Chapter 9

Virtual Communication for Field Education Placements in a Global Context

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ABSTRACT

Increasing reliance upon information communication technology is one of the major factors in the current student profile which challenges the traditional concept of professional field education. In Australia the involvement of a growing minority of students in international field education highlights the value of communication via different technological methods. Drawing upon the experience of students at one university in Australia who undertook international placements over a three year period, with particular attention to those engaged in group placements in Orissa, India, this chapter presents the different placement structures and the application of ICT and pedagogical factors requiring critical attention. Another longer term field education challenge has been the increasing demand for human service field placements in an environment of decreasing resources. A common electronic data base, developed by the schools of social work, in one state in Australia presents an approach aimed at promoting co-operation in a competitive situation.

‘Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere’. -- Chinese proverb

INTRODUCTION

Our journey towards sustainable models for international field experience was initially coincidental. The steep learning curve of students and staff during the past several years has led to policy based on established processes for social work students seeking overseas placements together with a realization that this development has been an incremental process.

The partnership between a tertiary institution in India from which Supriya Pattanayak operates,
and RMIT University in Australia where Linette Hawkins is a field education coordinator has facilitated a blending of western social work curriculum with significant learning experience in rural areas in Orissa.

Pattanayak’s involvement in lecturing, liaison, and international placement coordination at Deakin University in Victoria (Australia) and transference of these roles as coordinator, supervisor and liaison officer to her home state Orissa provides the bridge required by undergraduate students from Australia.

During the early years of the past decade ad hoc responses to individual students seeking overseas placements in countries to which they were attracted resulted on occasions, in critical situations and questionable standards relating to issues such as student accountability, liaison, relationship between international experience and curriculum. Overshadowing all these factors has been the satisfactory, or otherwise, means of communication amongst all parties. This has led us to focus on the development of two of the four models outlined below and recognition of the essential complementary role of ICT for international placements.

**CONTEXT OF FIELD EDUCATION**

No agreed upon concept regarding “international social work” has been identified in recent literature. The re-emerging possibility ‘for social work to play a role in international social work and social development’ (McDonald, 2007, p.187), as with social work per se, is likely to be interpreted according to the context. How might our academic programs accommodate this concept to prepare students for placements in contexts which are sometimes oppositional to that from which they come? Whilst various forms of ‘international’ social work have been identified which draw upon social work ‘professional expertise’ (Healy, 2001) the more likely auspices for our student placements in countries in transition to date have been in ‘community development’ contexts participating in environments and programs in new ways which may fit uncomfortably with their Australian social work. How might we prepare students for ‘the development of practices that are relevant in local contexts’ to graduate, after a short period of time (seventy days) as a “development practitioner” ?(Gray, 2005, p.236).

Petty et al (2005) promote an intensive and extensive pre-departure program encompassing the geography, politics, economics and social orientation of the placement destination. From our experience we would also recommend that special attention be given to student understanding of gender relations and other social classifications in different contexts. Each group of students on placement in India has indicated that they are quite challenged by these. The most recent reactions were highlighted by the critical incident reports of some students after their visit to an non-government organization (NGO) which provides shelter to trafficked women. Gender also impacts significantly on what tasks male and female students can and cannot undertake in the field. Boyle et al, Tesoriero and Rajaratnam (1999) focus on student preparation for group placements, the group being an important source of support ‘during the ongoing stress of engaging intensely with another culture’ (p.211). Commenting on international student exchanges between Malaysia and Australia, Martin and Ling (2008) stress the importance of attending to students’ physical, psychological and social needs to reduce levels of stress and anxiety and support students to make the necessary adaptations and adjustments to the new culture and learning environment. They also highlight the importance of preparation for the return home to assist with settling back into the home university and culture. They contend that ’all of these activities support cultural adjustment, academic performance, personal development and overall enjoyment of the exchange experience‘ (p.11).