Anne Ryen
University of Adger, Norway

"Hi, Madam, I have a small question."
Teaching QM online:
Guide to a successful cross-cultural master-course.

Abstract

A few years ago Centre of Development Studies at my Faculty, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, started an online Master's Programme in Development Management. The programme was implemented by a network of universities from the North (University of Agder/UiA) and the South (Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda, Ghana) recruiting students from across the world. The evaluation is very positive characterising it as a big success.

I will now look into one particular element of this study, teaching the qualitative methodology (QM) courses with a special focus on the South context. Each course QM included has been sectioned into modules based on a variety of students` activities including student-student and student-tutor/teacher interaction, plus a number of hand-ins across topics and formats. Evaluation of the students` performance is based on both online group activity and written material submitted either into the individual or the group portfolio.

My focus is twofold. First, how did we teach qualitative methodology and how did that work? Second, what about the contemporary focus on neo-colonial methodology and our QM courses? In a wider perspective the study is part of foreign aid where higher education is a means to transfer competence to the South. As such this study works to enable and to empower people rather than being trapped in the old accusation of sustaining dependency (Asad 1973, Ryen 2000 and 2007a).

This study then is embedded in a wider North-South debate and a highly relevant illustration of the potentials, success and hazards, inherit in teaching QM.

Keywords
Teaching qualitative methods; Online teaching; Cross-cultural methodology; Neo-colonial methodology; Africa.

In 2005 Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Agder started a Master's Programme in Development Management (M.Sc. Development Management).

This is a four semester full time study programme, covering 120 ECTS (credits) linking education and research on sustainable development with new information technologies. Apart from a couple of face-to-face sessions this is an online study

which means that teaching, instruction, tuition and supervision take place on the Internet through the Fronter Learning Management System. The programme is developed and run by University of Agder, Norway, and implemented in cooperation with a network of universities in the South. These include Ruhuna University in Sri Lanka, Mzumbe University in Tanzania, Mekelle University in Ethiopia, Makerere University in Uganda and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana. Students are recruited from across the world though reasonably with a majority from the universities involved in running the study Master in development management[10].

The study has been approved by the Norwegian accredit body for higher education (NOKUT) and has since 2007 been offered as a permanent study with an annual intake of students.

Still, the challenges in such studies are manifold. Teaching qualitative methodology can be a challenge in one's own culture, and teaching multicultural groups where the members are scattered around the world add on to challenges and potentials. In our case the students bring with them vast differences in training and practical experiences in the qualitative research field. This is accentuated by still another challenge, interacting online bereaved of observing the facial and bodily reactions (Ryen 2000 and 2002) that work as cues and feedback in the student-teacher relationship. And further, these meetings take place across cultures far apart ranging from more traditional till modern cultures. Undoubtedly, to some more than others, this does invite dilemmas being caught between politeness and ascribed status, and western higher educational expectations based on achievement and imported into the formal structure of evaluation and remuneration linked up with students` initiative, online activities and critical input in the debates. Put briefly, old rank meets merits giving birth to a new reflexivity, painful as well as liberating.

The article consists of six sections. In the next, section two, I will contextualise the study programme by referring to the international North-South issue followed by a closer look at the methodology courses including the online interacional particularities. In section four I look into teaching the QM modules in this particular e-learning study programme followed by the discussion in section five. My focus here is on the two referred aspects: experiences from the innovative teaching practices and second, the North-South issue and relevance. In the conclusions I claim that the particular challenges involved in such an endeavour are crucial to the potentials of QM methodology in enhancing social change or transformation. I also critically look into the category "success". Our QM-courses are embedded in a wider North-South debate and works well to illustrate the potentials - successes as well as hazards – associated with qualitative methodology. We may easily be trapped. If we succeed, QM may help to close the poverty gap; if we fail, we may sustain and even widen the cleavages.

Institutional affiliation: Building competence as foreign aid

To better get at the main idea and the wider goals in which the QM courses are embedded, I will present the bigger framework in which it is positioned. This leads us to the main arguments why teaching qualitative methodology is a highly relevant and a most important part of higher education. We are obliged to make sure that our students manage to go from the classroom to the field and back again to write up their research (Seale et al. 2004). But, qualitative research should also play a vital

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[10]http://www.uia.no/no/portaler/om_universitetet/oekonomi_og_samfunnsvitenskap/studier/undervisning_paa_engelsk/master_in_development_management

role in transforming society or in making social change (Mertens and Ginsberg 2008 and 2009). As such, QM is closely linked up with the wider commitment inherent in foreign aid programmes to contribute to empowerment and to eradication of poverty.

North-South collaboration

Our QM courses were one element in a long chain of activities under The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) which is a directorate under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Norad's most important task is to contribute in the international cooperation to fight poverty[11]. Much of the Norad activities are managed by SIU[12], the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education, a public Norwegian agency that promotes international cooperation in education and research. Norad's Programme for Master Studies (NOMA) is one example and is a programme for providing financial support to develop and run Master Degree Programmes in the South through collaboration between local and Norwegian Higher Educational Institutions. The NOMA programme is financed by Norad, but managed by SIU. According to the mandate for the NOMA programme[13]:

> The main objective of the Agreement between Norad and SIU is to regulate the cooperation between Norad and SIU relating to the NOMA-programme. The primary objective of this programme is to contribute to capacity building in the public and private sectors and NGO's in Norway's main development cooperation partner countries and other selected countries through capacity building in institutions for education in the South (Point 1, section 2).

In addition to designing programmes in accordance with national needs, the overall objectives also aim at building sustainable capacity of institutions in the South to provide the national workforce with adequate qualifications within selected academic fields of study[14]. And, to stimulate South-South-North cooperation[15] through supporting the development of regional Master programmes and to enhance gender equality in all programme activities [16].

Master in Development Management

This particular study programme is run in collaboration with the UNU network under the auspices of the United Nations University in Tokyo and implemented by the referred North-South network of universities with University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka, as University of Agder's main partner in the programme.

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[11] http://www.norad.no/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=1139&V_LANG_ID=0

[12] www.siu.no

[13] http://siu.no/en/Programme-overview/NOMA/Programme-board

[14] Thematic priorities are based on current Norwegian priorities and identified needs of the cooperating countries in the South.

[15] The Project Document specifies geographical areas or countries in the South eligible for support by NOMA.

[16] http://www.siu.no/en/Programme-overview/NOMA

University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka (http://www.ruh.ac.lk/). Also see http://www.uia.no/no/portaler/om_universitetet/oekonomi_og_samfunnsvitenskap/studier/undervisning_paa_engelsk/master_in_development_management.

To cite from the web site of the University of Ruhuna:

Idea behind the study programme

The Development Management Programme is primarily concerned with development, and with facilitators and obstacles to development, whether these are environmental or social, economic or political...

The relevance of the study programme

... It is clearly recognised both by national and international institutions that there is a need to increase the competence and capacity that can contribute to a positive development process. In Norwegian development co-operation, this aspect has been given high priority.

Programme objectives

The objective of the study programme is to familiarize students with theories and findings concerning development, and to offer managerial tools to practical problems...

Source:http://www.uia.no/no/portaler/om_universitetet/oekonomi_og_samfunnsvite nskap/studier/undervisning_paa_engelsk/master_in_development_management

The above makes the cross-cultural issue imperative in this study, so let us proceed to the teaching of qualitative methodology in practice.

E-learning: QM courses, e-system and e-pedagogics

Before the discussion we need to look into our e-learning system[17] including the international credit system used to facilitate student transfers in the international educational systems, and the QM courses. I will also show the e-spaces in our Fronter system where different kinds of communication take place such as

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[17] Since the study is still on-going, though I no longer teach these courses, I prefer present to past time.

discussions and hand-ins both individually and in groups before I round off the section with a few comments on the e-pedagogics used.

The QM courses.

The two-year study programme offers different courses in research methods both quantitative and qualitative methodology and methods. Second semester includes a course in Research Methods in Development Studies (10 ECTS, see Table 1) which later is followed up by a Thesis Preparation Seminar and Applied Research Methods (5 ECTS) and Master Thesis Work (15 ECTS) before the Master thesis itself the fourth and last semester (30 ECTS)[18]. Let us now have a closer look at the QM courses.

The system requires rather detailed documents available to all students as illustrated by the methodology course 2005. This course consists of five modules:

Document	No of Modules	No of pages	No of words
Course description	Modules I-V Per module: Overview over start and end dates, deliverables (task and activities) and deadlines per task and activity	5	973
Study Calender	For all 5 Modules: -Date for start, end and date per deliverables specified in the Study Guide	2	154
Study guide (205 hrs)	-Tasks and Activities per Module -workload specified as hours per task and activity -Questions for Module reflections -Supporting literature	15	3726
Article Compendium TOC	Curriculum specified per Module. All curriculum not accessible on internet were made available for the students in hard copies and copies.	2	418

Table 1. ME-409 Research Methods in Development Studies by Anne Ryen and Maung Sein.

In total these documents consist of close to 25 pages (4300 words) so much effort is put into the planning phase to offer the online students rather self-instructive material as tools to plan and to coordinate across academic and other activities in their life in a time consuming study programme. All study documents are available for students in the Fronter system.

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[18] The Master thesis is all together 45 ECTS of the total 120 ECTS (credits). The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) makes teaching and learning more transparent and facilitates the recognition of studies (formal, non-formal and informal). The system is used across Europe for credit transfer (student mobility) and credit accumulation (learning paths towards a degree). It also informs curriculum design and quality assurance http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm .

Modules	Theme
1	BASICS OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES
2	QUALITATIVE METHODS
3	QUANTITATIVE METHOD
4	ACTION RESEARCH
5	WRITING YOUR REPORT, PRAGMATICS AND CONTINGENCIES OF RESEARCH

Table 2. ME-409 Research Methods in Development Studies consists of 5 modules[19]:

All modules apart from the third refer to QM either fully or in parts. Dates, tasks, activities and list of curriculum per module are all in the course documents (see Table 1). In Module I the students are invited to the general context of research in the social sciences. This includes epistemological issues and the activities such as reading course material, a mini-lecture submitted by one of the professors using a practical example from the introductory FTF-meeting as point of departure, and a group discussion with hand-ins where students have to come up with a research topic. Module II introduces different qualitative methods including online methods and case studies, and the issue of the quality of qualitative research. The students now have to submit a project proposal using one or more qualitative methods (as in Module III where they individually have to submit a short research project using quantitative methodology). Module IV is dedicated to action research and the students here have to develop a research project using an action research method. The last, Module V, among others deals with writing your thesis and with research ethics. In the different modules the students also have to reflect on and discuss how to handle potential upcoming dilemmas when doing their research. This works to contextualise research and to make reflections on practice a crucial part of the research process.

Let us now proceed to teaching online in practice.

The e-learning system.

Focus is here on how the online teaching is organised. Practice will be discussed in the next main section.

The constructionist pedagogical approach focuses on the individual learner`s relationship with the surroundings based on ideas from the pedagogues Dewey and Piaget. Meaning and knowledge is never externally readymade, but constructed by the individual in his or her active interaction with the surroundings. These ideas were further developed by Vygotsky who claimed learning was embedded in social and cultural contexts. The meeting between experienced persons and newcomers then enables the latter "to understand the contexts and confidently participate in the activities in that context" hence "learning takes place in 'zones of proximal development' "(Bjørke 2004:7). There is a shift from positivistic transfer of meaning to meaning-making that encourages practices with the teacher as facilitator of good learning environments in which the learner in multiple ways is encouraged to pursue locally defined educational goals (Edwards and Usher 2000; Bjørke 2004). A more general description would be participation rather than acquisition, community and actors rather than containers (Crook 2002) in line with studies showing peers as the most potent source of learning for US college students (Astin 1993).

In global settings synchronous interactions have proved less flexible than asynchronous. The latter seems preferential both as to the drop-out problem,

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[19] My good colleague professor Maug Sein was fully in charge of Module 3 and 4. I was fully in charge of module 2. We collaborated on developing course documents (see Table 1), and collaborated on teaching modules 1 and 5.

reflection and higher order thinking, but demands a well prepared pedagogic strategy, a good learning environment (McLoughlin and Luca 2000) and most crucial, a high level of activity between students, tutors and lecturers to make online learning a success (Bjørke 2004). At a more practical level students need a support package, a well functioning learning management system, a start-up face-to-face session, and dedication to build an online learning environment with frequent log-in and standardized systems[20] (Bjørke 2006). The action plan called "African University Network" makes online learning possible across campuses at least in parts of Africa (Bjørke 2004) though Sub-Saharan Africa is worst off in the "digital divide". Let us move on to practice.

When I go to my personal online room in the Fronter e-learning system[21] a column comes up on the computer screen:

	Room
	Participants
	Curriculum and reading list
	Course material
	Archive
	Discussion Forum
	Chat
	Hand-in
	Course evaluation

Table 3 "My personal room" in the Fronter online system (every participant can log on to his or her own parallel room)[22]:

Clicking on any of these gives you access to stored information. "Participants" for example, shows all names, e-mail addresses[23] etc of all students, tutors and professors involved. The crucial parts in operating this e-learning system for both students and teachers are lines 3 – 8. Let me now illustrate what happens when you click any of the lines the table (see Tables 3.1-3.6 below with sub-tables).

All online activity for a course is archived for a period of close to two years which means that the archive deadline for some of the methodology courses 2005-6 has expired. This leaves me with ME 500, the Master thesis course for illustrating the online e-system. Let us start with line 3 "Curriculum and reading list" in Table 3.

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[20] like the ECTS
[21] All students, tutors and professors (anybody) need a personal log-in code to get access as you will see if you click any of the lines in the Table 3)
[22] After the course ended and was archived, some of the text that comes up now is in Norwegian. For our purpose here, this text can now be ignored.
[23] E-mail communicating is part of the options, in particular in one-to-one communication.

| Curriculum and reading list | ☐ Detaljert | 📁 Mappe 📄 Last opp fil 📄 Opprett 📄 Lenke 📄 Prøve 📄 Forum |

☐	**Tittel**
☐	▼ 📁 Protocol hand in
☐	▼ 📄 Course Description
☐	▼ 📄 Course Calender - Revised 071106 (Change of dates of hand ins)
☐	▼ 📄 Coach Assignment
☐	▼ 📄 ME500 Protocol
☐	▼ 📄 Study Guide - Revised 061106 (Change of dates of hand ins)

Table 3.1. Curriculum and reading list[24].

This folder gives you access to "Course Description" with course information changes or revisions included. "Coach assignment" shows you an overview over what method(s) each of the students have chosen for his or her proposal including an overview allocating students to professors for coaching. Of my six students, two will use qualitative method(s) and four mixed methods. This student group consists of 5 students from different African countries and one from my own country, now staying in Latin-America.

The next line, "Course material", in Table 3, gives you access to electronic supplementary articles ready to load down.

| Course material | ☐ Detaljert | 📁 Mappe 📄 Last opp fil 📄 Opprett 📄 Lenke 📄 Prøve 📄 Forum |

☐	**Tittel**
☐	▼ 📁 Articles of interest? Åpne

Table 3.2. Course material.

It should be mentioned that at the very start of the study each student receives all course curriculum electronically (a CD) or as hard copies (books). Students also have access to the rather extensive list of online (and other) journals subscribed to by our University Library, and are free to load down and print full texts wherever they sit working in the world.

"The archive" is the third available space (still Table 3):

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[24] For all tables, ignore all Norwegian text (all the non-English words in this archived version).

Archive	☐	Detaljert	📁 Mappe	🔗 Last opp fil	🔗 Opprett	🔗 Lenke	🔗 Prøve Forum

☐	Tittel
☐ ▼📁	Examples of Proposals
☐ ▼📁	Individual folders
☐ ▼📁	Online workshop (Mod. 4) - upload thesis prop., methods section and PPT (if you have figures_tables, write them in your PPT) here.
☐ ▼	End of course reflections - upload by the 12th of December (Ikke aktiv) (Anonym)
☐ ▼	The connections between UT 500 and ME 500.doc
☐ ▼	Online Workshop
☐ ▼	Maung Intro
☐ ▼	Nine Million Bicycles
☐ ▼	An example of a storyline
☐ ▼	ME500 Critique by
☐ ▼	ME500 Critiques

Table 3.3. The Archive[25]

This shows a variety of activities and documents. A couple of examples will do. Each student has his or her folder in the "Individual folders" where they can upload activities like their own Master Thesis Proposals, whereas the "Online workshop" folder offers help or instructions for the students as to the actual workshop in this QM module:

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[25] Line three in the table: the full parenthesis is as follows: "(if you have figures_tables, write them in your PPT) here."

Table 3.3.1. The "Online Workshop" folder in the "Archive": extract.

The "ME 500 Critiques" shows instructions for a particular student task in one of the modules. Each student's work in this module will be critiqued by two co-students. This then is the overview of student-combinations or pairs known as "critical friends", a pedagogical practice.

The archive thus contains a mixture of material all relevant to the particular course. The students need to go online to check if new material has been added. But, when we do, we also leave a message in the front-page that comes up on your computer when you log into the system (for an illustration, see later).

The content of the next line in Table 3,"Discussion Forum" varies according to the course. For another course, "The Global Environment Issues (GEI) Course", UT 400, the students uploaded group work in their group portfolio:

Discussion Forum Detaljert

	Tittel
	Opp et nivå
	Task 1.1 (indicators) - Polar bear group (**12** Bidrag, **12** Ulest)
	Task 1.1 (indicators) - Wolf group (**8** Bidrag, **8** Ulest)
	Task 1.1 (indicators) - Lynx group (**7** Bidrag, **7** Ulest)
	Task 1.1 (indicators) - Wolverine group (**17** Bidrag, **17** Ulest)
	Task 1.2 (socio-economics) - Polar bear group (**41** Bidrag, **41** Ulest)
	Task 1.2 (socio-economics) - Wolf group (**30** Bidrag, **30** Ulest)

| | | | Task 1.2 (socio-economics) - Lynx group (**43** Bidrag, **43** Ulest) |
| | | | Task 1.2 (socio-economics) - Wolverine group (**87** Bidrag, **87** Ulest) |

Table 3.4. Discussion Forum UT 400.

The first, Task 1.1 for the Polar bear group[26], shows the Polar bear group's work for this particular task. Again, we can click our way to a detailed overview over the group discussion showing who has written what and when including number of other students who has read each comment (each click is electronically registered). This way we can also register activity at individual level. The tutor and professors` comments are inter-sectioned the same way.

Chatting, line 5 in table 3, has not been used for this course, and the folder is empty (hence no Table 3.5). As for "Hand-ins", several modules demanded the students should upload hand-ins as part of the mandatory tasks and activities:

Hand-in ☐ Detaljert   📁 Mappe

	Tittel
	ME500 Final proposal - due 15th of December (Ikke aktiv)
	ME500 Methods section - due 15th of December (Ikke aktiv)
	Preliminary Master Thesis Proposal (Ikke aktiv)
	Written critique of two presentations due on the 30th of Nov. (Ikke aktiv) **Åpne**

Table 3.6. Hand-ins.

This table shows all hand-ins for "our" course. Time for submission per hand-in is electronically registered and put online which makes it hard for the late-comers (for deadlines we use Western "military" time). However, in case of anticipated problems of one kind or another (technical, cultural or other), students are encouraged to contact us in advance for an amicable solution if their argument is regarded legitimate (the pace in e-learning demands a rather strict rhythm).

These tables briefly illustrate the Fronter e-learning system. However, as courses run parallel, students will have to operate parallel boxes at the same time e.g. discussion forums and deadlines for uploading hand-ins just as in FTF studies. It takes a clear head combined with a certain level of computer knowledge to succeed. As foreseen, some students face more problems than others, a religious holiday suddenly overlaps with a deadline e.g. the date for id is regulated by the moon, not by a fixed date, a close relative is to be buried and the ceremony is not just attending the church ceremony next block, network is down, up and then down again, there may be a political or other riots making access to library, the computer room or the net- café complicated, female students may at times have to handle more strict gender roles. This accentuates the need for certain flexibility and good communication as crucial in e-learning for all participants involved, also built into the e-pedagogic used.

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[26] As shown in the table, the other students named their groups the Lynx group, the Wolf group and the Wolverine groups.

E-pedagogics

The study programme links up education and research on sustainable development with new information technology, and a e-learning pedagogic based on a social constructivist approach. The approach accentuates the students and the expectations towards their own active contribution and responsibility for learning making it a place for relational learning (Knowles 2002). This makes pedagogical practice crucial such as group work, discussions and joint assignments, and each student is expected to be active as well as responsible for making the most out of the learning environment. Learning how to operate the Fronter system then becomes a key to participation. This also interferes with the classic hierarchical teacher-student relationship by the lecturer rather as a facilitator or an e-moderator (Salmon 2003). The high activity level minimises the free rider problem.

Institutions that apply ECTS are obliged to follow certain criteria which also facilitate studying online in the absence of personal FTF contact with the teacher who traditionally has been waved as basic in teaching. All course catalogues have

> to be published on the web, including detailed descriptions of study programmes, units of learning, university regulations and student services. Course descriptions contain learning outcomes (what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do) and workload (the time students typically need to achieve the learning outcomes), expressed in terms of credits[27]. In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, and one credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of work[28] (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm).

This makes it possible for students to keep in rather good control as to what we expect from them after having completed each course and the expected workload to get there. Also, the ECTS system facilitates comparisons and transfers internationally, a highly relevant moment for students both in the North and the South[29].

Let us now look further into practice from one of our qualitative research courses.

Teaching QM online

Whereas the previous section described the system with instructions, content and activities, this section will focus on the daily operation of the system.

Communicating online: practice

Let me comment chronologically from recruitment, via teaching and learning to doing and writing up the master theses.

Making marks matter: equality in practice.

There are 12 NOMA scholarships available for students from the partner universities in the South. The scholarships will cover expenses such as travels, accommodation and food for the FTF sessions, travel insurance, visa, a monthly

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[27] All is included in Table 1- documents.

[28] http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm

[29] For the ECTS system, see http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ectskey_en.pdf

allowance, lap top[30] and curriculum. A formal uneven distribution of cash and computers thus becomes a facilitating mean to compensate for initial (start-up) inequality. However, it is required that all self financed international students[31] are registered students at University of Agder, and will need a residence permit and be able to document that they have 85.000 NOK or €9540[32].

Country of origin becomes relevant in at least three ways. It is crucial as to who may be considered rightful applicants (see footnote 2), access to scholarships, and the documentation required (cf. resident permit requirements). According to our experiences, the recruitment policy facilitates for diversity in the student group, itself an important element when doing qualitative research in complex societies.

As for tutors and lecturers, we started out as fairly "White and Western", but with an aim of becoming more multi-ethnic by recruiting from the South. Structural categories are not unproblematic. Are you Western or non-Western if you are born in the South, but studied, employed and making your career in the West? What about a White person born in and living in the South? Are complex societies in a global world geographically bound? However, the group has moved to become more mixed or diverse with more members from the South of mixed ethnicities and cultures though still male dominated, apart from at tutor level (making gender ranked?). This has in general made the hyphenated-member-dilemma less prevalent (Fine 1996).

Making common ground: Two Face-to-Face sessions (FTF)

To make the environment conducive for learning is part of the pedagogic concern. This calls for a good start as well as a good process and is baked into the structure by help of two sessions where all participants meet at the same geographical place.

At the very beginning of the first semester, students, professors and tutors meet face to face for 2-3 weeks. This meeting takes place at the University in the North (Norway). Apart from getting to know each other facilitated by a number of social activities, all students will be introduced to the learning resources, computer technology and the pedagogics applied. This is required to make all students handle the technical aspect of studying online. Variation in competence is huge. The first FTF aims at reducing the systematic technical gaps. By use of different ways of playing and communicating, all participants (students as well as lecturers) also learn to know each other by name.

> Calling out your name
> All participants stay in a huge circle and one by one we call out their names. The lecturer in charge of the session starts up by throwing a small ball over to the person next to him or her while calling out his or her name. If you have forgotten the name, the person or the other members will assist, and you then loudly repeat the name. The person then returns the ball to the lecturer who now throws it to the next person in the circle and continues this way till the full circle is done. Now the next person repeats the procedure.

Having listened to 20 rounds and much laughter, you are bound to succeed. From the start names come out in all variations to much joint amusement (think of the Norwegian Åsleik, Trygve or Aslaug). When you later go online and your name and

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[30] Initially a lap-top was not included, but adding a personal, portable computer to the student's basket, reduced problems considerably.
[31] From countries outside EEA
[32] 1 Euro= 8,91 NOK January 30, 2009 as a state requirement.

face (photo as in Table 6 below) get on the screen, you recognise the person and hopefully keep up the good mood.

The second FTF session is organised by one of the collaborating universities in the South (2006 in South Africa, and 2008 in Sri Lanka) and is dedicated to matters arising in the process and to prepare the thesis work.

Teaching and learning QM online.

I will start out with nipping into the interactional matter or the doing of student activities by showing extracts from the online debates still archived.

Online: Handling the asynchronous discussion
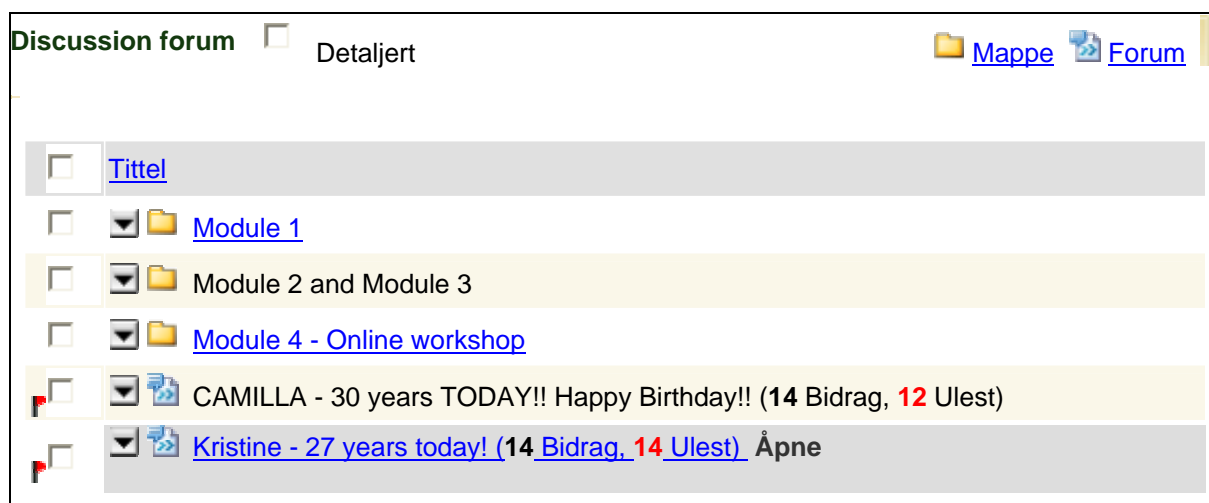
The "Discussion Forum", works well to illustrate.

Discussion forum ☐ Detaljert		📁 Mappe 📑 Forum
☐ Tittel		
☐ ▾📁 Module 1		
☐ ▾📁 Module 2 and Module 3		
☐ ▾📁 Module 4 - Online workshop		
🚩☐ ▾📑 CAMILLA - 30 years TODAY!! Happy Birthday!! (**14** Bidrag, **12** Ulest)		
🚩☐ ▾📑 Kristine - 27 years today! (**14** Bidrag, **14** Ulest) Åpne		

Table 4. Discussion Forum ME 500.

For an illustration: "Module 2 and Module 3" (see Table 2) shows the group folders. If we click on this line, a new set of lines comes up, one per group that gives access to the group's online asynchronous discussions as for "Anne's group" with an introduction by the tutor (as for the other groups) :

Tittel	Skrevet av	Dato	Lest av
📑Anne's group	Tutor	2006-10-29	26
📑Hello Group	Student 1	2006-10-30	22
📑Re: Hello Group	Student 2	2006-10-30	22
📑re: hello group	Student 3	2006-10-30	22
📑Question	Student 1	2006-10-30	22
📑Hi, good friends!	Anne Ryen	2006-10-31	22
📑🚩 Re: Hi, good friends!	Student 2	2006-11-02	16
📑Hello Group	Student 4	2006-11-01	22
📑Hi, student 4!	Anne Ryen	2006-11-01	21
📑To all of you! Have a look here:	Anne Ryen	2006-11-01	24
📑Re:To all of you! Have a look here:	Student 2	2006-11-02	20

🚩 Nicely put		Other professor	2006-11-03	18
🚩 Thank you Anne		Student 5	2006-11-04	16
🚩 re to all of you, have a look		Student 6	2006-11-09	15
re: to all		Student 3	2006-11-02	18
🚩 Thanks Anne		Student 4	2006-11-03	16
🚩 Re: Thanks Anne		Student 2	2006-11-03	17
Question		Student 2	2006-11-08	17
Re: Question		Student 4	2006-11-09	15
Another Question		Student 7	2006-11-10	16
hi guys		Student 6	2006-11-10	17
Very good, student 6!		Anne Ryen	2006-11-12	16
🚩 Re:Very good, student 6!		Student 2	2006-11-13	14
Very relevant questions, so...!		Anne Ryen	2006-11-12	18
🚩 Re: Very relevant questions, so...!		Student 2	2006-11-13	13
🚩 Anne		Student 6	2006-11-13	14
Hi - look at lists of references!		Anne Ryen	2006-11-12	17
🚩 Re: Hi - look at lists of references!		Student 2	2006-11-13	14
🚩 a lurker		Student 8	2006-11-14	17

Nytt innlegg

Table 5. The online discussion in Module 2 for "Anne`s group" (the six students I coach). Extract.

The figure shows the group-communication for the period October 29 till November 18 (Nov-15-18 excluded for practical reasons, and names replaced by number or category). To join in with a new comment or question, you click "Nytt innlegg" in the bottom right corner (in English when the course is running). By clicking a line the full comment comes up on your computer. Non-group members can also join in our discussion as shown by student 7 or "a lurker", student 8. This is like walking down the corridor with the colloquiums and you stop to listen to or join in with a comment to one of the groups before you return to your own.

Here is an illustration (my comment Oct. 31):

Hi, good friends!

Anne Ryen 2006-10-31 00:21

Glad to see you are all so active - definitely it will pay off in the long run!!

I just put my closing remark to module 1..., but let me copy last part of my message below here:

"So now, we are on to Module 2, and I hope you work well on getting the main ideas from the different methodologies as we put them in ME 409!

In general we select literature that is relevant (some general, some specific) for our own thesis - methodology and method(s). I`ll be out there looking for possible literature that might be of particular

---

Table 6. My comment October 31, 2006 ("Anne`s group", line 6 in table 4.2.1).

The bottom line shows this comment has been read by 22 students. The next day there were four comments or questions, so I went back online, and the good discussion went on. Challenges here is to make students feel confident to join in (your comments will not go away as in an oral debate – in case you regret), learning how to join in as to greeting procedures, initial or introductory phrases, politeness etc. that all are more extensive in traditional societies (cf. for examples of recipient-designed talk in a multi-cultural context, see Ryen 2008a and b). In an international, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural group, we observed great initial variations in competences.

<u>Diversity: dimensions of learning</u>

Here is an illustration from "Written critiques" (Table 3.6) where students submit their critical friends assignments:

My comments on the proposal by… (Student's name)

CASE: To examine factors prompting the dropout of PRIDE and the PTF clients

1. Is the topic interesting and important?
I think the topic is very interesting and important. … Also considering the fact that not many studies have focused on why people drop out I believe that your study can contribute in increasing the knowledge concerning factors prompting drop out. The topic has also been in the media these days related to the Nobel peace prize which makes the topic even more relevant to focus on at least the success part of MFIs.

2. Layout
You have a nice structure in the proposal and in the method section. Just a few comments on how to improve….
…

8. Conclusions
Based on my comments and discussion I believe that the research project is doable. Some changes will be needed related to sample size, methods to use and how to analyse data, but if these changes are made the research project will be interesting, doable and also have the possibility to contribute to increased knowledge about MFIs and factors prompting drop out.
GOOD WORK X (name) AND I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO READ THE FINAL VERSION. (name) ;=)

Table 7. Illustration of a student's critique of a co-student's master proposal (front page and name omitted).

This activity implies getting familiar with ways of seeing and of writing different from your own, and to frame your response in ways that enable your co-student to grasp what you say, and preferably in a way that motives him or her to improve his or her work.

Students from the North, tended to go right in, initiate debates and very early in the process promote themselves as weavers for the groups. The Norwegian students would also "celebrate" co-students` birthdays as we see in Table 4.2 lines 4 and 5 which includes compliments and "invitations" to parties:

(NAME) - 30 years TODAY!! Happy Birthday!!	Alltid åpen

🎂🎂🎂🎂🎂🎂🎂

The best greetings and millions of hugs to the worlds most youthful and sporty 30 years old!
I hope you are enjoying the day in [country] with friends, good food and a bottle of ["drink"]!
You're the best! I wish I was there with you!!
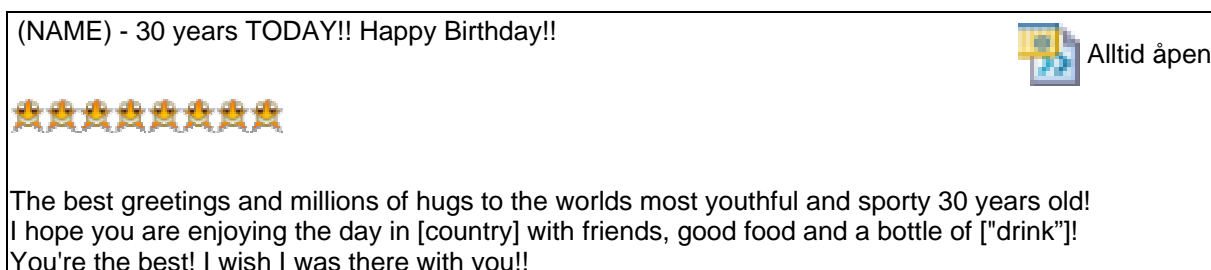
Table 8. A birthdays in our group

By time this procedure was adopted also for other students. Since activities also generated credits, Western students may initially have benefited from such opportunities. However, learning also includes looking at how co-students communicate. We did get reports telling us about the confusions some male students in the South experienced with the Northern female students who totally ignored or violated old standardised gender expectations still in operation in more traditional communities. For some of the female students from the South, this was their first experience with gender equality in practice. So, the structure of e-leaning ignored pre-fixed categories like sex or family background exposing participants to ways of doing being an online student. In a meritocracy, students from the North pursue their way thus motivating ambitious students from the South to climb their platform.

According to one of our female students: "This is the first time I have dared to open my mouth in a plenary session, and the first time I have heard my own voice" (female student from the South).

To others it was more problematic. A male student from the South who would benefit from his ascribed status in his own community, would now loose his privileges. This is the other coin of (gender) equality, and may easily cause individual level problems especially when taking place in a virtual space with no real-life companions. This is part of our concern for the QM learning environment. The cultural meeting between communicating styles can be confusing which eventually made us introduce "Protocol of communication between students and supervisors" (cf. Table 3.1) for the master thesis supervision. A document all had to sign.

Also, to make sure that students manage to pick up vital information along the process, you automatically get all new messages from the course instructors when you log on to the system. This is the information that was on the day the course ended and preserved in the study archive (newest on the top):

⇨ Remember to fill in the End reflections for both UT500 and ME500
⇨ Save early, save often!
⇨ The last leg!
⇨ Ladies and Gentlemen, the online workshop has begun, but do you know where your documents are? Seven of you have not uploaded anything in the workshop folder under Archives. **That was a requirement**. So is the material you are supposed to upload. Not all of you have done this.   I do assume that you all know

what you are doing. I know what I have to do. **Points are being slowly deducted with every passing hour**.

⇨ ME 500 Thesis proposal and methods section - **additional info**

All these worked to build up a feeling of community.

<u>Variety in assignments</u>

Marks were based on a number of different qualitative methods activities:

Task 1
Learn about the fundamental elements of research methods in social sciences research
and the role of research.

Activity A (1h)
Mini lecture. (On-line lecture in writing by professor)

Activity B (8h)
(Reading 2 book chapters on QM specified in the study guide).

Activity C (8h)
Discuss in your group (in the "forum"):
▪ What is the essential difference between qualitative, quantitative and action research in terms of ontology, epistemology and axiology?
▪ How does this influence our choice of research method and research question? Does the choice of research method affect the findings from a research project? If so how?
Write an individual summary of the discussion (1 to 2 pages). Put the document in your portfolio folder. Find an appropriate title.

Task 2
Generating a research topic

Activity A (10h)
In the online forum, generate as many research topics as you can …Then select one and generate specific research problems. These can be turned into project proposals for the assignments in this course and they are also possible thesis research problems.

Activity B (8h)
The tutor will now put you into groups.
Discuss (in the "Forum"):
▪ What is a good research topic?
▪ How do you know you have a good research problem?

Make a group summary (1-2 pages) of the discussion and put into your group folder.

Table 9. Student activities. From Research Methods` Study guide.

This module demands the students do individual as well as collective assignments that all have to be submitted in the correct folders, and demand student communication, coordination and completion. Tutors and professors can follow their discussions, guide and respond along the process. To follow a module means rather hectic work for everyone included since it is expected that tutors and professors follow and respond to students at a daily basis.

To focus on the contextual matters is vital in multi-cultural, complex societies:

> **Activity B:**
> Spend 1 hour searching for research ethics guidelines in your own country.
> Alternatively: search for the same in the country where you will do your
> fieldwork. If you cannot find any, tell your fellow students where you searched (universities, other
> institutions etc). Share the web-addresses with your student colleagues in the common forum.
>
> Write your individual hand-in:
>
> A.
> What are the major (select a few only) ethical challenges in working with your master thesis?
> (include the web-address or ref. to the guidelines you refer to)
>
> B.
> How would you handle these challenges in order to do ethical research?
>
> Write an individual summary (1500-2000 words) and put in your portfolio folder by the **20th of March**.

Table 10. Research ethics.

A and B showed ethical dilemmas where a large share in the South would be unknown to researchers from outside the South. This also works to inform and prepare supervisors for discussing hurdles during data collecting and when writing up the thesis (for illustration see Reissman 2005, Mertens and Ginsberg 2008, Ryen 2008 a and b).

Let us now discuss some major experiences from e-learning qualitative methods.

Discussion

What became of qualitative methods in this online, constructionist informed study? Our innovation is an official success, supported by external funding, receiving new external grants to pursue the North-South capacity building and enormously popular in the South (and North) as reflected in the constant increase in number of applicants. In the conclusion I will apply a wider contextual perspective with reference to the North-South issue and the neo-colonial, indigenous methodology debate as a prerequisite for transformation.

Innovative QM teaching as introduction to diversity and reflexivity

Our student group is mixed across sex, nationality, ethnicity, culture, academic background and family situations and obligations. The composition of activities built into a constructionist e-learning system makes the students collaborate in flexible smaller and larger groups, initiate weavers and take responsibility for leading the work until the very end-product. This conditions strategies for making good connections and community in the group (Hyerle 2009).

Community and dialogue

Our approach also invited to one-to-one time with students with responsive dialogue by being accessible for the students online via Fronter or e-mail depending on the nature of issue from academics to more personal or family matters. Tutors (cf. "Anne`s group" in Table 5) who are in charge of the daily interaction can also call for us to respond to particular students or questions if necessary or recommended. As lecturers and coaches we respond to the group or the individual students as in "Hi,

good friends", Table 5 and "Hi, student 4" (from me), or "Nicely put!" by "other professor". Students` quotes affirm the meaningfulness of such brief connections (Hyerle 2009) as in "Thank you Anne" by student 5 or "Thanks Anne" by student 4 (there may be many reasons for such flatter, though my point here is the positive environment such barters construct).

 We also design activities to maximise individual and small-group contact which increases attention to and meaningful dialogue with the students as they eventually do themselves as in "Hello group" by student 1 and 4 or the responses to my "To all of you! Have a look here" by students 2 and 6, or in "Question" from student 2 and a follow-up question "re: Question" from student 7. As to positive comments to individual students, I try to acknowledge each student or make each of them "visible" during a module,- there is always some minor or larger good effort done by individual students. Written comments were given in different ways from comments in the online asynchronous communication till using "track changes" in the document when responding to individual as well as group drafts or hand-ins. This is incredibly time consuming though the student response is excellent like: "I have never before received such detailed comments. It was incredibly helpful. Thank you, Anne"(Student).

 Interspersing personal talk is another way to make healthy connection with students or to make a difference as in the birthday greetings where we would follow-up a student initiative to participate in creating a positive and inclusive learning environment. The same goes with treating everybody with respect (Glenn 1996 and Deiro 2005), cf. the protocol for good communication (also the web is a space for power). The title shows how one of the African students addressed me by "Hi, Madam, I have a small question" reflecting his on-campus cultural practice brought into our online communication in ways that contributed to mutual respect.

Diversity and reflexivity across socio--cultures

 These experiences were crucial to the positive mood created in the whole study group. Bosalek and Matthews (2009) in their article "E-learning: A cross-institutional forum for sharing socio-cultural influences on personal and professional identity" focus on the outcomes of innovative pedagogical practices in e-learning and the context for relational and contextual learning (Knowles 2002) based on an e-learning module on advanced social work ethics, especially using the device of students as "critical friends" by reading and critiquing their partners' essays as we saw above.

 This also illustrates how the lecturer is transformed into a facilitator or e-moderator (Sánchez-Casal and MacDonald 2002 in Bosalek and Matthews 2009). Bosalek and Matthews accentuate how this pedagogical practice invites to identifying commonalities with and differences from each other (2009) illustrated with a student's comments on their own ability to think about their own work: "…It was through reflecting on her work, that I realized my views were different from hers, if not only, then mostly, because of my own experiences"(Student, p.241). The authors highlight the impact on meaning-making and achieving learning objectives by concluding that "…these students utilized a "virtual forum" to successfully identify and explore the ways in which social, economic and political factors in their respective social-cultural contexts affect them personally and professionally." (p.244-245). However, the crucial question here is to what extent teaching qualitative methods would benefit from this approach and pedagogical practices (also Moritz 2009 refer to how communicative activities in net-based working processes stimulate productive thinking and abductive reasoning).

From moduls to master theses: What happened to qualitative methods?

We used the same pedagogic practices in teaching QM to motivate to learning and reflexivity. If reflexivity worked, this should also be reflected in their theses. They were well trained in reflecting on and in writing up research topics and problems in quantitative as well as in qualitative research, in describing the research process in both methodologies, potential quandaries in the field, ethical issues and ways out.

Relevance?

As we saw in the idea behind the study programme, it "is primarily concerned with development, facilitators and obstacles whether environmental, social, economic or political". A selection of Master theses titles show that qualitative studies are used to explore developmental relevant issues. Topics range from sustainable fresh water management in urban areas to microfinance and empowerment of women, waste and waste management, microfinance clients` drop out, local community involvement in conservation and management of national parks, food security and sustainable development at household level, community-based eco-tourism and many more. The projects are often described as case studies of organisations, local communities, wards or municipalities in different countries. Students are free to choose research topic to invite perspectives from the South both in defining problems and in choosing sites as long as economically and practically possible. Examples of practical and other problems could be gender as a problematic issue in strict religious communities, roads and transport, negotiating access when gate keepers demand bribes, at times to do research in your own home town due to local norms of hierarchy, politeness and time, and some places may be ridden by crimes or political riots that seriously can delay your work and expose yourself to danger etc.

Qualitative methods in practice?

The majority of the students irrespective of country of origin use qualitative methods, in particular the interview method alone or in combination with one or more other methods.

But, if we look into some of the theses, we identify certain QM issues that seem to be problematic for students especially from the South which is my focus. I have selected ten or approximately 1/3 of the total number of theses, or close to 2/3 of the theses by students in the South.

The first is the *selection of methods*. In the final product as well as in the QM modules a very high number of students from the South want to combine methods. The dilemma is the number of methods. Frequently we find combining observation with both group and individual interviews. To illustrate, one student writes s/he will use secondary data ("review of books, magazines, articles, reports and other sources available") and primary data collected by interviews. S/he will use a semi-structured interview guide (at times supplemented by household interviews to "witness and confirm") and do focus group interviews or "focus group discussions" with women's groups, men, members in the same sub-groups and combination of men and women. S/he will also use observation and what s/he refers to as key informant interviews and in-depth conversations.

Second, the argument is classic: "the implication [is] that problems specifically associated with one particular approach might be overcome by others" (thesis year

2007:22[33]). However, there is no further discussion. Another student defends using the interview method this way: An interview is a qualitative research method that provides real and in-depth information about a particular issue as argument given by Ryen (2002) that, "Social reality is transparent in people's words and action. Given that the researcher follows certain technical guidelines in the interviewing". Still, another refers to Silverman as to how to get authentic data. Both citations show misinterpretations of vital parts of the curriculum. Their arguments seem to have passed the supervisors' checks.

Third, let us look into the *presentation of data*. In one of the theses, we find a number of tables presenting the socio-economic background of the involved (N=30). The biggest dilemma is that all tables are presented as separate tables with no possibility to link data across tables by tracing individuals along the different tables (the low number of participants makes it theoretically possible to do this manually). On the one side we get to know about participants` characteristics like ethnicity, religion etc. and on the other what kinds of loans and services people get. We also get to know the purpose of seeking microfinance, but we cannot link the tables at individual level for example to look at who invests in education and for whom (what family members etc). By this fragmentation of data, we are left with thin, isolated descriptions.

When data are used more qualitatively, they may report stories:

> One woman revealed that education from …[the org] improved her business tremendously. She said that, before she joined the credit union she used to send foodstuff to [place], the nation capital, without purchasing goods from there for sale in [other place]….(Ryen 2007:73).

Or by rewriting stories:

> It was reported that most of the members who were in good standing had access to educational loans for the payment of school fees and educational expences. Married people used more eduational loans than unmarried people….Moreover most members and non-members felt they were old and could not study…(Ryen 2007:75).

The dilemma is not with the data as such, but with the lack of analysing the data. A rather naïve approach to the status of the data is also seen in this extract:

> As evidence of increased productivity in agriculture the interviewees showed me the marked difference in the coffee trees in the well attended coffee farms belonging to graduates of (organization) capacity building programme. The coffee trees in the well attended farms looked dark green and thriving, but those in the unattended farms appeared yellowish and scorched. (Photo used as evidence).

These extracts reflect an approach to reality as external with the interviewees` reports as the authoritative versions used by the researcher. Data are not analysed beyond the isolated citations or observations. Reports are treated as "true" mirrors of social reality "as it is". Static reports suffice. Also, in most cases there is no differentiation between to observe (as a method) and merely to see (casually). We also find simple claims like: "In this study, I investigated the study variables without the influence of my preconceived ideas." (Ryen 2007:24)

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[33] Due to the critical angle, I have chosen not to use the names of students or supervisors. However, the theses are public.

It is problematic with mistakes such as with the literature (irony seems to be problematic) and the concepts that are misread such as with "negative cases" being used as references to people with different or opposing meanings where "negative" simply is heard as "disagreeing with" (like yes/no, agree/disagree with "no" and "disagree" as "negative cases").

How: the dilemma of sustained QM incapacity?

We need to ask ourselves how such observations still are possible, and I will briefly reflect over some possible sources.

Exporting Western methodology?

To import methodology books to African universities can be important when such material is missing. However, many books do not fit into the local context due to lack of illustrative material from the South combined with absence of references to national or regional authors that could have motivated to critical thinking of another sort. If philosophy matters to theory of science, such material frequently though often implicitly, is grounded on western, not African philosophy. Gordon takes this seriously in his writings about "Africana philosophy and their hybrid, mixed or creolized forms worldwide"(2008:1) by claiming that "Africana philosophers…are some of those who see the liberating aspects of thought among those who live this question from the underside of the modern life" (ibidem:32). By silencing this, studies may come to invite to copying or imitating rather than to critical reflect on the contextual-universal matter of methodology (Alatas 2004; Ryen 2007a and b). The alienation may even make local daily competence irrelevant since there is nothing familiar neither with the illustrations in the study material nor with the context in which the illustrations are situated. This might be exacerbated in pre-colonial contexts depriving exercises such as "critical friends" of their reflexive potential in mixed groups.

My critical comment is not with the naturalist or rather positivist approach in these theses, but with the lack of awareness of alternatives as well as with the absence of attempts to validate data (like checks and balances when reality is seen as external).

Scientific or mundane?

Classic textbooks tend to treat data collection as taking place in a scientific context hence prescriptions for good interview behaviour. The classic interviewer-respondent relationship is conditioned upon a hierarchical, disciplined communication with the aim to elicit pre-stored data. Interestingly, after twenty years of fieldwork in Sub-Saharan countries, I notice the disparity to how language is being used in daily practice with "truth" as narrated and highly contextual and talk as more circular (Ryen 2002). This bears parallels to parts of the Western academic community as well with focus on a rather simple approach to the referential aspects of language (for an alternative see Silverman 1998). Let us therefore also look into how such practices can be sustained.

Confusion or credibility?

In 2007 there was an evaluation of the use of marks at master level. The committee from three different Norwegian universities selected five theses for discussion. Here are the results:

Thesis No	Marks	Justification
1	D,D,B	-
2	C,E/D,F	poor or invisible empirical material
3	B,C,D	the two first find the analysis to be good
4	B,C+/B-,C	varied arguments: poor discussion, poor methodological approach and "report format"
5	A,A/B,D	D: methodology weak, no discussion Of context/structure

Table 11. External evaluation of five selected master theses from the online Master Study Programme.

This shows a rather huge variation in evaluation like D-F for no.2 or A-D for no.5 where the range goes from A as the best till F for "failed" despite national descriptions of requirements to the different scores or marks. This also shows there is no joint perception of what qualifies as a good, not so good or poor master theses. The evaluation goes beyond mere methodology and does call for at least an internal debate and action plan as to how the programme should deal with the credibility issue in research, qualitative research included (hence the wider external debate on the issue). It is not unlikely also to assume a variation within the supervisors` team with consequences to how students are guided through the research process hence the observations referred above (guidelines rather than rules or commands).

In a longer perspective this means the students will let their experiences from their master theses inform their further work.

This brings us to our next question.

Mechanism for neo-colonialism?

If we use reflexivity to critically look into the QM courses for this study, we may get closer to the complexity of the qualitative methods mystery. The majority of the professors from the North can be described as QM users, not as QM specialists. This makes it more problematic to promote QM as not merely a simple tool, but as crucial to the credibility of students` research findings as well as situated within an ontological and epistemological debate. Anthropology had for long a relationship with methodology captured in "fly on your own", economics and ICT has (for many reasons) no tradition for strong (or any) voices in methodological reflexivity in qualitative research dominated by sociologist, educationalists and others (as reflected in the disciplinary backgrounds to contemporary contributors and their historical reviews in major QM books like Denzin and Lincoln 1996, Gubrium and Holstein 2002, Seale et al. 2004, Flick 2004, Holstein and Gubrium 2008 or Mertens and Ginsberg 2009).

This may account for the observations in the theses from the South. However, based on my own experiences from supervising South students, this can be even more complex. With a rather positivist tradition last decades in the South, the constructionist pedagogic used may have reinforced this tendency when not seriously challenged. This may not have been deliberate, or at best related to selective perception. Tutors and the majority of the supervisors may have worked as passive transmitters of the old methodology regime by not exposing students to critical questions with reference to alternative epistemologies and practices either in the West or in the South or to critically pursue the credibility issue in qualitative methodology. As such, traces of neo-colonialism (as well as rather poor qualitative methodology) may have crept in the back door to the study. QM was not on the agenda for the second FTF session with the students and the coordinator's reply to my question "why?" was that "we don't see methodology as so important".

No doubt, to operate e-learning modules based on constructionist strategies is incredibly time-consuming (Hurley 1999) which made me withdraw after the first round with these methodology modules. However, it was a pleasure to give an introductory lecture for the next group of students. I was also invited to sit in for a lecture on Habermas by a professor from the South followed by students` questions. This invited to start my lecture by contextualising Habermas in the Frankfurter school and their claims to the social sciences, and to correct the response to the student who was told off when he wondered if one also could use qualitative methodology in action research.

I argue that we need to look at the mechanisms that continuously maintain the relevance of the critical voices from the South towards Western lack of reflexivity on alternative perspectives (Mukherji and Sengupta 2004). Though the slowness of social change to improve the poverty issue in the South is outmost complex, we also need seriously to recognise the potential inherent in qualitative methodology.

Conclusions: transfer or transform?

Qualitative research has blossomed last decades though the reasons are multiple from increased credibility in the research community till mundane practical arguments like lack of knowledge or even courage to do quantitative studies or limited economic funding. Last decade especially, we saw an upcoming focus on indigenous knowledge and alternative method questions (Denzin et al 2008, Smith 2005, Sardar 2006, Mukherji & C. Sengupta 2004, Ryen 2008a and b, Carpenter and McMurchy-Pilkington 2008). These debates take qualitative methods into the question of how to make research findings matter in the local context especially outside the West and in cross-cultural research contexts, in particular.

To transfer competence and capacity via higher education initiatives is a great endeavour, but it takes treating methodology seriously. To cite Mertens and Ginsberg on transformative research:

> …the transformative paradigm…embraces the critical examination of versions of perceived reality in terms of the cultural and societal parameters that have traditionally permitted those in positions imbued with formal authority and power to define reality for those who do not share this privileged position (2009: 486).

This positions qualitative methods, not in the periphery, but into a more central location in the knowledge production inside or outside the South, FTF or in CMC in any e-learning study.

In his discussion of survey interviews Cicourel (1964) argues that utterances always are occasioned with sense making based on unspoken meanings and aspects of settings, and never context-free. This means, we need to understand participants` use of categories in particular activities. "Success" is such a category that needs to be explored, so let us look into the contexts in which it is being used. From an economic institutional perspective, nearly all students in our study get through the full process to the academic certificate. Based on the new model for financing university institutions funding is now linked up with number of students passing the exams, and no longer per registered student. This makes it an economic success. At national level, the external funding involving a number of universities in the South also makes it a networking/South success. It involves a rather big academic staff and has invited to cross-department collaboration which also contributes to inter-organisational optimism.

The last question then, what about a qualitative research success? No doubt, students` enthusiasm is excellent, so by time we hopefully also can offer not only supportive participatory environments, but also a space for learners to "become actively engaged in knowledge communities" (Bosalek and Matthews 2009:236) though firmly based on the contemporary qualitative methods debates.

> The main goal of (Norwegian)[34] development cooperation is to contribute towards lasting improvements in the economic, social and political conditions under which people live in developing countries, with special emphasis on assistance which benefits the poorest sector of the community[35]. http://www.norad.no/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=1209

This is where the success should guide us.

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[34] Author`s parenthesis.
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