Designing, Setting Up, and Facilitating a Knowledge Sharing Virtual Community of Practice, between Social Work Lecturers in the UK and India

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of a virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) which was developed between social work lecturers in two University settings – one in the UK and the other in India. The design and methodology draws on qualitative data collected from online discussions and semi-structured questionnaires arising from the involvement of twelve participants over a one year period. An Action Research method was adopted which allowed the shift of power from the designer to the participants over the year. This paper illustrates how a vCoP can be an ideal tool to aid communication and knowledge sharing between universities within an international context. It adds value by increasing the knowledge of participant lecturers to more than local perspectives and gives a greater understanding of social work from an international, cross-country, perspective. Although one of the limitations is that this is a small scale study, it does raise important considerations necessary for ensuring the success for vCoP’s and offers a model to aid successful online collaboration as well as important messages for those who are developing online courses and teaching within an international environment. It further gives insight into adopting Action Research as a research methodology that can be usefully used for online collaborative research.

Keywords: Collaboration and Communication, Globalisation, India, Social Work, United Kingdom, Virtual Community of Practice (vCoP)

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the use of a Virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) which was designed, developed and facilitated by the author, a UK based Research Fellow and Independent Consultant in social work. The vCoP included 12 participant social work lecturers in two University settings – one in the UK and the other in India. This paper outlines significant literature relating to Virtual Communities of Practice and argues that this tool is ideal for gaining
further understanding of international social work by offering participants the opportunity of day-to-day conversations with geographically distant colleagues. It draws on qualitative data arising from the collection and analysis of online dialogue of participants together with semi-structured questionnaires which were completed at intervals throughout the year of the research. This data aimed to elicit participants’ views of being part of an online knowledge sharing collaboration together with discussion of what participants saw as important global related issues relating to social work practice and social work education. This paper focuses on the setting up of the vCoP and offers a model of considerations I considered necessary when developing vCoP’s with distant colleagues.

The research question that sought to be addressed was, ‘How useful is a virtual Community of Practice for promoting greater understanding between social work lecturers within two globally distant societies: what is shared, how is it shared and how does it advance collective knowledge of the global and local debate surrounding social work and teaching practices?’

The aims and objectives arising from this research question were to:

1. Add to practice knowledge by:
   1.1. Developing and analysing a virtual method as a means of sharing knowledge and understanding within the global profession of social work education;
   1.2. Gaining an understanding of whether ‘we’ can communicate, through online dialogue, with a shared degree of commonality about our profession through this means.

2. Add to theoretical knowledge by:
   2.1. Considering whether shared understanding is an important element within our exchanges when we talk about a local and global view of the social work profession;
   2.2. Considering similarities and differences in how globalisation impacts on the internationalisation of social work within the participants respective societal context;
   2.3. Considering the added value of understanding a global, as well as local, view of social work and social work education and consider whether this should be routinely included as part of our professional development and in our respective curricula.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA – THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

Social work is a profession which enables social workers to geographically move from one country to another in order to practice in different societies. Similarly, social work education and research can be seen to be international within the context of cross-cultural thinking, writing and debate at a social, educational, political, practical and conceptual level. The concept of cross-cultural knowledge exchange is not new: a useful historical account of three female international social work pioneers give us a thoughtful insight into early origins, in the 1800’s, when, ‘through scholarship and advocacy, organisational leadership and international travel, and direct cultural borrowing from other countries, the three women contributed to a transatlantic diffusion of social work knowledge at a time when the profession was emerging from earlier models of charity, voluntarism and reform’ (Hegar, 2008, p. 722). Today, 150 years since these early origins, the mission continues, with one of the primary aims of the International Federation of Social Work to, ‘provide means for discussion and the exchange of ideas and experience through meetings, study visits, research projects, exchanges, publications and other methods of communication’ (IFSW, 2005, p. 1).
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