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Utilizing Video Conferencing to Introduce an International Perspective to Foundation Practice

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Video conferencing has much potential to enrich international social work education. In this educational initiative, video conferencing was used to deliver a joint foundation social work practice class to students attending an MSW degree program both in the United States and in Ireland. Student feedback indicated that they gained an appreciation of the global nature of social work practice. They reported a deeper understanding of shared theoretical perspectives in relation to client engagement, and of the differences in many fields of practice. Students recommended additional opportunities for international discourse using both synchronous and asynchronous distance education methods.

KEYWORDS *international social work, distance learning, distance education, video conferencing, online learning*

Over the past two decades, social work education programs throughout the world have attempted to internationalize their curricula (Asamoah, Healy, & Mayadas, 1997; Rotabi, Gammonley, Gamble, & Weil, 2007). Many rationales have been put forth for this direction including the need for students to better understand how domestic social problems are precipitated by international events and forces; to expand students' program and policy development

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skills by exposing them to alternative approaches and programs used in other cultures; to better prepare students to work with diversity; and to train them for careers in international practice (Nagy & Falk, 2000). Movement toward internationalization also has led to much discussion and debate about what content should be addressed (Midgley, 2001; Powell & Robison, 2007) and how it should be organized within a program's curriculum (e.g. Asamoah, Healy, & Mayadas, 1997; Powell & Robison, 2007). As the field of international social work education continues to grow, attention must also be given to the issue of methodology, that is, what are effective and innovative ways for students to gain an international perspective (Nagy & Falk, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Exchanges and Study Abroad Programs

Experiential learning through international exchange programs, study abroad, and international field placements, which allow the student to be immersed in another culture and engage in "international discourse," have been the methods most often acknowledged within the social work literature as the means for development of an international perspective (Carrilio & Mathiesen, 2006; Cincatta, Tokatlian, & Miller, 2006; Gilin & Young, 2009; Midgley, 2001). Those advocating for the internationalization of social work education call for increased opportunities for faculty and students to attend international conferences and participate in international internships and exchanges (Yuen, 2009). Students who participate in such exchanges and immerse themselves in another culture have been found to experience a range of positive learning outcomes including increased cross-cultural competence and understanding, innovative ideas about practice, and deepened identification as a social work professional (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999; Gilin & Young, 2009; Holmes & Mathews, 1993).

While these findings point to the academic advantages of this type of experiential learning, concerns have been raised about the many inter-organizational and administrative challenges involved in setting up study abroad programs and international field placements (Carrilio & Mathiesen, 2006; Gilin & Young, 2009). Due to an absence of resources, such as time and money, the goal of participation in this type of learning experience may be unrealistic for many, especially older students who have family responsibilities and other commitments (Powell & Robison, 2007).

Internationalization Using Web-Based Distance Education Technologies

In response, there appears to be a growing interest within social work education in what Hendriks, Kloppenburg, Gevorgianiene, and Jukutiene (2008)

term an “internationalization at home” approach, that is, the use of distance education methods to promote communication among social work students across borders. Web-based technologies such as e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, and file sharing now are being used in innovative ways in a variety of social work education programs as delivery methods for furthering the internationalization of the curriculum (Bye, Prom, Tsybikdorzhieva, & Boldova, 2006; Carter-Anand & Clark, 2009; Ford & Rotgans-Visser, 2005; Hendriks et al., 2008; Johnson, 1999; Larsen, Sanders, Astray, & Hole, 2008).

Qualitative evaluations of the learning outcomes for students participating in these innovations suggest that they are contributing to the internationalization of social work courses. For example, Hendriks et al. (2008) conducted a pilot study of a cross-national learning experience involving students from four European social work programs. While working in small groups, the students engaged in a cross-national online case analysis of a client with disabilities. The evaluation revealed that the pilot increased the students’ identification with social work as an international profession, with a great amount of shared theory, methods, and values. It also revealed that the students’ insights into their own country’s social policy and national perspectives increased.

In another example involving an electronic student exchange using e-mail and chat rooms, social work students from Trinity College Dublin in Ireland and the California State University at Fresno in the United States participated in similar modules focused on equality studies, diversity, and oppression (Carter-Anand & Clark, 2009). Content analysis of the exchanges found that the interpersonal contact between the students raised consciousness of the diversity of global issues and new awareness of the socio-cultural differences in welfare systems and social structures.

Internationalization Using Video Conferencing Technology

Video conferencing, also known as interactive video or, in its earlier version, interactive television, is another distance education method that has much potential to increase the international perspective of students by facilitating synchronous virtual cross-national exchange. This method differs significantly from the online web-based methods noted above. With video conferencing, the interaction is in real time (synchronous) and includes both video and audio communication, allowing participants to experience both nonverbal and verbal expression as they would in traditional face-to-face communication. While its use has been documented within international social work education as a way to provide supervision to students participating in international field placements (Panos, 2005), there are no published reports to date of its cross-national use in social work education for the purpose of creating a virtual, collaborative classroom learning experience.

Nonetheless, other disciplines have successfully used video conferencing technology to facilitate cross-national student learning. Ekblad et al. (2004) report on a pilot study involving the use of international video conferencing in teaching medical students from Sweden, Australia, and the United States about transcultural psychiatry. In the sessions, students had the opportunity to interview both actual and simulated clients as a way to learn about assessment and intervention with immigrant and refugee populations and to experience the transcultural issues that emerged. Students rated the sessions from good to very good, and the video conferencing was seen as a major strength of the 4-day course. In a second study, university students in the United States and South Africa participated in a graduate seminar on globalization and the information society using synchronous (video conferencing) and asynchronous (online) technology. In the evaluation, students indicated a preference for the lectures being delivered synchronously via video conference (Cogburn & Levinson, 2003).

Social work education is well positioned to use such technology for the purpose of creating a cross-national collaborative learning experience. The use of video conferencing (i.e., interactive television) dates back to the 1980s (Raymond, 2005). It is described in the social work literature as part of an earlier generation of distance learning that preceded online web-based technology (Raymond, 2005; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009; York, 2008). The initial impetus for its use was in response to the changing needs and life circumstances of students and the resultant demand for more part-time and satellite campus programs. However, much scepticism was expressed initially about this method due to the distance involved between teacher and learner and social work's traditional preference for face-to-face interaction. Its eventual growth is attributed to the rapid development of new technologies coupled with the reduced implementation costs (Raymond, 2005); the mounting research evidence of comparable or better learning outcomes, compared to traditional face-to-face teaching (Coe & Elliot, 1999; Coe-Regan & Freddolino, 2008; Hollister & McGee, 2000; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000; Wilke & Vinton, 2006); and the growing recognition that distance education fulfilled social work's commitment to social justice and equality by increasing education access to disadvantaged populations (Abels, 2005).

Given the expense of, and limited student access to, the experiential learning provided by traditional international exchange and study-abroad programs, video conferencing represents a viable yet untapped distance learning. Social work education programs have a significant record of experience with this method for the purposes of expanding the national reaches of their individual programs (Vernon et al., 2009) but have not yet used this methodology to enrich the international dimension of social work education.

This paper will describe an educational initiative that used video conferencing to deliver a joint social work foundation practice class to

students attending an MSW degree program in the United States and in Ireland. The background and rationale for the project will first be addressed. The developmental tasks completed prior to its delivery will then be described, followed by the results of a content analysis of student feedback. Based on what was learned, the strengths and challenges of using video conferencing as a delivery method in cross-national social work education will be discussed. Future plans for expanding the project will also be noted, including ways that video conferencing technology and web-based learning could be combined to strengthen an international perspective in social work education.

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The idea for this project developed during the semester in which the first author, a tenured U.S. faculty member at Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, was a visiting Fulbright Scholar at the University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland.¹ During her Fulbright semester, she co-taught several courses with Irish faculty. One of the courses was in the foundation practice area that she co-taught with the second author, who was also a tenured professor at UCD. As a result of this experience, both the U.S. and the Irish faculties gained an increased appreciation for the similarities shared between the two programs, particularly in the foundation practice area, as well as differences, which led to discussions of how this international perspective could be shared more fully with their students. Initially, there was some consideration of developing a traditional student exchange program, but concerns were raised about the viability of this option for the majority of students, given the time and financial resources involved. In response to these accessibility concerns, the idea emerged to use distance learning technology to create a joint teaching and learning experience for faculty and students. The overall purpose of the initiative would be to increase awareness of the global nature of social work practice through an understanding of some of the practice similarities and differences between the two countries.

The first joint video conference took place in 2008. Discussion with students indicated that they valued the experience, and faculty were encouraged to continue with the project. The video conference became an annual event and, in 2011, after obtaining IRB approval from each university, formal feedback was gathered from students about their experience and reflections. This paper deals with what was learned from that specific event.

¹ Fordham University is a large private Jesuit University with campuses in New York City and Westchester County in New York. University College Dublin (UCD) is Ireland's largest public university.

INTERNATIONAL VIDEOCONFERENCE DESCRIPTION

Development Activities

Prior to implementing this initiative, planning occurred that involved joint decision making about the content and process of delivery. The groundwork also involved coordination with administration and with the Internet technology (IT) departments within each of the universities. Given the importance of this early work to the overall initiative, a more detailed description follows regarding the decisions made and the coordination activities completed.

Content

From the knowledge that both the U.S. and Irish faculty had gained about each other's foundation practice curriculum, a decision was made for the content of the joint learning experience to be infused into an initial foundation practice course required by both programs, and offered at each institution during the fall semester. The preliminary sessions of this course center on the development of basic social work practice skills such as empathic listening and styles of questioning. Later sessions focus on building upon these skills in the teaching of multi-level assessment and intervention.

The topic of "Engaging the Involuntary Client" was selected for the joint session, since this is a population frequently encountered by social workers in most fields of practice in both countries and requires a specialized skill set. Course readings specifically related to social work with involuntary clients (see DeJong & Berg, 2001; Rooney, 1992) and other relevant readings on the stages of change and motivational interviewing (see DiClemente & Velasquez, 2002; Miller & Rollnick, 2002) were selected to be read prior to the class. In earlier class lectures and readings, both sets of students had been introduced to basic interviewing skills and the strengths perspective of social work practice (Saleebey, 2008). The joint session, therefore, was part of a continuum of learning and built upon what had come previously.

Teaching Methods

Role play was selected as the major teaching strategy to be used within the session. Both faculty members had extensive experience with this method for teaching practice skills in the classroom. They also saw role play not only as a way to teach engagement skills but also as an important way to highlight the similarities and differences in social work practice settings. Support exists for the effectiveness of this method in teaching motivational interviewing skills (Mounsey, Bovbjerg, White, & Gazewook, 2006). Ekblad et al. (2004), in the study reviewed earlier, also used role play effectively as a teaching method in the international video conferencing sessions with medical students who were learning transcultural psychiatry.

This decision required each professor to develop a representative case involving an involuntary client. The Irish case was set in the field of probation in Ireland, and the U.S. case was set in a court-mandated treatment program here for perpetrators of domestic violence. Two students from each country volunteered to enact the social worker and client roles. The faculty members spent time with both volunteers to help them prepare for their role. Detailed information about the client characteristics, background, and presenting situation was provided to each student enacting the client role. Only basic referral information was provided to each student enacting the social worker role in order to mirror reality as much as possible during the role play.

Part of the developmental process also included the decision to use a telecommunication-based video conferencing system (Polycom VSX 7000s) as the distance education method to deliver this session, since having a dedicated line and IP address taken off a standard server provided the greatest assurance of a smooth connection throughout the class session. Other systems such as Skype were not considered for the joint class since they might pose difficulties due to the lack of control over interconnectivity when using freeware systems. Although other asynchronous web-based technology options were considered, the decision to use videoconferencing was informed by a number of factors. First, video conferencing would allow the students to see and hear one another in real time. In addition, the wide-angle lens and audio capacity of the cameras in both locations would allow the students to see one another's entire class and had the ability to zoom in on individual students when they spoke. Thus, all the students would be able to observe one another's role plays, including facial expressions and tone of voice. When the role plays were completed, students could share immediate reactions to what they had heard and observed, discuss spontaneous questions that emerged from the interaction, and experience "in the moment" learning together as a team. As such, it provided a more comparable experience to being physically together in a classroom than any other form of distance learning. Second, participation in this method of delivery did not require extensive training on the part of either the faculty or students, beyond gaining some familiarity with how a video conference operates. Prior experience with local video conferencing and participating in a brief test run to get comfortable with the camera were seen as sufficient faculty preparation. Finally, there was no additional expense associated with the connection since both systems were found to be compatible and, therefore, could be connected using a static IP address at no cost.

Coordination Activities

In addition to planning the content and teaching methods for the joint session, both faculty members engaged in coordination activities with university

administration in relation to course scheduling and time differences. After some exploration on both sides, a time that would work for the joint session was found, due to the Irish university's ability to move their class time on the day of the video conference to a later time slot, as all of their students were in class together throughout the day. The American university did not have this ability, given its much larger size and the fact that the students were spread out among classes throughout the day.

Each faculty member also coordinated with his or her respective IT departments prior to the session to ensure IT staff and equipment availability on that day. It was also necessary for the two IT departments to be in direct communication with each other well in advance to assess compatibility, exchange IP addresses, and conduct a test run of the connection.

Joint Session Description

Sixteen students from Ireland and 25 students from the United States participated in the 90-minute joint session. (Both sets of graduate students had worked together in their respective foundation practice class for approximately 5 weeks prior to the joint session.) The joint session was co-facilitated by the Irish and U.S. faculty members, one in each location. A member of the IT department set up the conference at each location, was available to address any technical issues, and operated the camera during the session.

At the start of the joint session, students introduced themselves and identified their area of interest in social work. This exercise immediately highlighted some of the similarities and differences in practice contexts and led to questions and discussion about some of the differences. For example, several of the U.S. students had field placements within school systems. This was of particular interest to the Irish students as school social work is not a field of practice in Ireland. Students shared views on the role of social work and the opportunities for preventative and early interventions that arise in this field of practice. Likewise, the U.S. students were curious about the number of Irish students with field placements in probation. The probation service in Ireland employs almost 30% of social work professionals, second only to child protection and welfare services. In fact, probation in Ireland had recently introduced the MSW as the preferred qualification for its probation and welfare officers. The American students also were interested in the fact that almost all of the Irish students complete a field placement in child welfare.

Next, the students were asked to identify the settings in which social workers generally find themselves working with involuntary clients. This discussion also provided the students with knowledge about some of the similarities and differences in practice settings that serve these populations.

After this introductory portion of the session, each professor took turns briefly highlighting what the students had read about the stages of change,

beginning motivational interviewing skills and specific strategies for engaging the involuntary client. As part of this overview, each faculty member referred to handouts that had been distributed to both sets of students at the beginning of this class.

The next part of the session involved the two student volunteers from each class, one playing the social worker and one playing the client, enacting their respective role-plays of a first interview, and attempting to use the knowledge and skills learned thus far about engagement. The two Irish students enacted an initial session between a probation social worker and a juvenile in trouble with the law, and the two American students demonstrated a first interview between a social worker and a man mandated by the court for treatment upon conviction for domestic violence. Each role-play lasted approximately 10 minutes. After each role-play, the student who played the social worker was given the opportunity to reflect on his or her performance, followed by the student who played the client. Then the other students from both classes were asked to discuss what they had observed about the client's stage of change and any interviewing skills demonstrated that may have facilitated the engagement process. Given that this was the first (and would be the only) "face-to-face" encounter between the Irish and the U.S. students, they were encouraged to focus their feedback on the strengths observed in each role play. During the discussion, students were also encouraged to ask questions and learn about variations in the role of the social worker in each scenario, the legal framework for social work practice in each case, and the variability in the practice settings within which social workers operated in both countries. The session ended by giving the students the opportunity to ask one another any further questions about social work practice and education that they had as a result of the joint session.

EVALUATION OF STUDENT FEEDBACK

At the end of the joint class session, both sets of students were provided with the same feedback form, which they completed anonymously. The students had been informed about this feedback form during the prior class and on the written informed consent, as required by each university's IRB. Students who voluntarily chose to fill it out were asked to return it (unsigned) to an envelope in each professor's mailbox.

The feedback form asked the students the following questions:

1. What did you learn from this class session?
2. Was there anything that you learned because it was an international joint session?

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with (1) being not comfortable at all and (5) being very comfortable, can you rate your level of comfort with the technology? Explain your rating.
4. Do you have any recommended changes?

A total of 26 feedback forms were returned, 18 from the U.S. students and 8 from the Irish students. A content analysis of the responses to each of the questions was conducted to identify specific themes. The themes identified for questions 1 and 2 overlapped, and therefore the findings were combined.

Similarities as Social Work Professionals

In response to questions 1 and 2, many of the American and Irish students commented that as a result of the joint session, in which they were required to observe and comment on one another's work, they learned about the similarities in theoretical approaches to client engagement used within each country. Recognizing these similarities increased their understanding of, and appreciation for, the universal aspects of social work practice.

- "I feel that the exchange made me think of social work as international with a cohesive bond and cause." (U.S.)
- "I learned that social work has a consistent theme across international borders. There seems to be a uniformity of social work speak & thought." (Irish)
- "It was very interesting to learn that very little difference appeared between the two countries in theoretical approach to the situations." (U.S.)

Collaborative Learning Process

Within the responses to questions 1 and 2, students also commented about the learning process itself and, in particular, the collaborative learning that occurred within the joint session through the use of the student role-plays, followed by a structured cross-national discussion.

- "I found the class very rewarding in that as a class we worked as a team. It was fascinating to link in with our American counterparts" (Irish)
- "I learned (saw) visually how to use the skills in the first interview that we learned in class. It was very helpful to see how the social work and client interacted, to critique and learn from them." (U.S.)
- "I got to see motivational interviewing in action and how effective it is. It was also good to see other students' views and opinions on it." (Irish)

- “By watching the interviews I gained a better understanding of the skills I read about.” (U.S.)

Differences Identified

In response to the initial two questions, the students identified differences with regard to the fields of practice of child welfare, probation and school social work. Many of the U.S. students expressed surprise that the MSW degree was required to work in child protection and probation in Ireland. Many saw this as a standard that the United States should adopt. Irish students found it interesting to learn about the field of school social work in the United States, which does not exist in Ireland.

- “I learned that there are many differences in the field of social work between the U.S. and Ireland. First, Ireland’s child welfare workers all have their MSWs, and I think this is an incredibly positive requirement considering the challenges child welfare workers face. Secondly, all of the probation officers have their MSWs. I think this is also a positive example and it may help to increase the success of parolees. Since our country has so many in the criminal justice system and our system does not seem to be that effective, it could be a good model of change.” (U.S.)
- “It raised my awareness as to the different types of social work functions available in America, for example, school social work.” (Irish)
- “I was extremely interested to hear that many [Irish] social work students had interests in going into child protective services, as this is not viewed in the US as one of the major areas that attracts MSW students.” (U.S.)
- “I also learned about the different roles of social work in the states in schools.” (Irish)

Comfort Level with the Video Conferencing Technology

Among those who responded, the majority of American students (15 of 18) and half of the Irish students (4 of 8) rated their comfort level to be high (either at 4 or 5). Two American students and three Irish students rated it a mid-point of 3, with the remaining one American and one Irish student rating it below mid-point at 2. (The transmission was interrupted and had to be reconnected during the U.S. student role-play, which may explain the lower comfort ratings given by a few of the students.)

Student Recommendations

In response to Question 4, students made comments related to how opportunities for international discourse with their social work peers could be

increased in the future by adding another video conferencing session and employing other forms of distance education technology.

- “Possibly a second session. I found the role plays and feedback extremely helpful in seeing the techniques of motivational interviewing utilized effectively by my peers.” (U.S.)
- “Perhaps, if possible, do it in two sessions—get more out of it.” (Irish)
- “It would be nice to have more interaction with the Irish students, not just a one time video conferencing. Maybe we could have extra credit or guided instruction by communicating via e-mail or other ways to continue to contact. Student to student contact would be great.” (U.S.)

Last, in response to Question 4, some students also made comments about their overall experience of the joint session.

- “It was very eye-opening to connect and communicate with students from a school in Ireland. I believe that this is the shape of things to come and that there will be more opportunities for this type of communication as well as more advanced and sophisticated technology to facilitate it in the future.” (U.S.)
- “Enjoyed the experience—loved the idea of the link and being part of [the U.S. University’s] day as we finished and they started.” (Irish)

DISCUSSION

The results of the student feedback about the joint session indicate that overall the students did gain an appreciation of the global nature of social work practice and some of the shared theoretical perspectives between the two programs as well as some of the differences that exist in relation to fields of practice. The findings also suggest that the teaching methods chosen for the session, namely the use of telecommunication-based video conferencing technology, role play, and discussion, were an effective means for learning this content. Some of the major strengths of the joint session optimized the value of the single-session, and cross-national interaction resulted from the extensive planning that occurred prior to its delivery. Other professions that have used video conferencing to teach students cross-nationally also have highlighted the importance of planning. For example, Bontempi, Runyan, and Heath (1999) reported a detailed and extensive planning process prior to a telecast video conference designed to teach medical students from different countries about community-based injury and violence prevention programs.

The planning that occurred also ensured that the content and teaching methods for the joint session were congruent with the other parts of the course. As a result, the joint session was seamlessly infused into the ongoing

curriculum and experienced as a matter of course, which has been highlighted as one of the strengths of the infusion model of international social work education (Asamoah et al., 1997), and an important aspect of curriculum design (Martin, 2003). By the time the students participated in the session they already had been introduced to basic interviewing and engagement skills and were familiar with the learning strategies of role play and feedback. This meant that the groundwork for the joint session had been laid, and the students were able to focus on the novel aspects of the session.

Another strength of this initiative was the fact that the two faculty involved were familiar with each other, with each other's curricula and practice contexts, and had had the experience of working collaboratively within their own schools in curriculum design and delivery. This allowed the two facilitators to model a relaxed, friendly, and open communication style to the participants, which appeared to contribute to the creation of a rapport between the two cohorts. This connection was also an important motivator. Both faculty were committed to working out any initial difficulties and were able to use their connections with university services to access the necessary technical support.

Utilizing the case material from each country in a student role-play demonstration and follow-up discussion also put the students directly into a collaborative learning experience where the practice similarities and differences came alive through what they saw, heard, and then reflected upon together. Video conferencing technology allowed for a unique learning experience that would not be possible with other web-based methods that rely more on written forms of expression. The wide-angle lens and audio capacity of the cameras facilitated the joint discussion by allowing the 25 U.S. students and 16 Irish students to see one another as a group and to zoom in on individuals when they spoke.

While there are many positive aspects associated with video conferencing in international social work education, there were challenges experienced during this video conference that could also pose difficulties for others who might embark on this type of initiative. As noted, the signal connection was briefly lost during the session, and although it was reconnected quickly, the event did disrupt the flow of the session, and perhaps was responsible for a few of the students' "lower comfort" ratings. In follow-up discussions with IT about strategies to reduce the likelihood of a disruption, it was suggested that a network technician could be assigned at both sites solely to monitor the connection. Given the critical role of technology for this teaching methodology, schools of social work interested in using video conferencing to further the internationalization of their curriculum must be prepared to advocate for university investment in the technology and IT support necessary to ensure a smooth implementation. The calculation of the actual cost of the IT resources is difficult, as they were provided as part of each university's support services. Irrespective of this integrated IT support

structure, having an IT technician available solely to monitor the connection may have implications for the number of video conferencing sessions that could be held per course. The operation of the camera, however, is a task that could be easily learned by a student, which would be one way to reduce the amount of IT resources necessary.

Another challenge when using international video conferencing technology involves the time differences. Since video conferencing occurs synchronously, a time that works for both sets of students must be found. The key to dealing with this particular challenge lies again in the preparation, since addressing institutional barriers to adjusting class schedules takes time. Nonetheless, it was our experience that, once the initiative was understood by all parties affected, creative problem solving around scheduling occurred. It is important to note, of course, that we were adjusting the schedule for only one class session. If multiple video conferencing sessions were planned, the institutional challenges might have proved more difficult.

Whenever a new initiative is introduced that will draw on limited resources or require ongoing administrative adjustments, as this type of initiative does, a clear and upfront understanding of the educational benefits is important. We have found that the students themselves (and the participating IT staff) were effective ambassadors for this initiative. After the first video conference, word spread quickly about this novel international experience. An article also was written in a school newsletter about the initiative and included a student interview about the experience. A stated commitment to ongoing evaluation of the learning outcomes for participating students also is critical to the process of maintaining support for the additional resources that may be needed.

Language is a further challenge that may be encountered in the development of an international education initiative. While it was not an obstacle in this example, as both sets of students spoke English, there was the need for adjustment to degrees and types of accents. There also was confusion at times due to the use of unfamiliar colloquial vocabulary. Preparing students beforehand to speak as slowly and clearly as possible and having faculty members and students prepared to repeat what was said if not clear are strategies that can finesse this obstacle.

Finally, a challenge that must be recognized in future replication of this experience between other universities involves the “digital divide.” As defined by Abels (2005), the term refers to the handicaps universally faced by economically struggling universities as well as by developing nations that may not have the requisite technology to participate on an equal footing with first-world countries. The universities that participated in this project had equivalent and advanced IT capacities. If video conferencing, as well as other forms of distance education, was to be adopted on a larger scale by social work programs to further internationalization, the digital divide

must be addressed to ensure that the opportunity to engage in virtual international collaborative learning does not just occur between universities in wealthy nations but that also includes social work students and educators at universities in poorer and developing countries.

The strengths and challenges of our experience provide some preliminary guidelines. While we believe that most social work courses have the potential to benefit from distance education collaboration, we believe it is critical that the faculty involved develop a relationship beforehand and become familiar with one another's courses and syllabi. This will allow them the opportunity to strategically select a class session that will likely provide optimal sharing of similarities and differences, whether that be in practice, policy, or research. Equally important, students need to be well prepared beforehand for the joint exercises and discussion and committed to similar readings and lecture material. The size of the classes might also rule out certain courses, since a class size of more than 25 students might not be able to be fully captured on camera.

Study Limitations

This pilot study involved a very small sample, mostly qualitative feedback, and did not have any type of comparison group. The response rate of 50% from the Irish students (versus 72% for the American students) also was disappointing in particular since the discussion and verbal feedback were positive. The Irish group was small and very manageable, so they may have found the submission of a written questionnaire to be an unnecessary additional task since they had multiple opportunities to discuss the experience with their fellow students and the facilitator in subsequent sessions. In retrospect, the response rate might have been increased if more time had been allotted for them to complete their evaluation immediately after the session. In light of these design limitations, the feedback results cannot be generalized beyond the experience of the students who participated in the study. In addition, in order to assess the impact on the students with respect to whether this experience increased their appreciation of global social work issues, additional measurement tools would need to be developed to track this anticipated outcome.

Future Directions

Despite these limitations, this project demonstrated the learning that is possible between social work students from different countries by giving them the opportunity through video conferencing to have a joint, virtual, synchronous classroom experience. Given the generally positive feedback received, we plan to continue the use of the videoconference as an inaugural cross-national encounter and to learn from the challenges encountered.

To further enhance the international aspect of this course and deepen the students' cross-national learning experience, we plan to provide more opportunities for them to interact individually and in small groups prior to and after the joint session by using other forms of asynchronous distance learning technology, such as discussion boards, file sharing, and video streaming. While in this pilot project both professors individually delivered similar lecture material to their students prior to the video conference as part of the preparation, in the future these preparation activities could be shared by having each professor and/or other international expert prepare a PowerPoint lecture with audio that would be shown to both classes. This addition would result in an even richer international experience, allowing the students to have multiple opportunities to learn cross-nationally from one another (and their respective professors) but in an asynchronous fashion not constrained by time differences and the technical support resources inherent in video conferencing.

In addition to expanding the types of technology to further the international conversation among the students, we also plan to conduct more sophisticated research on learning outcomes. In particular, we would like to better understand whether and how the learning from the virtual, face-to-face, cross-national sessions is similar to or different from the learning outcomes when solely using asynchronous technologies in cross-national education. Our very preliminary findings here suggest that there is value in this educational experience, but without a comparison group and more quantifiable outcome measures, we cannot say for certain how this method compares to other online methods available for enhancing international social work education.

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