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Jones, Helen M.F.

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'A totally worthwhile experience': mature students, community education and ERASMUS

Helen MF Jones, University of Huddersfield, UK

A literal interpretation of the phrase 'crossing borders, breaking boundaries' is physical and involves travel. The Commission of the European Union (EU) established the ERASMUS (European Union Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) Chapter of the Socrates programme, together with other schemes promoting transnational mobility, with the manifest intention of breaking down the barriers presented by national borders and promoting understanding and co-operation. In this paper I examine the use of ERASMUS by students who are working towards professionally validated qualifications in youth and community work (YCW), an aspect of community education. Funding from ERASMUS provides students with the opportunity to spend three months in a different EU Member State but what effect does the experience of crossing international boundaries have on the individuals and professional fields involved? I refer to ongoing research concerning the use of ERASMUS by YCW students and also to a recently completed small empirical study concerning mature students from the University College of St Martin, Lancaster, UK who had recently returned from placements in various countries. Quotes from interviews conducted during the latter study are included in the paper.

Structures and institutions

Given the complexity of the inter-relationships concerned in shaping the situation, brief definitions of the various organisations, institutions and structures involved are necessary. In the UK context, the training of future community educators through full-time degree courses which include professional accreditation in YCW, validated by the National Youth Agency (NYA), has been considered in earlier SCUTREA papers. YCW, as a facet of community education, was identified as sharing many features with radical aspects of adult education with particular emphasis on empowerment, reflective practice and education for transformation (Jarvis and Notley 1996; Jones 1996). I build on this identification and focus particularly on mature students on YCW courses. During their courses, students have practical opportunities to engage in one-to-one and group work with both young people and adults: the NYA requires that 40% of course time is spent on fieldwork placements (National Youth Agency 1994). These provide students with vital opportunities to link theory and practice in 'real life' rather than college environments, working alongside professional practitioners. A key aspect of placements is the supervision given by practitioners. They not only act as mentors, presenting models of good technique, but also

facilitate students' learning through, for example, highlighting links between theory and practice and promoting reflective practice.

At European level, ERASMUS offers individual full-time undergraduates the opportunity to spend three months living and studying in a different EU Member State. Published data show the majority of participants to be engaged in business studies, foreign languages, law and engineering courses. The percentage studying education and social sciences is very low; Teichler and Maiworm's extensive study of the 1988-9 cohort included individuals in single figures (Teichler and Maiworm 1993). Most participating students spend their time attending a higher education institution in their country of destiny. A minority engages in work experience with an employer. For YCW students, the period is usually used to complete a fieldwork placement in a community-based organisation. ERASMUS participants are mainly aged from 18 - 22 but YCW courses not only require a certain age on entry but also attract a high percentage of mature students. Most of the students involved in the empirical study were aged over 30. Thus the degree area, the activity in which the students engaged and the students themselves are not 'typical' for ERASMUS. Such atypical use of the scheme generates a number of questions. What, for example, are the outcomes of using a scheme which aims to reduce the effects of national borders for fieldwork placements during which students are required to conduct fieldwork within a clear framework of values, skills and knowledge? Is the physical crossing of borders reflected in the crossing of boundaries within individuals' professional practice? And to what extent are the ERASMUS goals of increased understanding and co-operation achieved?

'The opportunity to do something a bit different'

The students in the empirical study saw ERASMUS as offering a unique chance to experience living and working in a different country with a different culture, political structure and institutions; 'to do something a bit different'. They seized the opportunity despite scant information about the professional context or, indeed, the nature of the fieldwork placements they would be undertaking. During their placements they encountered two particular areas of barrier, both broadly related to issues of translation. The first, of course, was linguistic. Few of the students, in common with the majority of UK inhabitants, spoke a second 'official' European language to a sufficient level to be able to complete a placement in that language. Undertaking placements in a person-centred field of work inevitably requires a particularly sophisticated understanding of, and

sensitivity to, the nuances of language. Youth and community workers need to be able to understand fully in order to identify accurately what is unacceptable or oppressive before they can challenge effectively. The fact that most students were limited to working in English when in another European country imposed a restriction on the extent to which they could be involved in the NYA's requirement of 'informal education work with young people and adults'. Although those with activity-based skills were able to lead sessions and there was potential for sharing experiences and networking, the nature of the work they could do was inevitably different to what they could undertake in the UK. Currently, the extent to which the concept of alternative modes of communication and awareness of non-verbal forms of communication may be worked into the conduct and assessment of their work is a largely unexplored area. Given that not all interpersonal skills rely wholly on language, it could be suggested that, rather than focusing entirely on linguistic aspects of communication, there could be potential for exploring alternative ways round the barrier.

However, the problems of translation were not only linguistic. Whilst the precise skills, training and qualifications required of a hospital doctor or an architect may vary between Member States, the profession exists in a directly comparable form. This is not the case with the professions which, in the UK, include YCW and adult and continuing education. These share techniques and values and are distinct from social work and from welfare-orientated areas of work. YCW, with its focus on young people and communities does not 'translate' into a profession which is understood by workers in other EU member states. Indeed, it is far from easy to provide a clear and succinct overview of the various professions situated on the continuum of people-centred occupations in the different Member States of the European Union. As with the fields of compulsory and post-compulsory education, each Member State has its own, often assiduously guarded, structures and traditions. The difficulty of comparison has been identified by researchers: in his consideration of the potential for a comparative analysis of the education of adults, Jarvis observed, 'it is ... difficult to compare ... different countries since there is not even agreement among different scholars as to precisely what the phenomenon is!' (Jarvis 1992, 405) He added that certain forms of provision, 'such as social pedagogy and literacy' are regarded in some countries as 'social welfare provision for the needy' whilst elsewhere they are regarded as education (Jarvis 1992, 408). Davies Jones further examined the profession of 'social pedagogue', familiar in many EU states but which 'has no counterpart in Britain'. The precise nature of the profession varies between countries, including areas from adult education to youth work and from residential childcare to therapeutic care work. Considering Europe as a whole,

he noted, 'a great variety of mini-professions has been set up with little thought given to the overall professional structure and longer term considerations' (Jones 1994, 19). Each 'mini-profession' brings together different combinations of responsibilities, techniques and philosophies. The fragmented nature of the field should not be seen as the successor to a united and coherent past but rather a response to the different perception of new areas of need in different states. Furthermore, inevitably, each country's professions form distinct hierarchies based on aspects including length and scope of training required and on national attitudes. The lack of any professional area which presents a direct parallel with YCW poses a particular barrier when students attempt to practice the skills, knowledge and values learned in the UK.

The difficulty presented by the disparities between the philosophy and ethos on which the work is founded in the different Member States is more profound than the difficulties posed by language. Not only is the continuum of people-centred work divided up differently in each country but it is constructed on different intellectual traditions and state welfare systems. When workers in related fields in any particular country engage in inter-disciplinary initiatives, they share a general understanding of their differences and of their national context. However, where ERASMUS students are working with organisations in other states, the very lack of awareness of the nature of their different theoretical foundations presents a barrier. Professional terms (which the students termed 'jargon') could not be translated using a dictionary. Although the opportunity to observe and experience alternative models in practice could encourage understanding, the differences in frames of reference are more profound than students in the course of their studies were able to comprehend fully.

The principles underpinning each state's response to youth as an issue and the relationships which characterise the professional field both serve to demonstrate complexities of boundary encountered by ERASMUS students. Chisholm identifies four 'political orientations' within perspectives on youth affairs. These are not mutually exclusive but 'co-exist in varying patterns in each country'. The synthesis of 'social progressivism', 'solidarity and social justice', 'active citizenship' and 'social integration', forms the basis of the professional response to young people (Chisholm 1993). ERASMUS students encountered practice based strongly on a social integrationist approach whilst their own practice is grounded in 'solidarity and social justice'; in challenging 'persistent social inequalities' and, as mentioned earlier, is characterised by aspects shared with radical approaches to adult education. The practice approach is one of the areas of relationship identified by Lorenz. He suggests that the field in mainland Europe is characterised by:

- The relationship with different dominant

ideologies and political programmes as mediated by different types of welfare states and welfare regimes ...

- The relationship with different intellectual traditions in social science, psychology and pedagogy as an escape from ideologies ...
- The potential relationship with service users and social movements (Lorenz 1994, 9)

UK YCW emphasises particular values, skills and areas of knowledge. Practical techniques are highly developed. A range of methods is employed to develop effective reflective practitioners. Epistemologically, however, YCW is in its infancy. Whilst it draws from intellectual traditions of the social sciences, the fact that workers are required to demonstrate particular values in practice gives the field an uneasy relationship with traditional empiricist approaches. The overt emphasis on challenging the barriers presented by inequalities, such as those founded on gender, race and sexuality, results in an inherently subjective approach with an identifiable and strong ideology. Debate is emerging concerning the formation of an epistemological foundation for the work. The need has been highlighted (Popple 1995, 102) but discussion around its construction is in its early days. Both standpoint and post-modern epistemologies may be relevant but there is immense scope for exploration. YCW does not seek to 'escape' from ideology but rather to make explicit the relationship between practice and ideology. This suggests a difference with mainland European professions characterised by a social integrationist approach founded on social science traditions with ideology implicit rather than explicit. Furthermore, the language and approach owe more to methods developed in the USA than Europe.

The comparative weakness of YCW's theoretical grounding is thrown into focus when students encounter professionals in other Member States. UK students are knowledgeable concerning the practical impacts of oppression and they have developed skills to use in working with groups and individuals to challenge its manifestations. Supervisors, trained in professional areas with highly developed intellectual traditions in social science, psychology and pedagogy, were impressed by ERASMUS students' practice and sought theoretical explanations beyond those the students were able to offer. The students did not necessarily have the level of understanding to identify the fact that part of the difference they were experiencing was grounded in the fact that their field of work is grounded in a specific ideology whilst the workers in other states have their grounding in academic empiricism or alternative ideologies. This difference did not encourage mutual understanding even where linguistic difficulties were not present. Moreover, the difference in intellectual tradition extends to the ways in which the study of youth issues and young people themselves is formulated: the potential for genuinely transnational (not merely

comparative) perspectives has been identified but currently each Member State has its own distinct methodology (Chisholm 1993).

'They asked me, 'What's anti-oppressive practice?'

As indicated, the data I gathered for the empirical study suggested that the difference in professional perspectives was particularly evident when students endeavoured to rehearse their skills in the field of anti-oppressive practice. They found the reaction they encountered was useful since they had to articulate their values and explain their skills and knowledge to an extent which would not be required in the UK. Values had to be put into words which fully explained their nature, sometimes for the first time. Students identified challenging their fellow workers and even their supervisors around issues of racism including the use of stereotyping, jokes and terms offensive in English. They met blanket denials that any problems existed, requiring them to explain the range and diversity of oppression and, at the most fundamental level, why it was of the utmost significance. In one Member State, male students encountered little understanding of the reasons for providing single sex activities for young women and found themselves explaining the nature of sexism in a country with a history of equality of opportunity but where they detected no apparent parity of outcome. Although 'social exclusion' is a phrase found in many EU publications, students perceived little awareness of its impact at grassroots level. In one instance, students encountered workers who focused only on leisure-based provision in 'middle-class areas', who denied the existence of problems of inequality and were dismissive of the needs of the locality's 'poorer people and recent immigrants'. Work with poorer people was seen as an aspect of welfare and not, in this case, the responsibility of social pedagogues; the students did not encounter engagement in projects around empowerment or education for transformation.

In general, the data indicated that, provided students were confident in their personal models of reflective practice, there were many opportunities for them to engage in anti-oppressive work. However, supervision by a practitioner could not be structured in the same way as in the UK. Supervisors could not be expected to act as mentors or to provide a model of good YCW practice although their supportive and often questioning rôle was invaluable. Supervisors' professional theory and practice were not the same as the theory and practice the students were being required to develop although their obvious interest in the thinking behind what they were seeing was a great asset. The questions supervisors asked provided students with opportunities to examine fundamental aspects of their work which, in the UK, would go unremarked.

'If I had had doubts about the validity of youth and community work it took it away'

Whilst ERASMUS is intended to break down barriers, YCW students identified how the different perspective

resulted in new insights into their own practice. Chisholm identifies similar reasons for undertaking comparative research; 'deeper understanding of one's own society and culture by accessing external points of reference, improving the workings of one's own society and culture by learning or borrowing from others; and positioning or ranking one's own society and culture against others in relation to dimensions of development and performance' (Chisholm 1995, 21). However, students did not only gain a different perspective. Their experiences resulted in a strengthened confidence in the validity of YCW and in a conviction that UK practice was 'ahead' rather than 'different', especially with regard to anti-oppressive practice. Paradoxically, ERASMUS had led to a reinforcement of professional boundaries and the creation, amongst the participants, of a hierarchy.

There is a tendency amongst UK workers to assume that their model is better in some way. This is supported by the fact that the emphasis on the understanding and challenging of oppression, with particular focus on racism, is perceived by workers based in the UK to be more developed in the UK. This attitude denies the well-developed understanding of, for example, xenophobia, in certain states. It also ignores the way in which each country's discourse is shaped by its particular interplay between culture and history (Taylor 1994). Again, issues of language, terminology and translation affect the way the subject is addressed and can undermine comprehension. Nonetheless, the ERASMUS students, all of whom were white, perceived a lack of understanding of racism and even encountered denial of its existence. They endeavoured to explain such concepts but, for many people in other Member States, the UK's credibility on all social matters is epitomised by the government's opt-out from the Social Chapter.

'A totally worthwhile experience'

The ERASMUS students stressed the value of their placements, giving individual personal development as the key feature. Experiential learning, such as that experienced during placements, both challenges and changes people (Woolfe 1992) and it is clear that the ERASMUS placements offered such opportunities. Teichler and Maiworm found:

former ERASMUS students clearly rated the general impacts, i.e. those on personal development and ways of thinking, as most important ... many ... view themselves, or explicitly say they are viewed by others, as very capable of coping with unexpected situations, persons not previously known, etc., and that they are considered to be more flexible in their ways of thinking and acting (Teichler and Maiworm 1993, 67-8).

The ability to deal with unexpected situations and to think and act flexibly are qualities explicitly required in youth and community workers and are aspects which placements are designed to foster. The students also

reported being strengthened in their understanding of, and belief in the importance of, YCW. Furthermore, the practical experience of living as 'an outsider' is valuable to future workers in their understanding of oppression.

The effect on YCW as a profession was two-fold. First, focus was thrown on the highly developed practical skills and knowledge together with the values on which the work is built. This was essentially positive; the perspective was validated. Secondly however, the weakness of the profession's epistemological basis was highlighted. There are several possible responses. The latter point has been identified and discussion and research are taking place which will build relevant theory although such processes take time. In addition, given increasing globalisation, it could be suggested that work with young people and communities needs future community educators whose perspective is as broad as possible. Alternatively, the paradoxical increasing emphasis on the local could suggest that concentration should be on work with identifiable local communities; on building on existing strengths and that training should reflect this.

Currently, discussion continues on the broad issues while individuals continue to take the opportunity to gain the new perspectives on themselves and their practice afforded by spending time living and working in a different Member State. Nonetheless, the data suggest that the aims of ERASMUS may not be achieved; the physical barriers may be crossed but increased understanding of different countries might actually reinforce belief in YCW: the boundaries of the profession are strengthened. Although a contradiction, the experience of living and working in a different state appeared to reinforce students' confidence in the validity of the UK's model of YCW and particularly in its emphasis on challenging inequalities. In conclusion, however, consideration must be given to the students who emphasised how they had had the opportunity to understand 'the impact of the training', to gain confidence in their developing critical praxis and, above all, to participate in what one identified as 'a totally worthwhile experience'.

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