

Developing professional competence internationally and interdisciplinary

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First draft! Not finished.

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Introduction

The aim of this presentation is to reflect upon an experience of developing and experimentally implementing an IT supported course in dying and mourning for students of different health and caring professions at two universities: Umea in Sweden and Ljubljana in Slovenia.

Background: context of professional education – do we teach yesterday's skills to today's youth who are to work tomorrow?

There might be a tension between the characteristics of today's youth, like highly valued leisure time, privacy, orientation towards themselves on the one side (Ule, 2002) and on the other side the demands of professional work, like responsibility, rigour and orientation towards others. But is it really a tension or is there a possibility to include those traits into professional performance? Does being efficient at professional work necessarily mean being "hard-working" and "self-denying"? Is the moulding of the youngsters into the (hardly ever existing in full) professional model the core of professional socialization? Is the "either – or" dilemma real?

Globalization leads to the need for knowledge society, where education is no longer linked to particular jobs or occupations, but instead allows for wider qualifications, like social competence, the ability to work in team, conflict resolution, understanding of other cultures, integrated thinking, and the capacity to handle uncertainties and paradoxes. It replaces traditional lecturing with dialogue and the possibility to disagree. Transnationalisation of university education and curricula is necessary to enable students to understand and deal with transnational communication and conflicts, and provide them with a cognitive map for »glocal« living and action (Beck, 2001)

The internalization of given norms is not enough any more, students have to train to become the centre of action and organization themselves. Therefore they have to learn by themselves, through their own resources. They want challenges and excitement, they want to be surprised. On their way towards growing into a profession, they need to build knowledge (cultural capital) as well as social capital in the form of connections and ties in the world of professional work. Communication and collaboration skills are crucial for this.

On the basis of these considerations, an international IT supported course on dying and mourning has been developed together with undergraduate students of various helping professions – nursing, medicine, occupational and physical therapy, social work and psychology in collaboration between the University of Umea, Sweden, and the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The course has been experimentally implemented, and our experiences with and evaluation of this course, will be the focus of our presentation.

Question: How to be an efficient teacher and even enjoy it?

Our first meeting took place at Umea University where one of us (BR, a nurse) was doctoral student in Palliative care at that time, and the other (MP, a sociologist) was on a study visit from Slovenia. When discussing our respective experiences with undergraduate teaching, we came to the conclusion that it would be beneficial if students could have the possibility to take an elective course, which would combine all the authors' ideas about how to improve professional education. We made an outline for such a project and submitted it to the Swedish Council for Higher Education, which supported it with a grant.

The first year of the project, a student networking group, consisting of students from medicine, nursing, psychology, social work, physical therapy and occupational therapy in both Ljubljana and Umea has together with the project leaders developed a course outline, complete with study guide, teaching/learning aims, teaching methods, assignments and evaluation. The pilot course has been planned to run in the autumn 2002 in both countries. A support network of teachers and/or practitioners in palliative care in both countries has been formed.

The Swedish produced web-based platform named PingPong has been chosen as the IT tool relevant for a smooth running of the project.

An agreement between Umea Centre for Evaluation Research (UCER) and the Department of Nursing, Umea University has been reached for the external evaluation of the project. The evaluation was to be geared towards describing and analyzing the goal fulfilment of the project based on the experiences and impressions of students, teachers and colleagues in both countries.

In year two (2002-2003) the project has proceeded according to the plan. A pilot course has successfully been carried through in the autumn 2002 with a group of 20 students from medicine, nursing, psychology, social work, physical therapy and occupational therapy in both Ljubljana (10 students) and Umeå (10 students). A support network of practitioners from different disciplines and both countries has been formed. It has been more difficult to form a support network of teachers from the different disciplines in both countries, and the establishment of such a network remains a priority.

Answer: Make the students do the job!

The external evaluation study (Bonora, 2003) looked at the planning phase of the course as well as the first implementation of the course. The results of the evaluation show that both the students and the teachers were very positive to the course initiative regarding both process and content. Also using IT in a sensitive area like palliative care has been positive. But, students' conclusion was that face-to-face meetings are a necessary part in the course. Dying and mourning is experienced on a personal level as well as a problem in professional performance, but even if it is a universal phenomenon it is also a social and cultural issue. Most of the students felt that the course neutralized some or all of their fears and feelings connected to death and dying. More importantly, perhaps, the course helped the students to learn how to deal with the dying patients and with their significant others. Beside the topic itself, it seems that the course interdisciplinary organization was a deciding factor for students to take part in it. It was a positive experience: working in interdisciplinary teams, they gained a great deal of insight into the internal dynamics of an interdisciplinary team. It was at time difficult, but they took great benefits out of it. An additional "complication" of the team structure was their international composition of Swedish and Slovenian students. The

performance of the teams, including the production of the final paper with the care plan for their “patient”, depended on how well the teams were able to establish procedures for collaboration and resolve conflict in order to reach the aim. A good part of the teamwork was spent on this initial steps. Accessible IT environment, and necessary skills at its use might be an issue here. However, the evaluation study showed that IT works in combination with the face-to-face meetings, and the students were overall very positive to using it. Students mentioned self-discipline, which is a prerequisite for using IT as a learning tool. Students control over their work offers freedom, but some may also suffer from lack of structure of this type of learning. As a communication tool, Internet fully met the needs of both teachers and students.

There was an interesting difference between the two national groups. Both Slovenian students and teacher were on the whole more positive about the course than the Swedish ones. It might be the result of their previous learning experiences – the Slovenian educational system is still very rigid and does not encourage students’ participation as much as the Swedish one.

The second implementation took place in spring 2004 and incorporated all the changes suggested by the first year participants and evaluation outcomes, including three videoconferences instead of one, earlier start of team work, and a shorter list of obligatory literature. Students were also provided with more structured instructions about their assignments.

The evaluation of the second implementation of the course is still in progress. However, we can quote some of the students’ comments from their evaluation questionnaires.

Regarding IT use:

- IT gives you a lot of opportunities and different chances to do this kind of learning. You have better access to the literature, closer relationship with other participants of the course you are not dependent on anything/anybody. You are there & everybody else is there, even though not at the same time or in the same place

Course organizations

- The frequency, intervals, was OK. We have had enough time to read and prepare for the next steps. If you are gaining knowledge in PBL you memorize more. Working in groups learn us how to cooperate and deal with the problems

Individual work

- For me it was at the beginning very difficult to ask for help or explanation
- I think I've learned a lot from this course because I was forced to search and find information by myself to understand problems and facts alone – if not, to search answers and help by other students in the form of discussion and exchange of thoughts and experiences

Own fears and anxieties

- For me it was a good chance to work with my fears about death and about deaths of some of my close friends and relatives
- It came to me I can die alone and sick too, even though at 20 you don't often come to think about it. So I think it was good I had these feelings, since they kind of woke me up from my ideal world of being young and healthy

Experienced changes

- I realized dying was a complex process with a lot of people involved, each with his own needs and each having to bear the pressure of cultural and social environment

Communication skills

- The course definitely helped me to improve my skills of communication, understanding others, accepting different opinions

Interdisciplinary composition of the team

- I think working in such groups really opened my mind. I got to know other professions
- As a doctor-to-be, I wasn't aware of how much the other professions are important
- We found out that we don't agree on everything – which is good

International composition of the team

- I came in touch with differences between Sweden/Slovenia of perceiving death and realized how much needs to be done in this direction here in Slovenia. I also realized it matters where you die, as you won't get the same care, support, expectations here or in Sweden.

Goals fulfillment

- I learned a lot about what other professionals do (can do) and also how society functions (unsaid beliefs, unsaid rules etc)

Teachers

- They were accessible any time I wanted and always provided me with useful answers to my questions

Advantages of the course being interdisciplinary

- I got view into different professions, which I have hardly known before the course. Especially I got interested in OT, which I haven't met before

Disadvantages of the course being interdisciplinary

- Sometimes we didn't understand each other
- There can be conflicts, compromising, feeling of threat from other professions toward your own

Experienced changes because of the course being interdisciplinary

- I now see that we should work this way in the future
- Yes. I've noticed and realized that it is very HEALTHY to cooperate and consult other professions

Gained knowledge and skills

- It was fun and educating at the same time
- I've learned a lot, both from participants and from articles, books..
- I was fascinated what can be done for a person who has a terminal disease, how can we improve quality of life of such a person

Benefits on personal and professional level

- Both - I am very pleased to have taken this course because of that
- It has been beneficial especially on professional level, since I would probably won't have the chance to be educated in this field during the course of my study

Impact on the future professional choice

- I am thinking to do diploma about this theme
- To learn more about the role of social work in palliative care; connection with supervision
- I am certainly interested in palliative care, but there are many things I am also interested in, and I simply don't know which one interests me the most

Strengths of the course

- Working in teams, internationally and interdisciplinary
- New knowledge and interaction with others
- Good atmosphere in the team, available information
- Using IT and different language (learning to communicate), interdisciplinary teams, discussing with students from the same and different professions
- Ping-pong – being able to create your own schedule
- It is a great theme to discuss about
- Gaining lots of new information and experiencing others. Access to the knowledge
- Working on such a special topic, working in virtual world

Weaknesses of the course

- Slovenian students' access to literature on-line
- No feedback information from the patient
- Lack of time for participation in discussion with others – disorganization within the groups – I don't know
- Time management – all participant must have sense of time management and responsible mind set
- Some people didn't take it serious
- That we didn't meet each other face to face

Overall impression of the course

- It is very modern, very good, it gives you the freedom, responsibilities and support to develop yourself
- If you wanted you could get a lot from it
- There was a very positive and relaxed atmosphere which was very conducive to working
- It would have been excellent if we had had some feedback information (somebody should play the patient)
- It has still to grow and develop

Suggestions for the improvement of the course

- More control of time spent on pingpong
- More information about case patient
- By setting individual meetings with groups formed at university in both countries at the same time, on pingpong
- The environment of pingpong will develop with time even more
- There should be one meeting more and maybe it would be nice if we had some more literature from the patients' experiences of dying, not only the literature from scientific point of view.
- On-line access to different sources

Also the last evaluation emphasizes the importance of face-to-face meetings and the trouble of including them in the students' schedule as most of the students take the course on the top of other obligations. Credit system hasn't been completely established yet at neither of the involved Universities.

The students have no big problem in collaborating, but it is more difficult to get the different departments to work together. We must emphasize that all the teachers we discussed the project with, were positive about it, but the problem were time limits and stress, which does not allow time and energy for creativity and new thinking. Unfortunately, very often the institutional structure (birocracy, economics and pre-understandings and prejudices) hinders interdisciplinary collaboration, which in health care practice is already a must, but still not very much present in the professional education.

Conclusion

These last three or four years, since when we have been involved with the project of developing the course Dying and mourning, have been a special experience. We plan that by analyzing our material we will be able to understand it regarding its internal logic as well as its contextual dimension.

References

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