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Technical assistance, neo-colonialism or mutual trade? The experience of an Anglo/Ukrainian/Russian social work practice learning project

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Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been a steady stream of western consultants ready to work in eastern Europe and Russia and share professional and academic expertise and experience. Social work, unknown as a discrete discipline or profession in the Soviet Union, has been a growth area with funding from a variety of sources to help promote east-west partnerships (Bridge, 2000a; Constable and Mehta, 1994; Ramon, 1996; Wilson, 1999).

Social work theory and practice emphasizes critical appraisal of policy and issues of power, discrimination and oppression. In principle, social work educators should be especially alert to the complex ethical questions which these kinds of collaborations raise, and adept at finding practical solutions or workable compromises. This article explores these ethical and political issues with reference to a project to develop social work practice learning in a Russian oblast' (region). The project was an ambitious partnership of British, Ukrainian and Russian educators, involving numerous Russian social work and related agencies, and four Russian universities and colleges[1]. The authors use a series of vignettes to help the reader achieve contrasting insights into these east-west transactions. The article concludes with a discussion of different interpretations of these dealings, using three prisms: technical assistance, neo-colonialism and mutual trade.

Key words

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[1] We will refer to universities, colleges and the academic input to social work education collectively as 'the academy'.

practice learning; Russian social work; social work education; western assistance projects; international social work

Introduction

Although activities that might be recognisable as social work predated the fall of communism, social work as a formal profession has had a relatively brief existence in Russia, with the first courses established in 1995 (Ramon, 1996). Development has been rapid, with social work training courses established in over fifty universities and other higher education institutes just five years after the transition (Harwin, 1996) and an estimate in excess of 150 now (Shapiro, 2003). Moreover, there was early recognition of the importance of practical experience in placements (Constable and Kulys, 1995), now formalised at an international level in the global standards for social work education and training (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004, §3) and increasingly a part of international curriculum development (Williams, 2003; SWIPE).

The practice learning project was located in an oblast' in which social work education was already firmly established in a number of institutions. Research into the current and future needs of social work education in Russia suggested that this project could focus on the next stage; that is, the development of practice learning opportunities (*author 2, submitted*). This was confirmed in discussions with potential partners in the oblast', who felt the need for an improved learning experience whilst on placement. This would encompass better supervision in agencies, more tools for practitioners to teach students in practical settings, and a practice orientation for those who taught in the academies. The project was therefore able to move well beyond the rudiments of social work education because of an existing infrastructure of physical and intellectual resources. The ambitious nature of the multi-agency and multi-academy partnership would also require a high level of collaborative rather than competitive behaviour. The balance was always precarious, though we will discover that the project itself was catalyst to both kinds of behaviour.

The project consisted of four modules of teaching and learning, which took place between 2003 and 2004 in Russia and two phases in England. Each module lasted one-week and typically consisted of a mix of classes hosted by one of the academies, with seminars located in a number of different agencies. There was 'homework' between modules. At least 12 people from the Russian academies and 24 from the agencies were involved. One of the unplanned benefits of the modules was that it provided an opportunity to bring academics and practitioners together in a relatively relaxed atmosphere where they could develop new relationships. This has led to approximately 20 new placements becoming available for students, some in sectors where they would not traditionally work. The project included two UK-based phases, one in which two Russian colleagues gave a paper at an international conference on practice teaching in England, and another when four other Russian colleagues came to visit practice learning sites in England and to lead a seminar based on their work using task-centred supervision (Caspi and Reid, 2002).

It is not the purpose of this article to present a detailed evaluation of the project itself. As will become clear, our purpose is somewhat broader. However, the following précis of the main findings, as experienced by one of the Russian partners, provides a summary with which others in the project concurred.

- Much has changed since the project started. The triangle between the academics, agencies and students has become much closer and more professional. The agencies have become much more robust and fearless because of the project. The students have also become highly articulate and are now seen by everyone as a valuable resource rather than a group of young people who need to be occupied. The agencies are also viewed by the academics as a resource to be harnessed.

- One of the key things we have realised is that the students need to be taught how to think for themselves, rather than being told what to do. They need to be put into a 'reflexive position'.

- The Task-Centred Supervision (TCS) model has helped with this process. Also, the notion of 'portfolio' as a way of gathering student's learning on placement has greatly assisted all three parties (agency, academy, student) to speak a common language and, therefore, to have a common understanding before embarking on the placements. The example portfolio has had a huge impact in bringing partners together. Again, this is a direct result of the project.

- The TCS model was easy in theory, but not so easy to put into practice. There was a tendency to fill in the sheets *for* the students, giving them their goals rather than negotiating these with them and making them think about their learning needs.

- Similarly, the university tended to compile a list under headings such as 'what difficulties do you think you may encounter on placement?' Then the tutor would ask the student to tick from a prepared list, rather than providing an opportunity for the student to think about the difficulties themselves, without prompts or direction. The project has helped us to realize that students need to develop their own ideas.

- Through the project, the academic community has confronted its own fears and reservations about working in the field. We are not social workers by profession and we have not traditionally had a partnership with our colleagues in the agencies.

- There has been a great benefit from all the partners in the visiting team.

These comments are encouraging and supportive. However, it is not our purpose to offer a detailed evaluation of this particular project, but to look at it through different prisms, ones that will help us to learn more about western

assistance programmes to Russia and eastern Europe in general. We will use vignettes to explore the complex web of ethical and practical considerations in this kind of project. All but the first of the vignettes are descriptions of particular incidents in the life of the project, each designed to illustrate or symbolise wider themes, not just in this project but in the wider experience of knowledge and skill exchange. The backdrop of a Russian oblast' might seem relatively exotic to western readers, but we will argue that the themes which these experiences illustrate are universal, salient to research and development projects close to home, wherever home might be. Indeed, stark differences in context can help throw situations with which we have become all too familiar into relief.

The first vignette (*Buttering the bread,* below) is an abstract situation, but with a very concrete application.

Vignette A   Buttering the bread

You have a kilo of butter. There are a thousand slices of bread.
1) Do you butter them all very, very thinly with an equal amount?
2) Do you choose a proportion of slices to butter adequately?
3) Do you butter none?

Shortage of resources is nothing new, and methods of deciding priorities such as *triage* have a long history. The first choice, to spread thinly, is usually based on egality; above all, it is right and proper to achieve equal distribution. Yet if it is so thin that it cannot be tasted and, in effect, any one slice cannot be said to have been noticeably buttered, is this actually a waste of the whole kilo?

The second choice is based on the belief that it is most effective to butter those slices which either most need it, or which will make best use of it. Of course, this begs the further question of how it is to be decided which slices are to be favoured. The third choice is based on the belief that it is ineffective to butter all slices to the point that it makes no difference to any particular one, yet also wrong to discriminate in favour of a few slices. On that basis, it is fairest not to use any butter at all.

See Sim (1997: 127) for further discussion of the ethical issues raised.

The project had a budget of £50,000 over two years, with a mission to be as inclusive as possible and, indeed, to break some new ground by directly involving practice agencies and not just the academies. This was a political decision, a statement that social work practice learning should carry weight alongside the 'scientific discipline' of social work theory in the academy. It is a controversial statement and one which was clearly seen as attempting to shift the existing power balance, in which the academy was very strong.

Within the social work academy in the oblast' there were also power struggles, with five leading universities and colleges offering social work education. One of the guiding principles of the project was to engineer a partnership not just between academy and agency, but between the different parts of the academy. In the end, four academies participated as members, with over twenty different agencies.

This project was built on the relationships and networks which one of the authors, a Russian speaker herself, had established in the oblast' over a period of ten years. This meant that decisions about 'which slices to butter' did not have to rely solely on the fact that certain slices manage to ease themselves to the top of the loaf. However, this project was deliberate in its attempts to find agencies who had not yet been 'buttered', yet who had the potential to make effective use of the extra resources the project could bring, in terms of knowledge and support as much as financial help. Undeniably, there was a period of jostling for position throughout the project's life, though more especially in the early stages. The dilemma for the partners who bring the extra resources, the westerners, is how to develop mechanisms which increasingly share the way decisions are made about which slices are buttered, whilst guarding against relinquishing that power to those who would merely 'self-butter'.

Vignette B: Sharing the cake

About twenty of the project participants are seated around a long table in one of the Russian host universities. It is the conclusion of one of the modules of training, and the discussion must focus on the next phase, an exchange visit to England. The budget will accommodate six Russian colleagues. The western partners want to use 'objective' criteria to decide who will come to England in five months' time. Travel to England is, unsurprisingly, seen as a great prize. The powerful people round the table want the powerful people to travel, though they are aware that powerfulness is not an acceptable criterion. The western partners are determined that some practitioners (student supervisors) will be amongst the group of six, with the decision based on those who will have the most experience of using the task-centred supervision model and, therefore, the most to share with their English peers. The westerners find themselves strongly emphasizing this condition. They probably have the approval of the agencies seated around the table, but this is only tacit.

'Sharing the cake' exposes two fundamental but conflicting principles. One principle is based on respect for local custom. This would indicate that direct opposition to the stated wishes of the host partners is not acceptable. In this and other cases, custom and practice were being openly challenged.

A second and, in this case, conflicting principle is one of equality of opportunity and within that, positive action. This would suggest that people who have not had the opportunity for foreign travel should be prioritised. The powerful players, 'the ringmasters' (Askeland and Payne, 2001: 269) amongst the Russian participants, are involved in other western projects with trophies from these trips prominently displayed on desks. The opportunity to visit England as part of the project was seen as a major prize by the Russian partners, whereas the

westerners wished to recast it as a reward, a meritocratic principle that inevitably introduced an element of competition.

The complexity of the situation is deepened by two other factors. The first is the knowledge that there are people around the table who experience custom and practice as oppressive and who are pleased by the westerners' challenge, even though these people keep their heads low. By their very presence at the table, western partners put themselves in a position where choices about which principles to support are inevitable; it is not possible to be 'neutral' because doing nothing indicates support for the status quo.

Of course, western hands may feel tied by the knowledge that we, too, have trophies on our desks back home. Even more inhibiting is the charge of hypocrisy (not actually voiced but possibly there in the shadows), since our right to be visiting Russia has not been subjected to these same 'objective' criteria. There are no English practice agencies at this Russian table. We may consider that our places at the table have been earned by successfully winning competitive tenders, by recognition of our experience and expertise, but these opportunities are by no means equal in the west. So, there is a third principle which is in danger of being disregarded, and that is mutuality. Mutuality would suggest that these same objective criteria should apply equally to those holding the purse strings.

We must also be open to the possibility of other explanations, too. For example, Askeland and Payne (2001: 263) note in a Chinese context that 'Western participants thought that visits by senior administrative and political representatives were concerned to support status differences in the Chinese system, rather than furthering the project ... [perhaps, however] Chinese participants focused on the need to ensure organisational and political support for the programme which the western participants took more for granted.'

Vignette C   Sunday best

It is very early in the project. Two minibuses transport project participants to the first of the agency-based seminars. Having taken off our snowy outdoor shoes in the cloakroom, we are greeted by the Director of the Institute and given an extensive tour of her agency. Room after spotless room is presented as though the very future of the agency depends on our approval - and it is made very plain that the approval in question is the westerners in the group.

The tour is followed by a set-piece seminar in which, between long speeches of self-congratulation from the Director, students dutifully report on the wonders of a placement in the agency. The Director then gives a lengthy account of her teaching a student in which her pedagogical approach is strongly didactic and autocratic. A mild invitation to a dialogue about possible alternative approaches is met with a very defensive response which effectively closes down communication.

The focus of the project was developing opportunities for practice learning, so the cross-national steering group agreed that it was fitting to locate about half of the training and development in agencies. This had other potential benefits, such as acquainting all participants (the local social work education community and western educators alike) with the range of resources, the potential and the limitations.

With hindsight it is not difficult to predict that each agency felt great responsibility to put on their Sunday best. The keen sense of competition even extended to the lunches provided - some irony, since lunches were paid for by the project. Also, it emerged that agencies had been chosen because of their strong affiliation to a particular academy. This compounded the competitiveness, with each agency-university duo closing ranks against what was seen as the attacks

of rivals. On one occasion a practitioner stood up and denounced the poor support given by a 'rival' academy, provoking the representative from that academy to storm out of the room. Our visiting roadshow seemed to provide 'the oxygen of publicity' for many local squabbles.

Perhaps it is not possible to avoid this initial period of discovery, during which a search amongst the crowd is necessary for those partners who are most receptive to the underlying principles of the project and who are empowered by the project to have their voices heard. Although it feels like unproductive time, and potentially hurtful to engage with people and agencies who are actually likely to frustrate the aims of the project, perhaps this is an unavoidable stage in the process.

The roadshow carried risks, as the above example demonstrates. However, it did give a clear message that the project is aiming for a significantly different relationship between academy and agency, and a chance to signal what kinds of partner will find themselves valued in the project. We learned that it was vital to give a clearer message about the purpose of the agency-based study, that it was the occasion for shared learning rather than a tour. For those agencies who were able to see the opportunity in these terms, these seminars were a great success, and they did help the project to discover those agency partners who could best grow with the project.

Vignette D   Culture clash

We are exploring the possibilities of task-centred student supervision with a group of sixteen Russian educators - academics and practitioners. In order to understand the principles and practice of task-centred work, an exercise is introduced in which four groups of four people are asked to decide how they would achieve the goal of re-decorating a room. They are given a chart in which the day is divided into four time-slots (horizontal lines on the chart), and four person slots (vertical lines on the chart). They are asked to consider what the tasks will be for each person in the four-person team during each of the four time slots, so that together and cumulatively over the day they can achieve the goal of redecoration.

Every-one approaches the exercise with enthusiasm and the non-verbals from each of the four (Russian-speaking) groups are positive. After twenty minutes, however, the interpreter comments quietly that whilst three of the groups are very engaged with the detail and direction of the task, one group has spent all its time trying to decide who will be 'Number 1', 'Number 2', 'Number 3', and 'Number 4'!

| | *T e a m*   *M e m b e r s* | | | |
	1	2	3	4
09:00 - 10:30				
11:00 - 12:30				
13:30 - 15:00				
15:30 - 17:00				

The task chart appeared neutral to its western architects, but the group which spent its time trying to determine an internal hierarchy had interpreted ordinal numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) as cardinals, (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th), in a rank order. Did this reflect the dominance of status and hierarchy in Russian life? It seemed primarily related to the fact that whoever was allocated 4th would acquire kitchen

duties! This was a role which the westerners had not anticipated, but which each of the four teams had identified; curiously, though it was allocated 4th, it was clearly considered very important. "Somebody has to do it".

It is very easy to label this kind of situation as a failure - to communicate the purpose of the activity clearly, to explain properly, to understand the context. In fact, it had proved much more illuminating to have the interpreter translate rather than interpret (Horwath and Shardlow, 2000). Had she intervened early on to give a firm and authoritative interpretation of the task, we would all have lost an opportunity for much new learning. Ambiguity or loose ends can be instructive, in the way that 'Chinese Whispers' rather loses its point if everyone is able to hear the whispers perfectly.

Culture clash does, indeed, illustrate the power of context. One might rightly assume that History is present in the room, exposing centuries of hierarchy in Russian society, soviet and czarist. We might infer that the group struggling to establish its own futile hierarchy is less advanced in its thinking than those which just got on with the job. However, perhaps this is yet another assumption, compounding the original. For instance, the unreconstructed group might actually be the only one in which the members balked at an allocation of roles (perhaps roles based on gender), whilst the other three groups passively submitted to autocratic leadership ... ? If that were the case, which group might be considered to be working at a more 'advanced' level?

Transfer of learning must, of course, embrace cultural sensitivity (Horwath and Shardlow, 2001). However, *exchange* of learning requires receptiveness by all partners to learn from unplanned situations, to re-cast what might be considered culturally insensitive or mis-aligned activities as opportunities for mutual learning. This means not just questioning assumptions but questioning the assumptions about the assumptions!   Although this vignette is, in part, a culture clash, in fact the real learning comes not from an analysis of Anglo-Russian differences or

contrition about cultural insensitivity, but from a mutual exploration of the meaning of these situations. This leads to an understanding of the differences *within* cultures and some of the commonalities *between* them.

Vignette E: Cat amongst the pigeons?

We are entering the last phase of the project. It is late Friday afternoon and at the other side of the weekend lies the two-day Conference to disseminate the findings of the project, a prestigious event with plenipotentiaries from the local Duma (government office), the British consulate and local academies and agencies, as well as invited guests flying in from other parts of Russia. The Conference is being organised and led by the Russian partners in the project and the main representatives from the partners have gathered at one of the project's four academies, also the location of the Conference.

One of the representatives, 'Tatiana', is looking very stony-faced. At previous meetings over the two years she has been friendly and engaged, but today she sits with her hat still firmly atop her head. Not long into the meeting she says something to 'Ljudmilla', who is hosting the meeting. This starts a protracted disagreement. The translation stops, but the non-verbals are starkly clear. Ljudmilla becomes periodically heated, whilst Tatiana remains stony cold. We learn later that there were a number of different issues which came to a head in the dispute, linked to long-standing rivalries and arising from a lack of communication amongst the partners.

Crucial to the success of all projects is good communication. The most obvious challenge is that of translation and interpretation (Horwath and Shardlow, 2000); however, like a hill walker who takes great care over the difficult country terrain only to twist an ankle on the front doorstep, it can be when we feel it least necessary to pay attention that communication breaks down. The involvement in the project of an excellent interpreter, a bi-lingual project manager and a bi-lingual Ukrainian tutor, helped to ensure that miscommunications through language were minimal; it was, indeed, the more workaday communication

problems *between* the Russian partners which proved troublesome. We suspect that, for all the attention that is focused on the differences in languages, it is these universal communication difficulties which most challenge project work.

Western projects bring resources but they also cause more work for the beneficiaries, who are already under great strain, not least economically. To mix metaphors, these projects are both feather in cap and poisoned chalice. Many Russian and eastern European academics are balancing many jobs, more for the economic necessity than the intellectual challenge (Bridge, 2000b). This kind of project is an offer that cannot be refused, yet it will make more work for people and services that are already under great pressure.

One of the purposes of the project is to act as a catalyst for changes and it is likely that this process will produce or expose conflicts and be experienced as challenging, even painful. However, humour is useful in emphasizing commonalities; collective laughter had the effect of closing the door on the rancour of the 'cat amongst the pigeons' dispute and reminded us of the universal place of humour in making disagreements more palatable.

Vignette F   Dirty money

Many thousands of pounds are stuffed into our hand luggage, all in twenties and fifties. Our Russian colleagues have had to pay up-front for the coming Conference because they have not opened an account that we could wire payments into beforehand. The cash is, therefore, urgently needed to settle bills. Cash is 'more flexible' - in theory.

However, there is a problem in practice. The banks will only exchange clean, uncrumpled notes (laundered, one might say). Even ones which have been written on by the English bank teller are discarded. So, with only two-thirds of our currency acceptable to these fastidious Russian banks, we are left with a sterling surplus and a rouble deficit.

The exchange so starkly represented by the money which the project brings symbolises the trade in ideas and practises which the project represents. The symbolism of this vignette is poignant; it seems the money which we bring as western assistance-givers is not entirely clean, in every respect of the word. It comes with its own baggage and the Russians rightly treat it as suspect. Purcell, (2001: 51) notes that projects are 'a means to an end. What your hosts need and want most is the money', but others have remarked that foreign aid can end up reinforcing the very legacies it seeks to remove if it is not carefully applied. Vaclav Klaus, the Czech prime minister in 1993, confirmed that 'what we really need – instead of aid – is exchange … We do not need one-way transfers because they tend to be misused, misdirected, or misplaced. They are usually not taken seriously by either side' (Klaus, 1997: 143, cited in Wedel, 2000). However, the priorities probably vary from individual to individual and project to project.

There is perhaps nothing more symbolic than the exchange of money. Because of the local tradition of bartering, of having to rob Peter to pay Paul, of having to use monies creatively by using one source of money to dripfeed others, the project is conducted entirely as a cash economy. Prices get quoted in a confusing array of roubles, pounds, dollars and euros, and there is an obvious clash between the strict accounting procedures expected by the western funders and the hand to mouth economy of the Russians. Many westerners give their time freely, but in those cases where consultancy fees are charged, one day's fee can amount to many months' salary for a Russian lecturer. Set this against tiny attention to detail, such as the occasion of a visit to a distant practice learning site, where time was running over and the Russian colleague sheepishly asked if the budget would run to an extra hour's rental for the minibus, the equivalent of less than two pounds.

The local tradition of lavish hospitality is upheld, but only by an unspoken agreement not to break the mutual pretence that it is not being funded by the

project. So, we all thank the hosts for the lunch that they have provided, though we all know that it is paid for by the monies which the guests bring with them. It makes for a complex set of relationships in which hosts and guests silently choreograph a notion of dignity, and in this process build a sense of trust and greater mutual understanding. Certainly, the value of a project is tied to the value of the currency which it bestows, but the *values* are a different matter.

DISCUSSION

Technical assistance

The 'TACIS' in Tempus-TACIS stands for Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (former Soviet Union), so it is reasonable to assume that 'technical assistance' is the official view of the kinds of activities we have described in this project[2]. Certainly, technical assistance was offered at a number of levels, from new conceptualisations of practice teaching and learning to specific technologies of student supervision (Caspi and Reid, 2002) and materials for practice teaching and learning (Doel and Shardlow, 2005). Feedback received during the training workshops and subsequent evaluations suggested that the model of task-centred student supervision (TCS) adapted well, despite caution in the literature about modification-based approaches (Gray and Fook, 2004: 626). The model readily moulded to the *group* context for supervision which characterizes much Russian provision. The documentation around practice learning, especially the style of the portfolio, was something which the Russian academies and agencies specifically requested from the western partners, and all four of the Russian academies decided to use the same or very similar documentation based on the English exemplar. With hindsight, it

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[2] This practice learning development project was funded by the British government through the Department for International Development.

would have been preferable to have introduced the two topics (TCS and portfolios) separately since there was a tendency to confuse them.

Technical assistance was also provided in terms of processes as well as outcomes. This was especially important in facilitating partnerships amongst the Russian players. The project reinforced participative and experiential forms of learning. These were no longer the novelty they had been in the 1990s, prompting one participant to comment "we are all westerners now!" when the Russian planning group for the dissemination conference emphasized the need for workshops that were truly participative. In all these respects, the western partners brought experience and expertise which helped the Russian partners to develop local theory and practice.

Neo-colonialism

It is important to consider the psychology of a nation so recently one of only two superpowers and now a recipient of aid wrapped in the language and fashion of the former arch-enemy, the same language which a large number of its younger inhabitants now aspire to learn (Breslauer, 1995; Field and Twigg, 2000; Gelb, 1993; Khrushev, 1993; Kotz, 1999; Kourktchian, 1998, Stiglitz, 2003). Seen in this light, the various waves of westerners could be viewed not just as academic tourists but as neo-colonialists, a revival of Midgley's (1981) notion of professional imperialism. It is a controversial stance, but perhaps we should embrace some aspects of the neo-colonial motives, if only to be open about them. Just as there was a deliberate policy by the Allies to introduce small groupwork at the local level to help democratise Germany after 1945, there is a defensible position that it is right to bolster the fragile Russian democracy. At a socio-political level, introducing alternatives to the dominant market-driven model, behaving in democratic ways in small groups and empowering those people in Russian society who are open and supportive to this philosophy, is a justifiable endeavour if you believe in a mission to spread social democracy. At a

professional level, perhaps part of the mission is to caution colleagues currently constructing their own models about the worst excesses of our own; as the most regulated country in Europe, in terms of social work education and practice (Lymbery *et al,* 2000), this is something British educators are especially well-qualified to do.

The 'west' cannot be caricatured as a homogenous, monolithic entity (Ife, 2001) and one of the difficulties for post-soviet Russia has been the presentation of a singular (market-driven) west, rather than a pluralist one. it is important that differences *within* societies are explored. Social work rests on a contested body of knowledge, and one of the best service which westerners can provide is a variety of role models which reflect and celebrate this diversity. Indeed, though we refer to the 'western' partners, this too is a simplification, since central to the team was its Ukrainian member, a person who had participated in a previous programme to develop practice learning, and a key factor in the project's rationale and success.

Social work is actually a rather useful background for this kind of work and, though the profession would balk at the term, perhaps we are the new 'missionaries' (Purcell, 2001).

Mutual trade

A third way to conceptualise the activities in this kind of project is as mutual trade characterised by 'dialogical processes within local contexts ... to create indigenous and relevant models of social work practice [learning]' (Gray and Fook, 2004: 627).

An example of the complexity of mutual trade is the task-centred supervision (TCS) model to which we have already referred. It is a recent North American model which, as yet, has made little impact in the UK (Marsh and Doel, 2005).

The Russian supervisors were, therefore, breaking new ground, not just in respect of their colleagues in the oblast', but also compared with their English peers. In the seminar on their experience of TCS, the Russian visitors were teaching their English peers about using an adapted American model. An empowering experience of fair trade, or just a more subtle example of the 'one-way transfer of ideas and practice methods from the United States to other countries'? (Toors, 1992).

Another innovative trade route was opened when a graduate from a previous development programme in Ukraine (Bridge, 2002) joined the teaching team as a tutor. Her ability to speak Russian coupled with excellent teaching abilities were a great asset, and her experience was, of course, especially relevant to Russia. Even so, this strategy was not without risk. As one powerful and not easily pleased participant confessed during the final module, "at first I couldn't see why they were bringing this Ukrainian woman to come and teach us, but now I can - she's been wonderful." This experience, alone, confronted prejudices and built bridges within the ex-soviet sphere.

In exchange for the resources which the western partners bring, they take much home. This trade is often less tangible, certainly less visible in the literature, yet highly significant. Although the relative importance of these factors no doubt differs from one person to the next, they include the experience of new professional challenges and personal friendships, a chance to throw current practices at home into relief, esteem in its many guises, an international dimension for the curriculum vitae and material for peer-reviewed articles, in some cases a fee, the opportunity maybe to adopt a different kind of persona, to buy objects of interest - and, in this case, to experience a real winter!

Mutual trade should lead to mutual learning, but this can only happen when we break through the experience of difference and allow ourselves to understand the commonalities, too. Making the 'other' exotic is in itself a subtle form of

discrimination and keeps engagement at bay. Those who have lived and worked in another country, as both authors have, are well-placed to understand that engagement starts when we begin to see the starker differences *within* the 'other' society rather than those *between* it and ourselves. If experiences continue to be exoticised, mutual learning cannot occur. As the communication vignette (E) so clearly illustrates, it is not the exotic differences in language but the everyday discourse which can lead to so much misunderstanding and hurt. No different from 'home', then.

Acknowledgements

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