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Chapter 9

Culture meets culture at a distance

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In 2008, the social work department at Karlstad University in Sweden was asked to give a distance-learning course in social gerontology for students at the University of Namibia. The request was accepted, and the course was planned and offered in early 2009 to eleven interested students. We titled this chapter ‘Culture meets culture at a distance’ to highlight the fact that our experience of working with Namibian students included a strong aspect of mutual cultural exchange. The chapter outlines some of what we, as two of the lecturers involved, learned in the process of designing and delivering the course.

By way of background, it is perhaps useful to explain that the first author of this chapter has extensive experience of managing nursing homes for the elderly in different parts of Sweden. After many years of practical work, she returned to the academy to educate future elderly-care workers, and to conduct research with elderly people. The second author, while employed by Karlstadt University, has also been a visiting lecturer at the University of Namibia since 2006. During this time he has researched the lives and rights of the elderly in Namibia, as well as Namibian organisations that care for the elderly, including the Namibia Social Workers Association. In addition, 12 students in the social work programme at Karlstad University have completed their practical placements and collected data for their Bachelor’s theses in Namibia in recent years. This meant that we had access to basic information about elderly people in Namibia, even though the subject of social gerontology is generally rather neglected in the country.

Course preparation

Based on our experience in teaching social and care work, our idea was to encourage the students to try to produce knowledge from their own socio-cultural platform by comparing their own experience with that of other professionals expressed through course literature. The crucial step in this
process is for students to present the results of their comparisons and not simply reproduce what they have read and heard.

Having discovered that there is a shortage of literature on social gerontology from an African perspective, we suspected that we and our students would benefit if we were to establish a shared knowledge base that was neither Swedish nor Namibian. We therefore decided to look at using literature on social gerontology that has been published in English as our primary text for the course. Among the available literature, a book written in the United States seemed to fit our purpose in that it specifically addressed elderly care from a culture-dependent perspective. The book, *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* by Hooyman and Kiyak (2011), contained information that we found generally useful and valid.

Apart from this core text, we developed a written study plan. Such study plans are often applied in Swedish social work/social care programmes, and are routinely used by our department. The study plan provided an outline of the course and was intended to work as a course guide for students. It included additional readings as well as the schedule of assignments, and encouraged e-mail contact between lecturers and students. The study plan was based on the idea that students would need time to reflect on the theories they were being exposed to, and on whether those theories offered any useful tools and practical skills that could be applied to elderly care in Namibia.

Course preparation therefore focused a great deal on trying to translate the theories applied to elderly care in the USA into the Namibian context based on our practical knowledge of Swedish culture and elderly care. Part of our aim was to test how the American text and the Swedish study plan would translate into the Namibian context. Perhaps inevitably, our preparations ended in our accepting that both the teachers and the students on the course would have to start from what we know, and aim to create a shared understanding of one another’s culture. We then had to work out an effective way of achieving this.

As the course began, we soon discovered that there was a further knowledge process to grasp; namely, that the Namibian students knew best what was in the interests of the elderly living in Namibia. We therefore relied on the students’ ability to translate the theories and work processes they were learning about into their own contexts; they had to learn to shift between cultures to assess what aspects could best be applied to elderly care in Namibia. Students were therefore asked to look out for differences in perceptions and perspectives in each aspect of the course, as well as to describe these differences, and explain the positive and negative effects of the respective perspectives on the elderly and their ageing process. The work of Grenier and Hanley (2007) was particularly useful in this regard.
Some background on Namibia

Namibia is a young nation that gained independence from colonial occupation in 1990. The country has a modern, democratic constitution; its protection of freedom of expression and freedom of the press is among the strongest in the world, and it has a hint of a welfare policy. Namibia is classified as an upper-middle-income country (World Bank 2015), but also ranks among the world’s most economically unequal countries with a high ratio of absolute poverty. The country is large in area but sparsely populated. The population is estimated at 2.15 million people, approximately 85 per cent of whom are black and affiliated to 13 different African ethnic groups. Of the remaining population, about half (7 per cent) are of mixed origin and half are white Europeans or their descendants. This means that the country has a great mix of cultures, lifestyles and family patterns.

The majority of the population is very young, but population growth has levelled off and the birth rate is declining. In 2012, about 137 000 (6 per cent) of the total population (2.15 million) was over 60 years, which is the official retirement age and the age at which citizens are defined as elderly. The estimated total population for 2030 is 2.26 million, of which 190 500 (8.4 per cent) are expected to be elderly (60+), and for 2050, the projected total population is 2.15 million, with 300 300 (14 per cent) over 60 years (US Census Bureau 2015).

Namibia is one of the few countries in Africa in which a general social pension is paid to all citizens over sixty years. The amount is small but very significant for most pensioners. Public health care is free for the elderly, but apart from pensions and health care, there are no other public services for the elderly. Some municipalities do offer discounts to pensioners for electricity and water, but are under no legal obligation to do so. Some municipalities also have privately run retirement homes and other institutions for the elderly, but these are, for cultural and economic reasons, mainly requested by and available to a small number of people mainly from the mixed and white communities. For the large majority of Namibians, the day-to-day care of the elderly is seen as a family responsibility. However, family patterns and living arrangements have changed rapidly in recent decades, in response to urbanisation and the associated modernisation of the labour market and social life. Many elderly people suffer intractable problems as a result.

The aim and structure of the course

The course was designed to provide knowledge about theories of social gerontology relevant to social workers, nurses, and other professionals who have contact with, and provide services to, the elderly in Namibia. The
minimum academic entry level required for the course was a Bachelor of Arts degree or equivalent. All of the students who registered with us also had some direct contact with ageing and elderly-care issues in their professional work. The aim of the course was make students working in various occupations related to elderly care come together and discover new ways of thinking about their field of work.

As mentioned, we had realised that that, being from Sweden, our knowledge of social gerontology, at the levels of both theory and practice, was primarily relevant to our own contexts. By using a book from the USA we hoped to establish a platform from which both the lecturers and students could learn about the practice of social gerontology in the United States and compare this with their own contexts and experiences. Our assumption was that the students would bring their existing knowledge of their own culture with them, and that they would encounter new ideas through the course literature, as well as through the experience, knowledge and perspectives of their Swedish teachers.

The course was designed to include three assignments and three meetings at which the whole student group could discuss the assignment topics. Before the meetings, the first author received the students’ work via email, entered into some discussion and reflection with each student and with the second author, and then emailed comments back to the students. The second author then met with all the students, one of whom had been asked to present their assignment for discussion by the group. The second author facilitated a discussion about the assignment, giving the group an opportunity to reflect on their own work. On the basis of the written feedback they received, as well as what they learned from the meetings, students were given an opportunity to revise their assignments and resubmit them for final assessment.

This course was delivered over 15 weeks at a relatively slow pace. Students were expected to work individually and in groups or pairs on different tasks. We strongly recommended that all groups or pairs arranged face-to-face meetings when working on assignments together. Successful students were awarded a diploma from Karlstad University.

The process was not without difficulties. Besides teaching the material, the lecturers had to make time to be taught by the students about their society and culture so that together we could find ways to integrate the theory with the conditions students faced in practice. However, knowledge and knowing are always culture and context dependent; this is especially true in social work and related fields, and so many of the challenges we faced were not unique to this course. Those in the caring professions often see themselves at the intersection of scholarly knowledge (that is based on research) and praxis-oriented and
tacit knowledge (that is based on professional experience); indeed, researchers involved in ‘social care work’ often have this double knowledge. However, cultural clashes and even conflict in a research–praxis–teaching context are common, and practitioners have to learn how to manage these.

In our approach, we were inspired by a social anthropological research model that is well known in Scandinavia and known as, ‘Dig where you stand’. Inspired by Sven Lindqvist’s (1978) handbook of the same name, which was written for industrial workers who wanted to research the history of their work and workplaces, the model is based on the idea that it is possible to find truth close to home.

The course begins
When we offered the course, eleven students enrolled. We had e-mail contact with the group as a whole, and also gave feedback to each individual via e-mail. All students were expected to work on their own to prepare for group meetings and to reflect on the recommended readings. Where a student’s need for specific information became clear, lecturers sometimes recommended additional reading material. Throughout the course, students were required to reflect on whether and how the content of the course material transferred to their own cultures and social environments, and to the legislation and regulations pertaining to the care of the elderly in Namibia.

In an effort to prevent uncertainty or confusion from affecting student motivation or performance, all students were also encouraged to contact the course conveners for information or instructions. We expected students to demonstrate a genuine interest in their own work as well as in the work and participation of fellow students, since the course content generally focused on the students’ chosen careers. For this reason, we often used group-oriented work methods as a pedagogical tool; here we were inspired by the work of Paolo Freire (1970/1996) who advocated consciousness-raising, and encouraged a reflective approach to knowledge, as well as peer-to-peer learning.

We wanted the students to meet at least three times to complete the different course components, and we allowed enough time for each student to deal with the individual or group assignments that were due between these meetings. Thus students were required to read course material and actively contribute to the student group, and to seek additional information related to other current research on ageing. The students were also asked to look for articles in the field of elderly care that captured their interest and related to current knowledge of aspects of ageing and being a senior in society. Readings that we often recommended to students included Heaphy (2007) and Russell (2007).
Throughout the course, the students were asked to keep two key perspectives in mind: i) the need to contribute to general knowledge production internationally; and ii) that national/cultural/local knowledge provides the basis for effective praxis. We pointed out that these perspectives were equally important. Following Shenk et al. (2001), our view was that the course conveners of an international course are responsible for providing basic information about the former, and for encouraging and equipping students to take responsibility for actively developing the latter, and to search for articles on both.

We expected each student to decide on an area of specialisation related to aspects of ageing and of relevance to their own professional development of the field as a whole. The learning outcomes were related to the three components described in the following sections. We also told the students that they all should remember that they were not alone in the learning process, but supported by instructors, literature, fellow students and the study guide.

**Outcomes**

Early in the course design process, we discussed what kind of ‘results’ we wanted, and how we would evaluate the course. We decided to use an outcomes-based approach, as this allowed us to include and assess aspects of learning such as self-reflection, attitudinal change and capacity building. We used this term in all planning and course-related documentation. In this section, we outline the six intended learning outcomes and describe what students were required to do to achieve each one. At several points in the course process, we asked the students to describe how they understood the learning outcomes in relation to the tasks and assignments they were asked to complete.

We defined *learning outcomes 1 and 2* as, an ability to give an account of the social, socio-cultural, psychological and biological processes of ageing, and to demonstrate an understanding of how stereotypes, attitudes and discrimination based on age contribute to subjective experiences of old age.

The first meeting covered issues related to a basic knowledge of gerontology, social gerontology and its applications. Students had to study the first three chapters of Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) and list the issues that were most relevant to their own needs in relation to geriatric care. The students were also asked to reflect on ageing and its many multifaceted processes, including how stereotypes, attitudes and age-related discrimination affect elderly people and their self-image. The students then had to write a report on what they would like to know more about in the field of study covered by the next component of the course, and to prepare for a conversation they were required to have with an elderly person. The next step for the students was to prepare for a
face-to-face meeting with the rest of the study group at which their first assignment was discussed.

Learning outcomes 3 and 4 were defined as: an ability to communicate with the elderly based on the pedagogy of ageing, and an ability to reflect on how the conditions of ageing are created in meetings, routines and processes, as well as on the roles played by professionals in this process. In accordance with the study plan, we asked each student to read Chapters 5 to 8 in Hooyman and Kiyak (2011).

As a background to the second assignment, the students were asked to reflect on the demographics of development and change in the care of the elderly in their own vicinities and contexts and to compare this with the information provided in the prescribed literature.

In addition, each student had to carry out a field study, and interview an old person who was involved in an activity offered to the elderly in their own community or town. The aim here was to give students an opportunity to reflect on how the social care system works, and some insight into the ways in which the conditions of ageing are created via meetings, routines and processes that elderly people are involved in. In addition, students were expected to gain some skills related to conversation as a professional tool in the social care of the elderly.

Student experiences related to this task were then presented both orally and in writing. The written report was sent to the instructor. At the next group meeting, each student was given an opportunity to discuss their observations and their experiences of interviewing elderly people with their fellow-students and the instructor.

At the next course meeting the students were asked to do a role-play in pairs or groups, using students’ prior experiences, talks with the elderly and to the theories presented in the course literature. The purpose of the role-play was to enact an experience of ageing, so as to provide an understanding of the ageing person’s situation. Each student was also expected to refer to course material, the library and to the internet to seek current research.

Each group was asked to write a report on their role-play project, describing how their collaboration had informed the content of the role-play. The students were then asked to prepare a presentation on what they had learned for the next group seminar.

Learning outcomes 5 and 6 were defined as the ability to use current research on the elderly and on the ageing process to identify effective interventions at the individual, group and society level, and to relate a knowledge of demographic change to community planning.

The students’ final assignment concerned identifying appropriate and current research material on a chosen theme.2 Within this, students were also
expected to be able to relate their knowledge of demography and its effects on local planning, to caring for the elderly. Our aim was to ensure that, as future professionals, students would develop an awareness that their chosen field of work is informed by an ever-changing body of knowledge that is developing worldwide, and of the need to be willing to constantly update and critique their existing knowledge.

Examinations and course completion
On completing the third assignment, the students were invited to take a final examination. This took the form of an individual oral exam if practicable, and if not, a written exam. In both cases, the students were asked to document their reflections on the whole the course and draw up a presentation on one of the following topics:

- Information for a group of people considering working as ‘paid care givers’ to old people.
- Information for a group of politicians or government officials interested in old people, and wishing to create an ‘elderly policy’ for local or national implementation.

Here the assessment was designed to help the students reveal the knowledge they had acquired about theories of social gerontology and the application of these theories in the kinds of contexts they might face in their future careers. Our aim was also to help students develop their skills in addressing their peers and other important stakeholders.

Here, too, the students engaged strongly with the task at hand and coped well. Some proposed making slightly different presentations based on this course assignment, which they then used in their workplaces. One student told us after she had repeated her oral presentation at her place of work, some changes had been made and elderly care had improved. She was very proud.

Theory meets practice
The title of this chapter sums up our aim: it involves applying theory in a practical situation. As mentioned, the course was designed to help students understand how theory can be applied in practice. We reflected on this idea with students using James Dewey’s thoughts on learning by doing (Dewey 1985/1997), as well as Paulo Freire’s pedagogical idea about the need to make time for reflection and to develop an awareness of everyone’s value and knowledge (Freire 1970/1996).

The students wrote interesting papers on different themes. Some of them carried out quite thorough research on the quality of life experienced by
elderly people from the perspective of Namibian culture. Others conducted interesting research on ageing in relation to the usual retirement age of sixty years in the context of the fact that many older Namibians are forced to continue working because any loss of income would make it impossible for them to survive. Others worked on the issue of violence perpetrated against elderly people by their next-of-kin and how difficult it is for elderly people to get help in such situations – cross-generational relations seem to be problematic for many elderly Namibians. As course convenors, we found it interesting to compare this reality to that in Sweden, where, historically, the elderly often had to endure problematic relations with their children, and reported feeling vulnerable and worthless when they had to stand back and allow their children to take over from them as managers of family-owned land or businesses.

Student feedback

Students were asked what they thought of the course. One of them responded as follows:

I experienced the Scandinavian teaching and learning philosophy very different to get used to. It really is very different from the way we are tested in Africa, but I am impressed and appreciate it, because it is so much more positive and encouraging.

I really had to work hard, but the information was interesting and even for me who had 17 years of experience in the field, learned a lot. It was definitely a great course!

The assignments were not always clear and easy to understand, but challenged my knowledge and in the end I felt great about my own effort.

I found the last assignment’s article very valuable and used it many times since the course. I did a presentation at the Alzheimer and Dementia Support Group, as part of a group supervision [session] for social workers and a few other times with the care givers at the old age home [where I work]. I also used the information from the second assignment about the community for the management planning committee of the old age home where I also work. I think that the second assignment has all the potential to end in a Master’s degree, with information on the whole country.

It was essential and I needed to discuss the tasks with the group or individual group members. Although it also became a negative network of complaints for some of the members. It was also difficult to get everyone together for the meetings and sometimes we had to continue without members.
I am also passionate about gerontology for all the elderly people in the country; because the focus in Namibia is on the pre-modernised, ethnic elderly, ignoring the needs of the modernised older people and the gap between the groups is growing. In the group discussions we had the opportunity to talk and learn from one another. Gerontologists in Namibia still work in segregation with only the one or the other group. It is only me who works in both communities and is trying to build bridges.

The group support was also important and helped me to pace myself to follow through.

I am so curious about Sweden that my family is planning a holiday in December in Stockholm!

This was written by one of the most eager students on this course. She was very active and did a tremendous job in all assignments. Four other students were also very pleased with the course, a couple of whom plan to continue with doctoral studies in social gerontology.

As course convenors, we found ourselves very engaged in our students’ learning. We learned a lot from them and found ourselves reflecting in new ways and on new themes related to ageing and social gerontology in both the Swedish and Namibian contexts. Running the course, and interacting with the students has given us new knowledge about elderly care, which we appreciate very much. We also obtained some good insights about how to design distance courses, and when one of the students asked why the course was not part of a master’s programme, we were inspired to consider how to work together with students to further their studies.

Conclusion
The aim of our project was to see how a well-established concept in Swedish education (written study plans), in combination with theories of social gerontology developed for an American context, would translate into a Namibian context with students working in elderly care in Namibia. Our interest was in how different cultures can interact and contribute to a wider understanding of elderly people and their life situations, using social gerontology theory as a basis for discussion. The idea of learning through juxtaposing three cultures (Swedish teachers, Namibian students and American theories) seems to have worked well. The differences provoked thinking, and forced both teachers and students to examine their own assumptions and understandings of their own cultures and the situation of elderly people, in relation to other cultures. Judging from this experience, cross-cultural teaching and learning widens horizons and promotes learning for all those involved.
Because of the second author’s experience of lecturing in Namibia, we were aware that, in our work at Karlstad University (in both face-to-face and distance courses), we have less formal relationships with students than most Namibian students are used to, as well as a different pedagogic base and assessment model. But, as we were giving the course on behalf of Karlstad University, and not in direct collaboration with the department at the University of Namibia, we decided to follow the pedagogic model that we thought best. We could see the risk in this, but thought that, by presenting the pedagogic method and the material well, we could make it work. Of course, there were moments of confusion for the students at the beginning, and some students chose to drop out, but by the end, the course had received a lot of positive feedback. In the process we, as teachers, learned much about course presentation, both via distance and face-to-face-methods. We also learned that it is important to stress issues of ‘how’ students are expected to learn and demonstrate their learning so as to avoid a potential clash in pedagogical systems for students who participate in international distance courses.

As lecturers, we will go on developing our teaching practice, as we have done for many years. But we learned a lot from our collaboration with each other and with the Namibian students. We hope to be part of interesting future collaborations and that this model might inspire the development of other courses through which different cultures meet one another. The sociology department at our university is already basing another collaboration with the University of Namibia on this example, so the course seems to have laid a basis for sustainable and mutually beneficial collaboration between our two institutions.

Notes
1. The technical method for evaluating these outcomes was a semi-structured questionnaire responded to by students after the formal examination, plus contact that one of the co-authors had with students when he visited Namibia for other reasons.
2. The themes were proposed by the course convenors and included: life quality and ageing; love, sexuality and ageing; death in old age; next-of-kin perspectives; violence between close relations; ageing and cross-generational relations; ageing and work.

References