

Doing cross culture: some practices of internationalization in higher education

Wolfgang Berg

Hochschule Merseburg, Germany

Abstract

The article is focusing on one aspect of internationalization, namely its impact on the curricula. The example which can be used to discuss the aims and objectives stems from a bachelor program in social work. The module is called “Intercultural and International social work” and mandatory for all students. The students are expected to compare systematically social problems and social work practice in different countries and to experience learning and other activities in a culturally diverse setting. The setting is a multilateral workshop which “compells” them to practice intercultural communication.

The articles presents the results as far as they can be summarized on the basis of individual reflections (portfolio) given by the students themselves. Matter-of-factly there is an international, not only European Area of Higher Education, but it is still a minority of students and faculties who actually move within this area. More and more efforts are undertaken in order to increase and accelerate the “internationalization” of study programs.

Key-words

Students mobility, Cross-cultural learning, Empathy, Comparative approach, Social work in Europe

Internationalization

Among the various aspects of internationalization the following three ones seem to be most important:

- Mobility of students and lecturers
- Access to and exchange of knowledge and findings among the scientific communities of all disciplines
- Cross-cultural learning, intercultural competences as part of the “soft skills” all actors in a globalized world need to apply.

Mostly mobility is enhanced and supported by particular programs (like LLL Erasmus) or institutions (like federal agencies of cultural exchanges), and more or less the academic bureaucracies. Mobility remains an individual project, sometimes estimated as an ambitious initiative, sometimes ignored as a private adventure.

All types of publications and conferences serve to exchanging scientific findings. Beside the (natural) sciences and general theories there is a wide variety of disciplines which are closely restricted to national states, working within societies. The details of national economy, the impacts of particular legislation, the inquiries about political preferences etc. are mostly of no immediate concern for people outside this country. They are, however, the background of all problems, practices and projects, which are taken into consideration for a comparative study.

Cross cultural communication does take place in multicultural societies, in daily life. But there are only few cases in which they are steered, guided, prepared or reflected by educational authorities. Enterprises “discover” the importance of cross-cultural trainings only as soon as their customers or partners in other countries “make troubles”.

Hence there are many reasons to establish “internationalization” in a more obligatory, reliable, practical, systematic and sustainable way.

Curriculum

In Merseburg/Germany, Faculty of Social Work, Media and Culture of University of Applied Sciences, in order to proceed this way fairly, the decision was to respond to the challenges of internationalization by the means of institutionalizing, i.e. within the curricula. There are two Bachelor programs (Social Work = SW) and Culture and Media Education (CME). Each semester the students have to absolve 6 modules, with 5 credits each. There is one module in SW which is called “Intercultural and International social work” (3-1. i.e. third semester, but starting in the 2nd semester actually), another module in CME called “Intercultural learning” (4-4, i.e. forth semester) – obligatory for all students of these programs. In these modules three aspects are highlighted:

- Knowledge about the history, societal structure, daily life, arts in other - less known or smaller - countries like Romania, Iceland, Ireland, Russia, Portugal (CME)
- International comparison, comparative approach to social problems (SW)
- Intercultural competences (SW, CME).

Of course, there are other modules which deal with cultural traditions in other countries, too. Social work education cannot but deal with any social problem in a comparative way (How did Denmark manage to achieve this low rate of unemployment? Does the low protection against dismissal/security of work place there fit to German

tradition?). But it is a principal decision to design one module explicitly as a comparative one.

Merseburg is sited in the Southern part of Saxony-Anhalt, close to Saxony and the city of Leipzig. In Saxony-Anhalt the quota of “foreigners” (residents without German nationality) is about 2 %. Concerning residents with “migration background”, thus including “Aussiedler” (German rooted people who left Poland, Romania or former Soviet-Union during the last two decades) the figures are maybe 5 %, but still extremely low in comparison with West Germany (8 resp. 19%) or cities like Munich (22% resp. 40%). Actually people and also students living in the area of Merseburg do not really experience cultural diversity that immediately and directly in their daily life.

It is one advantage of German universities of applied sciences, to research and teach close to the practice, be it engineering, architecture, media production or social work. According to modern learning theories and empirical research all types of knowledge, not to speak about skills and techniques, are getting learned better, more easily and more sustainably if it has a relation to practice and can be exercised in real situations.

Because of these reasons the decision was made to realize at least one module (SW3-1) in any case, the other modules if possible, in a setting which allows students

- to do comparison and
- to practice intercultural communication.

In the best case the learners have already acquired knowledge or skills and can apply these to a particular situation. In the same way they can make experiences and reflect them in order to generate new knowledge and extend their skills.

Objectives

As intercultural competences include – first aspect – cultural awareness, i.e. the ability to become aware of cultural differences (concerning the rules of behavior, thinking, feeling etc.), this skill is similar to the comparative approach which demands the ability to observe and perceive the reality of life, also related to societal structures, economical development, traditions, legislation etc. at one particular place. Mostly inevitably this perception is due to one’s own rules – and it is an important step to work out the implicit comparison and convert it to an explicit comparison reflecting the observer’s point of view.

In order to operate this concept, workshops are organized. Those workshops bring students from different countries together and enhance them

- to compare systematically social problems and social work practice in their countries

- to experience learning and other activities in a culturally diverse setting.

The workshops usually take place in the first week of October, be it in Merseburg, in the average with 25 German and about 30 students from partner institutions, be it at the partner institution's places (groups of 5 to 12 German students stay about one week abroad). Hence, beside the Merseburg crew, students from Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Belgium, Romania, Moldova, Spain, and Russia used to be involved.

A typical workshop consists of lectures, presentations by the domestic group as well as by the guests, working groups, field visits, artistic production (e.g. music, photos, theater, and video) and all kinds of parties.

After having organized similar workshops every year since 1994 as an option within the diploma studies, an offer students could choose, this module now is an obligatory part of the Bachelor program since 2005, students have to acquire credits and get marks in order to pass this module.

Questions

The module raises lots of questions.

- 1) Every year about 90 students have to be provided with this course. Fifty to sixty students are supposed to go out in small groups; hence about eight destinations have to be available. The workshop in Merseburg can be successful only if more than 20, better 30 students from abroad take place. Hence the "setting" depends to a high amount on the partners' interest and opportunities.
- 2) The German students have to attend around 8 preparatory meetings; lectures make them familiar with the comparative approach (literature is available s. Berg 2002 etc.). They get an introduction in intercultural learning and do first exercises towards cultural awareness. They are demanded to prepare a presentation with regard to social work in Germany and/or a social problem from a German point of view. There is some evidence that these tasks are still too difficult for students in the second semester.
- 3) Though the general topic of each workshop is defined jointly and communicated several months in advance, the partner institutions might be unable to prepare the workshops straightly, in particular if the group mobility is not part of the curriculum there.
- 4) All feedbacks tell that students like the creative activities best: to make music together, to develop some dramatic scenes, to make photos and present them in an exposition, to shoot videos and cut them digitally, to make a newspaper jointly. Actually active learning, in a multicultural group, is the best method to acquire intercultural competences... Doing things together – on the stage, in the cutting room - is more demanding than sitting in the last row of a huge lecture hall. Due to this setting, however, people like to express rather communities than differences. Social work in Europe seems to be a topic which is not controversial.
- 5) Whereas students like to elaborate and create artistic products in multicultural groups,

and do it on the common basis of social engagement, they come to good results alongside a comfortable process, which seems to be without any irritations and problems. They “forget” somehow that there are German, Romanian, Lithuanian or Flemish students who work together. It might be the case that they follow different rules of communication and cooperation, but they do not become aware of this for several reasons. Even the fact, that the presentations which have to be prepared within the groups, get recorded and broadcasted in the local TV-channel, does not raise “enough” stress, conflicts are not “necessary”.

- 6) The comparative approach, as transmitted and enhanced by lectures, field visits and working groups, leads to more general insights, concerning the differences of the standard of living, the economical conditions, the societal development - in particular with regard to the Old Europe (Belgium, but also Germany – though Merseburg is sited in the former GDR) vs. post communist countries. The strongest concern, as it seems, comes about when the students are comparing the conditions (wages!) under which themselves as students and social workers in general are living and working.
- 7) To prepare the workshops, to be busy and even abroad for a week in the workshops, and to reflect and report own experiences - students do merit the five credits doubtlessly. But what about the marks? In the first two years, the students have had to individually present the project; each student reported about his/her workshop to other students who had been attending another workshop, presented its results (in terms of comparison). To some amount the quality of this report depended on the workshop itself (which was only partly the student’s responsibility); actually it was the individual way of presenting things, not the learning process, which was marked. Therefore the evaluation has been changed 2009: The students have now the task to report their learning process over all five months, from the first planning and introductory lectures until the workshop; it is a portfolio which is not judged or marked due to its form, but as reflection on the student’s own feelings (for instance before entering the plane for Moldova) and their sentiments and recognition at the spot.

The students’ view

The portfolios are important because of the necessity to give the students marks, but most important is to get more ideas about the actual learning out-come. Who does know it better than the learners themselves? The students’ have been told to make a report about the entire process under two aspects:

- comparison of social work between Germany and the other countries involved
- intercultural learning.

Reading the portfolios brings about a first surprise: Many students express concerns which have been important for them, but not taken into consideration by us, the well experienced professionals: It is not that easy for them to manage the trip, be it because of financial problems, their family (some students are married and/or have children). More than one student indicates that it was the first flight in his/her life. More than one

student told us that s/he has decided for just that project which was accompanied by a lecturer as it promises more “safety”. Hence we should not underestimate the challenge such a trip might be for students – not of all of them are global players since ever.

And there are more aspects which are not immediately related to international comparison and intercultural learning. Some groups have had to organize the trip themselves, i.e. find out the cheapest travel and a comfortable, but also affordable accommodation. To make decisions in this preparatory phase as well as during the sojourn abroad may cause a sort of group dynamic which can affect the “official” learning process remarkably. Being active in a group, but an unfamiliar environment, enduring conversations in English and finding one’s way, maybe by public transport which is organized differently etc., is more “work” than expected. It is not only because of room parties and nightly meetings with their partners (students from the domestic university), that the Merseburger students report how exhausted they were.

Comparison

With regard to the international comparison, lots of insights have been reported. Here a couple of examples, each item is in explicit or implicit comparison with Germany (to discuss the reality in Germany or judge its advantages and disadvantages, is not possible here):

- Sociocultural centers in Flanders do community work as they offer space and rooms for youth from all shifts
- For elderly people in Lithuania there are less services which allow them to stay in their own home, the only alternative seems to be institutional care
- In Moldova the main concern of social work is due to the fact that parents go abroad for work and leave children back with grandparents.
- There are day centers in Moldova which offer learning opportunities to children with handicaps and without handicaps, thus do a real integrative work.
- Whilst in Flemish youth centers the young people can drink beer, in Lithuania liquor can be purchased in the age of 18, but consumed (in public) only in the age of 21. To consume alcoholic drinks in public is strictly forbidden and charged in Granada.
- All services and assistance, may they have to do with family allowances, pensions or job seekers allowances, are given in one and the same office in Czech Republic.
- Poverty is not only a relation to the average income, but a dramatic lack of resources, an existential problem – concerning pensioners in Lithuania or the majority of families in Moldova. It is not easy to recognize the poverty in and behind the small tiny houses in some “nice” neighborhoods in Flanders.
- Volunteering seems to be more widespread and acknowledged in Flanders, less accepted in France or Lithuania.

- Services for families are, to some degree, in Moldova and Lithuania somehow reluctant, as nobody wants to have to do with the “state”.
- There is violence against elderly people, also by children against their parents, e.g. young men against their mother in Spain.
- “Kindergarten” in Russia and so some degree also in Lithuania are places where children are strictly educated to behave properly, function well.

Empathy

The starting point of Intercultural learning is awareness. Students have observed differences in the environment, be it the traffic means (Trolley), the smell or the architecture. Some students are strongly reminded to their childhood (in former GDR) when they stroll along in “East Europe” cities. Others are shocked by the poverty behind the facades, others by the number of extremely expensive cars in the streets of Chisinau.

Students have been surprised by the elegant clothes of their mates and their excellent knowledge of English – and have learnt that many of them did work (had to work!) in Ireland or Spain in summer times in order to be able to afford that (and the fees they have to pay to the university). Students are shocked by dormitories where 4 students share a room, shocked by lecture halls which are not heated because the university has to save money. “I have taken our standard of living for granted – now I know how well off we are” – recognized more than one student.

There have been also classical incidents, misunderstandings: the domestic universities invited the German students to a concert which they intended to attend by the way and remained totally underdressed as it was a classic performance in the opera hall. Students ordered a particular beer and found out that it was mixed with pure water. Other students ordered literally spider juice instead of orange juice (naranja-arana) in Spain. Funny and unforgettable experiences.

Comparison and intercultural learning go alongside each other and do this with high importance, when the conditions of students' life are touched. The German students appreciated much the fact that students in Metz have to do an internship, too, but with payment! The impact, however, is a lack of placements, because voluntary organizations cannot afford it. Lithuanian students have to pay fees which can be reduced or even deleted if the marks are good or very good. Hence the students are under strong pressure and forced to be interested in the outcome of all these exams, not in the issues. It is quite natural that the fact of being student has the highest potential of empathy. Students start to imagine how they would feel in that situation, whether they could cope with the reality in other countries.

The same is true with regard to the (future) role as social worker. Job opportunities, working conditions and – last, but not least – the salaries are of high interest. Those students who have been in Lithuania or Moldova have learned how important the acknowledgment of social work in the society and the development of a welfare state are.

The students did not hesitate to compare the buildings and equipment of the partner universities with Merseburg, and in some cases, e.g. Flanders and Czech Republic could hardly hide their envy.

Personal growth

Most of the students have confessed that they were afraid of the task to give a presentation in English and to follow lectures in English, too. Actually, almost of all of them did overcome this fear, even improved their capabilities and promised to work continuously in that direction.

Many students had been aware of all the stereotypes they had “in their luggage”. They expected grey towns with sad people, and enjoyed then festivals with people dancing and singing (by accident the fiesta of wine in Chisinau is just in the same period of time as the workshop). The students are deeply impressed and overwhelmed by the friendliness of people at the Czech university or generosity of their Lithuanian mates, not to speak about the rich traditional dinner a Moldovan family is offering them (a group of 10 persons!). How welcome are guests in Germany? Students in Czech Republic, Moldova, France, and Flanders have spent a lot of time in order to guide them, to show them the supermarket nearby or the best place at the beach to collect amber. Of course, it was also some fun for them, but a sort of volunteering which threatens to disappear in a world of Credits and accountability. It is a necessary and natural impact of doing cross culture to reflect one owns life, the values in mind, and the (opposite?) routines in practice.

Many students – and we can believe the portfolios here, too – are convinced that the workshops abroad have made an important contribution to their personal development, i.e. openness and empathy, self-awareness and self-efficiency conviction. They feel good as they experienced that they could cope with a complex, open or unknown situation. They learned that it is good to be able to act beyond the routine.

The students did appreciate this module, as a learning opportunity, not because it was a cheap travel opportunity (it was exhausting enough).

Conclusion

From the author's and his colleagues' point of view the module is worth the effort, though some improvement is possible. Next time the students have to be enhanced to understand and realize the portfolios more as reflections, less than report. And the portfolios should be an opportunity to have again group discussions and personal counseling: comparative approaches and intercultural learning do never end.

Bibliography

- Berg, W. (ed.)(2002). *Comparative studies in social work and social policy*. Aachen.
- Berg, W. (2003). Anregungen zur komparativen sozialarbeitswissenschaft. Der internationale vergleich. *Soziale Arbeit* 7, S. 242-249
- Berg, W. (ed.)(2004). *Comparison and transfer. Social work and social policy in international contexts*. Aachen.
- Berg, W. (ed.)(2005). *Matters differ. Comparative studies in social work and social policy*. Aachen.
- Berg, W. & Goncalves, S. (2007). Cross-cultural learning and citizenship. In A. Ross (ed.), *Citizenship education in society* (pp. 325-330). London. CD-ROM.
- Cross-cultural learning and managing diversity (2005). In A. Ross (ed.), *Teaching citizenship* (pp. 373-379). London.
- Cultures are always intercultural (2008). In S. Goncalves (ed.), *Identity, diversity and intercultural dialogue* (S. 53-56). Coimbra. CD-ROM.
- Transcultural identity (2008). In A. Ross & P. Cunningham (ed.), *Reflecting on identities: research, practice and innovation* (S.159-164). London. CD-ROM.

Correspondence

Wolfgang Berg
Hochschule Merseburg
Geusaer Str.
D 06217 Merseburg, Germany
Wolfgang.berg@hs-merseburg.de

