) argue that e-inclusion is one of the major challenges for African higher education communities. The University of the Western Cape in South Africa presents some promising initiatives. Adjustments that are currently undertaken by this university – jointly with external partners – to prevent e-exclusion are the African Virtual Open Initiatives and Resources project (AVOIR), the Free Software Innovation Unit (FSIU), the e-Learning Division and the NetTel@Africa programme.

Access denied

Access to higher education in Africa continues to face serious problems. Talented researchers and students

are widely dispersed over the country. Knowledge exchange among African talents is hindered by various factors. Modern technology has the potential to over bridge these problems. If these technical resources would be available, it may accelerate the creation of synergistic partnerships at local, regional and global scale. It will help African students and lecturers to make the cultural shift toward technology enabled education. Another problem that is hindering e-inclusion of talents is the lack of funding. African higher education is characterized by severe under-funding, limited e-access, high cost and scarcity of bandwidth. Many African higher education students are digitally illiterate when they enter the university. There is a still-widening gap between the developed and developing worlds, the 'digital divide' particularly excluding African learning communities.

E-exclusion in African higher education

Jagboro (2007) analysed e-exclusion practices at a Nigerian university where internet connectivity and usage is still insufficient. Where do students get internet access? Cybercafés had the highest score of 45.2 percent, followed by departmental offices with 21.9 percent, the Computer Building with 15.1 percent, personal offices with 9.6 percent and the University Library with 8.2 percent. The high score for use of the Internet via cybercafés is remarkable. The proximity of these cafés to student user facilities such as hostels, mini-markets and lecture halls explain this phenomenon. The low score recorded for personal and departmental offices could be due to their low level of connectivity, according to Jagboro (2007). In the Computer Building very few computers are available. This often leads to long queues of users. The use of the internet for academic research would significantly improve, according to the author, once more access points at Departmental and Faculty levels would be provided. Though the utilization of the internet in cybercafés is the highest of all access points, it is important to note that the real access rate would be even higher if the costs of cybercafé facilities would be lower Olajide Adelowotan and Lawal (2011) confirm these findings for the University of Lagos in Nigeria where learners in remote locations find it difficult to access e-learning communities. Ondari-Okemwa (2007) underlines another aspect of e-inclusion in the sub-Saharan region. The author argues that there is a need for scholarly e-communication, publishing and more visibility of their scholarly work. Technological media should serve and enable the sub–Saharan Africa region to have access to e-knowledge and e-information. However, African researchers find themselves in a working environment with a lack of scholarly journals and books, poorly equipped science laboratories and limited access to the internet. Maintenance of the internet connectivity is often to costly. The poor electrical supply infrastructure makes the technology deprivation and subsequently e-exclusion even worse.[1]

User-generated content communities

Wikipedia is one of the largest reference websites, a web-based content encyclopaedia built by a large community of Internet volunteers. Since its creation in 2001 Wikipedia has grown rapidly and attracts nearly 78 million visitors monthly as of January 2010. There are more than 91,000 active contributors of all ages, cultures and backgrounds working collectively on more than 17 million articles in more than 270 languages (source: Wikipedia.org). Another user- generated content (UGC) initiative specifically relevant for open educational resources is one developed by the University of Plymouth where a community of e-learners is building content online. Steve Wheeler, from the University of Plymouth, is project leader of the Concede Project (www.concede.cc) who is exploring the nature and direction of UGC. According to Wheeler (2010), UGC is created and shared freely by students and/or teachers. In an EDEN workshop (Wheeler, 2010) he questions what happens to UGC once it is being (re)used by others. What about the informal nature of UGC? Does UGC lose its informal nature when components of it are incorporated into e.g., a peer-reviewed journal article? According to Wheeler it does not. The wiki page or blog content, or whatever the UGC format is, remains informal in nature, regardless of how elements of it are being used or repurposed. Concede aims to enhance the quality of UGC so that it can be incorporated into higher education. According to Wheeler (see his blog) it could be argued than any UGC that has been incorporated into a formalised peer-reviewed piece of work (e.g., as a citation) is an indicator of high quality. Although UGC is not formally peer-reviewed, it is constantly being informally peer-reviewed. For example, blogs are open for comments from all, e.g., novices, enthusiasts and experts. These comments can provide valuable feedback, suggestions, even refutations, via the comments box under each post. This is one of the most instant forms of peer review available. It is hard to predict how the flows of formal and informal content (filtering) will contribute to the on-going creation of online knowledge. This formal and informal process is key for learners, and again possesses great challenges for the servant leader in virtual education.

Online communities and social justice. What can be done to help learners in poor circumstances? Still more than 4.5 billion people worldwide do not have access to the Web. The following two projects illustrate how servant-leaders can help building online communities in health (Senegal) and agriculture (Mali). The Web alliance for Regreening in Africa (*W4RA project*, www.w4ra.org) is an initiative to help extend the Web benefits of the knowledge society and economy to people in rural communities in Africa. To do so, serious challenges must be addressed, in content, access, and language. At present information on the Web is not relevant for farmers in the Sahel. But, mobile telephony is now in the reach of many poor people. This trend opens up great opportunities serving the local farmers. Most African farmers do not have fancy smart phones with Internet access. They use simple old-fashioned mobile phones, only for chatting and don't even use their phones for sending or receiving SMS. W4RA will therefore focus on access and interaction with the Web, based on voice. In line with W4RA and also co-coordinated by the Vrije Universiteit

Amsterdam is the VOICES project (www.mvoices.eu) investigating voice-based services in a rural African context. The major objectives are to improve voice-based access to content and mobile ICT services through the development of a free and open source toolbox for local developers. Also to integrate local community radios and ICT to leverage the quality and the volume of radio content broadcast and sharing. For educational purposes it is important that VOICES wants to support local languages in voice-based services through the development of appropriate speech elements (text-to-speech and speech recognition) for local language communities such as Wolof.

Eight steps towards community building. How does one create a serving and trustful community infrastructure to enhance e-learner engagement? Wojnar and Uden (2005) show different benefits of a trustful e-learning community. The teachers' servant role is crucial to achieve successful group discussion on a virtual campus. The teacher should create an online learning environment that promotes trust and group empowerment. Teachers can create a trustful environment by, for example, taking the time to explain the rules of online communication. The e-learners are motivated and empowered by the teacher. They learn the skills and procedures to conduct an online discussion. Subsequently teachers increase the probability of the online discussion being content-rich, productive and meeting the assignment tasks. Trust building can take place when students no longer (primarily) depend on their teacher, but when they also depend upon each other. Students are empowered and inspired by their teac her and peer-students to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. Once the students achieve their first joint successes, their willingness to share their thoughts in a public forum and online dialogue will increase (see also Fujimoto, Bahfen, Fermelis, and Hartel, 2007; Eteokleous, 2011; Economides, 2008; Brantmeier, Aragon and Folkestad, 2011; Arbauch and Benbunan-Fich, 2006; and Schroeder, 2007). According to Wojnar and Uden (2005) the teacher's role in a trustful online learning environment is primarily a facilitator (a reminder of a servant-leader's role). Facilitating successful online learning begins by leading, then supporting and fostering group empowerment. Finally the teacher steps aside and intervenes only when appropriate. Wojnar and Uden (2005, p.61) designed eight steps towards successful online discussion and building trust in an e-learning community:

1. facilitator learns about the students and sets everyone up (motivation/inspiration) for successful dialogue.
2. facilitator links content to the context and culture of the individual students.
3. facilitator establishes a risk-taking environment for the student-group to respect each other's thoughts.
4. facilitator leads the group discussion.
5. Student-group begins the dialogue and sharing of thoughts. The students begin to formulate thoughts about the trustworthiness of the group; learners are less vulnerable and conversations may begin with the word "They".
6. Student group leads the dialogue; the group increases trust slowly by taking one risk at a time (trust builds on small successes) and tests the trustworthiness of the group by taking more risks; learners are more vulnerable, i.e., conversation may begin with the word "We".
7. Student group sustains the dialogue; encouraging deeper sharing of thoughts. Members of the group depend upon each other to drive the dialogue. Learners are most vulnerable and conversations may begin with the word "I".
8. Student group sustains the dialogue; learners speak with a unified voice and understand each other. Highest levels of trust are evident. The group speaks openly, honestly, and avoids groupthink.

Conclusion

As well as acknowledging the merits of using new digital innovations in aiding learning, this article has also highlighted the usefulness of employing the concept of servant-leadership into building e-learning communities. The need for servant-leadership in the present online classroom is vastly increasing. The issue should have a significant place in the agendas of educational institutions. E-learners need to acquire digital, multilingual and cultural awareness competences in order to participate with success in our complex global world. Servant-leaders (online instructor, e-teacher or the facilitator online) can assist in making this happen. Both digital and cultural horizons need to be explored further in an inclusive manner. This will enable younger generations to fully integrate online (mobile phone) networks in their everyday learning and life. The future question is not if but how servant-leaders can support e-learners. In this article we have demonstrated how new technological innovations varying from social media, mobile phones and internet empowered software applications, can facilitate online knowledge exchange in e-learning communities. Servant-leaders will try to select best practices in dialogue with their followers on the 24/7 virtual campus. There is an ethical responsibility for servant-leaders in their roles as educationalists on the virtual campus. This role requires them to enforce the competences, motivation and inspiration of e-learners. Any e-learner - regardless of his/her economic or cultural background - should have the civic right to gain access to a good quality online learning community and to be engaged in a process of lifelong learning. It is vital that e-learners are served with empathy and afforded the necessary tools to engage effectively with other e-learners on the virtual campuses. E-learners need to be enabled with critical, cross-cultural and creative reflection. Constructive participation in e-learning communities prepares new generations of learners to be the future servant-leaders the online way.

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[1] One of the recent e-inclusion initiatives in Africa is 03b Networks, and infrastructure using satellites to provide broadband services to 'the other three billion' people at the same speed as those on offer in rich countries. Google is one of the investors.