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To cite this article: Janet Carter-Anand & Kris Clarke (2009) Crossing Borders through Cyberspace: A Discussion of a Social Work Education Electronic Exchange Pilot Project across the Atlantic, *Social Work Education*, 28:6, 583-597, DOI: [10.1080/02615470903027256](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470903027256)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615470903027256>



Published online: 23 Jul 2009.



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Crossing Borders through Cyberspace: A Discussion of a Social Work Education Electronic Exchange Pilot Project across the Atlantic

Janet Carter-Anand & Kris Clarke

This article discusses a trial electronic exchange project developed between social work education departments in the Republic of Ireland and the USA. It outlines the contemporary significance and challenges of integrating global content into national social work curricula, which are often strongly tied to statutory or accreditation requirements. The mechanics of the exchange are explained and critiqued in detail. An illustrative example of how the transnational students discussed two questions is analyzed. The article finds that an international electronic exchange has great potential to make global social work real to students by allowing them to cross borders through cyberspace, however it requires careful planning and attention to cultural and educational system differences.

Keywords: International Social Work; Innovative Learning Technology; Diversity and Equality Learning Modules; Global Social Justice

Introduction

Social work education aims to provide students with an understanding of the global context of social work practice. Grasping the transnational nature of human rights and contemporary social problems is essential to becoming aware of the complexities of local social work practice. The pedagogical benefits of internationalizing social work curriculum are well documented (Healy, 2008). The US Council on Social Work Education, for example, explicitly states that professional social workers must understand institutions, oppression and social systems within a global context

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(CSWE, 2001). The amount of international content in social work education is therefore certainly increasing (Rotabi *et al.*, 2007). Web-based learning in social work education has also grown exponentially, both in terms of theoretical knowledge and the development of clinical skills (e.g. Chan *et al.*, 2008; Coe Regan and Youn, 2008). However, there are few practical examples of how students can be challenged to critique national social work theories, roles and practices with those of other countries in dialogue across borders (Houston and Campbell, 2001). While there is increasing recognition of the impact of global social justice in local circumstances, the traditional conceptual divide between global and local social work tends to continue to dominate many social work education programmes (Asamoah *et al.*, 1997). Hence many educational institutions are struggling to find new teaching strategies to incorporate global content into social work teaching strategies which is relevant to local social work interventions.

This paper describes a transnational project involving social work lecturers and students from California State University, Fresno, USA and Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. An international student exchange project via Internet technology was developed, implemented and evaluated as part of existing taught modules in equality studies and curricula in diversity and oppression at each university. The project consisted of two learning trials lasting one semester each, though this article focuses on the first trial. The first project utilized electronic communication (emails) as a unique and creative medium for teaching. A discussion board was initiated during the second trial of the project. A preliminary evaluation of the project provided valuable insight into the different cultural perspectives of students in two distinct global contexts regarding the role of social work in relation to social inequality and the educational benefits of student-to-student learning through Internet technology. Nonetheless, the exercise was not without its trials and tribulations and a number of valuable lessons were gained regarding the use of technology and the delivery of transnational learning modules. The exchange project is still a '*work in progress*' and plans to improve the content of the project as well as the communication network are also explored.

This paper proceeds by outlining the key concept of global social justice in relation to equality, and diversity and oppression studies in international social work education. It then discusses the learning aims of the first trial of the exchange. Next the learning outcomes of this trial are discussed by discussing students' feedback essays and email portfolios. Preliminary conclusions are then drawn about how global social work education could be enhanced through further development of the project.

Conceptualizing Global Social Justice in Social Work Education

Western social work has its roots in the social conditions of nineteenth century industrialization. It developed as a profession committed to social reform within a modernist scientific framework (McDonald, 2006, p. 30). Social work in many non-Western countries has tended to evidence a greater blend of spiritual and indigenous knowledge in practice than many rationalist Western frameworks (Gray, 2008). Professional social work in each nation thus reflects the specific culture and social

structure of each state, as well as a belief in the possibility to achieve social change through the professional activity of helping people and communities (Midgley, 1997, p. 160; Cox and Pawar, 2006, p. 5).

The institutions of social welfare in Western social democracies reflect a liberal-communitarian trust in the ability of the state to manage identity, difference, resources and social problems in the promotion of 'the good life' (Moore, 1991). However, faith in the continuous linear progression of growth and ever-increasing prosperity has begun to fragment in the postmodern world, particularly with the impact of years of neoliberal policies and the recent economic recession (van Ewijk, 2009). Along with its benefits, contemporary globalization has brought a mounting sense of anxiety and insecurity amongst residents regarding the ability of nation-states to determine their own fate (Bauman, 1998). Social work interventions thus increasingly appear to be inadequate local responses to complex and often intransigent global issues.

Currently, almost all Western industrial societies are experiencing 'super-diversity' due to the rapid growth of international migration in the 1990s (Vertovec, 2006). Complicated new configurations of socio-cultural ethnic identity are challenging many of the traditional relations between immigrant and indigenous groups in societies, often creating cities of strangers rather than communities of citizens. The challenges that contemporary social work education faces include the prismatic impact of international migration, unequal social development throughout the world, and the increasingly transnational nature of social issues (such as trafficking, human slavery, forced migration, HIV/AIDS) on localities. All of these global phenomena have created distinctly new conditions in which local social work operates. Hence nationally-defined social work has become increasingly intertwined with global social issues, though social work education in most Western countries is still struggling to define what theoretical and practical tools it needs to arm its students with to address the current challenges (Razack, 2009). Studies on global social work literature in journals have noted how rare it is to have scholarly contributions from outside of the West (for example, Greif, 2004). Hence core social work education courses that focus on issues surrounding diversity and oppression, as well as equality studies, seek to address and analyze the structural and inter-personal relations and impact of power and domination. This is important in considering the situation of the mosaic of populations residing permanently and transiently in different localities and across borders.

Global social justice can be defined as an umbrella concept that applies ethical social action to the analysis of power relations intrinsic to the unequal experience of human rights, debt, poverty, health and development throughout the world. The concept recognizes the inherently transnational nature of contemporary oppressive socio-economic issues and their consequences. From the perspective of social work education, global social justice calls for research into transnational causes of inequality as well as global-local methods of social interventions to address the impact of oppression on diverse populations. Haug (2005) has pointed out that international social work can be defined as any social intervention activity anywhere in the world which is directed towards global social justice and human rights. In this sense, local practice is dialectically linked to the global context. This electronic exchange project

sought to develop a multifaceted understanding of the significance of these concepts by empowering social work students to make connections between the local and global through both structured and unstructured dialogues about diversity, oppression and equality in their respective societies and across borders.

Initiation of the Project

The original idea of this project emerged from an informal meeting in Dublin during the summer of 2007. The two lecturers met and discussed ways to link students transnationally by using web-based technology. The aim was to empower social work students to collaboratively learn about global social justice by sharing thoughts and experiences with other students abroad via the prism of their own societies. The two universities were selected due to the use of the same language and an apparent similarity between the two teaching modules.

The Socio-Cultural Contexts of the Partner Universities

Both universities use English as the language of instruction and offer bachelor's and master's level degree programmes in social work education. However, they are located in quite distinct socio-cultural contexts. In this section, we briefly outline the socio-cultural context of each university as well as the background details of the participating student cohorts.

California State University Fresno

California State University Fresno (CSUF) is one of 23 state university campuses. It is located in a metropolitan area of 450,000 residents. Approximately 20% of local residents are foreign-born and there has been an 8% increase in population between 2000 and 2006 (US Census, 2008). This rapid population growth has dramatically increased the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region and brought the rise of majority 'minority' populations (United States Census, 2008). In a recent Brookings Institution report, Fresno was defined as the metropolitan area with the highest amount of concentrated poverty in the nation (Berube, 2006). The university was originally founded as a teachers' college in 1911 and defines itself as the centre of the 'New California', by which it means the dramatic rise in culturally diverse populations in the region (CSU Fresno, 2009). CSUF currently enrolls approximately 22,000 students from a diversity of ethnic groups: 37% white, 31% Hispanic, 13% Asian, and 5% African American (IRAP, 2008). A large proportion of CSUF students are first generation college students and come from an immigrant or second language background. The Department of Social Work Education has approximately 650 students enrolled on a full or part-time basis, on both bachelor's and master's level. These students reflect the enormously diverse makeup of the university as a whole, but with a slightly higher representation of Hispanic and African American students than white.

Trinity College Dublin

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) is considered one of Ireland's premier universities and is steeped in tradition, still occupying the same site granted to the university by Queen Elizabeth I in 1592. The college is located in the heart of Dublin, a busy European city. The college has over 15,300 students including 2,300 international students from 90 different countries. Entrance to the university is determined by academic ability. Over 10 years of economic boom, referred to as the *Celtic Tiger*, the face of Dublin and Irish society has been radically changed. Ireland has shifted from an emigrant to an immigrant society. Between 1871 and 1961, the rate of emigration exceeded Ireland's natural rate of population increase. Since the dawn of the Celtic Tiger, however, the amount of migrants in Ireland rose from 6,000 in 1999 to 50,000 in 2003 (Ruhs, 2004). In the last decade Ireland has become a diverse dynamic and entrepreneurial society with a young population. With a population of just over 4 million, the majority still remain Irish Catholic, with approximately 420,000 non-Irish people resident in the Republic, with 112,000 from the UK, 164,000 from the EU, 25,000 from the rest of Europe, 35,000 from Africa, 50,000 from Asia and 21,000 from North America (Central Statistic Office Ireland, 2008). The 52 social work students who participated in this programme were predominately Irish born with approximately 3% from different ethnic backgrounds. The impact of economic migration and the visibility of refugees and asylum seekers have presented social work educators with the challenge of how to best integrate teaching and learning on inequalities and discrimination experienced by members of diverse minority groups in a changing Irish society (Torde *et al.*, 2001).

The Structure of the First Trial

The first trial matched an undergraduate social work course at Fresno State on diversity and oppression with a graduate social work course at Trinity on diversity and equality. One reason that these two courses were selected was because they were closest in terms of content and themes amongst all of the classes offered in each curriculum. They also necessarily coincided in terms of curriculum timing. This section discusses the aims, timing and positioning of the exchange from the perspective of each university. It then explores the structural problems of the project.

Electronic Exchange Aims

The aim of the exchange programme was to promote an understanding of the global context of social justice and professional practice amongst students. As noted earlier, social work curricula tend to focus on national social issues with theoretical frameworks that reflect the dominant discourses in local contexts due to the statutory and licensed nature of the profession. Accreditation requires that schools of social work cover specific areas which are usually developed within national policy discussions. Hence global social work often occupies an ambiguous position in the core curriculum. Many students have not had the privilege to travel abroad and

study different social work contexts. The combination of all of these factors can (unconsciously) contribute to an insular and parochial approach to social work practice. Providing students with the opportunity to step out of their 'cultural box' by exchanging views and ideas with students from other societies and cultural backgrounds not only helps to alert them to the influence of globalization but allows them to position themselves and their practice within a broader international context. These are difficult learning experiences and outcomes to achieve within the rigid confines of a traditional class room.

The aims of the exchange programme were as follows:

- (i) to enable students to use self reflection and reflectivity for the development of culturally sensitive practice;
- (ii) to enable students to define culturally diverse groups in Irish and North American society and to be able to discuss the nature of oppression experienced;
- (iii) to enable students to understand and critique the theories underpinning social work practice in relation to culture, ethnicity, race, gender, class and disability;
- (iv) to enable students to apply a culturally sensitive and empowering framework for social work practice including values, theories, principles, skills and interventions, appropriate for the empowerment of oppressed groups;
- (v) to enable students to understand the potential to address inequalities across micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice; and
- (vi) to enable students to share ideas about global social justice from different social work contexts.

Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing the Exchange Programme in a Curriculum in Two Contexts

The first trial of the new exchange programme was implemented as a learning activity in two distinct contexts. The exchange with TCD was placed within an existing Equality Studies module delivered to the first year students of a postgraduate Masters in Social Work course. The exchange with CSUF was placed in a lower division general education/social work undergraduate BSW course on diversity and oppression.

Two important factors should be considered when implementing such an exchange learning programme. First and foremost is the challenge of delivering a module across not only two different universities but different educational systems and their respective timeframes. For example, TCD offers three traditional terms per academic year whereas teaching in CSUF takes place across two semesters per academic year. In addition TCD uses modules which are interspersed periods of coursework with periods in the field (Diochon and Cameron, 2001). This means that the rhythm of learning experience is different in terms of attendance, assignments, holidays and exam periods. Diochon and Cameron suggest that implementation difficulties associated with exchange programmes are largely the result of inherent structural constraints involved in such international university milieu. These constraints involve having to negotiate around different academic years, term or semester structures,

levels of technological infrastructure and course structures and class size. These differences often contribute to a 'time lag' between the conception and implementation of a programme. Our experience has been similar to that of Diochon and Cameron (2001) and we found that to overcome inherent structural constraints requires learning new ways of working together when designing an interactive technology-based project of this nature. If we had considered including another university from the southern hemisphere as a partner in this programme we would have also encountered the added problem of different academic years. The importance of planning a lead up time for such projects cannot be overestimated in order to address problems outlined. It is therefore essential to approach potential partners before they complete the upcoming academic year's course planning.

Despite the struggles with the constraints of schedules, we realized that the exchange programme had the potential to be adopted across similar or across different types of social work courses or modules. In this case it involved learning around equality studies, international social work, diversity and oppression as well as practice studies. The electronic exchange was designed to be flexible in its context and delivery (Wasnitza and Volet, 2005; Guest *et al.*, 2006). Social work education places a high value on sensitivity to cultural difference. The rapid growth in ethnic and racial diversity is challenging the social work profession to educate students for culturally competent practice in multicultural settings (Chau, 1990). The electronic exchange provided the opportunity for students to make a personal connection in learning about the dynamics of diversity, oppression and equality in a different social context. This opportunity dovetailed with a primary aim of both the American and Irish courses, namely, a deep self-examination of one's own views on diversity and oppression as a precondition of internalizing social work ethics in working with diverse clients.

Curriculum issues in developing culturally and ethnically sensitive social work education experiences have often received limited attention. It is commonly accepted by cross-cultural educators that the experience of coming to know persons from another culture on a personal level reduces ethnocentrism (Boyle *et al.*, 1999). Experiential learning is an excellent technique for helping students to accept cultural differences and to appreciate cultural integrity (Chau, 1990). Social work students may also learn a great deal about the theory and practice from students from other countries. Learning is a two-way process involving cultural diversity, cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of difference (Boyle *et al.*, 1999). This kind of experience is especially beneficial when it occurs in the context of a structured cross-cultural learning programme, such as the one outlined in this paper. The use of educational exchange projects is not new and there are many examples of programmes designed to provide opportunities for students to learn how to 'read' socially and culturally diverse situations and apply knowledge appropriately (Wasnitza and Volet, 2005).

Positioning the Exchange Programme in Two Contexts

There was more than one opportunity to implement the exchange programme within the current curriculum of each university. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate

professional programmes offered students a teaching on Diversity and Equality Studies at TCD and in Diversity and Oppression at CSUF. The principle aim of these courses in both contexts was not only to explore key theoretical concepts of diversity, equality and social justice in reaction to social work practice with disenfranchised groups, but to facilitate students' awareness of their own social and cultural identity, a core part of each department's mission. The Irish programme offered a separate module in International Social Work, aimed at providing students with an understanding of the global context of social work practice, while the American programme infused global content throughout the curriculum. The implementation of the exchange programme was an appropriate learning tool for several courses in both sets of curricula given the common aim of imparting culturally sensitive practice. However CSUF's undergraduate Diversity and Oppression course and TCD's under- and postgraduate Diversity and Equality courses coincided with a 10-week period, providing the timeframe required for the exchange project. The Diversity and Oppression course in CSUF consisted of a three-unit, one semester class that emphasizes self-reflection on the subject matter. This undergraduate diversity and oppression course is required for social work majors as well as students seeking to complete a cross-cultural competency certificate. Hence the course is open to students from all majors. Most courses are dominated by social work majors; however there are usually many students from the health care and disability fields as well. The diversity of majors often adds multiple perspectives to the subject matter of the course. The matching of courses in terms of content, together with matching of the educational and work/life experiences of the student groups, are important factors to consider given the impact on student interaction and the level of participation.

Description of Exchange Trial One

The programme involved an electronic exchange between students in the TCD Equality Studies course and Diversity and Oppression course at CSUF. The purpose of this exercise was to have students from two different countries exchange ideas electronically on their own personal and cultural understandings of social diversity and oppression. In this way, students' perspectives and understandings of international social work could be reflected upon and developed.

How it worked:

- (1) Students were briefed on the project and asked to provide consent to participate.
- (2) Students received the email address of their learning partner student, together with an invitation to access an educational based chat room from one of the academics. Participation in the chat room was entirely voluntary.
- (3) Students exchanged introductions and described their own cultural contexts.
- (4) Questions for discussion were assigned every three to four weeks by the academics at TCD and CSUF. Students were asked to comment upon how diversity and oppression played out in the social structures of each society and how social work interventions in these areas were viewed.

(5) Assessment

CSUF: Students wrote an essay evaluating and reflecting on the experience. The assessment of the task was based on participation, self-reflection and application of discussion topics to course themes.

TCD: Students submitted a portfolio of their emails as evidence of their learning exchange. Assessment of the portfolios was criteria based on completion of the task, level of discussion, use and exploration of the concepts presented in the course.

Allocation of Learning Partners

The TCD academic sent the email addresses of her students to the CSUF academic professor who allocated them randomly to the students. As there was no information available on the background of any Irish student, there was no basis to match students.

Ethical Considerations

Students were informed of their ethical obligation to conduct themselves in an appropriate and respectful manner in all electronic communication with their learning partner student. This was done via an information and consent sheet. Students were not allowed to share the email addresses of their learning partners with anyone or any list unless explicitly permitted to do so by the person in question. Students were advised that if they experienced problems with inappropriate or disrespectful language or discussion topics, they should contact their respective academics immediately. Students were also asked to give consent to utilize their essays and portfolios as a basis for an assessment and critique of the exchange as a learning tool. Students were given the opportunity to opt out with no penalties, if they wished.

Assignment Challenges

Given the many time pressures placed on students it is not unreasonable that they have become highly strategic in deciding to only engage in learning activities that are linked to formal assessment. Most of the CSUF students appeared to find the assignment attractive because their undergraduate curriculum afforded them a little more leeway than was the case with students studying in the TCD postgraduate curriculum. The CSUF students therefore wrote an essay analyzing their experience of the electronic exchange in the context of the course, while TCD students submitted a portfolio of their email correspondence for marking. Understanding the strategic nature of student learning was an important lesson learnt from this initial trial of the learning programme. How well students engage in learning depends on how they think they will be assessed (Biggs, 2003). Assessment for this first exchange trial was therefore lenient because instructors wanted to take into account the experimental nature of assignment.

The completed portfolios and essays provided data for a content analysis of the learning outcomes of the programme, with the consent of students.

Findings from the Email Portfolio and Essays

This section briefly presents a content analysis of the data collected through email exchanges between the students at TCD and CSUF students. To maintain the privacy of students, no student is identified by race, age or gender. Moreover, while students were allotted partners by the American academic, these records were not correlated with students' email responses in order to maintain confidentiality. The data are organized by two of the questions posed by the academics.

Question One: Introduce Yourself and Your Cultural Background

Many of the students started out with an initial interest and a degree of enthusiasm:

I am so excited to hear from you! When our instructor informed us that our course this semester was going to involve cross-cultural awareness and an interactive learning exchange with students from Ireland I was thrilled. It is a rare opportunity, at least in my college experience to exchange thoughts, ideas and opinions with other students with a different cultural perspective (CSUF student).

The above quote encapsulates the intended rationale behind the programme that sought to create and maintaining this level of enthusiasm. Students were also interested in exchanging more personal experiences which appeared to foster their participation and openness to exchange ideas and points of view:

It's great to hear about family in America and your travels here. As I said before, I would love to someday visit Europe. And it is possible that I still have living family in Germany (CSUF student).

Background details of the internal and comparative diversity of the two student groups were apparent. The difference between CSUF and TCD students is summarized in the following discussion:

I am from a middle class background and the area I grew up in was quite homogenous up until approximately five or seven years of age (TCD student).

I grew up in a lower class family where my father and mother immigrated from Laos and Thailand during the Vietnam War (CSUF student).

The first question posed to the learning partners aimed to expand students' understanding of cultural diversity through a description of their own cultural identity. Traditional national stereotypes were challenged through this process:

As you might have suspected [reference to the origins of name], socio cultural group is African as I am originally from Nigeria but I have been living in Dublin for the past 8 years (TCD student).

I didn't actually guess what cultural background came with your name. I was really curious. I come from a mix of cultures. My mother at least is Hispanic and my dad is half Japanese and half German, so I'm a little of each (CSUF student).

Generally, the CSUF students were more descriptive of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds reflecting what seemed to be a greater level of comfort in discussing diversity as well as the impact of longstanding immigration:

Both my parents are of Mexican descent. They were both first generation Americans. My father was the first one in his family of 12 children to be born in the United States. I was born and raised in Fresno, California, USA (CSUF partner).

Both my parents are Irish, my father is from Westport and my mother from the next town (TCD partner).

I am Mexican American and very proud of it ... I live in two worlds. One that respects tradition and values which is my father's and the other which is modern liberal thinking which is my mother's side (CSUF student).

I love Dublin it's so busy and exciting and there is so much diversity with the community it's brilliant. We are provided with a brilliant opportunity to learn so much about other nationalities and how their lives differ from ours. As I explained I'm from a rural community in the west of Ireland steeped in tradition which I believe has helped shaped my current values and beliefs (TCD student).

CSUF students were confident in describing transnational identities whilst the TCD students were more tentative and appeared to be still grappling with the recent impact of immigration. Both groups of students talked about their family backgrounds with reference to how many children they had in their family, their parents' occupations and their religious beliefs. Students were keen to identify similarities and look for areas of common ground, in areas such as the Catholic religion, rural or farming backgrounds and socioeconomic class. This appeared to facilitate the discussion. These interchanges helped students to consider their identities in relation to their own socio-cultural contexts and partially fulfilled the curricular goal of exploring one's personal relationship to structural oppression in one's own society.

Question Two: How Does Inequality Play Out in Your Society?

The CSUF students tended to discuss equality in terms of poverty and class, while the TCD students were more likely to refer to the concept in relation to culture and immigration:

Fresno is a pretty ok city. If you drive to the north of Fresno it's a pretty rich area. You can tell because of the roads, and the landscape and the size of the houses. If you drive south then what I just describe is lacking. For example the roads are narrow and bumpy. It all depends on how much money you make (CSUF student).

The indigenous people in Ireland are the Irish, Ulster Scots who speak Gaelic and the marginalised Irish Travellers who speak Cant. However with globalization and the "Celtic tiger boom" Ireland which used to be an emigration country is now an immigration country with several ethnic minorities in the form of migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees, programme refugees, unaccompanied minors, international students with diverse culture, religion and languages living there. This social change has brought with it "the good, the bad and the ugly" reminding me of my country where there are inequalities due to tribal discrimination. The gap

between the poor and the rich has continued to widen, there is also racial tension due to the unprecedented influx of immigrants leading to several equality issues (TCD student).

I know both Spanish and English and I feel privileged. I like knowing both languages because I can communicate pretty much with anyone I see. California is one of the 50 states of the union of the great United States of America. Because California is so closely located next to the Mexican border there is a great Hispanic population here (CSUF student).

CSUF students seemed to be comfortable discussing the issue of race and ethnicity, reflected in the following statement: 'California, the state that I am from is one of the most diverse states within the United States'. Some students explored issues of inequality in relation to specific groups, reflecting their own interests or work experience:

I would like to find out some information about the services in Fresno for people with learning disabilities, how they are viewed in your society, are they seen as marginalized group, do they have rights to services, if so what type of services are available to them? In Ireland our services are mostly run by charitable organizations and disabled people who do have many rights they are quite discriminated against (TCD student).

It is my experience that learning disabilities are not an uncommon issue here. People with learning disabilities are not as scrutinized for their limitations generally. I would like to think that the attitude here is that people try not to place blame or make people with disabilities feel like it is their fault. I think the notion of inclusion is a primary factor when it comes to people with differences in general (CSUF student).

Both student groups were interested in exploring the implications of immigration across borders. Irish students often focused on the impact of ethnic diversity on traditional society:

My neighbourhood is a nice place—lots of elderly, low crimes, most kids finish school, and many go to third-level education. My belief is that this is typical of most Irish communities. Poverty, exclusion, unemployment, etc., in Ireland tend to be hidden in little pockets, mainly within urban areas invisible to the middle class masses. The sense of marginalization that is felt by people experiencing poverty etc in Ireland today is not only heightened by the fact that over the past 15 years the country experienced record growth levels. The arrival of such immigrants has at best been greeted with trepidation by most Irish people. The truth is that racism is now common in Ireland (TCD student).

On the other hand, CSUF students appeared more interested in the government's response to undocumented immigrants coming across the US/Mexican border. One reason for the high level of interest in this issue was the increase in raids by immigration authorities on workplaces and other venues which has resulted in a spike in deportations, rending families apart, and causing deep fear in many of the rural communities around the San Joaquin Valley of California. Undocumented immigration had been a hot political topic locally and nationally. Moreover, Fresno State does have undocumented students and there is currently national legislation (the DREAM Act) under consideration that would allow undocumented minors to earn

permanent residency through attendance at a college. Hence issues of immigration were often seen through highly personal experiences by Fresno State students.

Students tended to compare and contrast societies through personal experiences of current social issues.

To be honest I could see lots of similarities in our backgrounds—middle class, low crime, private Catholic education, predominantly white neighbourhood, lack of cultural diversity. The really striking thing from both emails was the fact that there seems to be really bad problems in Fresno regarding poverty and violence. I have to say that in Ireland, as I have mentioned before, the middle-class are really sheltered from the social problems that many people face (i.e. poverty, violence, drug abuse etc.)—these problems tend to be hidden away in deprived inner city communities far away from the middle class suburbs (TCD student).

Students independently explored subjects such as drug abuse, lone parenthood, homelessness, health care, the death penalty, lack of transport, and child welfare issues. Trinity students appeared more likely to discuss how theory could be applied to practice whilst Fresno State students wrote more out of personal experience. Ways of communicating also reflected cultural diverse ways of understanding and expressing experience. Cultural differences could thus be detected in how students considered the role of social work as a change agent. Trinity students tended to have a greater faith in the theory and action of the state in alleviating social ills, while Fresno students seemed to rely more on a community-based response to an overwhelming array of problems.

Conclusions

This international social work Internet exchange project between TCD and CSUF reflected both successes and failures. The interpersonal contact between the students certainly raised consciousness of the diversity of global–local social work issues. Students were genuinely curious about developing new ways of making contact across borders and learning about how social workers thought and practised in different countries. Practical examples of social work interventions in each context given by student learning partners opened new awareness of socio-cultural differences in welfare systems and social structures. This learning experiment thus reflected a practical, ground-level instrument that created enthusiasm amongst students to share their experiences and understandings of social work with students from other countries. Its interactive nature promoted active learning about diverse global contexts.

The students also showed real interest in extending their contact with their foreign learning partners though an exchange of photos, questions, and telephone numbers. The personal contact created deeper understandings of the diversity of understandings of personal, cultural identity and interest in social work practice. Getting to know a learning partner abroad created a relationship of trust to explore the complex issues surrounding globalization on local levels from a personal standpoint. This contact promoted the learning objectives of both courses by having students discuss their own socio-cultural backgrounds and views on issues surrounding diversity, oppression and equality within the perspective of social work ethics.

There was a great richness in the learning experience of comparing different cultural contexts and understandings of social work. The personal connections led to greater interest in cross-cultural understandings of social work. As Biggs (2003) has pointed out, education is about conceptual change and not merely the acquisition of information. The exchange programme promotes opportunities for deeper learning in that it allowed students to develop their own personal meaning in relation to the concepts being taught.

A key issue in further developing the international social work student exchange would be focusing on creating functional collaborative learning projects. Hence problems of distinct schedules, curricula and levels of education must be carefully considered and addressed. Future directions for the development of the exchange include carefully designing problem-based learning tasks that can translate into concrete collaborative learning projects with clear instructions and assessment criteria. A review of content-based web-learning courses would be a useful first step for obtaining clearer examples of how to develop collaborative learning tasks appropriate for social work learning. A detailed assessment of each university's social work programme would assist in finding suitable courses where the exchange could be properly embedded in curricula. Finally, from the perspective of global social justice, broadening the discussion beyond the boundaries of the Western world would be a vital way to raise awareness about the dominance of Eurocentric voices on transnational issues of cultural diversity, oppression and equality.

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