An Online Course in Trauma for School Personnel World Wide: Collaboration, Challenges, and Opportunities

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An Online Course in Trauma for School Personnel World Wide: Collaboration, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Increasingly, professionals depend on distance education to fulfill their faculty development needs. Although there are many traditional continuing education offerings for school personnel, these generally require time away from work and family, and are often geographically inaccessible. Internet-based distance education offers a solution to these problems, and has other major advantages as well. Participants can access the material anytime, anywhere. Working at their own pace, they can review video segments for pertinent information, dissect material as often as needed, and exchange ideas with colleagues in geographically distant settings. Individually and in small groups, they can apply their newly acquired knowledge of trauma in online discussions of content, readings, and case studies.

Background—the Trauma Environment

After the shock of September 11th, 2001, we concluded that heavy demands would be made on school personnel (teachers, social workers, school counselors and administrators) whose students had been exposed to the effects of the terrorist attacks either directly or indirectly. Although most students exposed to traumatic events will show resilience over time, for some the aftermath of trauma and loss can be stressful and protracted. Long-term effects may not emerge until an individual is specifically challenged by subsequent developmental situations or life events (Pynoos, 1994).

The combination of traumatic reminders and secondary stress may seriously interfere with daily activities and place many at risk for developing chronic symptoms related to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the classroom, overt behaviors associated with traumatic stress (e.g., lack of concentration, withdrawal, aggression, substance abuse) can disrupt classroom functioning and generate anxiety among teachers and other students.

Unlike traditional mental health settings, schools can provide a stigma-free, non-threatening environment offering mental health services (NYSOMH, 2001; Pynoos, Goenjian, & Steinberg, 1995). Although educators are in a unique position to appraise student behavior over time, observe peer relationships, and recognize problems in concentration and changes in academic performance (Moor et al., 2000), the formal education of most school personnel does not include content on trauma (Jackson, 2002a). Without such knowledge, school personnel are not prepared to contribute effectively to these efforts.

The atrocities committed upon children secondary to war and terrorism can have long-lasting and devastating effects. Studies of school children in Kuwait and Armenia demonstrate that a high percentage of children, as a result of being exposed to catastrophic events, suffer from posttraumatic symptoms ranging from mild to severe (Paramjit, 1998; Pynoos, 1996). These events can be severely damaging to children's and adolescents' mental health whether their exposure has been direct or indirect. This is true not only for nationally and internationally visible disasters but for other more insidious traumatic events such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, suicide of relatives or friends, and homicide. Thus the tragic events of 9-11 led us not only to an increased awareness of the pervasiveness of traumatic events in the lives of children in the U.S. It also challenged us to recognize childhood trauma as an epidemic of global proportions (Paramjit, 1998).

Methodology

Needs Assessment

Focus groups

To assess the need of an online course in trauma for school personnel, we conducted two video taped focus groups for teachers who, with their students, had witnessed the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC).

Teachers expressed their need for guidance on how best to respond to their students after 9-11. In the words of one third-grade teacher, 10 months after the 9-11 attacks:

> *We're not counselors—that's not our expertise. I'm learning how to teach, I'm not a [mental health] professional, and I don't want to miss these kids who have problems, because... it's surfacing now. I now have kids who are having nightmares, and—and maybe they've had them all along. I don't know. And maybe they're just admitting [it] to themselves now.*

School personnel survey

In addition to the focus groups, we conducted a needs assessment survey for school personnel in

the five boroughs of New York City to identify the trauma content they believed most relevant to their classroom needs (Jackson, 2002b) (See Figure 1).

Initially, our aim was to identify content for an online curriculum on trauma and loss that would help school personnel respond to K-12 students whose lives had been precipitously disrupted by the traumatic events of 9-11. However, within months of the terrorist attacks, the magnitude and scope of childhood trauma became painfully clear, not only from the results of our needs assessment, but from other surveys conducted soon after the disaster. For example, in the U.S., a New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) study conducted shortly after 9-11 showed that prior to the WTC attacks, significant numbers of children had been suffering from effects of exposure to high levels of various kinds of trauma (Aber, 2002). Identified traumas included being badly hurt, having seen someone killed or injured, and having a close friend or family member murdered. The results of our needs assessment survey were consistent with these findings: 70 percent of the respondents, and to their knowledge, 70 percent of their students, had directly experienced or witnessed at least one traumatic event prior to the WTC disaster (Jackson, 2002b) (See Figure 2).

As the universality of traumatic experiences and their effects upon children became apparent to us, we decided to expand the course content to include the various types of trauma to which school children may be subjected, and to shift the target population to include both national and international school personnel. We believed that collaboration with a geographically and ethnically diverse participant population would offer a range of cultural perspectives not usually encountered in traditional learning environments.

Course Development

Collaborative partners

To ensure the efficient and successful development and implementation of the course, we worked closely with the Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW) Office of Computing and Instructional Technology (OCIT), Columbia's

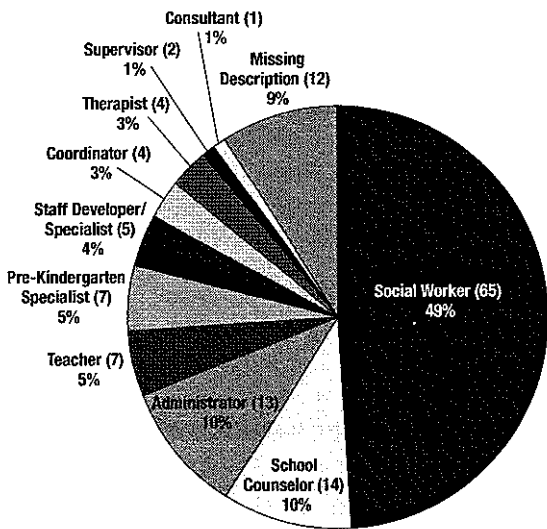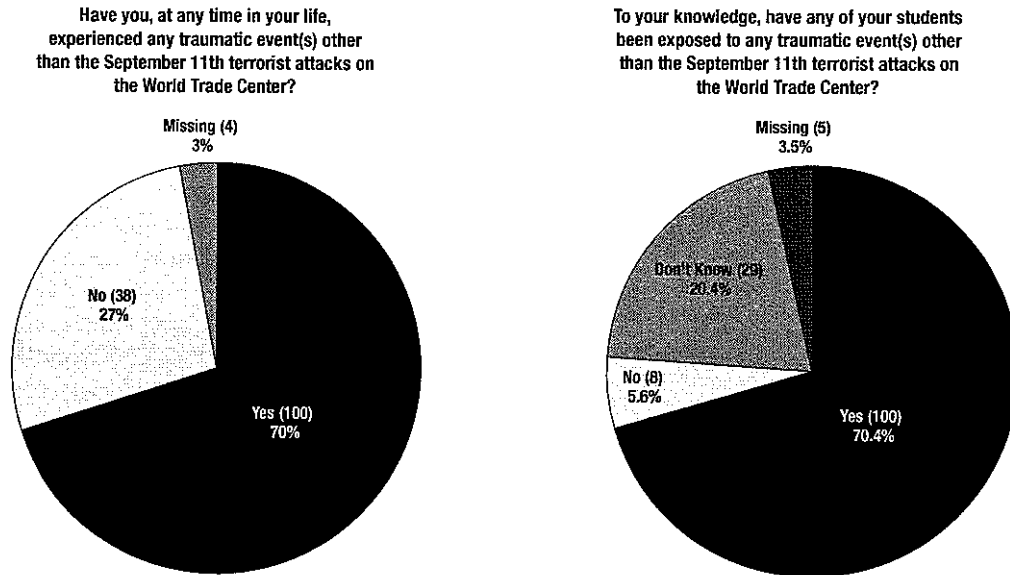## Figure 1. Respondents to needs assessment survey by profession.

35

Figure 2. AQF needs assessment responses.

Have you, at any time in your life,
experienced any traumatic event(s) other
than the September 11th terrorist attacks on
the World Trade Center?

Missing (4)
3%

No (38)
27%

Yes (100)
70%

To your knowledge, have any of your students
been exposed to any traumatic event(s) other
than the September 11th terrorist attacks on
the World Trade Center?

Missing (5)
3.5%

Don't Know (29)
20.4%

No (8)
5.6%

Yes (100)
70.4%

Digital Knowledge Ventures (DKV), the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN), and the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE).

DKV provided the technology infrastructure and expertise necessary to develop, launch, and maintain the course offering. They were responsible for the videotaping, compression, editing and mounting of all supporting curriculum materials. As a result, the online course resources included visual images, e-mail for academic and technological support, digital videos of experts in the field of trauma, case studies, focus groups, interventions, assigned readings with links to full-text articles, an online glossary, and electronic bulletin boards for assignments and online discussions. With the first author (HJ), the director of the Office of Computing Information Technology of CUSSW served as a consultant and liaison between CUSSW, DKV and iEARN.

iEARN, a non-profit organization and pioneer in online distance learning since 1986, provided the expertise and infrastructure needed to develop the

international version of the course. As a pioneer in the area of interactive online professional development both nationally and internationally, its courses have successfully prepared K-12 teachers to engage in collaborative online, project-based learning in 25 countries. iEARN believes in the transformational power that evolves as students collaborate on a common global or national issue—exploring ways in which their individual knowledge, research and perspectives can be brought together in collaborative learning and action in their communities.

The CUSSW Field Education Department, Project Director (HJ), Dean of Continuing Education, Bank Street School of Education, and iEARN were responsible for recruitment of school personnel in NYC. In addition, the course was accredited by the NYCDOE and listed in their catalog. These contacts permitted us to recruit school personnel responsible for over 5,000 students.

Curriculum development

The course was designed to prepare national and international educators to recognize and respond effectively to the psychosocial needs of students

whose lives had been precipitously disrupted by traumatic events and their aftermath. Our intent was to enable participants to intervene in cases of childhood trauma in a timely fashion, minimizing the risk of students developing chronic posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), its associated co-morbidity, and the consequent need for more intensive treatment (Foa, Davidson, & Francis, 1999; Pynoos & Nader, 1988). In addition, we wanted to prepare educators to manage their own traumatic stress reactions such as burnout, compassionate fatigue, vicarious traumatization, pathological grief reaction, and self-destructive behavior (Palm, Polusny, & Follette, 2004).

Materials from trauma courses taught at Columbia University, from experts within the field of psychological trauma, the trauma literature, and data from the two teacher focus groups and needs assessment survey enabled us to develop a curriculum to meet the needs of K-12 school personnel and their students. Content was examined and assessed for its academic quality, and then screened and organized for its relevance to each of the school personnel cohorts and for its applicability to the developmental stages of the targeted student groups. Ultimately, the content was converted and translated to be compatible with the available distance learning technologies.

The resulting online course *Helping Students Cope with Trauma and Loss: Online Education and Training for School Personnel* consists of two sections: 1) *Overview of Trauma*; and 2) *School-Based Interventions*. The curriculum is empirically based, uses cutting-edge technology, and is of high academic quality. The first section includes content on the impact of trauma and its risk and protective factors; the second includes content on self-care and specific interventions for teachers, counselors/ social workers, and administrators. In each section, experts in the fields of social work, psychiatry, and psychology discuss and demonstrate various trauma interventions in the form of case studies, lectures, and role-plays via streaming videos.

There are two versions of the course: one resides on the Columbia University server and is available to the general public free of charge (at http://ci.columbia.edu/w0521); the other is available only by registering through iEARN. NYC school personnel who want to receive credit from the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) must register for the iEARN nine-week, structured version of the course. Individuals who are not interested in receiving credit from the NYCDOE, but who wish to interact with international school personnel may also register for the iEARN version.

The course content of the iEARN version is identical to that of the Columbia course. Both have links to streaming videos of experts discussing and illustrating different issues related to childhood trauma, and to glossaries of differential diagnoses, lists of available referral sources, and trauma assessment tools. The difference between the two is that iEARN registrants engage in collaborative group activities, forum discussions, and assignments in an exciting and supportive interactive environment (see Table 1).

Facilitators

We assigned two facilitators to the iEARN course. In addition to responding to participants' needs, concerns and requests within 24 hours, their challenge was to generate and nurture interaction, learning, and cultural sensitivity among participants.

One facilitator, a technology expert, attended to technical housekeeping issues such as responding to participants' technology concerns and questions, updating links and adding or deleting information on the course web pages.

The other facilitator was a doctoral student who was an expert in trauma and loss. She communicated with participants through email, kept track of and responded to participants' postings and assignments on the Web, and helped create a global classroom community.

Evaluation Plan

A summative evaluation was conducted to determine the feasibility and academic value of the online modules. A pre- and posttest questionnaire was developed to assess: a) knowledge acquisition (e.g., ability to recognize trauma risk factors, PTSD symptoms, need for referrals, etc.); b) adoption and

	Content/Topic	Any Combination of Process/Activities	Objectives/Goals
Session #1	introductions, online orientation, and review of syllabus	online discussion, case studies, videos, discussion of required readings, assignments	introduce all participants to the use of the internet, content, expectations, goals and objectives of the course, completion of participant pretest part #1
Session #2	history of childhood trauma, definition, risk and protective factors	online interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage all participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning
Session #3	impact of childhood trauma, developmental issues in symptomatology	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage all participants in collaborative online activities and quality online postings that show evidence of learning
Session #4	types of retraumatization, new traumas, traumatic reminders, secondary stresses	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage all participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning, completion of participant posttest part #1, completion of participant pretest part #2
Session #5	teacher interventions, creating a safe classroom environment, therapeutic activities	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning
Session #6	school counselor interventions: prevention, assessment, traumatic reminders, secondary stresses, family interventions	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning
Session #7	school counselor interventions (cont): treatment guidelines, cognitive model, cognitive therapy	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning
Session #8	administration roles: leadership, infrastructure, protocols, responding to teachers' needs	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies	engage participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning
Session #9	self-care for school personnel: vicarious traumatization, strategies	online, interactive group discussion of assigned readings, postings, video, case studies, final assignment	engage all participants in collaborative online activities, quality online postings that show evidence of learning, completion of final assignment, completion of posttest #2

diffusion (Rogers, 2003) (e.g., perceived relative advantage of the material presented in the modules, comprehension and relevance of the material, and ability to apply course material in school settings); and c) participant satisfaction.

The assessment of knowledge acquisition was conducted before and immediately following completion of each of the two sections of the course. The other two components of the instrument (measuring adoption/diffusion and consumer satisfaction) were determined at the close of the training program. Data were gathered electronically by incorporating the evaluation questionnaires into the online training program. To assess the extent to which the course content has been retained and used, a follow-up questionnaire will be given to the participants six months following completion of the course. The results of the evaluation will be presented in a subsequent paper.

Participants

Since its introduction in 2004, the iEARN course has been offered twice. Of the 22 people who registered for the first class, Fall, 2004, 18 participated in the course (retention rate 82 percent). Five of the 18 were from countries other than the U.S; 15 of the participants were women. Of the 27 people who registered for the second class, Spring, 2005, 21 participated in the course (retention rate 78 percent). Six of the 21 were from countries other than the U.S.; 17 of the participants were women (see Figure 3).

The following two profiles are fairly representative of the background and experience of those who participated in the online trauma courses:

Susan: a U.S. participant

Susan is a high school social studies teacher in New York City. She also trains teachers working in an alternate certification program for teaching

Figure 3. Demographics of iEARN participants.
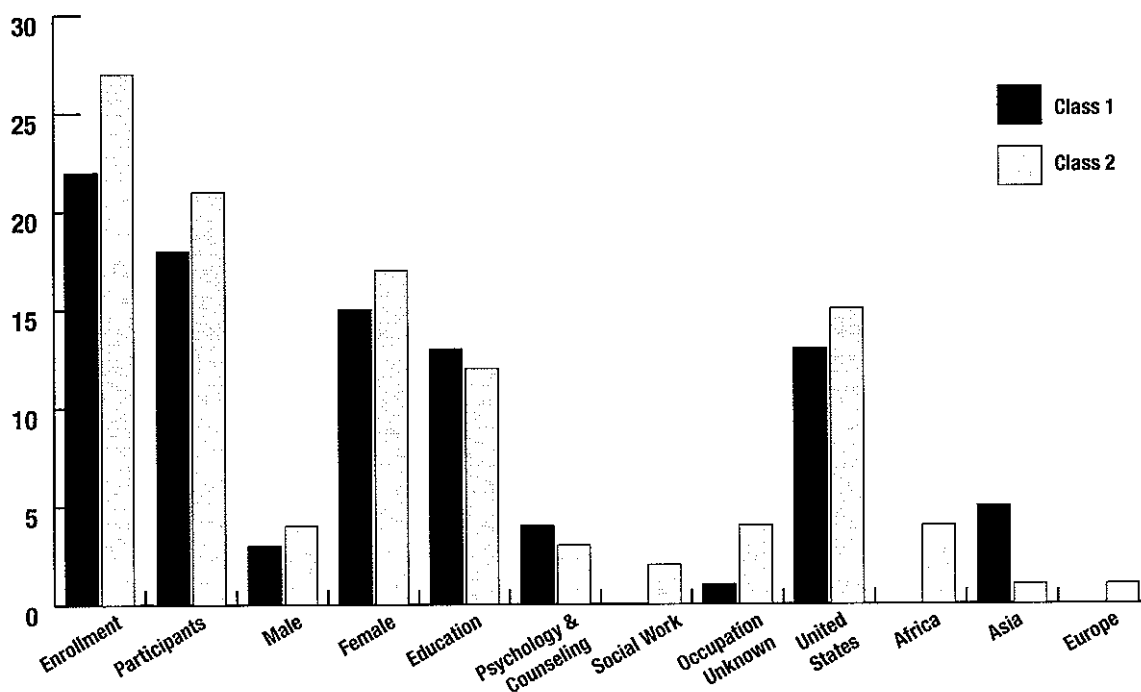
fellows. In that capacity, she teaches an innovative course called "Ethnicity and Race Through Film." Susan states that her students "watch clips of movies about Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Irish-Americans, and Italian-Americans." She says "Talking about race in class, we break down the stereotypes and prejudices we have. The students have so much to say and they have so many questions about other cultures. Just starting a dialogue is the first step."

Like most US participants, Susan was teaching the morning of September 11th, 2001. As was true for many other participants, Susan's school was close enough to the World Trade Center that she was able to see smoke and papers flying after the planes hit. She lost family members and close friends that day. Fortunately, none of the students in her school lost immediate family members. However, she lamented that there was "no real outlet for discussion...despite the fact that students were visibly shaken by the experience." When she returned to school several days later, two family members and a close friend were still missing.

When Susan describes the emotional challenges she faces while trying to help her students cope with trauma, her comments reflect the experience of other teachers in this course, both domestic and international: "It overwhelms me and breaks my heart to hear some of the abuse and trauma that our students go through. I not only want to help them, I want to take away their pain. It is refreshing to know that there are educators who really care and have not lost their idealism. We need to continue to be advocates for our students and get them the help they deserve."

Samuel: an international participant

Samuel currently lives and works in Liberia, although he was born and raised in Sierra Leone. He teaches elementary through high school students in a wide variety of academic subjects, as well as special classes in human rights and child rights. Most of his students have lost parents during the war in their country and are in foster care and in refugee and displaced camps. Samuel describes

how some of his students witnessed the killing of their parents when their towns and villages were attacked by governmental or rebel forces. Other students are ex-child combatants who were captured by rebel factions and forced to join or be killed. To alleviate the problems these children face, Samuel provides counseling to both victims and perpetrators who have been directly or indirectly traumatized by war.

Like other international participants living in countries experiencing ongoing war or conflict, Samuel describes how difficult it is to earn the respect and trust of children who have been abandoned, abused, or hurt by adults and war. Despite the challenges of helping these students, Samuel feels that the "payoff can by huge-you need to measure success in the 'small' things. As the saying goes *it is better to build up children than to repair men.*"

Results

Having a facilitator address the range of technical issues that arose was essential; some course participants were less experienced with computers and technology than we expected. Others needed reassurance to alleviate anxiety associated with taking an online course for the first time (Hara & Kling, 2000). The following excerpts illustrate the importance of ongoing technical assistance:

> *I am not very good with computers, so my biggest concern was...would I be able to surf the internet and access the information I needed to do this course? Trying to connect the first week was very nerve-racking to say the least, but after the second week I was fine, because I was confident that if I needed help, there were people out there whom I could depend on for help. (U.S. participant)*

Also:

> *Expert coordinators were of great help; especially since they answered the messages with short and useful comments. Introducing good links, articles, web sites and books for participants was very useful in this course. (International participant)*

Special technological challenges were faced by some international participants as reflected in this student's experience:

> Overall the entire course has been very successful and I think we have learned a lot; however there were some constraints which I have faced. First of all, technology was a problem, because in this part of the world connection with the Internet is not very efficient. ...there is only one service provider in the entire region and they have a monopoly over the things; therefore Internet speed is very slow and frequently we remain disconnected as well. (International participant)

The role of the facilitator with an expertise in trauma added an important perspective that might otherwise be missing. Knowing that they could ask questions about the content of the course enabled participants to feel secure:

> I assumed the whole process would feel very anonymous and cold but that was not the case. I was curious about how "learning" was going to take place. ... Although I have never met [the facilitators] I feel very comfortable with these instructors. (U.S. participant)

And:

> Although this was an online course and the entire discussion has taken place in the forums, there was such a realization...as if we all were sitting in a classroom and giving feedback to each other. We never met the course participants, but I feel as if I know these people for a long time. I am looking forward to keep in touch with all these fellows. (International participant)

In addition, the facilitator's in-depth knowledge of trauma allowed her to clarify, explain, and expand on course content, and encourage and guide dialogue among the various participants. At one point she posted the following message to participants:

> Because trauma is so universal, and because the world is getting smaller, it is important for us to consider the role that children and family culture, race, and ethnic identity plays in how you can help students cope

> with trauma. Use this discussion forum to comment on any of these issues about trauma in school-age children, and to discuss any experiences and observations you have had working with children from different racial/ethnic/cultural groups. (Facilitator)

The occasional reluctance of U.S. school personnel to respond with empathy to stories of horrific traumas such as honor killings, war, and genocide presented both a challenge and an opportunity. The wish to avoid such topics, even in a course devoted to trauma, is not unusual (Rousseau & Drapeau, 1998). Feeling overwhelmed by the traumatic events their international colleagues were confronting on a regular basis, the U.S. participants tended to focus on those traumas most relevant to their work (e.g., the impact of 9/11, and intra-familial and community violence). The facilitator's clinical experience and knowledge about trauma allowed her to be sensitive to the difficulty the U.S. participants were having. She realized that their apparent absence of empathy could, perhaps, be attributed to a lack of cultural competence. According to Athey & Moody-Williams (2003), the acquisition of cultural competence is "an ongoing process of...development that includes learning more about (one's) own and other cultures; altering (one's) thinking about culture on the basis of what we learn; and changing the ways in which we interact with others to reflect an awareness and sensitivity to diverse cultures." The facilitator also thought that the lack of responsiveness could be a reflection of resistance, a psychological defense individuals use to avoid emotional pain and anxiety, fueled perhaps by the disturbing nature of the traumatic events as well as by their perceived "foreignness."

The following excerpt illustrates how the facilitator attempted to address the lack of empathy and support in order to foster more culturally sensitive responses to the discourse:

> I was moved by the messages posted by teachers from NYC on the impact of September 11th. But it also made me wonder how differently we would react in NYC and in the United States if we had to deal with similar kinds of

chronic, on-going, long-term war and civil conflict as some of your colleagues in other countries have had to do. For those of you in the United States, try to place yourselves in the shoes of some of your colleagues teaching in countries like Liberia and Yugoslavia.
(Facilitator)

The excerpts below are illustrative of the responses to the facilitator's attempts to elicit more responsiveness from participants:

From day one, I was excited about the possibilities of sharing with other teachers around the globe. It was a thrilling experience to hear what others thought, what their schools and students were like and what their experiences were. It gave me a greater understanding of the issues that students and teachers deem important on a global level and has made a huge difference in my life as a teacher and as a member of the global community. (U.S. participant)
And:

As an educator I sometimes feel I get desensitized to situations...this course was a great reminder that catastrophes such as an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, fire, flood, or violent acts are frightening to children and adults alike. (U.S. participant)
And:

It was heartbreaking to read each other's accounts of 9-11 and international disasters. Reading my classmates' recollections made these traumatic situations that people experience more real to me. (U.S. participant)

The following reflect the participants' acquisition of new information and the capacity to apply the newly acquired information to their work with students:

For me, this course has given me an understanding of how we can link our practical experience with theory related to trauma and its related issues. I had already been experiencing the trauma-related cases with my students and generally in the society. Being a teacher I have been handling such cases at

school for the last five years. But this course has built our professional capabilities for properly handling such cases.
(International participant)
And:

I enjoyed the lectures, especially on PTSD. It is helpful for guidance counselors to learn about evaluating a student for PTSD.
(U.S. participant)
And:

The material presented in the course made me more aware of the needs of my students. I realized that several children went untreated because I was unaware of what to look for as symptoms of trauma. After taking this course, it made me more aware of the importance of trauma. I feel there is not enough stress placed on trauma and the effects traumatic experiences have on children of all ages.
(U.S. participant)

Limitations

In both course offerings, the imbalance of the United States to foreign participants suggests the need for more active recruitment of foreign students. As noted by some of the international participants, the technological infrastructure in developing countries may not always be reliable enough for sustained interactive discussions and streaming video. This global digital divide between developed and developing countries may account for the relative under-representation of students from countries other than the U.S. The over-representation of women over men in both courses most likely reflects the greater number of women in education, social work, and counseling. However, such disproportion precludes a balance of male and female perspectives in the discussion board postings and in the reflections of participants. Although it may seem that the ratio of teachers to social workers, school counselors and administrators is high among our participants, it is actually much higher than that found in most school settings.

Conclusions

According to an international participant:

Another useful thing was learning from different cultural contexts. In my view, certain trauma-related cases are closely linked with culture and social norms, laws of the land, and other such things; therefore the cultural diversity in our class was one of the strongest factors which provided us an opportunity to learn.

In sum, instructional technology offers new and exciting possibilities for delivering high-quality, international education and training at a distance. An urgent need exists to educate and train school personnel worldwide to respond effectively to the psychosocial needs of students whose lives are impacted by traumatic events and their aftermath. The course presented here is an example of a successful collaboration among Columbia University, Bank Street College of Education, the New York City Department of Education, and iEARN, a community non-profit organization.

Representative excerpts from participant feedback demonstrate the technical, academic and cultural challenges and opportunities inherent in developing and implementing an international, innovative, interactive, online course. Self-reports show that the knowledge of trauma and its applicability to real world issues facing school personnel worldwide were increased; empathic responses to traumatic events that were outside the realm of American experience were fostered. Importantly, our findings show that it is possible to create a classroom of geographically and ethnically diverse participants in which a collaborative global community can develop.

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