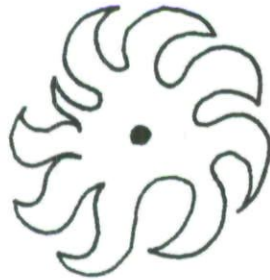


INTEGRATING DUAL-DISCIPLINARY LEARNING IN A CROSS-CULTURAL SETTING: REFLECTIONS ON FIELD EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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In this personal narrative, a dual degree student in divinity and social work explores how her understanding of the integration of Christian ministry and social work practice were enriched by a summer field education placement in South Africa. Encounters with language barriers highlighted the importance of building relationships based upon establishing rapport and listening with empathy. The lessons from this cross-cultural experience have implications for interdisciplinary education.



My experience in South Africa consisted of a ten-week field education placement, plus a two-week "Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope" through Duke Divinity School. I was hosted by a Methodist church in Durban, South Africa, that supports and partners with agencies like an AIDS orphanage, an AIDS hospice, a preschool, and a homeless shelter. During my final two weeks in South Africa, I participated in the Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope program with other students and alumni from Duke Divinity School. We visited agencies, historic sites, and Christian churches to learn about the impact of apartheid and contemporary issues facing the church and society in South Africa.

Throughout the summer, I heard a wide range of "voices." As the name of the pilgrimage implies, some voices were exuberant songs of joy, whereas others resembled more of a groaning or cry of lament. At times, it was overwhelming to navigate and live in the tension of those two extremes. My conversation partners on this journey represented a diversity of ages, races, nationalities, social classes, and living situations. The resulting conversation was filled with

questions, feelings, and poignant insights as I sought to share several encounters with a broader community. Sharing personal narratives is an important dimension of social work and Christian ministry, because within daily, mundane experiences are moments of realization and transformation. Reflecting on these experiences provides the space for transformation—to view the world differently and change attitudes and behaviors. I hope to illustrate through narrative the ways that my understanding of Christian ministry and social work practice have been enriched by my time in South Africa.

The people whom I met in South Africa welcomed me with amazing hospitality as a student, a pilgrim, and a stranger in their land. I arrived with two large suitcases and serious misconceptions about what I was "bringing" to South Africa. I had attended a field education orientation and lectures and even read Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Peter Storey's *With God in the Crucible* in an attempt to prepare for the experience.

Though I did hope to learn much from South African people and culture, I was naively enthusiastic about my ability to make a difference in the lives of people living in extreme poverty or dying from HIV/AIDS. With the same generosity that my South African hosts smiled and helped me with my heavy luggage, they helped me unpack my misconceived view of service and the inflated regard for my ability to help others in the cross-

cultural setting. Over the course of three months, I realized that building rapport and relationships were much needed prerequisites for my understanding of service for both social work and Christian ministry.

Even while experiencing warm hospitality, I was painfully aware in particular situations that other persons might not have been welcomed in the same way due to their nationality, race, class, HIV status, or access to resources. On many occasions, I was overwhelmed by the ways that persons who were marginalized by society warmly welcomed me into their lives. The theme of hospitality was especially poignant with regard to refugee populations. My experiences with refugees at various faith-based and non-profit organizations in Johannesburg, Capetown, and Durban opened my eyes to the conditions of displaced persons in South Africa. The persons in exile from Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were among the most hospitable and gracious people I met during my entire time in South Africa. Each of their stories and situations was unique, but all had fled their native countries due to genocide or governmental oppression. Their stories from their homelands of pain and violence were distressing, but the xenophobia and living conditions experienced by refugees in South Africa were shocking as well.

As the pilgrimage group toured the facilities of the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg, we passed through crowded hallways and rooms where men, women, and children were sleeping, playing, and even cooking meals on hot plates. Over 800 refugees from Zimbabwe were living in the church, and the bishop received criticism for this radical form of hospitality. While the general response of the government and society was to deny Zimbabweans refugee status or access to resources, this Methodist church opened up its sanctuary to fellow brothers and sisters.

My most difficult times on this journey were moments of helplessness and hopelessness as I became more aware of my own vulnerability and humanity. Because of the intense suffering and hardship present around me, I often had to depend on others to offer me hope. My visits to AIDS hospices

were bittersweet with moments of connection with patients but also feelings of uselessness and inability to effect change. It was extremely difficult to see people suffering and not be able to communicate with words because I knew only a handful of phrases in isiZulu, which is one of eleven official languages. I struggled to see hope at AIDS hospices for persons who were waiting to be put on anti-retroviral drugs and who have no family to care for them.

On one particular visit, I walked into a room where a woman was in the process of dying and her caregivers were gathering around her and singing in a cultural ritual. Her biological family had abandoned her, yet she was surrounded by women who had cared for her physical, medical, and emotional needs. These same women were her caregivers even as she died. I was present in the situation simply as an observer of this tender moment—unable to speak their language, unable to alleviate her suffering, and even unable to cry. Perhaps it was best that I was not able to intrude upon the caregivers' ability to be fully present to this woman in her final moments of life.

One of my tasks as a field education student was to plan and co-lead an exposure and service program for young adults in Durban, South Africa. During the "Give a Week of Your Life" program, some of the conversations revealed ways that different persons cope with the realities of growing up in the new South Africa. As I was guiding these young people through the process of recognizing bias, responding to social need, and seeing their surroundings in fresh ways, I became painfully aware of the overlooked areas in my own life and context. I realized my lack of knowledge and involvement with displaced persons and immigrants to the United States. Participating in Christian worship services in isiZulu and Xhosa, struggling to communicate with non-English speakers in our Sunday evening small group and at Greyville Methodist Mission, and hearing painful stories of xenophobia from refugees at a Managing Diversity retreat and Union for Refugee Women opened my eyes and exposed some of my biases with regard to language barriers and immigration issues. Exploring contemporary issues in South Africa kindled a

desire to further explore similar issues in the United States.

My language deficiencies became evident soon after I arrived in South Africa. I was shadowing seminary students from John Wesley College in Kilnerton on their field education placements at a local hospital and feeling extremely self-conscious because I was unable to speak to the patients in their preferred language. Hospital visits have always been difficult for me because I want so desperately to bring hope and ease a person's pain, and so it was even more frustrating when I was unable to communicate with words. I asked the students to let the patients know that I was sorry that I could not speak their language but that I was thankful to be able to visit with them. Each of the patients was incredibly gracious about my inability to speak their language, but I felt useless and was ready to move on to a task where I could really "do" something.

In that moment of frustration and inadequacy, one of the patients responded to my apology for not being able to speak to her by teaching me a valuable lesson. In her own native language, she thanked me for my presence and said that she could hear me speaking with my eyes, my laugh, and my smile. She had watched me as I visited with every patient in the room and was thankful that I had come to see her. Her kind words were a wonderful reminder that in social work and Christian ministry "being present" is much more important than having the right words to say. In fact, a caring presence can often speak more boldly than words or in the absence of words.

Although her comment gave me some comfort at the time, I knew that I wanted to learn how to speak at least a few phrases in isiZulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans as a sign of hospitality. Co-leading a Sunday evening small group meeting for homeless men and women gave me the opportunity to learn some isiZulu. It was one of the most rewarding and challenging tasks of my time in South Africa. Some in the group, like me, only spoke English whereas others spoke only isiZulu. A few were able to communicate in both languages, and even fewer were able to read. For the first

several weeks, we had a regular interpreter, but for the rest of the time we had to rely on whoever was willing to translate for us. It was humbling to try to learn some words and phrases in isiZulu and facilitate discussion in such a diverse group. As I was struggling with the pronunciation of some words in isiZulu, one woman shared with me that she appreciated my effort because there are people who were born in South Africa who would not even try to learn a few words.

Though her words were some encouragement to my feeble attempts, I knew that I could not be haughty, especially since I have spent years learning Latin and New Testament Greek in high school, college, and graduate school, but have never tried to learn a contemporary, spoken language. Indeed, the language barriers that I experienced during my field placement in South Africa have made me realize the value of learning Spanish as I return to the United States. Hearing the stories of isolation and distress from refugees offered me a different perspective of the situation of immigrants in the United States.

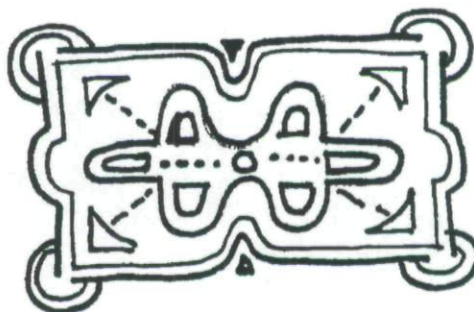
Voices from South Africa are still lingering in my ears, and if I am truly honest, it will take more time and space to fully process my experiences. Still, my encounters with suffering and hope have led to reflection and considerable growth in my life. Over the summer I realized that both social work and Christian ministry happen in the context of conversations, although not simply in monologues or necessarily in words. As in clinical social work practice, cross-cultural interactions involve empathic listening, meaningful pauses, and nonverbal communications. Social work is as dynamic as a conversation, which also makes adjustment for cultural contexts and translation. One question that lingered in my mind this summer was, "How can I best serve people in this context?" However, the helping relationships that I entered in this cross-cultural experience were not merely one-sided but had the mutuality of a conversation. I certainly learned the truth of being helped by those whom I sought to help.

As I have had an opportunity to reflect on some of the lessons that I learned from my

gracious hosts, I have realized that the most teachable moments were when I was aware of my own humanity and inadequacies. In hindsight, I was most shaped by the moments when I was literally rendered speechless, either for lack of words or comprehension of another language. My field experiences in South Africa taught me the importance of self-awareness and building relationships. In order to practice culturally competent social work, we must allow the context to inform our understandings of service and learn to observe and listen to the wisdom of our clients. Engaging with persons and social issues in a cross-cultural context can profoundly illuminate and reframe concerns in one's own context—professional or personal. Above all, we must learn from the people whom we seek to help. Only after building rapport and listening with empathy may we truly enter into a cross-cultural conversation.

As I continue to reflect upon the richness of my experiences in South Africa, I am finding that cross-cultural dialogue provides an excellent metaphor for interdisciplinary education. Various disciplines employ distinctive values, use particular language, and draw upon different worldviews. In my dual degree program, I am seeking to integrate social work and Christian ministry, which at times has felt much like an English speaker trying to teach in isiZulu. While struggling to become proficient in professional jargon and communicate to “native” speakers of each discipline, I am recognizing common language and values. My experiences in South Africa are helping me to recognize points of resonance in social work and Christian ministry as I am discovering that concepts of listening, empathy, service, caring presence, relationship building, community, and social justice are common to both disciplines. Certainly, an understanding of the skills needed for culturally competent practice can also inform interdisciplinary education in helping professions. These lessons from South Africa will guide me as I continue to pursue my graduate education in divinity and social work.

Emliy Sanford, B.S., will graduate with dual Masters' degrees in 2008: M.S.W. in Social Work from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and M. Div. from Duke Divinity School, Duke University. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: sanforde@email.unc.edu.



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