

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: TENSIONS AND TRANSFORMATION IN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING

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Abstract

This article will present a best practice model employed to support an international service-learning course in international social work. Learning will be drawn from collaborations between a United States graduate social work programme, the child welfare professionals in a mid-sized Russian city, and between the American programme and a partner College in Southern India. The course design features in-depth exploration of the challenges of poverty, child abuse and neglect, child trafficking, mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuse from a global perspective using a collaborative model with emphasis on reciprocity with the host culture. The model features a project-based international service-learning experience. The model incorporates an immersion experience aimed at a comprehensive student education procedure. It features a process-based model of service-learning through reflective writing and discussions as well as project-based and community-development international service-learning features. This article will include strategies in establishing and maintaining a sustained international partnership together with the service-learning educational

opportunities embedded in the instructional pedagogy. Specific recommendations will be provided to address the thorny and difficult challenges specific to international service-learning along with recommended planning strategies for faculty delivery.

Key words: *service learning, community development, -pedagogy*

Background

The work described in this article follows a strict adherence to the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) model of global service-learning (Krauel et al., 2002). These elements include a) service learning as an educational activity, b) service-learning as a public service activity and c) service-learning and community development (Tonkin, 2009). Reciprocity among all partners was a central feature in the design of the course (Grusky, 2000, Hoff, 2008). Examples of reciprocity include engagement strategies utilized between course instructors with Russian and their Indian community academic partners. This approach has allowed instructors to learn what the host country partners were identifying as the challenges and learning needs, so that their activities would reflect a reciprocal exchange. In the Russia programme, this information led to a dialogue about training needs, which assisted course instructors in developing evidence-based training modules based on the request of the Russian Child Welfare leaders to address the challenges and needs that they had identified. Additionally, the training modules featured client case examples developed by the Russian community partners. The specific manner in which the Russian community partners engaged with course instructors in the early stages of the planning process, provided the context for the service-learning activities. In the U.S. the graduate social work students and the Russian community partners engaged in it as joint learners. In the case of the Indian partnership, the information led to the design of a service learning project with an SOS Village for orphaned children, based on what were the real or actual needs of the children of the village. As part of the course requirements, the U.S. graduate students utilized a guided reflection on a daily basis during their trip and throughout the courses. The guided reflection

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procedure incorporates features found in the process-based models of service-learning (Tonkin, 2009). In both cases the partners came together at the end of the trip for a joint meeting using guided reflective dialogue to ensure learning needs were addressed and to strengthen their on-going partnership.

From the point of view of a best practice perspective, one of the most important aspects of service-learning is sustainability (Jacoby, 1996). This article describes service-learning experiences that grew out of a 16 year old partnership between the Sister Cities Programmes among Rochester, NY, USA and Velikiy Novgorod, Russia. The Russian course was combined with a four year academic exchange one of the Indian course. With the Russian partnership, multiple annual exchanges of professionals have occurred especially in 2004 where the two faculty members involved in this manuscript were invited to go over to Russia to teach strengths-based family work. At the 2004 conference, for the first time ever, all the child welfare professionals in Velikiy Novgorod gathered to learn and partner together. Eight years after this first historic conference, plans were made (supported by annual exchanges) to bring the next generation of partners together for combined learning. The Russian partners expressed a desire to learn the cutting edge on the advanced family focusing on child welfare interventions. A course was developed in which the American students would travel to Russia, stay with Russian families and attend a week-long conference with their Russian counterparts. The course was taught simultaneously in Russian and English, with Power Point slides and role plays done in both languages. For the partnership between the Indian and American academic institutions, a series of faculty exchanges led to two of the classes coming over to their Indian counterpart's center namely (Rajagiri College) International Social Work Conference in 2011 and 2013. These conferences have become a springboard for student scholarships as well as for paving the way for joint Indian-American faculty scholarship. This article will present the specific framework of the learning approach that supports an international service-learning pedagogy.

International service-learning presents some very specific challenges and learning opportunities (Boyle et al., 1999). For instance these

challenges include lengthy travel routes and time differences, home stays with Russian families, language barriers and cultural differences. The requirement to partner collaboratively under these circumstances presented a significant challenge for all involved. At the same time these factors presented wonderful learning opportunities as well as the development of friendships, cordiality and collegiality among the U.S. and international partners. The strategies utilized to recognize and embrace these challenges as opportunities are explored in this manuscript and are consistent with service-learning. Central learning is the best practice for consistency in communication and relationships to sustain a sense of trust, so that the service-learning trip can be planned to address the real needs of the host country that matched the learning needs of the U.S. students. Attention as to how to build and sustain trust is critical to support international service-learning. In addition, it is essential that partners work to promote a sense of reciprocity. It was of vital importance and this aspect was stressed and made known to the U.S. students that we would be learning together and in unison. There would not be an "American in charge", and therefore, considerable time was taken to develop a cultural sensitivity.

Pedagogical Model

The approach taken in these international social work courses followed an integrative model of social work practice (Parson et al., 2001). In this collaborative educational approach all parties are seen as learners. Therefore, the faculty model too were considered to be learners and they too engage openly as learners. In addition there is a commonly held belief that the collective expertise of all is much stronger than any individual expertise. To achieve this, the courses were designed to address the following five practices: a) To engage in a reciprocal manner. This was noticed when the Indian and the American faculties took turns in making class presentation to the collective group of students. b) To actively embed empowerment and asset development. For example a discussion related to the soaring rates of domestic and partner violence in both the U.S. and India, lead to the development of action/ remedial steps that the social work students could implement on their respective campuses. c) To develop organizational and

community partnerships. Numerous examples are present in both courses, the relationship with non-governmental child welfare professionals in Russia and the SOS Village in India are among the most prominent. d) To practice culturally competent behavior. One of the key learning opportunities in international travel based education relates to adapting to diversity practice, students and faculty worked hard to adapt to different cultural norms related to dress, food, and interpersonal communication (Deardorff, 2008, Fairfield et al., 2006). e) To apply social work values and ethics. True professional delight has been demonstrated to all the involved participants with regard to how well the ethical code of the social work profession can easily transcend international borders and forms the basis for all our activities.

Lessons Learned

Assessment of the two courses have provided a rich source of data that can support the use of international travel as a part of academic social work education. This approach is best formulated by the development of sustainable partnerships between the traveling academic institution and the host institution. Student learning is fostered by the use of guided reflection. Service-learning while overseas, presents an excellent opportunity to deliver course content. Faculties are encouraged to consider an integrated model so that the entire student community is provided with an educational opportunity. Finally it is essential that opportunities are made available for an honest reflection and planning among the partners at the end of each exchange session.

As faculties all over the world tend to be comprised of highly committed and busy professionals, it is recommended that partnership memorandums of understanding be drawn up. Communication can make or break down an international exchange. Keeping this factor in mind, open, frequent and transparent communication is required. The demands of international travel tend to lead to various challenges, therefore, communication and planning will address these challenges and allow the desired process to work. Faculty are encouraged to discuss a praxis model of experience, reflection and action with the students prior to travel and then

look for opportunities to direct the students to process a situation out. For instance, the faculty predicted that there would be times when the student group might struggle with each other interpersonally, and when such a situation did happen then both the groups should be ready to help the other group work through these challenges and sort out the problem through guided reflection on the value of conflict resolution. Service-learning has shown great promise as an educational vehicle (Eyler et al., 1997, Watkins & Braun, 2005). By creating reciprocal service-learning experiences such as the nursery song exchange at the SOS Village. This allowed the students to both make a contribution as well as be learners simultaneously. Emersion, whether it is by home stay in the case of the Russia course or Yoga lessons in India, provide comprehensive education to the student in a way that stateside classrooms really struggle to achieve. These diverse promotional experiences, especially when processed using guided reflection activities are a rich academic tool (Mayadas et al., 1997). Finally, for international social work education to work _ has to be real partnerships. Partnerships take time, communication and trust (Midgley, 2001). Each Partner-needs to be prepared to give and extend their help among themselves and to each other. By scheduling partner meetings during the course and certainly at the end of the exchange experience sessions, this desired-depth of relationship will be facilitated.

Conclusion

Social work is increasingly becoming an international profession (Cox & Pawar, 2006). As such social work educators need to strongly consider how to deliver the proper international social work content into the curriculum (Abram & Cruce, 2007). Courses that feature short term travel as a part of the course, that can use guided reflection and service learning hold a greater promise of deliverance in this emerging social work content area (Bennett, 2008).

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