



Continuing Education Across Boundaries: Exploring the International Exchange of Social Work Knowledge and Practices

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Continuing Education Across Boundaries: Exploring the International Exchange of Social Work Knowledge and Practices</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 3 No. 3</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>33005</i>
Page Number:	<i>5</i>
Year:	<i>2000</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

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Beatrice Traub-Werner

Preface

Seymour J. Rosenthal, MSSW

In conceiving *Professional Development*, the long-standing and initial intent was that it would provide information and guidance to scholarly attempts to enhance the practice of continuing social work education and human services. The underlying theme of internationalism was promoted as a way of recognizing that the unrelenting and dramatic shifts that occur in one part of the globe have a direct impact upon the entire world. What is becoming obviously more evident is that these shifts and changes are felt more clearly and more immediately now than they ever were before.

The immediacy of social crises is no longer contained within traditional political borders; rather, they are like air pollution, unconstrained by physical geographical markers. The advent of the emerging communication technologies has redefined our conception of national boundaries—the notion of a connected “global neighborhood” must now enter our shared knowledge base. The impacts of social and political turmoil around the world now occur on the same scale of intensity that we normally associate with neighborhoods within the same city. What once was an isolated problem now permeates our new-found global consciousness, presenting us with numerous challenges and opportunities for remediation. The cumulative effect of our global neighborhood is that in all professions, especially social work and human services enterprises, the need for information exchange and collaboration has become imperative for our collective survival.

Clearly, the economic scholars and brokers in our midst have for some time understood the impact of the global economy, a term we now readily use with confidence and ease. They have been cognizant of the nature of global economic impacts, realizing that the mystical force of geographic boundaries has lost all relevance in a highly concentrated global market. For instance, the rise and fall of Japan's stock market has had immediate and disastrous consequences for our own economic stability. We have

learned the hard way, perhaps, that it is in the interest of all nations within the global sisterhood to search for ways in which they can support the economies of other nations, rather than relish in their economic demise.

A similar response has occurred within the sphere of social movements and social upheaval. Wars, ethnic violence, droughts, famines, poverty, epidemics, and the subsequent migration patterns that follow, have had a measurable influence upon the autonomy of other nations. Within a relatively short period of time, the fluid shifts in racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics, which test the existing cultural fabric, have forced the welcoming nations to search for ways to address and acclimate the rich and inherent diversities that these migrations entail. These changes pose new challenges for the wider practice communities to address from an international perspective, encompassing our new-found knowledge of global neighborhoods.

As social work practitioners and educators, we have been sensitive to these cultural changes from a neighborhood perspective, and we must now refine our practice orientation to incorporate a global community of customers, clients, and participants. For some time, we have practiced from a macro, as well as a micro perspective, and we have continued to search for ways to bring positive collective behaviors to help resolve both individual and societal conflicts. When working with individuals, we attempt to define those barriers and antecedents that have prevented the individual from achieving self-efficacy. Traditional ways of comprehending these constraints must include the information and knowledge that can only be derived by understanding the cultural geography of our clients' native nations.

In order to achieve the intent of the aforementioned practice direction, *Professional Development* will develop a journalistic infrastructure of information gathering and dissemination, which will assist in the dialogue necessary to enhance “neighborhood” life in countries throughout the world, where social work practice has been, or is emerging as, a

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force for societal intervention. Our plan is to seek editors from around the globe, whose function would be to stimulate the development of manuscripts and articles for peer review, to encourage institutional and individual subscriptions, and to focal point, perhaps, the development of workshops, lectures, and commissioned articles. We currently have international desks in Russia, Korea, and Canada that have provided *Professional Development* with invaluable insights into the social, political, and economic climates of these nations, which have had considerable impacts upon the universal human condition. Our goal is to utilize *Professional Development* as a means to facilitate this global-neighborhood dialogue, to ensure that the wider practice community can anticipate and apply new trends in global social work practice.

Introduction

"Internationalizing" the professional development of social workers is an inevitable next step in the ever-shrinking global village, as social work educators and practitioners work around the world, in cultures and nations that are different from their own. In the English-speaking western world, there are two parallel processes occurring simultaneously. Social work schools, departments, and faculties are increasingly being staffed by men and women who are diverse in their ethnicity, culture, race, religious/spiritual beliefs, and sexual orientation. Their scholarly production reflects their rich diversity and speaks to the need to "internationalize" by broadening the scope of traditional social work education (Rowe et al, 2000).

The second process entails the travel of social work students and practitioners to all corners of the globe, pursuing a vast array of educational and training opportunities. This increase in the geographic mobility of social work educators and practitioners mirrors the broader immigration policies in the so-called "new world," and/or the acceptance (more or less) of "guest workers" needed in countries that normally are hesitant to welcome immigrants (Kymlicka, 1995). Geography is no longer

experienced as a barrier, and people in the profession will follow these opportunities wherever they may present themselves. The debate concerning the implications of geographic mobility in social work education and practice began to appear in the scholarly literature (in the US/UK/Canada/Australia) within the last five to ten years (Lyons, 1999). How this mobility will pan out in social work practice in multicultural and poly-ethnic communities, within the context of continuing social work education, remains to be seen and requires in-depth study.

International Exchanges in Continuing Education

Issues identified by some scholars with regard to the apparent "universal" nature of applied knowledge and practices will need to be more systematically addressed by researchers and scholars. This attention should occur both in the scholarly literature and in the professional education and training of social workers (Traub-Werner et al, 2000), as well as in their lifelong professional development (Darkwa & Mazibuko, 2000).

It is the purpose of this article to discuss and develop an initial model of implementation to establish international exchanges of knowledge and practices for professional lifelong learning programs. Such exchanges will promote culturally sensitive best-practice guidelines, which reflect the needs of the communities where professional social work services are required and being provided. This process must be broadly constructed to take into consideration that both the practitioners and the communities they serve may vary widely in their diversities. Human services ought to be based on the best and most appropriate knowledge for that time and at any given place.

The challenges faced by practitioners are enormous as an increasingly globalized world also means greater disparities in social well-being (Midgley, 2000). Acceptable practices in any one community are not universally applicable, and a thorough understanding of local values and particular policies is required for ethical practice. Explanatory models of health, illness, and justice

are inherently culturally derived. In order to provide service that is useful and acceptable to those being served, practitioners must acknowledge and integrate these cultural and social considerations. While considering best practices in a global village, it is crucial to develop a body of knowledge to be applied by professional practitioners, who are working across national, ethno-racial, and cultural boundaries. Another dimension adding to the complexity of a globalized service provision is the interdisciplinary and multicultural make-up of both the service providers themselves and their teams.

Most of the traditional social work education has been quite narrow in its conceptual framework, teaching practitioners to think and practice from the cultural perspective of their local realities. In an era of rapid globalization, it is clear that traditional social work literature, practice, and education in English-speaking western countries must look "outwards" to broaden its scope and vision. Before a wider perspective can be more readily embraced, it will be necessary to resolve those difficulties arising from the fact that professional degree-granting education remains confined to distinct, geographically bound accreditation requirements. In turn, these accreditation requirements are reflective of local needs founded upon specific social policies and legislation. Deliberate educational initiatives must be undertaken to broaden these perspectives and the knowledge base before practitioners can provide beneficial services to people and communities in countries different from their own (Dubois & Ntetu, 2000).

Although social work schools and departments in the US and Canada continue to make great strides in diversifying their teaching faculties — incorporating the inherent diversity of various sex/gender, ethno-racial/cultural, and religious/spiritual orientations — the curricular content that represents current ideas about social work knowledge and practice wisdom remains generally grounded in western values, scientific traditions, and locally defined needs (Compton & Galaway, 1989). It is unclear whether social work programs in parts of the world steeped in non-western

cultural traditions consider useful or necessary any of what passes as social work knowledge and practice wisdom in the western world.

Local and International Best Practices

I argue that continuing education in social work has a pivotal role to play in promoting the internationalization of social work best practices across the spectrum of our professional work, because it can do so unfettered by "provincial" accreditation requirements. Continuing education may well spearhead practice, education, and research in its quest to internationalize curricular content. Professional social work development will thus be infused with the cross-cultural knowledge and best-practice wisdom required for ethical professional practice across the globe. In that sense, continuing education could become the motor both pulling and pushing traditional social work education.

The Proposed Model

Utilizing *Professional Development* as a vehicle, I propose that a section of an issue, or perhaps even an entire issue, be devoted to the discussion of a certain topic, problem, or situation from as many geographic and social settings as is editorially possible. Modeled on the ideas used in Departments of Foreign Affairs, it would be useful to include both academic and practitioner analyses of certain situations/issues arising in their countries and/or communities. For example, were *Professional Development* to devote an entire issue to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as well as the need for social work practitioners to understand their role in working with populations afflicted with this disease from a holistic perspective, articles could be commissioned from authors practicing in this field from various geographic locations. Exposure to diverse perspectives cultivates a broader understanding of issues, which then informs universal practice, theory, and knowledge building. Continuing professional education programs ought to reflect the truly universal learning needs of professionals, who will inevitably be engaged in trans-cultural practice.

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