

**STRENGTHENING AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS  
THROUGH UNIVERSITY WEB-BASED LEARNING**

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with the support of  
Centre for the Support of Teaching, York University  
<http://www.yorku.ca/cst/>

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Diverse Needs, Interests and Capacities**

African civil society organisations increasingly engage their governments on issues of social policy. But while political access to policy processes is typically improving, civil society's technical capacity to influence policy often remains weak, due to skills deficits and other resource shortages. In southern Africa, the need to strengthen the technical skills repertoire of civil society organisations is now widely recognised. However, training resources around issues of social and economic rights are still inadequate.

At the same time, learning about African politics can be an alienating experience for Canadian undergraduates. Most students have little personal connection or experience with distant African realities. Much of the established academic literature on Africa tends to be broadly-cast, and a good deal of it reflects a disenchanting "Afro-pessimism". The richness of contemporary African politics, and especially the politics of "new social movements" that is increasingly prominent across the continent, is often under-explored in distant Canadian university classrooms.

The web course "Civil Society and the State in Africa" emerged from a recognition by its founding partners that a cross-pollination of practitioner-focused training and scholarly research could advance some way to addressing both sets of needs in Africa and Canada. York University (Toronto), in cooperation with the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC) in Harare, Zimbabwe and the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, sponsored the development of the course, which was first offered in the undergraduate programme of the Department of Political Science in 2006.

Course participants are drawn in approximately equal numbers from York and from civil society organisations in southern Africa whose focus is social and economic rights. No fees are charged to the African practitioner participants. Registration is by invitation only following adjudication of applicant proposals. Enrolment levels are maintained at comparatively low levels (18-20 students in total) to enable high levels of communication with, and greater facilitation among, the heterogeneous mix of course participants.

For York, the course presented an opportunity to consolidate teaching strengths in Africa and the Global South, and to enhance existing linkages with southern partners. For the African partners, the course offered civil society practitioners access to high-level training resources, including faculty and guest expert lecturers, York's extensive e-library and other materials. Throughout development of the course, the principle of equity has been central – in the shaping of the objectives, parameters and derived benefits from the course; in the quota of Canadian and African course participants and online lecturers; in the level and ease of access of all participants to the learning materials and online activities; and in the institutional resource contributions to the course, calculated on the basis of uneven levels of resource capacities. In each respect, this required an extensive period of consultation, exploration, training and planning in advance of the course's launch in January 2006.

## **ESTABLISHING THE COURSE**

### **Development Phase**

Exploratory consultations in 2003 with TARSC and CCS focused on the institutional options for developing research and teaching cooperation. The option of student or faculty exchanges was seen as unworkable because of the high travel and relocation costs implied, but especially because African course participants were not based in educational institutions but held full-time positions in generally-understaffed civil society organisations: it made little sense to weaken the latter by removing important skills from them on a regular basis. On the other hand, conventional distance-education courses were not considered viable, as they added little value to the traditional learning experience of the Canadian students, and offered limited opportunities for effective interaction with, and inclusion of, African participants who were themselves experts in

the field. The notion of a web-based course emerged from discussions at York with faculty and support staff working in the area of technology-enhanced learning, where the university has recognised strengths.

Two key early inputs at York were a substantial internationalization grant to the project and support to course director Dr. Richard Saunders for intensive training in web course design. The grant initially enabled face-to-face consultations with prospective partners in Africa. Later, funding helped with institutional support to TARSC and the Zimbabwe-based course participants (whose access to the internet via "internet cafés" was subsidized directly by York); enabled the recruitment of expert guest lecturers from southern Africa and the distribution of teaching materials; and helped to cover other start-up expenditure. Costs associated with website design and management, software, library research resources and continuing technical support, were borne by York.

### **Identifying Learning Objectives**

Two critical learning objectives were identified by the partners: strengthened understanding of civil society-state dynamics, and strengthened skills for engaging in policy-making. Curriculum design would be measured against this yardstick. The first objective was focused on scholarly criteria: students should develop a strong familiarity with current research on civil society-state relations in sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly with recent debates on Africa's changing location in global restructuring. The second objective was rooted in the development of practical research skills: students would be expected to demonstrate a capacity for research planning and implementation appropriate to local organisations engaged in policy-oriented interventions. Overall, the course would aim to strengthen students' capacity to both identify the policy environment, technical resources and organisational politics influencing policy-making "from below"; and to develop strategies for intervening on this terrain.

### **Syllabus Design**

The foundational learning objectives led to a syllabus which combined elements of "traditional" undergraduate instruction and alternative approaches to skills training.

The standard academic literature helps frame the scholarly debates. This literature is then placed in the wider context of African policy debates and practices, by several means. New materials were developed to interrogate the international academic literature from a contemporary African civil society perspective: one-half of the lectures were commissioned from leading southern African civil society scholar-practitioners. There is substantial use of so-called "grey literature" – research produced outside the context of formal academia, which is at the core of contemporary research, debate and policy making in Africa. Students are encouraged to identify research resources from their home civil society organisations in Africa and Canada, and to reveal fresh information from peer conversations.

Course assignments are designed to encourage active, peer-motivated learning. The first assignment is a political-economic autobiography that asks students to reflect on their intellectual and political engagement in civil society issues. The circulated responses serve as both a self-introduction and a mechanism facilitating the formation of smaller groups in assignment two, a term-long fieldwork research project. In the second assignment real-life civil society policy challenges are tackled by focus research groups, each of which must include members from Africa and Canada. The research framing draws heavily on inputs from African participants. Regular student engagement is encouraged by means of a discussion forum (or course blog), constructed around lecture units and animated by questions posted by the course director.

### **Technical Considerations**

The technical design of the course was heavily shaped by constraints. Limitations on internet access and bandwidth in Africa was one crucial factor; a second was the lack of high-end computers. Time zone differences (southern Africa is seven hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time in central Canada) and restrictions on classroom times at York were also considerations.

The primary technical criteria for the web course therefore revolved increasingly around questions of ease of access for low-bandwidth users, and simplicity of software. In practice, the selection of technology was by process of elimination. Bandwidth limitations ruled out graphic-laden interfaces. WebCT was abandoned because it proved too cumbersome at low browsing speeds. A popular multi-media package was dropped after repeatedly “freezing” in field tests. Real-time text and audio interfaces were unmanageable due to time zone gaps and the lack of centralised, accessible computer facilities.

The main sections and functions of the course site are mounted in html format with no graphics, protected behind a password-protection entry page created with php. PunBB, with straightforward navigation protocols and relatively quick load time, was selected as the discussion board platform. Online text lectures, readings and discussion forum blogs are downloadable from the website. As back-up, readings are provided on memory sticks or CD-ROMs to African participants, and an email distribution list enables them to remain in touch if local connectivity is interrupted. Successful experiments in teleconferencing using “Skype” were made in the first year of the course, although bandwidth limitations restricted African participation.

### **OUTCOMES: LEARNING BY DOING**

The second cycle of the course ended in May 2008. While detailed student evaluations from the latest offering are not yet complete, Canadian and African participant evaluations from the first year of the course, along with observations compiled by the project’s partners over the two cycles, suggest a generally positive but mixed set of outcomes. In some cases modifications were made to the course format in response to emerging challenges.

### **Workload Challenges**

Both African and Canadian students found the workload onerous, particularly the extensive required readings. This was difficult to avoid. The relatively specialised nature of the course focus meant that the Canadian students needed a set of strong background materials to become sufficiently familiar with the terrain of debates from which the African students came, and to which key aspects of the course were addressed. African students reported insufficient time to work through materials and to respond to reading questions fully – work and personal commitments left little time, and the challenging readings required more of it. Still, Canadian and African participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the materials, particularly the “grey” literature that emerged in the case studies.

A unanimous recommendation by students in 2006 was the doubling of course duration from one term (13 weeks) to two. This was implemented in 2007-08, however the benefits of this change appear mixed: while a small number of students seemed better able to work their way through a greater range of materials, overall student participation appeared to decline relative to the first year. It was difficult to maintain student enthusiasm for debates and materials over a lengthened lecture unit, and regular contact was needed to keep them from drifting. This problem was compounded for Zimbabwe-based students by a rapidly deteriorating political and economic environment, which served as both an unavoidable distraction and as a factor in the effective collapse of regular internet connectivity. By the end of course Africa-based participants were engaging with the course almost exclusively via email. In some instances their communications were then posted by the course director to the discussion forum in an effort to keep group discussion alive, although this approach proved a slow and ineffective means of stoking debate.

### **Technology Obstacles**

Reliable and efficient access to the internet has been a key obstacle standing in the way of Africans’ full participation in the course. Low quality and increasingly intermittent connectivity in Zimbabwe and Uganda has been a persistent problem. Whereas relatively low access to other technology inputs like computers and printing facilities has also posed challenges for some African students, these kinds of shortcomings have been manageable through arranged local

sharing of institutional resources, and other means. But solutions to internet connectivity are more daunting, and short-term interventions – including the provision of CD-ROMs and memory sticks loaded with course materials, and email communication – have not fully bridged the communication gap and enabled Africans' equitable engagement.

On the other hand, the York-based students reported easily adapting to online learning. No technological barriers were noted; indeed, the Canadian students suggested adding new technological components to the course, including the "Skype seminars" which linked with weekly face-to-face discussion groups that had earlier been created by York students as an extra-curricular study tool. The primary point of technological frustration observed to date by York students has been the unreliability of communication and research links with African colleagues.

### **Institutional Roles**

Beyond initial collaboration around course design and implementation, the importance of active continuing institutional involvement in the course through student mentoring, troubleshooting and other forms of hands-on supervision, became clear at an early stage.

African participants, for whom it was difficult to organise regular meeting times, sometimes reported a greater sense of isolation from the course. Several attributed their lack of engagement to low organisational capacity and poor encouragement of discussion on the part of their local courser "host". In one case, where local students never met as a group and the post of local course facilitator was occupied by four people in quick succession, students performed poorly. In contrast, in another instance the local partner organisation assigned a senior administrative officer to locally manage and facilitate the course, and convened occasional student meetings. The same partner organised a wrap-up seminar at which research findings were presented to a wider civil society audience – a critical feedback component that was well received.

Institutional capacity emerged as a key issue with regard to continuing access to resources. After the first year of the course, York's inaugural grant funding ceased. Partner institutions have since had to make ad hoc arrangements for supporting the course from their own limited resources. In Zimbabwe, TARSC contributed a senior administrative officer free-of-charge, a meeting space for students and occasional access to computers and the internet. At York, the relatively low number of fee-paying students in the course (less than half the level typical in senior undergraduate courses) effectively constituted a subsidy from the Faculty of Arts – this subsidy ends in 2008-09. Other funded inputs at York, including the provision of a classroom studio equipped for teleconferencing, and memory sticks and other materials for African students, ended after 2006.

Resources will be needed to fill these gaps to enable the course to continue. Longer term funding proposals to external donors are in development. Another option is to revise the nature of the course's international partnership, to enable African students to take the course for credit; however, this would likely entail the levying of fees for the course for foreign participants, which could act as a barrier to entry unless fees were covered by external funding.

### **PRELIMINARY LESSONS**

Although still in its formative period, the web course "Civil Society and the State in Africa" presents a number of preliminary lessons about the construction of North-South cooperative linkages around teaching and research involving academic and civil society institutions.

#### **Strengthening Civil Society Linkages in Africa**

An important objective of the course is to enable the strengthening of civil society capacity in southern Africa through the inclusion of practitioners and a focus on the real-life research problems they confront in their work. While progress has been made, the integration of key civil society groups, issues and personnel into the course and its curriculum requires time and further institutional contact managed through local course partners. Feedback loops into civil society need to be strengthened, and there is scope for greater flexibility in the inclusion of changing

topics of research focus from year to year. Local recruitment mechanisms might be reviewed to encourage greater reach and civic institutional buy-in (for example, by means of duty waivers that would enable organisational employees time off to work in the course). The capacity of the course's participants, the quality of their research outputs and the depth of the impact on the surrounding communities, all stand to be strengthened by greater integration of civil society interests into broad management of the course.

### **Recognising and Embracing Diversity**

Partner institutions in the North and South are often marked by profound differences in access to resources (financial, technical, human, infrastructural); in constituent or client needs and interests; and in surrounding environmental limitations (political, economic, infrastructural, and so forth). These differences result in both unevenness of potential partner contributions to cooperation, but also a rich range of varied and complementary resources, such as differently-skilled course participants. The success of the York-Africa partnership will rest partly on its ability to embrace these differences and draw mutually-beneficial inputs from them at the very heart of the project, in the virtual classroom.

### **Continuing Institutional Engagement Among Partners**

International partnerships of this kind require time and continuing consultation. Trust and mutual awareness of needs between York and its African partners required an extended period of exploratory discussion, negotiation, testing and revision of plans. Continuing institutional contact and review was critical to ensuring equity of participation and local commitment to provision of inputs in southern Africa. Meanwhile, face-to-face mentoring by African partners of local students emerged as an essential component of institutional commitment with clear, direct benefits for the learning environment.

### **Blending the Curriculum**

The blending of traditional scholarly learning materials with "grey" literature, autobiographical reports, audio and video materials, and other less conventional instructional materials for senior undergraduates, has been a resounding success. Both Canadian and African participants stressed the positive contributions of this approach to their overall learning experience. Similarly, the varied resources constituted by the different life experiences, training and skills of the course participants was seen as a key element in the overall educational impact of the course.

### **Technical Considerations**

After much preliminary testing of software and communication options, experience to date demonstrates the critical importance of simplicity and reliability in the technological aspects of course design. Low bandwidth, unsteady internet access and varying computing capacity in much of Africa – and the likely persistence of these trends – requires deliberate scaling of technical aspects to accommodate these conditions. Low grade, less interactive forms of communication, including CD-ROMs and email, have been an important means of complementing or providing back up to web-based teaching in the course.

### **Resource Subsidies**

This international web course entails continuing operational costs associated with personnel and operational technical inputs, material provisions, communications and tuition subsidies. These were not adequately forecast at the time of launch, particularly resources enabling face-to-face mentoring and servicing of African participants, and the belief that the course could run without additional input once it was established, proved flawed. Given the relatively weak resource base of many target partner civil society organisations in southern Africa, it is now clear that external resources, albeit modest, will be needed to enable the continued participation of York's southern partners.