

Transgressing Boundaries for Encouraging Critical Thinking: Reflections on the Integration of Active Pedagogy and Transnational Exchange into Social Work Education

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Abstract : Almost three decades ago, bell hooks (1994) identified the classroom as “the most radical space of possibility in the academy”. A feminist scholar, educator, and activist, hooks urged educators to transgress the boundaries of what might be customary or considered acceptable in teaching, thus encouraging the pursuit of new ways of knowing and different strategies for sharing knowledge. This paper reflects upon a particular response to hooks’ still relevant call for transgression in teaching. Specifically, this paper reports on the design, implementation, and preliminary analysis of a social work course integrating active pedagogy and transnational exchange to encourage students’ critical thinking and autonomous learning in their development as social workers in a global context. The bachelor’s level course, *Pratiques spécifiques: Projet international*, was developed collaboratively across three francophone institutions of higher learning in Belgium, Canada, and France: the Haute École de Namur-Liège-Luxembourg (Hénallux); the Université de Montréal; and, the Institut d’enseignement supérieur et professionnel, l’IRTS Paris Île-de-France. The driving aims of the course are to promote autonomous learning and critical thinking through a lens of transnational understandings of social problems -competencies indispensable to students’ development as social workers. The course is offered to two paired cohorts, one addressing the subject of “migrations” (Canada/France) and the other the subject of “sexual exploitation” (Canada/Belgium). Through the adaptation of a critical pedagogy of problem-based learning, students are called upon to actively engage in acquiring and applying knowledge to respond to “real life” social issues relating to migration or sexual exploitation. At the conclusion of the course, each cohort of students is brought together for a week-long intensive period of transnational exchange either at the Université de Montréal in Canada or at Hénallux in Belgium. Extending the bounds of the classroom across international borders allows students novel opportunities to deepen and expand their understandings of issues relating to predefined social issues and to critically examine associated social work practices. The paper opens with a presentation of the social work course. Specifically, the authors will outline their adaptation of a pedagogy of problem-based learning integrating transnational exchange in the design and implementation of the course. Returning to hooks’ notion of transgression in teaching, the paper offers a preliminary analysis of how and with what effect the course provides opportunities to transgress hierarchical student-teacher relationships; transgress conventional modes of learning to explore diverse sources of knowledge and transgress the walls of the university to engage with and learn from local and global partners. The paper concludes with a consideration of the potential influence of such transgressions in teaching for students’ development of critical thinking in their practice of social work in global context.

Keywords : active learning, critical pedagogy, social work intervention, transnational learning

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