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THE INTERNATIONAL JOINT E-PROJECT FOR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: A PRACTICE- ORIENTED, CONFRONTING LEARNING TOOL

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CAUSE AND AIM

It is not easy involving students and lecturers in international exchange and cooperation. This has to do with motivation, with the availability of means and conditions, and with personal

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circumstances. We present here the outline and results of an educational module, which aimed to bring more social work students and lecturers into a situation where they have to cooperate with their peers and counterparts in other countries, and are confronted with the different national conditions in which social work is done.

The educational module concerns a joint research project for social work students from two or more countries in which they form mixed project groups in order to explore the same (social) subject in each of their countries, compare and analyse the results, report on these in a joint report in the English language, and present them in the form of a short audio-visual production. No travelling is involved in the Joint E-Project, because students make full use of today's effective, widespread and affordable Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

The extra dimension of a Joint E-Project is the comparison between and focus on related social issues and problems in different (national) contexts. This confrontation "helps" put into perspective what seems to be obvious and is taken for granted "at home", in one's own environment. It helps to develop an awareness of the national-cultural context in which people live, study and work.

We like to add that such learning effects can also be achieved by providing students with historical experiences (for example by having them interview older family members about everyday life in earlier historical periods). Both perspectives – the international-cultural one (how is it elsewhere?) and the historical one (how was it in the past?) – can lead to "contextual awareness". In turn, contextual awareness is part of a critical-reflective attitude of social workers that many authors in social work consider necessary to survive in our era of neoliberal social policy and managerialistic social institutions.

THE DUTCH-CANADIAN PILOT

The idea of a Joint E-Project was developed by Willem Blok of NHL University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands in 2008, after a working visit to the School of Social Work of Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning in Oakville (Ontario), Canada. He wondered why he could not cooperate with Canada using advanced and affordable internet technology. Blok developed a first pilot for second-year social work students in 2010. From the Netherlands 34 students participated, and 36 on the Canadian side. The students formed twelve mixed project groups of 5-6, chose a subject, started researching and produced reports. The chosen subjects were: drugs addiction, foster care, the elderly, youngsters, rehabilitation, juvenile care, and physically disabled persons.

The evaluation of the first trial resulted in the conclusion that the concept worked; however, the viability and impact of a Joint E-Project will depend on sufficient and comparable conditions for the participating students.

THE DUTCH-IRISH CONTINUATION

It was decided to discontinue the E-Project with Sheridan. NHL Social Work studies found a new partner in Applied Social Studies of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) in Castlebar, Republic of Ireland. We reached a mutual agreement and started to prepare a Dutch-Irish E-project in 2011.

On the Dutch side, the Joint E-Project was embedded as a practical research project in the new Minor in "International Social Work" in the fourth year of NHL's Bachelor's programme in Social Work. The first Dutch-Irish joint E-Project was launched in 2012, with eight Dutch and ten Irish students participating. The Dutch and Irish students formed four mixed project groups, and produced reports and small AV-productions about the following subjects: (1) Alcohol use among early teenagers, (2) Provision of care for asylum seekers, (3) Second-level student attitudes towards homosexuality, and (4) Early child-care provision.

The following year, in 2013, nine Dutch and seven Irish students were involved. The students formed four mixed project groups and studied the following subjects: (1) Domestic violence, (2) Support for volunteer workers in mental health, (3) Treatment of depressed youngsters, and (4) Support for unemployed single parents.

STUDENT EVALUATION

The core rationale of the module lays in the quality of learning involved for the students. Was their understanding of social work enhanced? Did an international perspective and experience enrich their approach to their own professional practice? Did the students succeed in negotiating their way through the various historical, methodological and cultural differences to nonetheless achieve positive learning outcomes? The value and utility of the Joint E-Project depends on positive answers to these questions. Paying close attention to the students' actual experiences and degree of learning, allows us to reflect on international social work as a concept and practice, and to improve further our development of the Joint E-Project as embedded in the Dutch Minor International Social Work and in the new Irish module "International Social Work".

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The results so far have been very encouraging. The student teams succeeded in producing useful reports. They also presented well-coordinated and coherent presentations during video-conferences, attended by a number of academics from both institutions. Secondly, as part of the joint E-Project, the students completed an evaluation document. The results were fairly informative and permitted us to take considerable encouragement from this delivery of the Joint E-Project. Some representative comments from the students may help to illustrate the quality of their learning experience.

Irish students

"It takes you out of your comfort zone but this is where the most learning occurs about yourself and your ability to work with such a diverse group of individuals."

"It requires extra patience, strong communication skills and develops an understanding regarding other cultural values and beliefs."

"This international project provides students with a greater understanding of international social care philosophies and practice and international practitioners' values & beliefs. It provides an opportunity to stand back and examine practices, social policies, issues etc. and evaluate your own philosophies on social care practice."

"Working with students from another country gives an important insight into different ways of working, and different approaches to social care."

Dutch Students

"This project broadens your horizon and makes you aware of the bigger picture of globalization."

"Cooperation is a real skill. This joint course allowed me to develop this skill. Besides that I learned a lot about cultural differences and how to work with students from another culture. It helped me to develop my vision and think more widely about social work."

"This course is a good one if you want to practise social work abroad. You learn that social workers have different philosophies all over the world. It's not the technical features you learn about working abroad, it's more the vision and different views you learn to see."

CONCLUSIONS

In our experience, the Joint E-Project represents a useful model for developing international social work learning in project groups of students. Our findings suggest that students benefit from the opportunity for this kind of collaboration and that the experience of working across national boundaries greatly improves cultural understanding. It also shows the extent to which social work in diverse countries nonetheless shares common underlying values and concerns, and faces similar challenges from an increasingly dominant neo-liberal and managerial paradigm. We have also learned the importance of devoting time to developing relationships between the participating students prior to starting the module. It is also necessary to provide students with contextual lectures and workshops, so as to clarify in advance differences in the national settings of social work. We think this will help them in their search for a common language, theory and methodology of social work.

A Joint E-Project can be integrated in the regular curriculum of social work studies at Bachelor's or Master's level, and can be used in the (further) education of social workers.

In our opinion there are at least four reasons why we, as social work educators, should invest more in developing modules that can contribute to advanced, internationally based educational programmes for social work.

1. The march of globalization and its social effects;
2. Strengthening what we have in common, and learning from it;
3. Learning from national differences;
4. Making more and effective use of ICT in education.

We believe that the International Joint E-Project is a good example for curriculum-based international cooperation between schools, colleges and faculties of social work.