

CZU: 316:37

## SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT – LEARNING FROM A CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

Jonas CHRISTENSEN, Joachim THOENNESSEN\*, Janet WALKER\*\*

Malmö University (Sweden)

\*University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück (Germany)

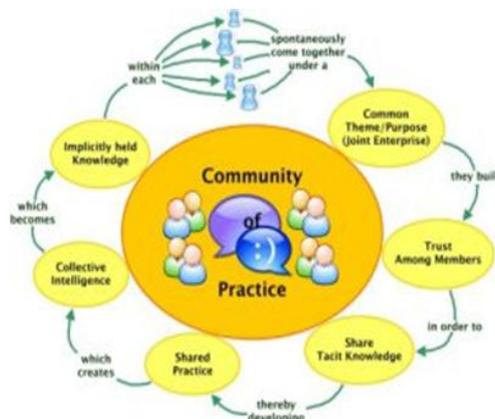
\*\*University of Lincoln (United Kingdom)

This article reflects on issues and lessons from an annual joint programme of learning for social work students from England, Germany and Sweden. It contributes to the understanding and development of International Social Work Education. The initial focus is on introducing communities of practice (CoP's) as a theoretical framework. We extend this idea to interlocking circles with students, educators and practitioners. Further on, the question of how learning in Social Work in an international context can be organized and pushed on is addressed. Through participant feedback we highlight views and experiences of students who have learned from the programme. We show that a continuous cross-border cooperation in Social work Education in which teacher's work closely together within permanent meeting places provides a social context in itself for students and teachers. Our main conclusion is that out of different learning outcomes, the environmental one is our 'unique' contribution to knowledge and learning. A continuous cross-border cooperation in Social Work Education in which educators, students and practitioners work closely together within permanent meeting places, creates a social context in itself for all involved actors. Learning through the stimulation of being in a new meeting place and culture may create a new framework for learning in the International Social Work discipline. Our cooperation encourages the student's capacity for social construction.

**Keywords:** social education, learning, community of practice (CoP), international social work, cross-border.

### Introduction

The need for international education in social work is clear, although achieving it may be complex [1]. Social workers are faced with new responsibilities, and it is important for the education to go beyond the national level [2]. Nagy and Falk [3] claim that the impact of ongoing global processes on the social work profession is dramatic and that reformulating the education to include more international and cross-border cultural content is needed. Whilst internationalization of Social Work is a contested idea, it is none the less seen as an evolving and indeterminate project [4]. The principal reason for the pressure on internationalization in Social Work might be a very practical one: Today Social Workers around the world have greater opportunities for social action in a globalized world-either individually or through agencies and organizations [2]. Contemporary Social Work has neither fully recognized the extent to which its practice and professional environment are shaped by interdependence nor has the profession seized available opportunities for increasing its impact internationally [2]. It could be suggested that these opportunities present the practical opportunities to develop internationalisation of Social Work as a real opportunity for shared meaning and understanding. As pointed out by Cox & Pawar [5], dimensions in international social work needs to have, a local as well as a global face and that a reality of globalization is that it requires a dimension of localization. This article reflects on issues and lessons from an annual joint programme of learning for social work students from England, Germany and Sweden. It contributes to the understanding and development of International Social Work Education. John Dewey, the famous American Pragmatist, highlighted "learning" as a shared social endeavor in which students are partners with teachers in common activities and goals. The concept of community of practice (CoP) derives from Dewey's notions. It was first proposed by cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger [6]. They define CoP's as a group of people with a common area of interest or a common concern. The graphic (Fig.1) describes the development of a CoP in an ideal typical way:



**Fig.1.** Community of Practice (11).

Members of a CoP build a trusted relationship with each other around the area of common interest. They share their unique knowledge and experience related to the issue, develop a common approach to the issue and build a collective knowledge base which informs their practice guiding how they approach the common area of concern. The end result is that working in a CoP builds in each member a collective knowledge base that, when applied, improves their individual performances and "can have a dramatic impact on improving the issue they were drawn together to address" [7]<sup>1</sup>.

Lave and Wenger [6] illustrate their theory by observations of different apprenticeships (Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, US Navy quartermasters, meat-cutters, and non-drinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous). As people become more competent they become more involved in the main processes of the particular community. They move from legitimate peripheral participation into 'full participation' [6]. Learning is, thus, not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of *social* participation. The nature of the *situation* impacts significantly on the process [8]. In order to define what Barnett [9] term as university activities "super-complexity", the educational room of these creative contexts are characterized by student groups and their learning processes focusing development of learning objectives and organization of new Learning environments. This mean that teachers acting jointly must validate and create an education characterized by the Community on the basis of ideas related to the cooperation and transnational mobility of students.

### **The International Module as a CoP**

In 2009, and coming from three different welfare traditions with each of them following a very specific understanding of Social Work as well as a specific teaching and learning approach of Social Work, we started a common project on Social Work education. We initiated an annual course joint programme of learning for Social Work students from England, Germany and Sweden. Background of the starting-up of the programme was based on two existing bilateral cooperations between Lincoln University and Osnabrück University of Applied Science and Malmö University and Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences. Through the existing bilateral agreements, we did see a potential to connect our three Universities. We then defined what we had in common in Social Work Education such as a common view on that a cross-border cooperation could be a essential part in our Syllabuses to strengthen the students understanding of International Social Work when it comes to comparative aspects out of three different contexts; the British, the German and the Swedish. What we also identified was how our different field of profiles and competencies as teacher's and researcher's could give an added value into our cooperation. The first part of it, the first module, takes places at the University of Lincoln. Its subject is based on a special qualification of the teaching staff there – which is "Child Care and Child protection". Students from Malmö, Lincoln and Osnabrück meet in Lincoln for the first part of the course. Thereafter, they proceed with the course in February in Malmö. Special subject there is "Social Policies in Europe". The finishing part of the course takes place at the University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück. Its topic is "Religious and Cultural Diversity from an Ethical Perspective". Pedagogical principles in the modules are based out of the meeting in itself in which a linkage of research and practice in lectures, seminars/workshops and field studies during eleven days are integrated. The lecturers from each of the three Universities take place actively as facilitators in each module. Above the content of the programme, there are staff-meetings with colleagues. Each module ends up with a presentation where the students present their chosen topic.

After completing the course set number six (and before starting number seven) we decided to reflect intensively (and in a written form) upon the course. For us, the theory of CoP was very helpful to formulate questions, but we needed to extend it's idea to interlocking circles with students, educators and practitioners in each of the three circles and to the interlocking space of the community we have established. Students, educators and practitioners do have different interests and goals, and only if everything works out fine they come together in that what we call an "interlocking space of the community". This finding and the literature on CoP's gave the basis to ask the following questions [10]:

- How did our communities of practice evolve?
- What are the purposes and objectives of our communities?
- Which opportunities for open dialog within and with outside perspectives have we created?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a comparison of communities of practice with functional or project teams see Kietzmann et al (2013).

<sup>2</sup> While the members and their knowledge are the CoP's most valuable resource, it is also beneficial to look outside of the CoP to understand the different possibilities for achieving their learning goals.

- Did we develop both public and private community spaces?<sup>3</sup>
- Did we focus on the value of the communities?<sup>4</sup>
- Did we welcome and allow different levels of participation?<sup>5</sup>
- (How) Did we combine familiarity and excitement?<sup>6</sup>
- Did we find and nurture a regular rhythm for the communities?<sup>7</sup>

## Results

A number of 30 students of Social Work from Universities in Germany (University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück), England (Lincoln University), Sweden (Malmö University) were asked to anonymously (only name of institution) evaluate the course. The students were given one hour of time to answer questions like: Is this an interesting module for you? If yes or no: Why? What have you learnt? What can be improved in the module? Does this module contribute to your professional development? If yes or no: Why? In what way has this module changed your understanding of Social Work and of the involved countries? The evaluation took place in all three Universities. Additionally, the following answers are derived from intensive discussions between the educators and from their subjective observations.

### *How did our communities of practice evolve?*

The educators started as Erasmus-fellows, visiting interesting universities for a week or more for teaching in a different cultural context. Contacts and sympathy grew steadily which made us think about a vast cooperation. We found this in the here described "International Module". In the meantime the Osnabrück educators successfully integrated the international module into their curriculum (and attract many students who choose for Osnabrück just because of the international module).

### *What are the purposes and objectives of our communities?*

Initially we wanted to set up a module taking place at our three different universities (each course lasting eleven days) where students and educators could work together on a certain topic (Child care in Lincoln, Social Policies in Malmö, Religion and Ethics in Osnabrück) and tackle this topic from their own and from other cultural perspectives. Aim of the course was to widen the intercultural understanding of certain relevant topics of Social Work. Here are some comments of students regarding this topic:

*"We got to know about other countries approach to Social Work practice"*

*"Some of the topics were on a European Scale so we could look at it from a whole European view rather than individual countries"*

*"We learnt about topics such as religion and developed our knowledge in regards to the differences in countries"*

*"Greater understanding of difference and diversity across all three countries which can then be applied to own practice"*

*"It's important to gather much different impressions to get a good overview about social work and everything that belongs to it. The international course gives the opportunity to get a "bigger" view about the situation in Europe".*

### *Which opportunities for open dialog within and with outside perspectives have we created?*

It is important to look outside the CoP as well. We invited practitioners from different fields of Social Work to contribute to our courses. We went on excursions to see the practitioners work in their field of expertise. We also invited clients to talk to them and to enrich our knowledge about the certain field of study.

<sup>3</sup> While CoPs typically operate in public spaces where all members share, discuss and explore ideas, they should also offer private exchanges. Different members of the CoP could coordinate relationships among members and resources in an individualized approach based on specific needs.

<sup>4</sup> CoPs should create opportunities for participants to explicitly discuss the value and productivity of their participation in the group.

<sup>5</sup> Wenger identifies three main levels of participation. 1) The core group who participate intensely in the community through discussions and projects. This group typically takes on leadership roles in guiding the group. 2) The active group who attend and participate regularly, but not to the level of the leaders. 3) The peripheral group who, while they are passive participants in the community, still learn from their level of involvement. Wenger notes the third group typically represents the majority of the community.

<sup>6</sup> CoPs should offer the expected learning opportunities as part of their structure, and opportunities for members to shape their learning experience together by brainstorming and examining the conventional and radical wisdom related to their topic.

<sup>7</sup> CoPs should coordinate a thriving cycle of activities and events that allow for the members to regularly meet, reflect, and evolve. The rhythm, or pace, should maintain an anticipated level of engagement to sustain the vibrancy of the community, yet not be so fast-paced that it becomes unwieldy and overwhelming in its intensity (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002).

*Did we develop both public and private community spaces?*

As the relations and activities among the educators went on very well we hope every year that students from the different universities gather together and organize outside/private activities as well. Normally this is very successful: The student union in Malmö was invited to organize a pub-crawl for our students, the students set up a big get together in the evening where every nation had to prepare a specific dish and so on. There was a lot of fun playing different games and making funny photos.

*Did we focus on the value of the communities?*

Students have to prepare an international comparative thesis and to discuss their thesis with fellow students. They were rated for their thesis and discussion and by receiving comments felt as respectable subjects of the group. Furthermore we valued the communities by evaluating the course and by the permanent presence of all educators.

*Did we welcome and allow different levels of participation?*

There are always good and motivated students as well as students who are not so motivated to follow a course. But for a learning outcome a course alone is not so important – because students find themselves in a different cultural setting. If they do not learn from the course they will learn from the culture and from the contacts with their fellow students from other cultures.

Here are some of the students-comments:

*"It's interesting to meet students from other countries, to hear how Social Work is organised and viewed there"*

*"We learnt to compare, e.g. the Swedish welfare state and the German welfare state"*

*"We learnt to reflect on our own social system, to judge the advantages and disadvantages"*

*"We learnt to develop our own professional understanding of social work in other countries"*

*"We learnt about cross-border understanding of different aspects of key terms in social work"*

*"We learnt about the student environment in another country"*

*"We have experienced how teachers, coming from different fields, with different perspectives on Social work contributed and developed their own knowledge"*

*(How) Did we combine familiarity and excitement?*

Emphasis was laid on group work. Students worked in national and international groups to answer questions and solve problems. They were requested to develop different perspectives on a topic under discussion.

The course takes place for two weeks (eleven days: Mo-Fr next week) in September, in February and in September again. It does not disrupt with the normal curriculum. The course schedule starts each day (Mo-Fr) at 9.30 am and ends at 4.30pm. We have a one-hour break for lunch. The evening and the weekend is free for group and/or individual activities. Sometimes the educators make voluntary offers for spending time together like – for Malmö – organizing a guided tour through Christiania in Copenhagen or – for Lincoln – organizing a tour to Newcastle upon Tyne. Evening activities are very important. In Sweden for example there are different cooking groups - preparing the food for themselves in a cheap and effective way.

Other results of our discussions are for example that the content of Social Work Education in Sweden and the UK is very much governed by national guidelines due to the professional title 'Socionom' in Sweden and Social worker in the UK whereby the education system in Germany is governed on state ("*Bundesland*") level due to the federalism. As the student groups focused in this article are students on bachelor-level, the comments on Social Work education will be on this level, no comments for Master or PhD-level will be made.

The academic emphasis in Social Work Education in Sweden is rather strong and tied closely to the university system. The length of the study programmes is related to the length of academic career programs (on bachelor-level estimating 3,5 years). The academic subject Social Work has got its own autonomous position and can be seen as being the „parent discipline” (12) in which the core subjects are Psychology, Sociology and Pedagogy. Throughout the fourth semester, an internship takes place. In the last semester of the Social Work program on bachelor-level, the student's ought to deepen their graduation profile into eligible themes, dependent on the single University. For example, at the Malmö University, the eligible courses are focusing on social policy, children and family, drug addiction, migration and elderly care. In the UK, the Social Work education is closely connected with the interaction of practice. There are similarities to the Swedish system when it comes to length and the core content even though the interaction of practice is more outspoken in the UK than in Sweden. In this sense, there are more similarities with the German Social work education. In Germany, Social Work is studied at Applied Universities (these are universities which traditionally lay a strong emphasis on practical experiences and praxis-related teaching). The practical relevance of the study programme is especially worth

emphasizing. For example, from the second to the fifth semester, two internships take place, running parallel to the program. In addition, students carry out an academic field project in the sixth semester. Thanks to the internships, students make important contact with potential employers even during their studies. Graduates of the study program who would like to acquire state recognition must complete a one-year professional internship when the study program is finished.

### Analysis and Discussion

When students meet in the "international classroom", different kinds of exchanges take place, including social, academic and cultural dimensions. The Theory of CoP suggests that learning in groups should be seen as a key. Our students comments emphasize different aspects about their learning processes through cross-border meetings which has developed new learning environmental rooms and contributed to what Barnett (9) describe as university activities "super-complexity". Out of their comments we have derived three categories of learning outcomes:

*The professional – comparative outcome* (learning from each other through exercises, discussions and workshops)

*The professional – individual outcome* (learning from intrapersonal knowledge acquisition through own reflections and understanding)

*The professional – environmental outcome* (learning through the stimulation of being in a new meeting place).

Out of these learning outcomes, the environmental one is our 'unique' contribution to knowledge and learning. Personal international meetings should be seen as a key success factor - they make it possible to assimilate knowledge and resources. Learning through the stimulation of being in a new meeting place and culture may create a new framework for learning in the International Social Work discipline. In our cooperation, we as teachers have shared our unique knowledge and experience related to Social Work out of our own competences and frame of references and throughout developed a common approach where the meeting-place in itself has become the main driving force in our cooperation. This driving force has in itself developed a collective knowledge base which informs their practice guiding how we as teachers approach the common area of concern. The end result is that working in a CoP builds in each member a collective knowledge base that, when applied, has improved the individual student performances and what Pennington [7] says "can have a dramatic impact on improving the issue they were drawn together to address". According to Pennington [7], working in a CoP builds in each member a collective knowledge base that, when applied, improves their individual performances. By creating the International classroom, it can bridge, connect, and meaning making, where the Social-worker students make associations linked to their own frame of references. Learning is largely about the acquisition of knowledge and it requires a dynamic relationship between an already known knowledge and an unknown one. It is when the appropriation of already known knowledge combined with the unknown throughout the meeting with Social worker's students coming from other cultures than their own that develops views on the profession. It is the encounter between people of different backgrounds, culture and frameworks that we are challenged in our notions, not least in education contexts. A fundamental challenge in their own learning are many times to come "beyond" their own obstacles - and willingness to dare, and to yourself to look up.

The quest for internationalization in Social Work, as involving any aspect of Social Work in which there is a relationship between two or more countries [2, 13], is demonstrated in part by international bodies quest to find an international definition of Social Work and on the development of global standards for Social Work education [14]. More recently the shaping of Social Work as a profession practiced all over the world has been demonstrated by the creation of a new definition:

*"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (Definition by the International Association of Schools of Social Work, IASSW, 2014)"*

Our students like to see their role as Social Workers in a critical way. They set up a connection between the local and the global. They ask another: How do you do that in your country? And then they learn: We don't have to do this in a prescriptive and anticipated way. Social Work today is under financial pressure. We witness that borders are closed and that states will not help anymore. We have to push the borders and try to extent the discourse. We have to mirror what we face on our doorstep and reflect at the same time on the "global sound" and about alternative approaches.

Social Work is an international profession – we are committed to that position. Our students say that it is very important for them to have a module on “Internationalization” embedded in their curriculum. The problem of refugees for example is not to be solved on a national level. But there is even more worth in a joint international program. Students will become more critical and develop analytical skills and reflectiveness towards their own view of profession by communicating with each other and learn from each other in an international context. We want to provide a structural learning opportunity in which students recognize the international dimensions of a social profession; we want to make them think critically beyond the structures of their own country; we want them to collaborate with practitioners and make them reflect together with them. We want to introduce longstanding relationships between students across the borders. Our purpose is to provide critical space for academics, service-users, students and practitioners in a cross-border-way to enhance and extend understanding and professional practice.

### Conclusions

In this article, we have shown that Social Work is much bigger than what educators and students learn from their own education at “home”. In creating an international working space in and outside the universities, we established communities of practice for students, educators and practitioners. Theoretically the idea was put forward that these communities meet at different angles so that an interlocking circle has been formed. Our international module in itself is unique. It is runned in three universities over a year and there is not just an academic approach. The program contributes to a more critical social work view and develops the understanding of what we have in common. It raises the knowledge about the understanding of different ways to work within Social work. We have shown that a continuous cross-border cooperation in Social work Education in which teacher’s work closely together with students and practitioners within permanent meeting places, creates a social context in itself.

This study leads to some main conclusions about what can be seen as success factors in development of the understanding of International Social Work through cross-border cooperation. We need to explore how we can raise our mutual understanding of social work which assists us in developing a more global understanding, while at the same time, being aware of our different traditions and values.

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**Acknowledgement:** We thank Dr. Wilfried Hellmann and Dr. Ulrich Kuhnke, University of Applied Sciences, Osnabrück, and MBA Adrian Croft, University of Lincoln for their contribution in discussions.

Prezentat la 11.01.2017