
Dishing from the Cultural Pot: An African Instructor's Experience Teaching BSW Courses

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Introduction

Social work literature abounds with reports of collaboration of U.S. social work schools with other schools of social work abroad, and the experiences of U.S. social work faculty teaching in foreign countries (Boyle, Nackerud, & Kilpatrick, 1999; Cornelius & Greif, 2005; Gilin & Young, 2009; Johnson, 1999; Tunney, 2002). Similarly, the narratives of the fieldwork experiences of U.S. social work students abroad are documented (Horncastle, 1994; Mathiesen & Lager, 2007; Rai, 2004). However, not much attention has been devoted to capturing the experiences of international educators teaching social work courses in the U.S. This paper seeks to fill this gap by describing some of the differences and challenges faced by those who come into America and teach BSW courses. It is presented from the point of view of an African doctoral student and his teaching experiences at a major university.

International students travel to America in their search for quality education, research opportunities, and most importantly, the contribution of an international education in securing more lucrative job opportunities. Social work scholars have identified a range of crucial issues facing international social work students. These issues are social, cultural and financial adjustments (Garrett & Herman, 2006), loneliness and mental health challenges (Lui, 2009), English language proficiency and the different pedagogical environment in the U.S. (Centingok & Hirayama, 1990; Rai, 2002). The same issues can be hypothesized as facing foreign instructors of BSW or MSW courses in the U.S.

Most universities have international students and faculty colleagues who face steep learning curves about America and American students. Social work educators who have been

educated in the U.S. and who have spent little time living in other countries may not be attuned to the uniqueness and characteristic differences that we accept every day. Some of the differences are cultural; others are pedagogical and structural. For instance, in Nigeria every classroom has a student “class representative or governor” (i.e. a liaison between the students and the instructor), who cleans the blackboard and waits for all the students to arrive and be seated. The student rep then informs the professor that the class is ready. It is only then that the professor enters the room. Similarly, syllabi in that country do not contain the prohibitions against cell phone use and internet surfing during class time because students wouldn’t dream of being so disrespectful.

The contrasts between African and American education are instructive for U.S. instructors in terms of helping those from other countries prepare themselves for the “American way” and the American undergraduate student. Accordingly, this article will make suggestions about orientation that can be used with baccalaureate and master of social work programs to prepare international instructors for the American undergraduate student.

Internationalization of Social Work Education

Awareness of diversity and internationalization is no doubt a cardinal objective of the Council on Social Work education (CSWE). To underscore the importance of this mission, the CSWE over the years has consistently emphasized infusing international content and knowledge in social work curriculum (Asamoah & Beverly, 1988; Healy, 1986; Healy & Thomas, 2007; Horncastle, 1994; Johnson, 1999). The most recent CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) 2008, (Section 2.1.5) reaffirms this commitment.. The implication of the EPAS requirement as mandated by the CSWE is the new responsibility required of instructors to prepare the next generation of social work students as competent and knowledgeable practitioners in human, civil rights and global justice issues.

One of the strategies for achieving this internationalization mission is providing international instructors and graduate teaching assistants the opportunity to teach social work courses in the U. S. This provides the exchange of social work knowledge, cultural expectations, indigenous practice wisdom and education about the competences required to practice social work in Africa. International instructors, however, face challenges inside and outside of the classroom in the U.S. in their quest to contribute to internationalizing American students.

Challenges Faced by International Instructors and Adjustment Strategies

Inside the Classroom Challenges

Studies have shown that international students and instructors face a lot of classroom challenges in the U.S.(Adelegan & Parks, 1985; Cetingok & Hirayama, 1990; Foote, Li, Monk, & Theobald, 2008; Herrington & et al., 1993; Kavas & Kavas, 2008; Rao, 1993). Some of the common challenges international instructors face are: English language proficiency (Rao, 1993); complaints about accents or pronunciation (Kavas & Kavas, 2008); teaching skills and effectiveness (Neves & Sanyal, 1991). Others are : different grading system, students’ expectations (Alberts, 2008); and students’ stereotypes about foreign instructors (Foote, Li, Mony, & Theobald , 2008), to mention but a few.

From an African social work instructor’s experience teaching BSW and MSW courses, the following are other potential problems faced in the classroom. These include: absence of a class representative, culture shock of being called by first name by the students, revealing clothing that some students wear, the challenge of mastering the use of different technologies to teach (e.g. Blackboard software), inability to use local socio-economic, pop culture and political

issues as examples in teaching, and the different pedagogical approach to teaching social work (e.g. social development versus remedial approaches. See Anucha, 2008). The African instructor will also have to deconstruct media portrayal of all African as living in huts, slums, squalid villages and in perpetual poverty. This distorted impression influences students' perception, of Africans in general as well as the self-worth and overall demeanor of the African instructor in the classroom.

In addition, the African instructor will have to grapple with understanding the contractual obligation of the syllabus and perhaps the role of an academic ombud. Moreover, the pressure of having to learn rapidly to understand the different social welfare policies and programs in the U.S. (e.g. Food stamps, TANF, Medicare, Medicaid e.t.c), is another herculean task. The reason is that such policies and programs do not exist in most African countries. Finally, African instructors must adjust to the enormous power of American students in advocating for themselves as well as evaluating the instructor at the end of the semester. Students' evaluation of faculty is not common in African institutions.

Strategies to Overcome the Classroom Challenges

To address the classroom challenges faced by African instructors in American social work programs, the following strategies are suggested. First, the director of doctoral/graduate studies or a well-known faculty should introduce the new instructor on the first day of classes. This serves as an "ice-breaker" and helps to connect the instructor and the students. Second, prior to the initial class contact foreign instructors in social work programs should be given an orientation to the teaching styles (e.g., active learning), and technologies, as well as a brief overview of what American students expect of faculty and themselves. International instructors who are to teach in specific content areas (e.g., policy) might be given a reading list and sufficient time to learn about the various social welfare policies and programs in the U.S. Third, foreign instructors should be informed not to try to speak like Americans as this makes their communication more complicated and could elicit frowns from students. The emphasis should be on clarity of speech and slow but steady tempo of their communication in class. It helps students to follow and understand the teacher. Lastly, African instructors should be oriented about cultural and social behaviors of American students (e.g., dating, involvement in fraternities and sororities, etc); this will help international instructors to become culturally competent.

Outside Classroom Challenges

Beyond the four walls of the classroom, foreign social work instructors also face a lot of psycho-social challenges which may affect their teaching. Evidence from literature indicates that the most prominent of these problems are: loneliness, isolation, and mental health problems (Lui, 2009) as well as the demands of acculturation (Mittal & Wieling, 2006). Other issues include, financial difficulties (Rai, 2002) and meeting the expectations of American graduate studies (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007).

Furthermore, foreign instructors feel detached from faculty governance, student activities, and often desire research collaboration with their U.S. counterparts. In addition, non-native instructors often feel the need for a supportive environment for their spiritual and religious identity.

Strategies to Address These Problems.

Social work programs and faculty can help address many of these problems. First, faculty can link-up African instructors with professors or other students from their country through their

office of international affairs. Second, social work programs can do an initial background search of resources that foreign instructors might need. These include grocery stores, places of worship, and immigrant organizations. This greatly hastens the acculturating process.

Foreign instructors can be integrated into faculty governance and the life of the college by being invited to serve on committees and by being asked to present in brown bag sessions to social work students' associations and faculty. Similarly, international graduate students who are instructors should be specially mentored to further develop their teaching and research competencies. A potential benefit of this is that it may be the bridge and resource for future collaboration, whether the foreign instructor needs a dissertation topic or to return to his or her country and wishes to continue a research interest. Knowing about and participating in ongoing research projects provides the international teaching assistant/instructor with real examples that enhance lectures and classroom activities.

Conclusion

International instructors can enrich and broaden undergraduates' knowledge about social work in other countries. Implications for social work programs include cross-cultural knowledge, competence, and education (Carrilio & Mathiesen, 2006). It provides a new lens for understanding diversity, while internationalizing the curriculum and fulfilling the CSWE EPAS requirements. In addition, it exposes students to social work practice and professional opportunities outside of the U.S. as well as supplying opportunities for collaboration, various types of exchange programs. Despite the challenges international instructors face, social work programs are adequately fit to meet these challenges and encouraged to give more opportunities to international instructors.

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