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International Social Work Student Exchanges

Rosemary J Link, Simpson College, Iowa, IA, USA

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Abstract

This article identifies the goals, orientation, planning, and outcomes of international social work student exchanges. It argues that cross-cultural communication is a key skill developed by an exchange. The value base proposed includes belief in global interdependence, a willingness to scrutinize the history of student national and cultural identity, and commitment to evaluation. The knowledge base includes human rights, the history of social and economic development, and models of assessment and social justice.

Introduction

In his address to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in Washington, D.C. in 2012, Tiong Tan from Singapore, asked his listeners to realize that we have to ‘break the mold’ (Tan, 2012). Tan referred to the history of the social work profession in the Western World as still focusing on micro-systems, casework and the client as victim or person caught up in pathological relationships. Although many of the audience were radical social workers and community organizers, it is difficult to refute this imagery of the West when so much agency and therapeutic work is based on individual interventions financed through health insurance or in some countries, departments of child protection or education.

In contrast to this individualized and as experienced in some countries, ‘colonial’ model, Dr Tan characterized Asian social work as focused on the wider community, where the individual sees herself/himself as part of a greater good and the individual is deemphasized. Part of the challenge lies in funding sources for the profession. The exchange of information across countries can alert us to opportunities and strategies developed by other systems to separate the principles and implementation of social work practice from purely fiscal control. One example of fiscal control in the US is the influence of insurance company administrators on which claims for healthcare are appropriate. Fiscal responsibility is a professional expectation. When caught up in familiar systems, professionals may miss the wider array of practice that comes with a global view. Student exchange in particular, is a way to escape narrow vision. The focus of this article is the learning that can happen when students are encouraged into exchanges and conversations with social work students, educators and professionals in countries and cultures other than their own. In addition to conceptual arguments, reference is made to the increase in efforts to assess the impact of programs through research and evaluation (Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005; Center for Global Education, 2011).

The following introduction gives the background to the goals of student international exchanges in social work. Then the article develops in four sections focusing first on theory, followed by practical aspects of exchange and analysis:

- Introduction of Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks for International Exchange
- The Practical Framework and Types of Exchange
- The Future and Assessment of Exchanges
- Summary and overview of the goals and results of exchanges.

This article recognizes that there is a place for both of the approaches to professional practice that Tan refers to, plus some combination of medical/therapeutic and community/social and economic development change models. The premise of international exchange is to broaden thinking and recognize that limiting intervention to one model or another is to underserve communities. The tension becomes how to change traditions and find compatible language to share plans for effective future international and global collaboration in a fast globalizing world. Compounding this East–West divide is the current demonizing, especially in the US but also in Europe, of China’s fast industrial growth and dominant market position (Editor, Economist, December 2012). For example, it was part of the Republican platform in the US during their 2012 presidential election, to cast China in the negative light of cheap labor and exploitation. An alternative view sees a vast country with much work to do in terms of fair working conditions, catching up on the same cycles of industrial and postindustrial growth that countries of the West have passed through (Midgley, 2012). India and China, are two vast countries caught up in rates of growth that strain every aspect of life (Editor, Economist, December 2012).

Letting go of ingrained stereotyping is one of the key opportunities and challenges of student exchange. Thus the first goal of student exchange is to reach beyond the familiar and to be curious about new cultural norms and the second is to realize that appreciating the cultural traditions of another does not lessen one’s personal identity. As a result of a formal exchange in China, student Cali Breese illustrates this goal:

I was invited into Peace Corps service … I thought I was ready … but each day I felt challenged to understand the dialects, the culture, strange sounds and smells, different social rules …

Cali Breese, excerpt from Link and Ramanathan, Rowman and Littlefield, 2011: p. 199

Communicating effectively across cultures rests on the exchange of ideas with humility and respect, where students are eager to learn new ideas, in the context of an explicit (third) goal to reach intercultural understanding. Beyond the frank interpretation of meaning – what is trash to one, is rubbish to another is treasure to yet others – is the task to be truly curious, without feelings of superiority. It means realizing that our sense of reality is just one perspective on a complex gathering of cultures that make up the kaleidoscope of the world. Carter and
Qureshi (1995) define culture in a way that reflects this notion of variety and equal worth: “culture is a learned system of meaning and behaviors that is passed from one generation to the next” in a geographical setting. Similarly Razack (2002: p. 251) puts culture at the center of student exchange, where colonial and oppressive history is looked in the eye and students challenge themselves to trace their generational identity.

It follows, that the theory of student exchange also focuses on challenging the ‘hindsight’ and superior interpretations of social and economic development. First, second or third world concepts are replaced with the (fourth) goal of recognizing that every country is part of a development cycle and all have elements of learning and human insight to share and to benefit from. A fifth goal, integration of this recognition of our universal generational experience of social and economic development, leads to more open attitudes to learning, to future career choices that include international opportunities and relationships (Bess and Link, 2012). Without this internalized recognition, social workers are at risk of ignoring valuable international policy instruments and worse, exposing themselves to unethical or illegal practice, such as the inadequate documentation of international adoptions (Rotabi, 2012; Shukovsky, 2003). These goals build the theory of student exchange, which is still relatively new, but the practice of exchange goes back much further (Lager and Mathiesen, 2012).

Thus the goals of student international exchange are about more than acquiring new knowledge and skill – they depend on a willingness to study cultural efficacy and to reflect upon values awareness. Researcher Terry Cross (1986) proposes a values continuum in relation to prejudice and racism, which offers a useful theoretical framework in organizing curriculum for an exchange. This theory is applied in the following section.

**Introduction of Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks for International Exchange**

International exchange in the social work profession has been flourishing for at least 100 years:

…from the days of Toynbee Hall, the Settlement House in London visited in 1904 by the US community organizer and peace activist Jane Addams, to the early days of the Tata Institute in Mumbai and its center for international visitors. A leap forward occurred at the 1928 International Social Work conference in Paris, when social work leaders, including Addams and Jebb called for increased professional opportunities to exchange ideas and practice, with a primary goal being to promote peace in the world (Cacinovic in Healy & Link, 2012: p. 343).

Peace in the world was an imperative following the devastation of the nineteenth century battles in Europe and South Africa including the Boer War which ushered in the twentieth century; and the First World War (1914–17) which provided the catalyst for international exchange. Then, after the Great Depression and the eruption of the Second World War (in Europe 1939–45), there was rapid expansion in international organizations, pulling East and West into dialogue. Most central to the new forums for exchange during the 1930s was the League of Nations, and after 1948 the United Nations.

Another step was the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council, established in Nairobi and London in 1965. However, the domination of the norms of colonial power slowed true exchange. This is illustrated in the context of language that perpetuated attitudes of, First, Second, and Third worlds, first used in economic and development sociology (Midgley, 2012).

In 2013, the numbering of worlds in terms of economic and political status has been abandoned and the scene may be set for more genuine exploration of cultural meaning and exchange. Instead of a WalMart US style organization expecting its staff to smile broadly at strangers and stay open on Sundays in Europe, corporations are learning the hard way how to be successful – by listening to local custom. The transnational corporation ‘Dairy Queen (DQ)’ set up store in Ljubljana in Slovenia, in a country that has the best ice-cream and gelato outside Italy. It should be no surprise that DQ soon left, having given scant attention to effective forms of cultural exchange and underappreciating what was already in existence (Link and Cacinovic, 2012). This failure of a company to respect local norms is an important lesson for social work students reflecting on their own cultural awareness and communication.

The theoretical frameworks that apply to this exploration of international exchanges are those of Norton and the ‘Dual Perspective,’ Cross’s ‘Cross Cultural Continuum’ and Bosch’s ‘cultural efficacy.’ In Cross’s continuum, students share their ideas about culture and come to realize that ‘I respect everyone, I treat everyone the same’ translates to the limiting ‘same as me’ (Cross, T. 1986: p. 6). Norton prompts initial awareness of how a person has the advantage when they join a workplace or community that reflects many of the same cultural norms and patterns that someone is raised with and in particular seems to put newcomers, migrant workers or exchange students at a disadvantage (Norton, 1997). Assignments and orientation to student exchange can be organized in ways that infuse these theoretical frameworks and focus on values and styles of communication.

In organizing student exchanges it is widely recognized that for some students this is their first foray into new lands and cultures (Mathiesen and Lager, 2007). There is a natural ignorance which can be compounded by lack of realization of the layers of norms that we build over a lifetime (Cross, 1986: p. 6). Norton speaks of students who settle easily into higher education because the context is familiar. A student at the University of Ljubljana, who speaks Slovenian, has ties with Slovenia, in a country that has the best ice-cream and gelato outside Italy. It should be no surprise that DQ soon left, having given scant attention to effective forms of cultural exchange and underappreciating what was already in existence (Link and Cacinovic, 2012). This failure of a company to respect local norms is an important lesson for social work students reflecting on their own cultural awareness and communication.

Henna John-Fisk is researching the resilience of children of prostitutes through an exchange in Mumbai, India (Henna Fisk, 2012: p. 147). Part of John-Fisk’s data highlights the preference of the children interviewed, to stay with their mothers. The research reports that the children understood what was pressuring their parent into prostitution and wanted to stay with them. For a Western reader, ignorant of the cultural ties in Mumbai that take into account the community of prostitutes, the oppression of the control of prostitutes by male handlers, it is easy to be shocked at the idea of a child staying with her mother in such circumstances. This is the cultural norm and professional response, even though the women
involved are often controlled by exploitive and violent men. It can be argued that there is a secondary oppression by society’s attitude to their capacity for mothering.

It is realized that student exchange is multilayered and the theoretical sources referenced here become key design elements for educators. Lager and Mathiesen have identified 10 ‘facilitating factors’ which are a combination of theoretical and practical approaches to student exchange in the context of international field placements. Five of these are:

1. A communication feedback loop with supervisor, field liaison, and student with mutual evaluation and debriefing.
2. Contact should be maintained at the micro, mezzo, and macro with the host country.
3. The common ethical framework established by the principles established by the IFSW is adopted by all participants.
4. A reciprocal strengths-based approach for all parties is assumed.
5. Mutual goals (Lager and Mathiesen, 2012: p. 338).

These concepts for building international exchange lead directly into the practical planning, orientation, implementation, evaluation, synthesis, cycles of exchange. The concepts also emphasize the important of ongoing learning and the message to students that this is a journey to be continued when they return from their exchange with their new perspectives and learning.

**Practical Frameworks and Types of Exchange**

An underlying theme of this article is: how can international exchange transform later professional behavior. What are some of the goals and challenges that need to be addressed, what are the best practices in international student exchange and what variety of forms do they take. The increase in commitment to exchanges is facilitated by the fact that the core professional international organizations for social workers endorse exchange, including the International Association of Schools of Social Work.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century examples of international exchanges are expanding fast and include: the Singapore Institute of Management which has extensive ties and professional exchange with social work programs in China (Tan, 2012); Harvard University in the US, which expects all students to have passports and to travel. Most of the universities of the European Union participate in former European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of Univesity Students (ERASMUS) and now Socrates and Tempus (since the end of the Soviet Union) exchange programs:

Celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2012, ERASMUS is the most successful student exchange program in the world. Each year, more than 230 000 students study abroad thanks to the Erasmus program. It also offers the opportunity for student placements in enterprises, university staff teaching and training, and it funds cooperation projects between higher education institutions across Europe (www.ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/erasmus).

Schools in India, including the Tata Institute in Mumbai, have long-standing relationships with employers in the Western World, and participate in student field placement exchange and international conferences. The National University of Singapore has extensive ties with India and the International Association of Schools of Social Work has just published a report on the ‘IASSW and Indonesian Social Work: Building Capacity Together’ (www.iassw-a iets.org, 24.01.13). An outstanding feature of this growth is the recognition that international student exchange contributes to curriculum development for faculty as well as learning amongst students.

Table 1 demonstrates the widening goals of exchange.

International exchanges occur through a variety of formats including:
- physical two-way exchange between host and sending organizations (including field placements)
- interactive video exchange between classrooms in different countries
- instructional exchange online.

Asamoah (2003) speaks of the unbalanced approach to exchanges in the past, with schools in the Western World designing the goals and expecting those visited to grasp their curriculum design and expectations:

Many of the early exchange models are most accurately described as one-way consultations without a true exchange component, and some models lacked cultural relevance and sensitivity...

Asamoah 2003: p. 3

The first step in planning then is to review the goals of the exchange with potential partners and to design the curriculum

| Table 1 | Goals for exchange |
| --- | --- |
| • Identifying a variety of solutions to common problems, such as child abuse. |
| • Encouraging social work students to question their own sense of cultural identity and ‘norms’ so that they become more accepting and welcoming of others. |
| • Expanding the knowledge of a variety of countries amongst students so that they understand the original impetus for immigration. |
| • Developing a sense of the strength of the profession worldwide to foster collaboration, especially at borders and in questions of human rights such as international adoptions. |
| • Building a curriculum that is relevant beyond the local situation which recognizes issues that are common to social workers worldwide, such as access to health, healthy pregnancy, access to safe environments for vulnerable people including older people, people with disabilities and children. |
| • Sharing and expanding theory and practice, for example the work in Ljubljana to ‘cocreate’ solutions for families. This work builds on the idea of a ‘fourth wave’ in social work practice – the first being community work, the second clinical practice and the medical model, the third being psychosocial work with an understanding of the person in their environment and the fourth being the expectation of working alongside rather than ahead or above service users (Link and Cacinovic, 2012, in OUP Handbook). |
in outcomes language, for example: as a result of this exchange students will be able to explain the reason for professional adherence worldwide to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The most successful physical and practical exchanges seem to be those where the emphasis is on institutionalizing the planning so that it endures changes in personnel, while also emphasizing the importance of building true friendly relationships. Hokenstad (2003) describes the ongoing exchange between the Department of Social Work at Eotvos Lorand University (ELTE) in Budapest and the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in Cleveland. He identifies advanced planning, regular contact and faculty sharing of curriculum innovation. Similarly the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia has developed multiple exchanges with partners in Europe, including Barcelona and Finland as well as long-standing exchanges with North America. Such enduring exchanges require the following planning, orientation, implementation and evaluation phases:

- in depth planning for each stage;
- visits between leaders through interactive video or preferably in person, including to experience ahead of the students where possible, accommodations, food, access to water and travel arrangements;
- shared goals for orientation in advance of travel;
- readings recommended by host setting for each leg of the exchange;
- frank discussion of cultural expectations and norms;
- norms for travel (partners; avoiding clothing with national slogans; attention to nonverbal behavior; adherence of local laws, for example, in relation to alcohol use, gum chewing, spitting, sneezing); and
- review of evaluations for implementation of changes and improvements each time.

Such detailed planning also includes crisis management and strategies for student misadventure or ill health. During an exchange in Slovenia, which included brief field agency experiences, the group leader (Link) was telephoned with the news that ‘Victoria has blown up.’ While taking the fast train to investigate, the group leader was reviewing her conflict negotiation skills. On arrival, she found that language had intervened to send the wrong message: the student ‘threw up.’ Language, particularly when participants are under the impression that they share it, such as English, can lead to much misinterpretation and deserves attention (Moss, 1994).

Planning leads to the detailed ‘orientation’ and preparation for learning prior to travel. The nuts and bolts of successful exchanges are characterized with well-documented organization such as demonstrated the Center for Global Education. In their 25th anniversary book, they address the elements of their orientation that have evolved over the years:

As educators, we see our role as one that engages students and participants in the world, facilitating critical analysis and reflection that leads to action. We believe that intercultural dialogue and collaboration with decision makers and historically disadvantaged urban and rural communities is a way of developing greater understanding of the power relations in the world.

McBride, 2007: p. 2

Orientation takes many forms but essentially the goal is to engage students in the exchange prior to travel. Key elements include identifying the theoretical framework, such as a human rights perspective for a social work exchange between Slovenia and the US, or as above, a feminist perspective for a program of exchange with Mexico and Nicaragua. As discussed above, cultural awareness is both a goal and an activity for students as they begin to apply their theoretical learning. Lyons and Ramanathan (1999: pp.175–176) identify activities during orientation including:

- Beginning a journal.
- Small group discussion of advantages and disadvantages of undertaking an international field placement exchange.
- Write a paper for presentation about the country you will be going to. What are its main demographic, geographic, historic, economic, cultural and political characteristics?
- Using these discussions draw up a checklist and action plan for departure and arrival in a new country.

Clearly orientation also includes all the practical matters of organizing a group and these include: a sense of geography is essential so maps have to be studied and local conditions including weather and terrain; travel arrangements are made well in advance so that students have necessary visas and passports, health preparation and immunizations are scheduled, students practice social norms, such as greetings, supplies are planned including water purification tablets, warm clothing, travel, health and loss insurance, finance planning and access to necessary currency. Guidance on international exchange can be found in many locations including the US State Department country information, Lonely Planet Gravel Guides and the World Health Organization country updates (www.who.org).

This short article on international exchange will not dwell on the details of implementation other than to identify key elements as listed above and references and resources. It is etched on this writer’s memory to instill travelers with a knowledge of their surroundings and the importance of knowing where they are on the globe. Flying has robbed students of the sense of geography and borders.

Similarly, regular processing of events as an exchange unfolds assists students to see the relevance of their learning to their own practice.

In a program with the Center for Global Education in Mexico, a group called ‘Luce Y Libertad’ agreed to publication of a case study as long as it was in both Spanish and English so that they could share it with their community. This exchange between students and the women’s self-esteem project led to direct learning for the students. They participated in classes on organizing themselves as a food cooperative and took their learning back to the MidWest, US (Link and Ramanathan, 2011).

In addition to physical, face-to-face exchanges, there is increasing attention to interactive video exchange between different countries, sometimes in a dyad and sometimes expanding to a trio of relationships. In 2004, the University of Singapore agreed to participate in a video exchange with Augsburg College, Minneapolis in the US, sponsored by the State Department. The project was one of 10 interactive video programs offered during 2004 and 2005 and is available both
through US State Department records and narratives by the faculty and staff involved (Link and Bill, 2005).

The interactive video classroom involves similar cultural awareness, practical planning and thoughtful exchange of ideas concerning curriculum to the planning for a physical exchange. The most notable differences lie in the protocols that the students themselves develop that include ways of nonverbally taking turns to converse; greetings; use of language; attention to process (Link and Bill, 2005).

An extension of the use of technology in multiple forms, such as Skype, Facebook, Twitter, and all other social media, is the opportunity for students to connect with one another outside the virtual classroom, to study, to become friends and to share insights about their practice. Technology is racing ahead and the expectations of the twenty-first century workplace mean that students require experience and practical assistance with online learning. Many universities have courses completely online so that it is a natural form of exchange for students to find themselves in virtual classrooms with students across the globe. The distinction here is that the online course is content driven and disciplinaried based, and does not address the issues of cultural exchange expected in the true formal international exchange courses.

Also, many schools are now involved in a US initiative begun at universities such as the Massachusetts Institutes of Technology and Harvard, termed ‘Massively Open Online Courses’ or MOOCs. These courses are offered free of charge, enroll hundreds of students and are taught by professors who offer certificates of completion. There is lively debate as to the disruption caused by MOOCs and the positive stimulus for administrators in Higher Education to think more creatively about open access for students of all income levels. It follows that as courses become available online worldwide, that education will become more widely accessed in a variety of countries. Although MOOCs have yet to spread to social work, they are on their way as a new form of exchange.

**The Future and Assessment of Exchanges**

While every exchange will have its own itinerary and level of involvement with local social workers and human service professionals, there are some universal aspects to endings and evaluation. As described by the Center for Global Education (CGE) all of their courses include oral and written evaluations and follow-up meetings at ‘re-entry’ to home country (CGE, 2007). Similarly, one of the enduring features of the Slovenia-Midwest US exchange has been the thorough review of feedback so that learning is built-in to the next iteration of the exchange. For example, 1 year costs were reduced via less expensive accommodations in a hostel used by many travelers, but the location, noise levels, and general stress of the accommodation led to re-instating an earlier location. Van Hoof and Verbeeten undertook a detailed research project, including but not focused on human service, surveying 1487 undergraduate students from a variety of countries who were incoming or US students outgoing on courses abroad. They achieved a 23.74% response rate and although a limitation lies in the focus on one large, public US university, the data is useful. For example, the reasons for international exchange and studying ‘abroad’ were:

1. it is a good opportunity to live in another culture;
2. it is a good opportunity to travel;
3. I liked the country my exchange program was located in…
4. and when it came to determining what it had meant to their personal development, the respondents were most enthusiastic: 67.7% considered it extremely relevant (Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005: p. 42).

One of the most vivid quotes occurs in the introduction to Van Hoof and Verbeeten’s evaluation research. A student, Penny Barend, asked for water at the first supper with her ‘host’ family in Italy, only to be told: “Wine is for drinking, water is for washing” (Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005: p. 44).

In a study of exchanges, Vestal (1994) spoke of the ‘promise of today’ and the expectations of the next generation of students. It is nearly 20 years since Vestal foresaw the expansion in student interest and recognition of global interdependence (Vestal, 1994). Students are recognizing the ideas of Dower and Williams research, that national borders are now false limits on knowledge and research (Dower and Williams, 2002). The diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) cross all boundaries and natural disasters unite everyone on the plant in the need for emergency preparedness and collaboration. At this time the United Nations is the focus for international learning and the work of the UN in establishing policy frameworks for practice are bearing fruit. An example of this is a simple one: staff at the adolescent refuge in Celje, Slovenia, say that it is a natural part of their work to use the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This contrasts with students in the US who live in one of the last countries in the world that is yet to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Conclusions**

As stated earlier, an underlying theme of this entry is, how can international exchange transform later professional behavior? The examples cut across all forms of social work intervention. Some of the impact of exchange dialogue is highlighted in the example of the use of the UN Convention on the on the Rights of the Child. Another is the impact of the University of Mona, West Indies on practice with elders in Hartford, following the longstanding exchange with the University of Connecticut, School of Social Work Center for International Social Work. The social workers at the Seattle Adoption Agency may wish they had been more involved in formal social work exchange to avoid their malpractice (Shukovsky, 2003).

This narrative has identified at least four key goals for international exchanges:

- to reach beyond the familiar and find new ways of doing familiar things;
- to be curious about new cultural norms and in doing so to realize that appreciating the cultural traditions of another does not lessen one’s personal identity;
- to communicate effectively across cultures and make new friends in distant places of the planet; and
- to expand innovations, effective strategies and implementation of international policy instruments in social work practice.
These are just examples of goals highlighting the need for expanded dialogue across cultures and regions of the world. The goals undergird the hard and detailed work of making practical arrangements, implementing and assessing courses.

Apparantly there is much thinking to do if we are to understand one another better; thinking and talking and walking together. Student international exchanges represent a key step toward this talking with one another. If social work exchanges continue to build, the next generation will take the new ‘Global Agenda’ seriously. The Global Agenda combined the work of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and was agreed at a conference in Hong Kong in March 2012 (IFSW, 2012). The agenda includes ‘a set of objectives to meet our joint aspirations for social justice and social development’ (IFSW, 2012). The Global Agenda expects students and educators, through their exchanges, to join in communicating and organizing in solidarity with social work practitioners across the world. To be effective as a profession in a globalizing world, we have to seize the moment and build international exchanges.

See also: Afrocentric Approaches to Social Work.

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