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CAN E-LEARNING PROMOTE COMPETENCES FOR FUTURE PRACTICE?

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TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMUNITY WORK ONLINE: CAN E-LEARNING PROMOTE COMPETENCES FOR FUTURE PRACTICE?

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This article presents a case study of an online course in Community Work and the learning outcomes for an international group of students participating in the course. Examples from the process of, and results from the development of virtual-learning material are presented. Finally, the students' learning experience and competences achieved by the use of innovative learning material and ICT communication tools are presented.

Keywords: *community work; e-learning; international courses; participatory action learning; participatory action research; social work; virtual-learning material*

The EACEA¹ funded project Social Work-Virtual Campus (SW-VirCamp) (2008-2010) with 12² partners from nine countries aimed to establish a Virtual Campus for Social Work in Europe including e-learning courses, placement and study abroad programs and Bachelor thesis written in English with a comparative perspective on social work. The Virtual Campus includes both the e-learning courses which have been arranged since 2005 by the international consortium, the Virtual Classroom for Social Work in Europe (VIRCLASS), and a new e-learning course in Community Work (CW) from an International Perspective (15 ECTS credits) which is one of the outcomes of the SW-VirCamp project.

This article will describe the process of the development of information and communication technology (ICT) delivered learning materials made for the CW online course and how this

material was used during the students' learning process. This has been a challenging but rewarding experience which will be shared here.

Because the courses are delivered completely online, a great effort was made to ensure that students worked together in mixed groups representing different nationalities, sharing their knowledge from their own countries' social work practice and developing their thoughts and reflections upon the various tasks they were given.

The aim of the international e-learning courses was to meet the new demands and needs of a globalized society with increasing labor mobility and immigration which influence the work of social workers. The common challenges all over Europe demand intercultural cooperation and the development of methods to strengthen social cohesion and reduce ethnocentrism and social exclusion, which must be met by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering social work education. A detailed description of the study program can be obtained from the SW-VirCamp website (<http://www.vircamp.net/>).

The development of a Virtual Campus for Social Work in Europe is a pioneering project which aims to integrate the Bologna process and to inspire HEI to increase English skills among students and teachers. The Virtual Campus offers possibilities for both “internationalization at home” and student and teacher exchanges. The curriculum plans are developed in cooperation among the partners in both projects and the teaching is done by a multinational teacher team. A Consortium Agreement for the continuation of the Virtual Campus has been completed including administrative and financial models.

One of the objectives for the SW-VirCamp project has been that partner institutions should offer the online courses as optional modules for their students and accredited as part of the Bachelor program. For some of the partner institutions this was not possible at the time the pilot course started. As a result of this a severe dropout of students, from 50 to 24 students, occurred before the midway survey.

METHOD

The research carried out in the project is within a “mixed methods approach” (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Creswell, 2009). Multiple data has been collected during the pilot course (Hole, Wouters, & Olsson, 2010). In this article we present findings from three student surveys (start, midway, and end). To give an overview of the course, some quantitative data are presented by simple descriptive statistics. Findings from students' open ended questions are briefly discussed here to present their views of the course. More in-depth analysis will be undertaken in future research. Informed consent was obtained from all students involved in the study in accordance with the Norwegian regulation for ethical research. All screen shots and figures in the following material were produced in the course and are presented with permission of the owners.

In the following, we will present both the research method and the method used when developing the online course and the material made for the course.

Participatory Action Research and Action Learning

During the process of developing a new course in CW the development group decided to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Participatory Action Learning (PAL) (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) as a framework for the development of both course and curriculum. This was because international community work in social work is based on “*assisting people to improve their own communities by collective action*” (Twelvetrees, 2002, p. 1). Continuous feedback and action, based on evaluation is a central tenet of this way of working. Central outcome goals of the competence-based curriculum plan for the CW course are that students shall develop competence in theories and methods in CW, cooperation, and professional development. One of the aims of CW is to make community changes possible. This should be reflected both in the curriculum plan, in the ways the future students should work with the study material and actively participate in development of the course, and by sharing experiences (Bracht, Kingsbury, & Rissel, 1999). By using the dialectical and reflective methods³ of PAL, focusing on “*shared knowledge and learning*” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 597) during the process, the participants would get a hands-on experience, and be better equipped to work in accordance with CW principles.

Through the years of developing the educational projects, different theoretical perspectives have both enhanced our understanding and given useful guidance to further development. Several researchers have been involved with different perspectives. Some have used an ethnographic framework, guided by an interest in exploring “*what happens here?*” Others have chosen the pragmatic paradigm with a focus on the *consequences* of the act, where the underlying questions are: “*what works?*” and “*what does not work and needs to be improved?*” (Creswell, 2009, p. 10). A third approach within the social-constructivist perspective is how art can be a tool for antioppressive practice (Borup, 2006).

Students' experiences of participating in the course have been investigated by three surveys focusing on different aspects related to learning. The three surveys cover both process and product evaluation. After the first survey a summary of the results were presented to all students in the Learning Management System (LMS) thereby eliciting new feedback following the principles of PAR/PAL. The surveys consisted of both quantitative questions and statements evaluated with a Likert scale, as well as many qualitative open-ended questions. Students gave in-depth and thorough answers to these open questions. All three surveys asked about ICT facilities, skills, and competence; and experiences regarding cooperation; use of learning material; and previous knowledge of CW. The first survey also focused on intake procedures; the last survey asked the students about their suggestions for improvement. The second and third surveys asked about experiences with the pedagogy of the course, e.g., using the principle of transparency, reflection on learning, and collaboration in the learning process. The second survey aimed mainly to cover the learning process and adjustments were made after both the first and second survey related to students' comments. The last survey also asked about students' overall experiences and satisfaction with the course.

Students in the Course

The number of students that started in the course was 50. Figure 1 shows the students' ages from 21-45+ years with a peak in year 25. This is also the mean age of the students both at the starting point and among students completing the course. The distribution of students from the partner universities is presented in Figure 2.

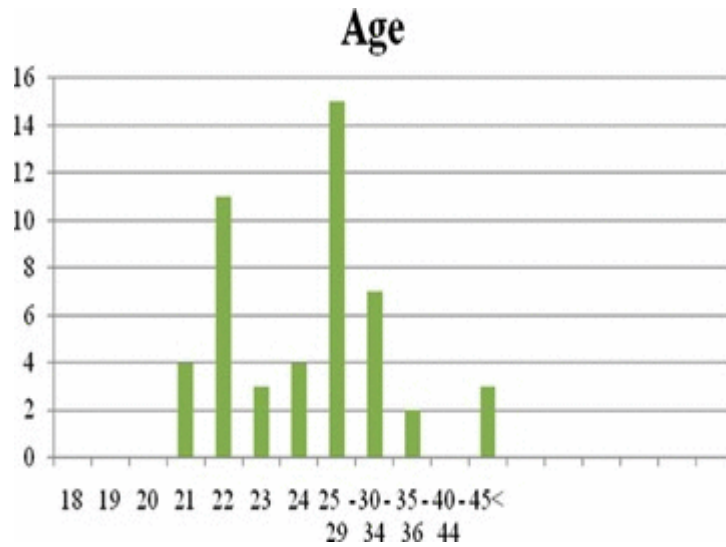


FIGURE 1. Age range of students.

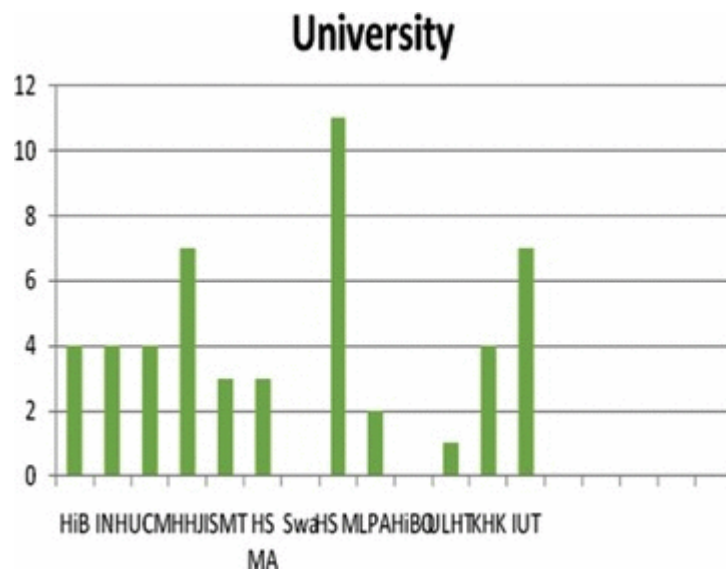


FIGURE 2. Students' universities. For explanation of acronyms see Note 2.

In Figure 1 the vertical axis shows the actual numbers of applicants, and the horizontal, the age of the students. In Figure 2 the horizontal axis shows the acronyms of the HEIs sending students to the course and the vertical axis shows the actual numbers of applicants.

The majority of students applying for the course were Bachelor students (96%) wanting to start the course as an option or on top of their full Bachelor program. In addition to these some were Master students and professional social workers taking the course as a postgraduate study program (4%). The dropout rate of the course was high and many students disappeared within the first two weeks. By the middle of the course, 24 students were still in the course, and 23 of these delivered their final exam. Examinations of the surveys show that the students who responded to the first survey completed the course and took part in the midway and the end survey. This is the data used in our analysis.

A closer examination of the students that left the course show that many of them did not get proper information about the workload. They planned to take the course on top of the regular program, in parallel with their practice placement or with other courses in their Bachelor program. Other reasons were of a more personal nature like illness or family-related problems. A majority of those who succeeded were either professional social workers or Bachelor students that had been working voluntarily in social work and in community work-related projects.

Collaborative Learning

SW-VirCamp is founded on a sociocultural learning perspective intending to develop a community of learning among students from different countries (Larsen, Hole, & Fahlvik, 2007; Wenger, 1998). Participation in the e-learning courses gives the students an opportunity to look at commonalities and differences in social work practice from different countries and compare their own knowledge and tradition to that of students in other countries (Ford & Visser-Rotgans, 2005). The CW course intends to stimulate creativity in project work as a community worker. Through interaction between students from different countries working with the same assignments in a transparent classroom, the program hopes to stimulate new methods and strategies in social work. One of the main challenges in teaching and learning by online courses is to promote cooperation and communication among students (Salmon, 2004). Because a core objective for SW-VirCamp courses is to stimulate international collaboration in the learning process we had high ambitions regarding this. As stated by others (Knowles, 2007; Moore, 2005), careful planning, adjustments and commitment are needed when creating the courses. During the first years, obstacles like students' different time schedules, different holidays, and times for exam as well as the time they could spend on the Internet courses at their home university arose.

Structure of the Course

Like other VIRCLASS courses, the course in CW was organized in weekly programs giving students a complete overview of the workload and tasks during the course period. As shown in Figure 3, in the first bulletin the teachers presented themselves with pictures and a short video. The students were told to give a written personal presentation. A transparent classroom where students presented their tasks in an open ePortfolio gave all the participants a possibility to read and comment on each other's work and also to read the teachers' feedback on completed tasks. This approach was taken to stimulate collaborative learning and knowledge sharing among students and teachers.

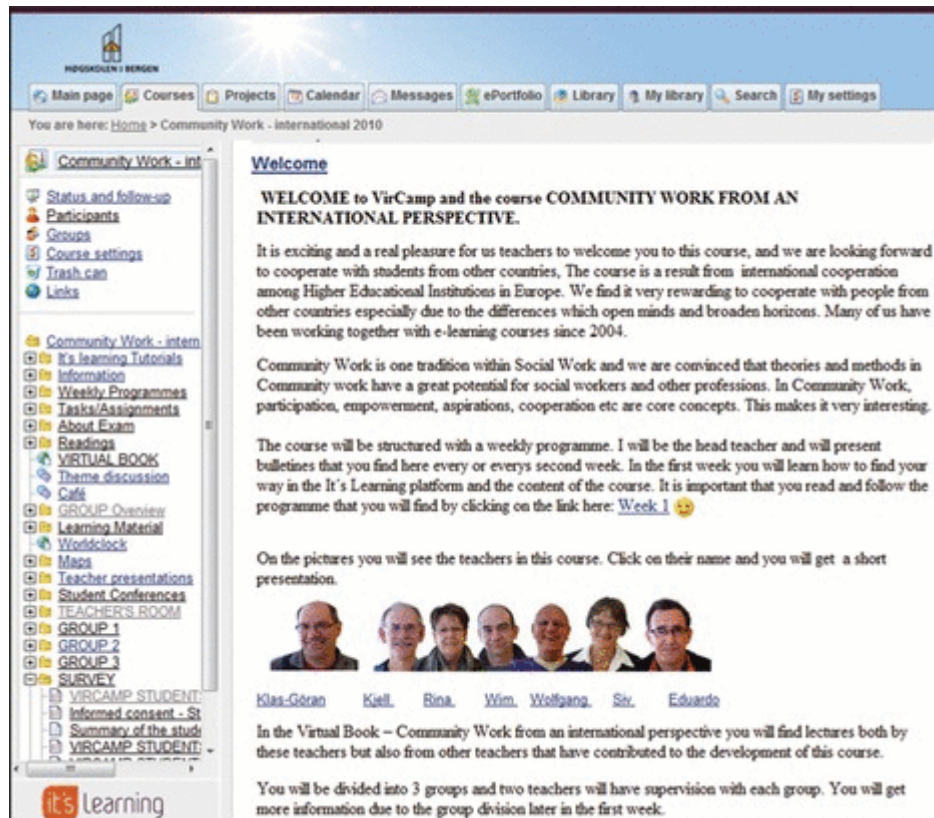


FIGURE 3. From the bulletin board in the LMS, it's learning.

Even though the common platform for collaboration and information channel in the students' learning process was the commercial LMS, it's learning,⁴ a wide range of other Web.2.0 communication tools, available from the Internet free of charge were used. The reason for selecting these was because the preferred tools were not incorporated in the LMS.

Tools for Collaboration

An important part of the students' learning process was through collaboration online, and students were divided into groups with participants from different countries. Thus, they had the possibility to share experiences from diverse contexts and practices. Although previous courses had tried to reduce the number of ICT tools to ensure a low threshold of entry for the students, this pilot course invited students to use Skype with headsets, Google.Docs, discussion forum, and other synchronous and asynchronous programs. To arrange a meeting at the same time was a challenge because of different time schedules. Nevertheless, the teachers wanted students to discuss online by participating in synchronous chats. Students also used Skype for setting up a role play, inviting people from the community to a meeting with the community worker for the development of a project plan. To increase flexibility, different online tools were used for coursework, for example, when the students prepared their project plan. Web.2.0 tools provided students with opportunities for reflection, spell checking, searching for references, and so forth. Triggers, for example short video clips, sound tracks, or pictures triggering associations were used for reflection in theme discussions among the students. The students' different perceptions and interpretations of these triggers were explored. An informal Café (discussion forum) (see Figure 3 in the left menu) gave the students and teachers an opportunity for informal contact where they could share, for example, their musical interests, by linking up to mp3-files and YouTube videos.

Both students and teachers used reflection blogs during the course. Students were asked to write about their learning experiences during the course, and teachers established their own blog for reflection on the process of being a teacher in a pilot course. Reflection on learning is important for professional development (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1994; Fook & Gardner, 2007) and also an important part of the Action-Research and Action-Learning spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

As a supplement to traditional academic writing, students also presented their project ideas for the public in a Newsletter blog—“the Europe Magazine” as can be seen in Figure 4. Addressing the general public in a nonacademic way is seen as a necessary skill for engaging people in a community work process.



FIGURE 4. Examples from students' presentation in the Europe Magazine, including a “tag cloud” giving links to the posting.

These different tools helped the students in their collaborative work. SW-VirCamp tried to achieve an optimal balance between synchronous and asynchronous tools to give the students as much flexibility as possible within the strict frames. The use of many diverse tools gave the students a lot of different logging-on procedures which were experienced as complicated and irritating as the following student comment illustrates:

I think the use of different tools is good in general. But I also made the experience during this course that a lot of tools were on different websites. To have an overview about all these were

quite difficult because one also use a lot of websites and tools in private as well. It would have been easier if every used tool had been on the e-learning platform.” (Survey 3, R2)

Collaboration Triggered by E-Learning Material

In both projects, VIRCLASS and SW-VirCamp, technology was used intensively for communication, sharing of information and knowledge building, as in many other e-learning courses (LaMendola, 2010; Moore, 2005). But more interesting might be the extensive development of different audio-visual material to support the students' learning process. Since 2006, three virtual books with learning material for e-learning courses have been produced (Larsen, 2006; Larsen & Hole, 2009; Larsen, Olsson & Henriksbø, 2010). In these books e-learning materials such as short-screen lectures, audio-visual triggers and cases are presented. Experiences from early e-learning courses made it clear that good virtual-learning material, as noted above, is important for students' learning outcomes (Larsen et al., 2007). The importance of using learning material which stimulates perception in different ways is also supported by cognitive psychology and theory about perception. The human processing of the different visual elements (pictures or film) can trigger learning in different ways (Helstrup & Kaufmann, 2000), as well as support students' various learning styles (Gardner, 1993).

One of the outcomes of the SW-VirCamp project was to develop competence among partner institutions in developing virtual-learning material. Previous production during the VIRCLASS project had been done by the Media Centre at Bergen University College (HiB) in Norway. When starting the SW-VirCamp project, partners wanted to participate in the production themselves. Therefore, several workshops were arranged with the support of the Media Centre and resulted in the production of screen lectures and triggers at several of the partner universities. During the workshops, teachers and technical and media staff worked together, and competences in the making of e-learning material were developed. The final versions of the Virtual Book and the Green Park Community blog were produced by the Media Centre at HiB.

Figure 5 shows the interface of the book where one can find 10 screen lectures, 9 triggers, and the Community Case.



FIGURE 5. Virtual Book, including screen lectures, triggers and the Community Case.

To develop a case which could be presented as a web resource and simulate a “real life” community was not easy. The challenge was to give the students a learning arena which gave them the possibility to explore the different issues related to Community Work within a virtual community. Limited time and money made the process even harder. Fruitful collaboration in workshops with teachers and technical and media staff developed the metaphor: *the Green Park Community* as illustrated in the Figures 6 & 7.



FIGURE 6. Workshop, drawing ideas for the Green Park Community.

In this “Park,” located in a city anywhere in Europe, all kinds of people are encountered: young skateboarders, old ladies, drug users, and homeless people, as well as families, young mothers and their children, immigrants and young activists. Students in the CW course meet these people when they enter the Green Park Community blog. Maja, a fictional student who

lives near the park opens the blog, presents herself and invites people in the park to deliver their posting in the Green Park Community Blog. We wanted the blog to have an amateur look and feel, rather than a professional one, to make it as realistic as possible as a case for the students' work, illustrated by Figure 8.



FIGURE 7. The map view of the Green Park Community blog as the outcome of the creative process.



FIGURE 8. Maja presents the blog and invites people to contribute.

In the blog, Maja has uploaded three feature articles from the “City West Magazine” (see Figure 9) highlighting events from the Green Park and presenting the voices of the official authorities (e.g., police and politicians) as well as those living in the neighborhood of the park. Events in the park during half a year are mapped in the blog. Short YouTube videos as well as pictures from Creative Commons are integrated in the blog to give life to the activities in the park. Students are introduced to Green Park by the Gardener, who is video interviewed by Maja's friend, Patzy. The blog was made in *WordPress* and the fictional text and content

of the blog was made by text authors working from a draft manuscript made by the teachers and media staff in the project.



FIGURE 9. Feature-article in the City West Magazine, presented by Maja in the blog.

The result of all these texts, videos, and other presentations about the park is a complex case study aiming to present a community as diverse as one can find in a “real” community. Following CW methods, course students were invited to map the Green Park community and suggest ideas for projects which could be developed together with the people in the park.

A thorough evaluation of all the produced learning material has been completed (Hole et al., 2010). The next section focuses on students' experiences of using the Green Park Community Case.

RESULTS

Following the principles of PAR/PAL, the summary of the results of the first survey was presented to all students in the LMS opening for new feedback. In the following surveys, we received in-depth responses to the open questions; this might be due to the feedback given after the first survey. In the following, we will present some of our findings regarding students' experiences during the course.

Students' ICT Skills

Eighty percent of the respondents in the last survey (n = 19, N = 24) stated that they had developed their ICT skills during the course which could be useful in their future work as a Social Worker. Seventy percent did not use Google.Doc before the course and at the end all respondents considered that this tool contributed most to their learning during the course together with chats. For most of the respondents Skype had never or seldom been used before the course. After the course more than 80 percent found this tool to be helpful for their learning.

In the open-ended questions, several respondents experienced the use of ICT tools like Google.Docs, chats, blog, and discussions forum as very useful for their job as social workers. It gave possibilities to reach and communicate with clients independent of time and space limitations. Many respondents expressed this as an increase of their professional repertoire of tools. This was also expressed by currently practicing professional social worker, not only by the Bachelor students.

To be able to reach people that I normally don't reach, for example, people with disorders that are afraid to leave their home, I can discuss online and reach them that way. (Survey 3, R7)

Integration of Theories into Practice

Fifty-six percent of the respondents in the first survey (n = 25, N = 50) indicated they knew nothing about CW when they started. At the end of the course the respondents had not only increased their general knowledge about CW theories but also increased their hands-on skills working from a bottom-up perspective, and their ability to make project plans. The question regarding the project plans was rated on a Likert scale from 1 (*least*) to 10 (*most*) and gave an average of 9 (standard deviation 1.49).

The case, the Green Park Community Blog was the most important learning material, giving students an experience of applying theories to practice. Students expressed this e-learning course experience as being as near as possible to the “real world.” The mapping of the park and people there were as complicated as in ordinary communities.

A Bachelor student stated:

The theories offered insights that helped during my internship where I worked bottom-up. I also linked my internship organization with the tasks we had. This link boosted my learning process. (Survey 3, R3)

Also the professionals appreciated the learning material:

I am currently a social worker in a community development project. The situations were very similar to what I faced every day. Actually the Green Park portrayed very well the community where I work. (Survey 3, R8)

Another student expressed:

The practical part was great. The Green Park Community appeared totally real. Also the Skype role play made it more realistic. Furthermore I think it has been a great case for working, in my opinion, it could be a real situation. (Survey 3, R19)

Expectations and Experiences

In the first survey students were asked to present their three main expectations and in the final survey they were asked to rate to what degree these were met. The students' expectations were mainly regarding international cooperation, increase of English skills, and knowledge about CW.

The answers in the last survey showed that their expectations were fully met even though some problems occurred in regards to collaboration and time for personal reflections due to the strict time schedule of the course.

They were also asked if they had some unexpected experiences. Students mentioned here friendship, and the content being useful for practice as social worker.

I didn't know what to expect but I didn't think that my learning outcome would be as huge as it has been. Taking things step by step has definitely been an advantage. (Survey 3, R13)

Can E-Learning Promote Competences for Future Practice?

The curriculum plan stated three core competencies students were expected to gain from the Community Work course: *Methods and Theories in Community Work*, *Co-operation*, and *Professional Development*.

In the last survey the students were asked “to what degree they had developed the necessary competencies” as a community worker in these areas. This was graded on a scale from 0-10, (0 [*the lowest*] and 10 [*the highest*]). As Figure 10 shows, all students rated their competence development in these areas as good and very good. On a Likert scale from 1-10 the average score was from 8,3-8,9 for the three competencies. The vertical axis shows percentage of students, and the horizontal axis shows the scores of the students.

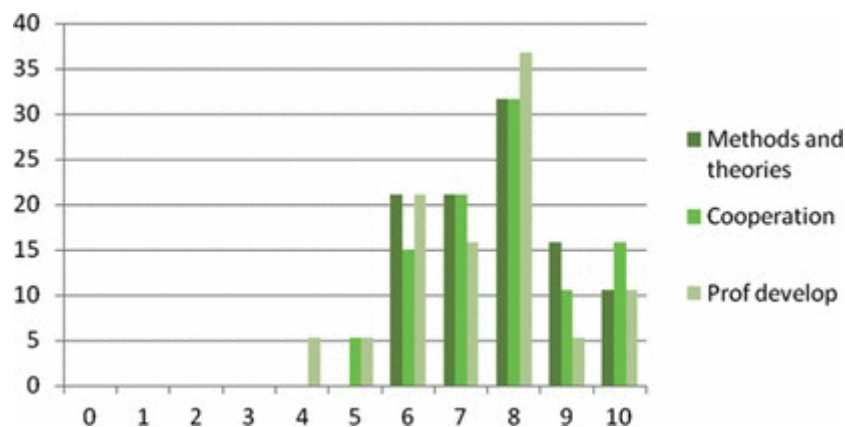


FIGURE 10. Students rating of their competencies as stated in the curriculum plan (in percentage, n = 19, N = 23).

To get a better understanding of the development of different competencies, these were explored in more detailed questions related to the main aspects of community work in the first and last survey. In this way the students' growth in knowledge was explored. Figures 11-14 shows the development. The graphs are shown in percentages. For the first survey n = 25, N = 50, in the last n = 19, N = 23 (Hole et al., 2010).

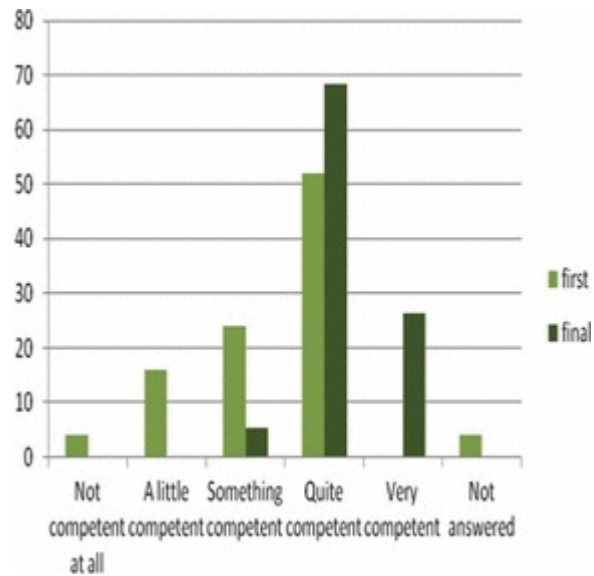


FIGURE 11. "I am able to reflect on the understanding of a specific situation and able to justify the chosen methods for CW."

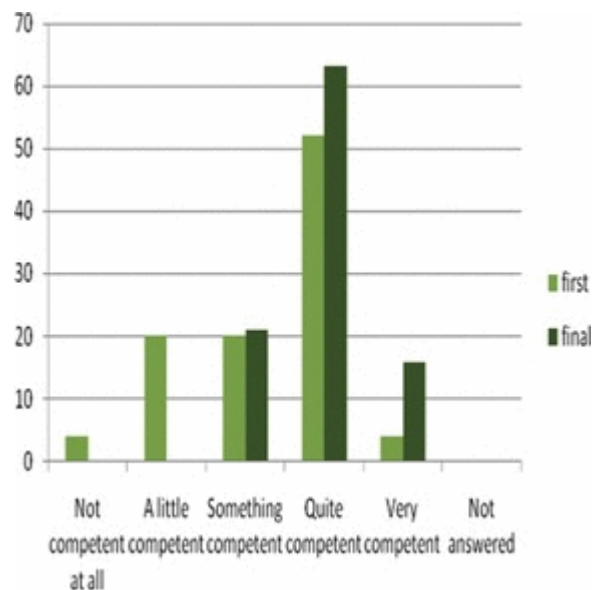


FIGURE 12. "I am able to collect and analyze relevant information about CW and report the findings."

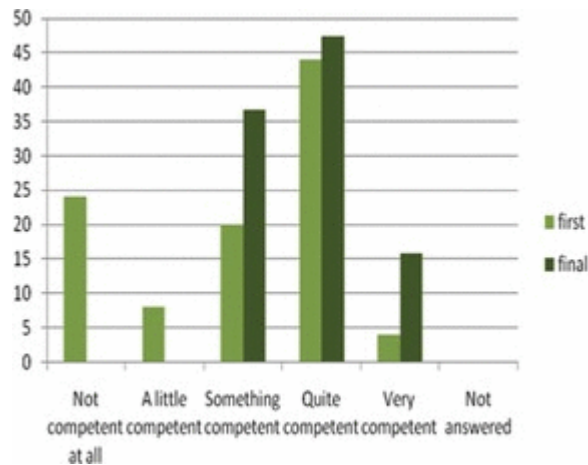


FIGURE 13. “I am able to see opportunities on macro-, meso- and micro-levels in communities and to create a plan for a community work project.”

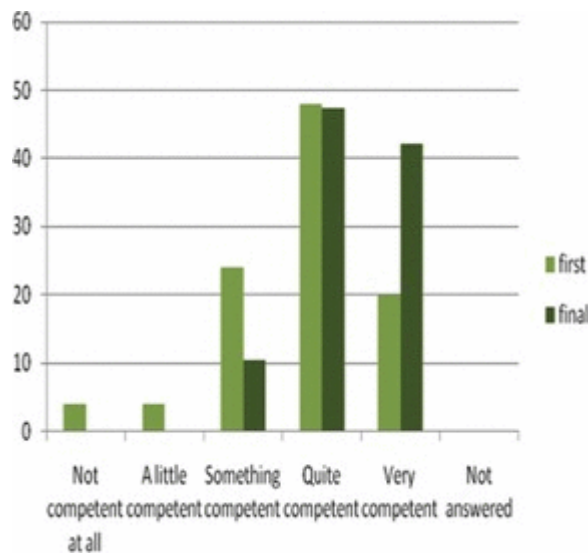


FIGURE 14. “I am able to reflect on my own continuing professional development.”

The first question was “*I am able to reflect on the understanding of a specific situation and able to justify the chosen methods for community work*” represented in Figure 11 while the statement “*I am able to collect and analyze relevant information about CW and report the findings*” is represented in Figure 12.

Figure 13 represents the statement “*I am able to see opportunities on macro-, meso- and micro-levels in communities and to create a plan for a CW project,*” while Figure 14 shows the answers to “*I am able to reflect on my own continuing professional development*” (Hole et al., 2010, p. 34).

Planning the Curriculum for the CW course, a discussion among the teachers raised the question of the possibility of using the PAR/PAL approach in the development of the course. This should result in a transparent, inclusive, and democratic learning arena where all participants were heard and where feedback and suggestions for changes were taken into account. During the planning process of the curriculum and the course, students were not involved. However, during the course, students' reactions and opinions were asked for in the

surveys and their opinions were taken into account both for the improvement of the pilot and when planning the next course.

At the end of the course, the development group wanted to explore how the students had experienced the strict structure of the course in relation to the ideas about the students being active contributors to knowledge development. One of the questions was: “*Community Work is also about Participation, Democracy and Empowerment. This course has been made in a very structured way. In what ways has this contributed or hindered your learning process?*” (Survey 3, Q38). Seventeen students (n = 19, N = 23) responding to this question made it very clear that the structure had been important for their learning and had not been a hindrance to their participation and involvement. The following quotations are examples of their responses:

I feel the structure have been good for my learning process. Yes, it has been challenging but by completing each week's assignments I've been climbing the steps for the next weeks assignments. In this way my learning increased each weeks and I got the tools needed for next week. (Survey 3, R14)

It has improved my learning process and showed a clear way on how to grow as a social worker. These themes are often the base of many projects we will be confronted with in the future. (Survey 3, R15)

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The SW-VirCamp project ended as a EU-funded project, September 2010. However, the SW-VirCamp Consortium of seven HEIs from Portugal, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Belgium continues to take responsibility for arranging online courses, increasing the staff with e-teacher competence through arranging e-pedagogy courses and continuing to develop new modules as optional courses for students. A core aim for the future will be to get an overview of good practice placements abroad and possibilities for courses in English for students who want to study abroad. In the future, we hope to have students with in-depth studies in international social work writing their final thesis in English from an international comparative perspective.

A Quality Guide has been developed for the e-learning courses during the project period and evaluation and research related to central aspects of e-learning will continue.

CONCLUSION

This article has described the development of an international online course in CW and how students have experienced their learning process. Questions have been raised if social work can be learned on the Internet. As others have shown before (LaMendola, 2010), our findings during this project certainly confirm that students have achieved new competence and skills as social workers. While bachelor students are clearly aware that this is a good preparation for real practice and are looking forward to practice these in the real world, skilled social workers have achieved the theoretical background to inform their daily practice.

... It has widened my knowledge through introducing new theories especially the work by Paolo Freire has interested me much. I worked with the competences my clients have and

start to develop these competences through cooperating with them, but I didn't realize that there is a theory behind why I am doing so. (Survey 3, R13)

Integration of theory and practice is an essential learning outcome in the competence-based curriculum plan. Even though a small number of students completed the course, our data show that this and other student-learning outcomes were met. Both this course and other online courses will be offered to social work students in the future to meet the competence needed in a global society.

Notes

1. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme-Call for Proposals 2008 (EAC/30/07) Erasmus Programme: Erasmus Virtual Campuses under the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. Reference number: 142767-LLP-1-2008-1-NO-ERASMUS-EVC. This article reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
2. During the years there have been changes regarding partner institution. Pr. 01. October 2008-1 September 2010 the following partners are members of the new SW-VirCamp Consortium: Bergen University College (HiB), Norway; Inholland University of Applied Sciences (INH), the Netherlands; Mannheim University of Applied Sciences (HSMA), Germany; Miguel Torga University College (ISMT), Coimbra, Portugal; University of Complutense (UCM), Madrid, Spain; Bodø University College (HIBO), Norway; K.H. Kempen University College (KHK), Geel, Belgium; School of Health Sciences (HHJ), Jönköping University, Sweden; University of Liepaja (LPA), Latvia; Mittweida University of Applied Sciences (HSM), Germany; Lusofona University (ULHT), Portugal; Swansea University (SWAN), Wales, UK. Nine of the partners mentioned above have also been partners in VIRCLASS. In addition also University of Parma, Italy; Vorarlberg University of Applied Sciences, Dornbirn, Austria; University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn, Poland; Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania have been partners.
3. The Action-Research spiral: the *“spiral of self-reflective cycles of planning, acting and reflecting ... , then planning ... , etc.”* (Kemmis and McTaggart, [2000](#), pp. 596-597).
4. From its learning webpages: *“it's learning is one of the world's leading providers of educational technology ... we are a global market leader in developing, deploying, supporting and hosting learning platforms and educational software”*. <http://www.itlearning.co.uk/aboutus>

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