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Social Work Education in the changing Nordic Welfare States – Where are we – and where are we heading?

## **ODL (open distance learning) AS INSTRUMENT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING SOCIAL WORK IN A CHANGING EUROPE**

*Presentation of the VIRTUAL CLASSROOM FOR SOCIAL WORK IN EUROPE (the VIRCLASS project).*

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**Open distance learning is an up-and-coming method in international social work education. ODL has a long tradition in many countries and in many professions, but is relatively new in social work education on an international level. This paper will start with a short description of the Virtual Classroom for Social Work in Europe (the VirClass project); its origin, ideas, objectives and target groups. The main focus will be on the learning activities during the educational programme and a presentation of some of the results from the evaluation of students and teachers that took place during and at the end of the programme.**

### **PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT**

#### **The origin**

The Virtual Classroom for Social Work in Europe started as an idea in 2002 during the first network conference for the thematic network European Social Work (EUSW-TN) in Parma, Italy. Since then a 20 ECTS credit course in European Social Work has been developed in cooperation with 11 European countries, which participated in the development of the curriculum plan and the running of the course. More than 70 students from 20 countries have taken part in this educational programme.

The EUSW-TN programme had planned for a summer school to be held in Parma in 2005. In the working group for the “school issue”, the idea of developing an e-learning study as a precursor to the summer school period arose. The “school group” started to work on this idea in addition to the summer school, and an e-learning programme comprised of three modules was created. The VirClass project was established in 2003 under the leadership of BUC and with most of the same partners as those in the “school group”. I have been involved in this work as leader for the “school group in EUSW-TN in addition to my role as project manager for the VirClass project.

The VirClass project receives financial support from the Norway Opening Universities (Norgesuniversitetet) and Høgskolen i Bergen in addition to the work and commitment from the partner institutions. The partner institutions were: Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania; School of Health Sciences, Jönköping, Sweden; University of Wales, Swansea; University of Parma, Italy; University of Complutence, Madrid, Spain; the City of Bergen; the local community of Parma; Polytechnic, Helsinki, Finland. In addition to these partners, teachers from universities in Germany, Portugal, Belgium and other universities in Italy and Spain have also participated in course development.

### **The idea and innovative aspects**

The idea of creating e-learning courses for joint international activities among educational institutions in Europe is in many ways new. Not many institutions are using e-learning as part of their social work education programmes, and there seems to be an idea that there is a contradiction inherent in using internet technology to teach social work. The experience of the students and their evaluation of the VirClass project prove otherwise. The innovative aspects of this project are first and foremost the fact that e-learning has been introduced as a tool for international social work education in a common virtual classroom and with a common curriculum plan. While other professions have been using ODL as part of their educational programmes, this has not been the case in social work education in most parts of Europe. The values of this project so far have been the scope and breadth of international cooperation among teachers from different universities.

Students who have participated in the courses have expressed the value of getting in contact with students from other nations and acquiring knowledge not only about social work in foreign countries, but also a new perspective about the situation in their own country.

One student from Eastern part of Europe summarized the experience in this way:

*“.....I will describe this E-learning process as very precious to me. My colleagues from Lithuania and Sweden brought their system of studying and the profession of social worker in their countries closer to me. But the most important thing is that now, I am more interested in social work than ever. My mind was functioning in a different way these past 7 weeks. I learned the importance of the research work and I felt that everyday I wanted to learn more by going deeper and deeper into the research. I honestly expected to find many more differences between these three countries, but I saw that many of the differences have been overcome in the past ten years. Now, I am sure that our country is successfully handling the changes, trends and demands for better education and professionalisation for social workers.”*

### **The educational programme and curriculum plan**

The educational programme consists of three modules. Module 1 is called: “Social Work in Europe. Commonalities and Differences”. The second module is called: “Comparative Social Work. A European perspective on core issues of social work” and the third module is called: “Social Work as a Subject and Profession in Europe”. The first two modules are offered as e-learning courses. The first module can also be taken as a self-study course. The third module includes a preparatory period and in the end an assignment period that may only be taken as self-study. In the middle of these two self-study parts there is a summer school campus in Italy for 16 days in July 2005. Module 1 is compulsory to enter modules 2 and 3. Students can choose to enter only module 1, modules 1 and 2, modules 1 and 3 or modules 1, 2 and 3.

The first module started in January 2005 and the second module ended in the middle of June 2005. The third module that includes the above mentioned summer school in Parma, will conclude with an individual written assignment in September of this year.

The curriculum plan and information about the project can be found on the website: <http://home.hib.no/ahs/virclass>. Module 1 is a general introduction to social work in Europe and how to do comparative studies. It is mainly based on the first book from the EUSW-TN, European Social Work, edited by Campanini and Frost (2003), which includes contributions from authors from 24 European countries.

Several of the themes in module 2 centre on anti-oppressive social work. Module 2 also focuses on core items in social work such as: discrimination and oppression, poverty, ethnic diversity, welfare systems, education, skills training and professional competence. Module 3 is a continuation of the themes from module 2. This offers students from module 2 an

opportunity to increase their knowledge of the subject of social work, while allowing new students to start their learning processes on specific topics.

### **The target groups and participating students**

The target groups for this international study are students in BA, diploma and MA programmes and professional social workers actively involved in field work in Europe. Even some PhD students have joined the course. The statistics show that of 32 participants in module 1 of the e-learning programme, 53% were undergraduate students (BA, diploma), 40% were graduate or postgraduate students (MA/PhD) and 15% were professional social workers. The combined percentage of MA/PhD students and professional social workers increased in module 2 (25 students participated) to 52%, whereof 20% were professional social workers and 32% were MA/diploma students. In module 3, 34 students participated, and the percentage of BA students increased to 67% while the MA/PhD students amounted to 17%.

**Table 1 Educational background of students in the different modules**

Module	BA/DIPLOMA	MA/PhD	Social Workers	Number of students
Module 1 e-learning	53%	40%	15%*	32 students (100%)
Module 2 e-learning	32%	52%	20%	25 students (100%)
Module 3	67%	17%	16%*	34 students (100%)

\*The total percentage amounts to more than 100 per cent. This is because some of the MA and PhD students were also working as professional social workers in addition to their studies.

The students are from 19-50 years of age. The majority of the students are under 25 years of age.

At the start, 120 students from 20 countries in Europe applied for this study programme. In the final assignment of module 1, students from 13 nations participated and in module 2 students from 10 nations participated. The students who applied to the programme came from: Great Britain, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Macedonia, Turkey, Finland, Iceland, Slovenia and Austria. At the end, Iceland, Slovenia, Austria and Turkey were no longer represented.

### **Using a standardised platform for e-learning**

A quick survey during the first conference of the EUSW-TN demonstrated that there was little experience of using e-learning in social work education, and that there was no dominant standardised platform for e-learning currently in use by the participating institutions. Since the VirClass project was initiated by BUC, the platform “It:s Learning”<sup>1</sup> which is used by this institution, was chosen as the basis for the development of the e-learning programme on social work in Europe. Most standardised e-learning platforms are built on a similar structure which includes possibilities for synchronic and asynchronous discussions, portfolios for the students’ work, readings and study materials, and a bulletin board for messages and information about progression and new course materials. In this way, persons familiar with one standardised system can easily or with some practice use other systems. Among e-learning professionals, discussions about the pros and cons of standardised and non-standardised platforms are

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<sup>1</sup> The It:s Learning programme is powered by the company It:solutions in Bergen, Norway (<http://www.itsolutions.no/>) and is used by several universities and primary and secondary schools in Norway and abroad.

ongoing (Hoem, 2005; Hoel, 2003)). In the VirClass project a standardised platform was regarded as the easiest way for to include newcomers in the creation of an open distance learning environment.

During the two years of cooperation in the teachers' group prior to the start of the educational programme, courses were held in how to use the e-learning platform and construct course materials for the e-learning programme.

### **The e-learning students**

Hardly any of the students in the e-learning courses were familiar with e-learning before they started. Only very few Norwegian and Swedish students had prior experience of using standardised platforms. The introduction to e-learning started one week before the official course programme started, and students were introduced to a tutorial programme with tasks that guided them through the first difficulties of being new students in a virtual classroom. They had to introduce themselves and bring in personal information and a picture of themselves. They were also asked to participate in a discussion or present their opinion about an issue. In the evaluation at the end of this module, the students seemed to be satisfied with the tutorials as a good introductory aid and also the structure of the platform/classroom.

Merely for fun but also to stimulate the students to participate in classroom activities, a weekly competition about "where in Europe is this" was set up. A picture from someplace in Europe was presented every week during module 1 accompanied by three possible answers. About half of the students participated each week and, according the feedback from students, it was this non-professional task that made them curious and prompted them to enter the platform and look at the picture, and then also to look at next week's course programme. The idea of the picture contest was to inspire everyday discussions and small talk about travel experiences and so on. This was not the result, however. Instead, some students really increased their creativity and ability to conduct research on the Internet by looking for the right solution to the pictures.

As one of the students said:

*"The most exciting task was the pictures for every week. I was waiting for them. I like to travel and I have visited several countries, but every week it was very interesting to get closer to some places in the world even if by photo".*

### **Contact with and among students**

One of the most challenging things about running international studies using e-learning is to stimulate interaction between the students and between students and teachers.

The main idea of setting up international comparative courses in a virtual classroom is to stimulate cooperation, curiosity and the development of new knowledge among students and between students and teachers. This stimulation has to be initiated by the teachers and the pedagogy of e-learning, and by using a task-centred approach to learning.

One of the things pointed out by several students in the evaluation of the courses was that participation in online discussions and group discussions should be mandatory.

The students' own report of how often they visited the classroom each week shows that 52% have been working on the course 4-8 hours/week and 20% from 9-12 hours/week. 70% of the students visited the classroom more than three times/week.

### **E-learning pedagogy and the role of the e-learning teacher**

E-learning teachers have to use other communication tools than face-to-face contact and direct verbal communication. An e-learning teacher's role is more focused on supervision,

setting guidelines and triggers for discussions, stimulating curiosity, independent study and cooperation, and coaching students throughout the courses.

Our experience after preparing and running two modules emphasises the importance of having the weekly programmes, assignments and lessons ready from the very beginning. This will allow the teachers to devote more time to feedback for the students and bring in new elements for stimulating cooperation during the courses. It also creates a better overview and a clearer idea about progression in the courses.

It is important, however, that students do not get all the materials and instructions for the whole course at one time, but that weekly information or information for a period of a couple of weeks is presented. This makes it possible for students to maintain focus and keep in touch with other students going through the same learning process.

In addition to these weekly introductions, an overview of the whole course, with objectives for periodic work and assignments, is important in order to give the students an opportunity to plan their e-learning course in relation to the other activities in their lives.

Nearly all the students in our courses were full-time students or in full-time jobs. Many had limited access to computers, and this made cooperation and synchronic contact difficult.

One of the main difficulties, at least in the beginning of the course in module 2, was to adjust the workload to fit the time available for the students' participation in the courses. During the first weeks, many students complained about too much work and too little time to prepare their assignments. Especially for students who had taken module 1 as independent study and had not participated in VirClass, starting out as a new e-learning student in module 2 created difficulties.

Another important thing to have in mind is that students have other exams at their home universities that will demand their full attention for a while. These aspects have to be clarified and taken into consideration when students apply for participation in the European educational programme. During the acceptance of new students in the VirClass programme, creating groups of students with a good basis for cooperation will be important. When designing the student groups who will be working together, it is important to consider the following: representation from different countries, the level of education, the schedule of their ordinary educational programmes and drawing up contracts for participation and progress. This is vital if students are to be able to cooperate during the courses in a constructive way. Without cooperation the idea of an interactive international study is impossible to realise.

### **The overall concept of learning**

The overall concept of learning in this educational programme is connected to constructivist and socio-cultural knowledge and understanding (Wenger 1998; Säljö 1999). The main pedagogical and didactical approaches are task-oriented and problem-solving methods of teaching and Learning. Focus and emphasis are on a learner-centred curriculum with learning materials and tasks/assignments structured in a way that activate students in the learning process. This inspires individual work, but more importantly, interaction, discussion and cooperation that cross national borders. Our experience so far indicates a need for learning objects that can elucidate the topics through images, short videos and texts that can trigger discussions among students.

To stimulate cooperation between students and encourage them to take a comparative approach to their studies, assignments were tailored to stimulate these activities. A lesson in task-oriented approaches or problem-based learning methods (PBL) was presented during the first weeks and the students' own active involvement in the learning process was emphasised as an important aspect of e-learning. For many students this was also a new way of learning, and one of the challenges was to choose a manageable topic for study and comparative work that was connected to the objectives and content of the course and curriculum plan.

In the first module students were instructed to choose topics from Campanini and Frost (2003). The options for topics were limited to: the background of social work, the history of social work education, the curricula for social work education, the meaning of the term "social worker" in different countries, the professional status of social work, the role played by social workers, challenges facing social work and the most significant European dimensions of social work and social work education for the future.

Students were asked to present their topic of interest to two students from countries in other parts of Europe than their own regions, together with a selection of questions about their topic. In this way, students were forced not only to focus on their own and very limited problem of interest, but to research the questions presented by other students using resources in their own countries. However, the level of accuracy and the use of references to sources and literature differed among the students, and this made it difficult for the students to know if the answers to their questions were based on subjective opinions or reliable sources.

The students developed their final assignments step-by-step; based on a specific topic, they first presented the situation and aspects connected to their topic in relation to three different countries and then presented the commonalities and differences between the countries. More complicated comparative research was not expected of the students in these modules. To study and understand different aspects of the "same" phenomenon in different countries and cultures is difficult enough as a starting point for international comparative research.

### **Academic or evidence based writing**

Throughout all the modules an academic standard of writing was applied. Students were advised to use the Harvard Guide of References and were given a direct link to the source. Only a few students managed to use this guide properly. During the summer school period of module 3, a lecture/seminar was held on how to carry out evidence-based writing. A quick show of hands when asked how many students were familiar with and had been trained to do this kind of writing at their universities and university colleges showed that very few had been required to meet these demands before, were familiar with this standard or used it in their own papers.

### **Online discussions**

Both students and teachers raised the importance of stimulating discussions online and in the virtual classroom. During the first two modules synchronic conferences did not work. During the first module the server did not yet have the capacity for this. This problem was later solved by using a new server for synchronic communication in It:s Learning, and this made communication easier. Only one of the course teachers, however, made use of synchronic discussions. The experience of module 2 was that only few students were able to be online at the same time even though we tried to set up different times and days for conferences.

The teachers had the best experience of the synchronic discussions, which they used to discuss different aspects concerning the running and teaching of the courses. Nevertheless, even if discussions are synchronic, too many participants can make communication slow and difficult, and there is a need for one moderator, an agenda and time limit for this kind of conference.

Video conferences have not been used during this programme, but with the possibilities for small web cameras even on personal computers, it is only a question of time and money before more face-to-face contact can be established in e-learning, without the use of video conference rooms.

### **Readings and literature**

One of the main obstacles of this e-learning course has been the lack of permission to post literature on the web. Until recently, the restrictions have been more restrictive than those for making copies for compendia. The restrictions set out by Kopinor in Norway are under revision and this will make it possible to post literature for the virtual classroom online, using the same rules as for compendia. Making other links to literature such as Ebrary and other web-based databases available is also important and of great help to students coming from Eastern and Southern European countries. European Social Work edited by Campanini and Frost (2003) was, by agreement with the publisher, made available online for the students in our educational programme.

## **EVALUATION OF THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

### **Assignments, grades and certificates**

Every module in the educational programme Social Work in Europe concluded with a final assignment that was graded from A-F according to the new grading system recommended by the Bologna declaration. Every module is also calculated into ECTS credits. Due to the Bologna agreement, the partner institutions were able to make these decisions without difficulty and debate. Students in Master's degree programmes and PhD programmes are able to include the credits in their ordinary study programmes. Some students in Bachelor's degree programmes also had this possibility.

Two teachers are assigned to an assessment committee to read the final assignments and determine the grades for each student. These teachers will be from different institutions and countries, with one "internal" teacher (the teacher responsible for running the course) and one external teacher. Bergen University College is the administrator for the courses and the assessment process, and the certificate of completion will be signed by two institutions: Università degli Studi di Parma and Høgskolen i Bergen.

Some of the challenges that have occurred during this project are connected to assessment and the formulation and presentation of assignments. Assessment criteria have been set, but even so there are different traditions and ideas about what is considered good and what is considered grounds for a failing grade. Disagreement can of course also occur between teachers from the same country, but it becomes even more visible when the teachers on the assessment committee are from different universities and countries.

One effect of the cooperative effort to run the educational programme is that many important elements that have not been discussed before, such as ECTS credits, grades, assignments and

assessment, academic writing, cooperation between students for the final assignment, rules for delivering the final assignment on time or applying for postponement, regulations for taking a new exam in case of illness or other circumstances etc., have now been taken into consideration and agreed on.

In module 2 students were given a portfolio assignment (Taasen, Havnes & Lauvås 2004). This type of course work is especially useful for students in e-learning courses. The idea is that some – not all – assignments that students prepare during the course period will be part of the final portfolio, which will be assessed. During the course, students who deliver their assignments on time will receive feedback from the teacher or fellow students. These comments may be used to re-work and improve the final project for inclusion in the portfolio. This study method takes the learning process into account, and earlier course work can be improved by using new knowledge acquired later in the course.

For most of the teachers and students in these courses this was a new way to complete assignments. The difficulties it has caused show us what needs improvement next time round. One of the things that must be clear from the very beginning is the number and scope of assignments to be given during the course. It is also important to have in mind how the assignments are worded, since some of them will be assessed by externally, as well as the number of words allowed in the final portfolio and the composition of the assignments presented. These elements may seem obvious today, but when working with new teaching and learning methods we have to proceed by trial and error.

### **Self-reflection on learning**

In addition to the assignments already given during the course, students were asked to present a short paper in their final portfolio on their process of learning during the course. This is an important part of the portfolio assessment, because the reflection on learning also illustrates the individual student's method of studying and his/her maturity as a student in a course that demands independent study and self-discipline.

Reflection on the learning process (Schøn 1982; 1987) is important in order to increase the awareness of new knowledge, ideas and also obstacles to learning, thereby generating information on how to optimise the individual student's learning process. This has been compared and seen as parallel to the problem-solving process involved in the social worker – client relationship (Askeland, 1994). The observations made by the social work students as regards their own learning/problem-solving process can be useful in their later work with clients.

According to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985 reprinted 1999), everything starts with the experience (and this includes behaviour, ideas and feelings). By starting the reflection process we return to our experiences; we utilise positive feelings remove negative obstructions and then re-evaluate our experience. The outcome is new perspective on experience and changes in behaviour.

Reflection on learning and experience are important tools for increasing our professional competence. This has been pointed out in several chapters of the book Social Work, Themes, Issues and Critical Debates, edited by Adams, Dominelli and Payne (1998).

Students in this educational programme have used the opportunity to reflect on learning in different ways. To include this as a part of the final assignment seemed to be new to most of

the students, and some admitted that, in many ways, this was the hardest task of all. All have agreed that their knowledge of their subject of study and their knowledge of social work in Europe and in their own country has increased. Some of the students had to overcome frustrations in the beginning as they struggled with the e-learning platform and finding their way in this new learning environment.

Most of the students have indicated that the quick response from teachers to their questions and assignments has been an important aspect of the course. Some students have experienced language difficulties due to having to read, write and express their own ideas in English. For many students the task-centred approach has been a new experience that has triggered their own abilities and interests for research and seeking out information. Most of the students have expressed frustration due to the lack of time to concentrate and do their best while also attending to all their other activities. At the same time, all the students who presented their final papers seemed to be satisfied with having managed to fulfil their intentions and with what they have learned through the programme. Some of the students also expressed feelings of increased self-confidence by having participated in this setting.

### **Final comments**

During the 3-year period of development and implementation of the curriculum plan for an international course in social work in Europe, we have had many expected and unexpected experiences.

The most important experience has been that it is possible, through cooperation with partners from all over Europe, to agree on a common curriculum plan, including ECTS credits and a common grading system.

In addition, overcoming the fear of computer technology as a tool for teaching social work and the positive response to this idea from students all over Europe has been a positive experience. The positive and enthusiastic work done by fellow teachers from different European countries with little or no experience of e-learning pedagogy has also been impressive.

For most of the teachers involved in the project, the work has been done in their leisure time, with little or no support from their home institution. However, without financial support for travel costs in connection with meetings from Socrates and later from the Norwegian Opening University and Bergen University College, and the financial support for the workload of the project leader and one colleague from BUC, this project would never have been possible to realise.

The experience of the 16-day summer school in Parma in July has demonstrated the importance of not only being e-learning students, but also having the opportunity for direct communication and dialogue. 34 students from 15 countries in Europe evaluated this as an intense but very good experience in 35-40°C.

To focus on social work in general and very important issues such as discrimination and oppression, poverty, ethnic diversity, the welfare systems and the social work education, skill training and professional competence in a European perspective in particular, is important and of great interest to students of social work in all parts of Europe. It increases the common understanding and awareness of the role of social work and the importance of addressing the problems on different levels of intervention. The importance of increasing the self-confidence

and professional status and position of social work all over Europe is important to empower not only the clients and service users, but also social work students and social workers.

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### **Reports, Workshops, Whitepaper (all viewed 28.06.05)**

Digital literacy:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/studies/dig\\_lit\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/studies/dig_lit_en.pdf)

Virtual Models Europe

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/studies/virtual\\_models\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/studies/virtual_models_en.pdf)

E-learning content

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/workshops/elearning%20content/workshop\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/workshops/elearning%20content/workshop_report_en.pdf)

Virtual Campuses

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/workshops/virtual%20campuses/report\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/doc/workshops/virtual%20campuses/report_en.pdf)

Life-long Learning

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lil/life/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lil/life/index_en.html)

Bologna

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Becta Research overview, 2005

<http://www.becta.org.uk/research/research.cfm?section=1&id=3497>

Managing the future with MLE

[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded\\_documents/MLESG%20report%20v2.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/MLESG%20report%20v2.pdf)