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Chaitali Das and Janet Carter Anand

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1–16

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Chaitali Das

Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

Janet Carter Anand

Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

Abstract

International contexts provide social work students with the opportunity to develop knowledge of international social work, global citizenship and cultural competency. While these contexts are powerful sites of learning, there is a need to ensure that this occurs within a critical framework. The paradigm of critical reflection is used to facilitate this and has been popular in international programs. In this article, we develop this further by describing critically-reflective techniques and providing examples used in a pilot exchange program between a social work school in the UK and in India. The potential implications of these strategies for social work education are discussed.

Keywords

critical reflection, cultural competency, international context, international fieldwork placement, social work education

Corresponding author:

Chaitali Das, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, 6 College Park, Belfast BT7 1LP, Northern Ireland, UK.

Email: c.das@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

The internationalization of social work curricula is gaining prominence as the global interfaces with the local in day-to-day social work practice (Gray and Fook, 2004; Ife, 2001). A commitment to promoting human rights and social justice in an interconnected and globalized world is the future agenda for social work (Dominelli, 2002; Lyons, 2006; IFSW, 2010). Social work practitioners are increasingly working with culturally diverse service users and are exposed to global social issues such as human trafficking, migration and disasters (Lyons, 2006). Professionals themselves are opting for greater geographic mobility and migrating to different countries to practice (Lyons, 2006; Walsh et al., 2010).

In this globalized context, social work students need to be educated to work across international contexts. For this purpose, some schools of social work increasingly promote learning about global contexts through exchange visits and field placements in 'developing' and 'developed' countries (Boyle et al., 1999; Furman et al., 2008; Heron, 2005; Panos et al., 2004; Tresario, 2006). This provides pedagogical opportunities for students to develop skills in comparative practice and cultural competence (Boyle et al., 1999).

However, cultural competence is a contentious concept as it is based on knowledge and ways of knowing that are embedded in modernist Eurocentric ways (Furlong and Wight, 2011; Wehbi, 2009). Developing international student programs underpinned by these assumptions can reinforce power imbalances and oppressive practice. A critical understanding of issues of power, imperialism and colonialism is crucial (Haug, 2005; Razack, 2009). Without a critical framework, international exchange may be a haphazard experience which results in little more than cultural tourism, benevolent helping or paternalistic engagement (Wehbi, 2009). The benefits of using a critically reflective framework to encourage a deeper transformative learning are highlighted in the literature (Parsons and Stephenson, 2005; Tresario, 2006). However, there is limited detailed description of processes that promote a more critical form of reflection and reflexivity for teaching and learning (Pawar et al., 2004; Wehbi, 2009).

Critical reflection and international contexts

Critical reflection encompasses an understanding of the dimensions of power, privilege and inequality based on social justice and anti-oppressive perspectives, which are central to social work education (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002). It involves deconstruction of taken-for-granted assumptions

that underpin knowledge, values and beliefs to enable critical enquiry, aimed at positive social change and transformation (Brookfield, 1995; Fook, 2002). Critical reflection incorporates concepts of reflectivity (Argyris and Schön, 1976), reflexivity and power, which is central to transformative learning.

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (O'Sullivan, 2003: 327)

Educators have identified different approaches and strategies for the teaching of critical reflection. These include the identification of critical incidents (Askeland, 2006), formal debriefing (Heron, 2005; Tresario, 2006), narrative work (Bay and Macfarlane, 2010; Furman et al., 2008), reflective questioning and deconstruction of practice and theory (Parsons and Stephenson, 2005). These strategies are particularly effective in international contexts as they facilitate students' ability to make sense of and consolidate new personal and cultural experiences. International sites enable immersion in another culture (Boyle et al., 1999), discovery of the self (Lam et al., 2007) and a new understanding of theory and practice that can be reintegrated in local realities (Cheung and Liu, 2004; Cornelius and Greif, 2005; Heron, 2005). Reflection is constant in international contexts (Cincotta et al., 2006; Tresario, 2006) and by physically positioning students in another country, outside of their local professional practice, they are exposed to and challenged by different ways of thinking and knowing (Fook, 2002). In the process, they learn to tolerate uncertainty, unravel personal assumptions and reinterpret reality. Students not only examine the local practices of the host country but more importantly critique practices in their country of origin. International contexts can provide dynamic opportunities to 'reverse' students' tendencies, from ethnocentric denial and defensiveness to heightened acceptance, adaptation and integration of new cultural contexts (Abram et al., 2005). These experiences can promote transformative learning and are not easily replicated in the classroom.

Critical learning, however, presents new risks and uncertainties for both faculty and students and requires a safe space to de-construct cognitive biases without threatening one's ontological security (Bransford, 2011;

Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005). A feminist approach to creating an environment conducive to reflective processes requires a re-appraisal of the inequality of power inherent in the teacher–student relationship and open channels of communication between learning partners (Oakley, 2000). For critical learning, the teacher and student relationship requires modification (Chan and Chan, 2005).

Whilst most social work educators are committed to the use of reflective processes and can identify when transformative learning occurs, the challenge is to identify and describe the processes involved. This article seeks to contribute to the teaching of critical reflection in international contexts by describing and discussing our experiences of using some of the critical techniques mentioned above. We also consider the impact of the teacher–student relationship in the effective application of these techniques. Real-life examples are used to illustrate our application of four strategies, namely: 1) critical incidents and debriefing; 2) peer learning and support; 3) deconstructing and reconstructing theory; and 4) partnership and participation. This article is aimed at academics and planners who are interested in using international sites and critical reflection for social work education.

Outline of the project

The pilot exchange program was funded by the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work (SSPSW), Queen's University Belfast (QUB), as part of the university's internationalization strategy. Internationalization is a well established theme in UK higher education, spanning both teaching and research. The QUB internationalization strategy includes developing the student experience and building collaborative partnerships. The learning for this project was aligned with the IFSW (2010) global agenda of social work. It sought to broaden the understanding of the scope of social work by facilitating student and faculty exchange as outlined in the IASSW mission statement.

Two female faculty members from the School of SSPSW, QUB, initiated the project along with a male Indian colleague from Karve Institute of Social Services (KInSS) in Pune, India. One of the QUB faculty member was an Indian national and Hindu. She had worked and studied in India and the UK. She also had close personal links in Pune and had lived and studied there for seven years. Her links with Indian social work facilitated this collaboration. The other QUB faculty member was an Australian graduate from a Protestant background who had practice and teaching experience in Australia and the Republic of Ireland. Factors such as gender, religious and cultural affiliations and international experience contributed to faculty

members' commitment to the internationalization of social work. Their position as 'outsiders' to Northern Ireland also shaped their interactions with the participating students, as will be discussed further below.

Northern Ireland has been a site of ongoing sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics which has not only shaped the identities of students but also the practice of social work. Social work has increasingly become statutory, bureaucratic and more focused on service provision rather than social change (Campbell, 2007). The faculty members believed that exposure to different contexts would allow students a unique opportunity to explore their identities, context and social work practices and consider a wider scope of social work, including community development and advocacy.

To select students for the exchange, expressions of interest were invited from first year Bachelors in Social Work (BSW) students. First year students were targeted for involvement because of the relatively lighter workload compared to the second and third years of the program. Not all educators would consider introducing self-reflection and critical reflexivity at such an early stage of the academic course, due to the complexity of the processes involved. However, this was an opportunity to introduce key concepts and skills to students, which they could further build upon throughout the professional program.

Interested students were interviewed and requested to make a presentation outlining their motivations for participation, conceptualization of anti-oppressive practice and ability to cope in unfamiliar settings (Tresario, 2006; Wehbi, 2009). Students were selected based on their ability to present clearly defined motives, a basic understanding of the links between anti-oppressive practice and the global context, and attributes of flexibility and adaptability. The three students selected varied in age (23–33 years) and religious background (one Catholic and two Protestants). All three had previous international experience. One student had volunteered in Nepal, another in France and the third student had volunteered in South Africa and had completed an internship in New York.

In January 2011, QUB faculty and students undertook a two-week visit to KInSS. The program, organized by KInSS, consisted of lectures on social work theory and practice, field visits as well as informal opportunities for interaction such as a staff (faculty including administrative staff of KInSS) picnic and dinners with KInSS faculty members. QUB faculty and students gave two presentations to KInSS faculty and students outlining the agenda for and outcomes of their visit. Students also facilitated a workshop with KInSS students to exchange ideas of social work practice and their aspirations.

The following section outlines the implementation of strategies to enable critical reflection. Student quotes from presentations made by them on their return to Northern Ireland, have been used to demonstrate their experience.

Strategy 1: Critical incidents and debriefing techniques

The learning came in both expected and unexpected ways: Of course the lectures on social work in the Indian context and the visits to the field were invaluable, but the discussions that spun off from these, which were often carried late into the night, were also so important in terms of developing critical thinking skills. (Student quote)

Critical incidents are events that make one think and revisit personal and professional assumptions (Flanagan, 1954). International contexts, like all other environments, present multiple and continuous critical incidents. However, it is recognizing these incidents, analysing and challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions that result in critical learning and reflection. As outlined earlier, though students in this exchange had visited other countries, these experiences may not have necessarily enabled a critical understanding that problematized dominant power relations (Wehbi, 2009). Critical incidents were used to bring to focus assumptions and unquestioned power dynamics to the fore.

Process. QUB faculty members facilitated critical reflection in three ways. First, they enabled exposure to a variety of experiences. Students were encouraged to live and engage within an Indian community environment including accessing shops for everyday needs, purchasing and eating local food, buying and getting tailored dresses in local fashions, using public transport, visiting temples and accessing venues (clubs, restaurants and tea rooms) that locals used. Second, faculty actively identified and reflected on incidents that had prompted an emotional reaction and any feelings of dissonance or acceptance of common assumptions. The problematizing of these experiences by faculty members helped initiate critical reflection (Parsons and Stephenson, 2005; Bransford, 2011). Third, formal debriefing sessions were planned at the end of each day for group reflection. This provided students with time and a safe space to enable analysis of the critical incidents. Within these sessions, QUB faculty members modelled the process of deconstruction and the skill of critical questioning. It was during these sessions that both faculty and students were able to rework knowledge and values and acquire for new insights about themselves.

Exposure and critical engagement with different aspects of the culture resulted in a more holistic understanding, extending beyond cultural tourism (Boyle et al., 1999). Students were able to explore the more complex issues of social difference such as caste, religion, class, gender, ethnicity, regions through exposure to multiple discourses and realities.

Example. One student commented on how she believed the Indian faculty member from QUB was ‘an example of modern India’. The faculty member then encouraged a discussion on what notions of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ meant, thereby challenging simple dichotomies and promoting de-colonizing ways of knowing (Bay and Macfarlane, 2010). What regions in India would be considered modern and who were likely to occupy these spaces was explored. This was later discussed in more detail during the de-briefing sessions and students were encouraged to consider the same themes in the context of Northern Ireland and who occupied what spaces in their local communities. Students drew upon different perspectives, meanings, identities and relations and compared them to the Northern Ireland context facilitating new awareness. Thus critical incidents and de-briefing provided chances to examine assumptions more closely and reflect on them. The de-briefing allowed students to compare and contrast differences, similarities and parallels between the international and local context through a more critical gaze. This discussion led faculty members to develop greater insights about rational modernity and the post-modern. The Indian faculty member reflected on her own identity as an Indian. Faculty members discussed between themselves the notions of traditional and modern and how these were largely defined and applied through Western paradigms (see Midgley, 2008). Faculty thus went through similar processes of reflection as the students.

Strategy 2: Peer learning and support

We also engaged in discussion with the [Indian] students on these issues which gave us valuable insight into their thoughts of social work in the West and social work as an international profession. (Student quote)

Peer learning is defined as ‘the acquisition of knowledge and skills through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions’ (Topping, 2005: 631). The facilitation of group or peer learning is a common theme in international learning programs as it provides opportunities to support and learn from each other (Pawar et al., 2004).

Process. Peer interaction amongst the three QUB students promoted learning opportunities. Students actively supported each other to articulate problems and manage different points of view in a relatively neutral power framework. As students were from different religious communities, they were able to talk about how issues were perceived differently by different groups in Northern Ireland. In addition, QUB students also had opportunities to interact with KInSS students. These interactions were highly valued and presented a rich source of learning, comparison and discussions about social work education, practice and its future in India and in Northern Ireland. This led QUB students to appreciate the motivation of social work students in India as well as focus on their own commitment to social work.

Example. Students talked openly about the contentious issues of the Orange (Protestant) parades in Catholic neighbourhoods as well as the issues around positive discrimination of Catholics in the Police Service of Northern Ireland from both Protestant and Catholic perspectives. The peer group context and dynamics facilitated the process of reflexivity. Faculty members were either spectators or initiators of some of these discussions that educated and informed them on how the issues of sectarianism was viewed by and affected students.

The opportunity to interact with KInSS students enabled QUB students to not only pose questions but also respond to questions that required them to focus and reflect on their own context. Both KInSS and QUB students were curious as to the basis of marriage and relationships in the 'other' culture. QUB students posed questions about arranged marriage. KInSS students asked questions to the QUB students about sexuality and fidelity. This mutual curiosity and questioning proved to be a powerful tool for students' learning to appreciate the complexity of culture in shaping human interactions.

Strategy 3: Deconstructing and reconstructing theory and practice

The exchange trip to India gave us the opportunities to attend lectures, which gave an overview of social work in India, and we were also given the opportunity to partake in two days of field placements. This gave a real insight into how social work is taught, practised, in India, and allowed us to critically engage with the role of social workers both in India and at home. I gained a lot from this experience – the opportunity to critically engage with issues such as what the role of the social work is, and potentially could be. (Student quote)

Social work practice and education is often critiqued to be a colonial enterprise, re-iterating and legitimizing Western theories and practices that 'promote

“modern” economic, social, political and cultural practices’, particularly in the ‘Third World’ (Midgley, 2008: 33). The dangers of students applying Western theories to non-Western contexts uncritically have been discussed (Cornelius and Greif, 2005; Nimmagadda and Cowger, 1999). The processes of deconstruction can be important in enabling critical reflection as they involve questioning of dominant discourses and power relationships (Fook, 2002). The processes of reconstruction enable formulation of new discourses, categories and practices (Fook, 2002).

Process. QUB faculty members and students participated in lectures presented by KInSS colleagues outlining the historical context of social work, contemporary practice and community traditions. This was substantiated by visits to field work sites with unorganized labourers, street children and community development programs. Students were able to appreciate the development of social work in context.

The students were encouraged to critically appraise the strengths and limitations of the practice of social work in India by engaging in questions such as what services are provided, how services are shaped, what services are not provided and why. These questions were then applied to the local context of Northern Ireland and QUB students then compared and discussed social work in Northern Ireland. QUB students re-engaged with the history and context of social work in Northern Ireland, particularly how issues were addressed, why they were not addressed differently and what had shaped professional responses. QUB students were then encouraged to reconstruct different versions and possibilities of social work in view of contemporary realities.

Example. KInSS designed and delivered a local community development program in which KInSS faculty members and students were involved. They were also involved in empowerment and advocacy activities beyond the curriculum requirements. This prompted QUB faculty members and students to reflect on the role and scope of social work in Northern Ireland. This process highlighted how the profession was shaped within the historical context of sectarianism, in terms of which issues were addressed and which were marginalized. Students were able to explore opportunities for addressing sectarian conflict, building communities and tackling the marginalization of Traveller¹ communities. Subsequently students were able to understand the particularities of the Northern Ireland context and that Indian community building models could not be simply transferred to the Northern Ireland system. Nevertheless, they were able to reconstruct alternative visions of social work and its engagement with marginalized communities. As a result students reconsidered their aspirations

for social work. One of the students reported exploring community development strategies to address sectarianism. She then proceeded to reconstruct a broader model of social work for her practice that went beyond the statutory role to include community development and social activism. She talked about engaging with community development projects with Roma² and Traveller communities, peace building processes in Northern Ireland and advocacy for marginalized groups.

Students were able to challenge discourses and reconstruct new ideas for social work practice within their local context.

Strategy 4: Partnership and participation

Throughout our time we also gave two presentations, firstly outlining social work teaching and practice in Northern Ireland, and secondly highlighting what we [as students] had observed as the key differences and similarities in social work teaching and practice in India and Northern Ireland, and things which we felt could be applied to teaching and practice at home. (Student quote)

Critical reflective learning problematizes power and requires a reappraisal of the hierarchy inherent in the teacher and student relationship. Compassionate modes of communication (Oakley, 2000) are necessary to address these traditional hierarchies of power, if transformative learning is to occur. Within such communication, learning is 'relationship based' and the emphasis on emotional safety, trust and recognition of the needs of students and teachers facilitates two-way interaction (giving and receiving) between faculty members and students.

Process. The faculty members made active efforts and plans to challenge the student–teacher hierarchy and achieve open communication. It was stressed that both students and faculty members shared the position of 'learners'. Because the faculty members were originally not from Northern Ireland, they could occupy the positions of learners during the discussions on Northern Ireland. The fluidity of teacher–learner positions was acknowledged very early on. Faculty members demonstrated their own self-reflection with students by sharing their personal experiences such as feeling nervous before a lecture as well as sharing their personal histories. Students responded to this approach and this facilitated a working partnership. Each individual exchanged their expectations from the program, resulting in more open communication. Students were included in all phases of planning, implementation and problem solving processes and subsequent dissemination and

presentations of the project. These enabled a reworking of the faculty-student relationship where each other's responsibilities, expertise, vulnerabilities and concerns could be acknowledged.

Example. Open and transparent dialogue between faculty members and students was emphasized and facilitated in the formal de-briefing sessions. Students were able to pose critical questions about each other's identities. One such incident that exemplifies this transparency involved a difficult and heated exchange regarding the celebration of India's Republic Day, which falls on the same date as Australia Day. The Australian faculty member noted the irony that Indians celebrate the formation of the Indian Republic and Australian's celebrate colonization by Britain. She added Indigenous Australians refer to this as 'Invasion Day'. This resulted in discussions about colonization, nationalism and the various connections and disconnections of meaning, power and location. It also resulted in demands by the students for the faculty member to identify a political position. The faculty member resisted being forced into taking one of these two political positions because she didn't subscribe to either. As a white Australian, she didn't celebrate Australia Day or Invasion Day. Another discussion emerged over the issues of identity during dinner when the Indian faculty member referred to herself as 'black'. Students found this difficult to accept and insisted that she was not 'black'. This resulted in a discussion of what 'being black' might mean and the implications of this for 'white' people. Discussions could be passionate at times and uncomfortable as views of self-identity, issues of oppression and diversity were challenged.

Faculty members actively sought to minimize power differentials by involving students in all engagements with KInSS faculty and students and decision-making. This mode of communication changed the hierarchy between students and faculty members.

Sequel

The critical processes initiated during the two-week exchange continued to have an impact on the participants after their return. Students and faculty members together presented their learning experiences to the QUB School of SSPSW as well as national and international conferences. This ongoing involvement facilitated further development of the critical processes and skills gained. Faculty members and students continue to work together to promote these strategies within the curriculum and collaborate on possible publications, developing resources and planning the visit from KInSS colleagues.

On reflection

The four strategies outlined can enable critical reflection and promote a unique pedagogical experience in an international context. By being physically immersed in the Indian context, participants were exposed consciously and unconsciously to different ways of thinking and knowing (Fook, 2002). Formal and informal processes of de-briefing provided a structure for reflexivity 'on and in' action (Schön, 1983). Both students and faculty members found themselves constantly having to rework previously held values, assumptions and theories of social work practice and education to match a new context. Whilst faculty members and students learnt about social work in India, the most significant insights gained were that of social work in Northern Ireland. This was demonstrated by the frequent debates and open discussions on religion and identity. The development of flexible and open communication underpinned these reflective techniques (Fook, 2002).

The international context facilitated a change in the traditional faculty–student relationship. It enabled a site of learning which inculcated participation, dialogue and acknowledgement of power relations, which are important for deep learning (Clare, 2007). The inclusion of students in all aspects of the project encouraged them to take ownership of their learning. It was within this participatory context that critical incidents and debriefing, peer learning and engagement with theory and practice could be usefully articulated to encourage critical reflection. Students demonstrated a greater understanding and appreciation of the process of critical reflection and continued to be interested in further developing their learning. They reported increased confidence and skills of engaging with different audiences, preparing and undertaking presentations as well as their ability to apply this learning across other modules.

Over the course of the project, the role of the faculty members changed from that of expert to one of facilitator and collaborator. The relationship between them and students was transformed and remained oriented to partnership and mutual appreciation even after returning from India. The reflective experience proved to be just as powerful for the participating faculty members as for the students. Students' questions challenged them to critically rethink their own positions about many taken-for-granted assumptions. They were able to appreciate the agency of students in the learning process. They learnt more about the context of Northern Ireland and its impact on students.

The strategies outlined enabled an opportunity to examine self and 'positionality' in relation to diverse cultural contexts and facilitated awareness of self and identity (Abram et al., 2005; Furman et al., 2008; Tresario, 2006;

Wehbi, 2009). However, these dynamics, insights and learning gains cannot be considered as finite outcomes. Critical reflection has to be viewed as a developmental process. We believe that the strategies outlined were effective tools to encourage and teach students about critical reflection and its use in a live cultural context.

The critically reflective processes in this pilot project were shaped by the particular positions, in terms of gender, nationality and religious identity within the faculty and student group. Models of international engagement vary considerably and this two-week project would differ in nature and outcome compared to a three-month student practicum. Short and long-term outcomes of different models of international experiences require more intensive research and comparison. Given the resources involved in this international project, it is a valid question whether the same results could have been achieved in the local context. Could these strategies be applied in local sites? Could virtual international linkages through electronic and technological processes be just as effective? With increasing social networking sites such as Facebook and even virtual reality possibilities like 'Second Life', it may be possible to replicate similar processes and learning gains (Anand and Clark, 2009; Corder and Alice, 2010). However, the complete immersion and limited opportunities to disengage in international contexts remains difficult to replicate.

Conclusion

Involvement in this project has convinced us that international locations remain powerful sites for critical reflection. An international context facilitates the use of critically reflective techniques. The reformulation of power dynamics between faculty members and students was central to the effective use of these techniques. International opportunities such as this pilot project are effective in challenging traditional approaches to teaching and learning, particularly when combined with the concept of critical reflection.

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Notes

1. Irish Traveller communities have historical presence in Ireland. However, they have faced multiple forms of oppression in and are among the most marginalized, oppressed and deprived communities in Northern Ireland.

2. Roma are a marginalized group of people in Europe. They first arrived in Europe in the 13th century.

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Author biographies

Chaitali Das is a lecturer in Social Work in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, in Northern Ireland. Trained as a social worker in India, she has experience of working with vulnerable children including child labourers, street children and children in prostitution. Her interest remains in working with vulnerable children and processes of exclusion and 'minoritization'. She is also interested in international social work and pedagogies and recently developed a research exchange programme with the Karve Institute of Social Services (KInSS, affiliated with the University of Pune, India), to promote the internationalization of social work education and research in Northern Ireland.

Janet Anand is a lecturer in Social Work in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, in Northern Ireland. Her research interests have included paediatric social admission to hospital (risk and clinical decision-making), ageing and elder abuse, practice-based research and international social work education. She is currently involved in a cross-cultural study exploring social workers' responses to the abuse of older people in the community. Over the past three years she has been actively involved in developing and promoting opportunities for international exchange partnerships with universities in the USA, Australia and, more recently, India.