# Reflections of an American Professor and Ghanaian Social Work Students: Implementation of Collaborative Teaching/Learning Methods to Assess Indigenous Social Problems in Ghana

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*This narrative chronicles the reflections of an American Professor and Ghanaian social work students at the University of Ghana with the development of a collaborative teaching/learning model of instruction on how to provide social services to the vulnerable, particularly users of Ghanaian welfare services. The purpose of the model was to teach students from their self-identification of indigenous social problems, proposed methods of assessment, and incorporation of philosophical perspectives to address ethical dilemmas in the resolution of these problems. Finally, the authors will address lessons learned and the extent to which the model achieved its goal.*

## Introduction

*"I remember vividly one hot afternoon during the second semester of the 2001/2002 academic year in a class of level 200 (Sophomores in the U.S.), students of Social Work waiting anxiously for a new lecturer to take us through the course, 'Philosophy of Social Work,' when suddenly an African American entered in the company of the head of the department. The excitement that followed her introduction as the new lecturer was expected since many students complained of the teaching style of the lecturer who had handled the course in the previous semester."*

The narrative above is the recollection of my former student, George Domfe, about my initial introduction to the class and the reaction of his peers to me at the University of Ghana. Like George and his peers, I also was excited that first day of class but for different reasons. I was excited to meet them, of course, but also a bit nervous because before me was the development of a course mostly from scratch. Although I did have an old and dated syllabus, I did not have any instructional resources, such as a text book, a bibliography, or multimedia materials to develop course content. Another drawback to getting off to a good start was the fact that I was not familiar with the students, either. Thus, given the lack of knowledge about the students and indigenous resources, the purpose of this narrative is to present cross-cultural strategies that I used in collaboration with students to create a social work course to teach them about indigenous social problems and the state of social welfare in their homeland. By all accounts, as a non-Ghanaian, it seemed that I lacked the knowledge to effectively teach Ghanaian students about social work assessment and interventions to arrest social problems specific to traditional culture in Ghana, including an understanding of ethics and philosophical, problem-solving strategies.

Now I was not a total novice about life in Ghana, or in West Africa for that matter. In 1999, I had made my first trip to Ghana with my then 10-year-old son, Jelani[1], as the principal investigator of a study to assess a social problem indigenous to the country. Prior to arrival, I engaged Dr. Phyllis Antwi, MD, PhD (Professor), who coordinated the study and secured a community nurse, Beatrice Addoh, to recruit all cases interviewed in 1999

and 2001-2002. Upon arrival, I met with Rev. Dr. Seth Ayettey, MD, PhD (Dean), and his committee; approved study, informed consent, and signed IRB documentation. They were both at the University of Ghana's School of Public Health and Medical School. In 1979, with a Fulbright-Hays[2] award I commenced my first trip to the continent of Africa traveling to Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Haute Volta (now Burkina Faso). In 1981, I followed this experience in West Africa by spending time in Dakar, Senegal taking part in a gerontology research study.

Thus, given these experiences with diverse African communities and cultures colonized by the French and British, I believed that the only way to be effective in teaching this diverse group of Ghanaian students was to implement what was, for them, an unconventional collaborative instructional/ learning model. I could not be so arrogant as to assume that I had the knowledge and skills grounded in my western values to do this! So from day one, to the surprise of my students, I engaged them in this ongoing dynamic process throughout the course, teaching them the required content using much of the indigenous knowledge, values, ethics, and information that they provided. Throughout this narrative, my personal reflections, as well as those from former students George Domfe and Kwasi Boakye Akosah, will be integrated to support the implementation, assessment, and effectiveness of this collaborative model.

**Teaching Experiences in Ghana**

As a Visiting Scholar and Study Abroad Professor at the University of Ghana, I taught in the Departments of Social Work (2001-2002) and African Studies (2005) as a primary investigator of field studies on social problems indigenous to Ghana. During my second trip to Ghana, I taught "Philosophy of Social Work," with a focus on an assessment of indigenous social problems to 134 undergraduate students. Professor Nana Araba Apt, the Director of the Centre for Social Policy Studies at the University of Ghana at the time, encouraged me to apply for a teaching position. My primary responsibilities consisted of teaching, advising, curriculum development for a conflict resolution course, and conducting research studies.

During my third trip to Ghana, I taught "Social Issues in Ghana," with a focus on the rights of women and girls to a group of seven American and Japanese undergraduate and graduate students. The model for teaching this course was derived from my teaching experiences in 2002, and thus indigenous knowledge about Ghana was enhanced by service-learning projects, research experiences, guest lecturers, and field trips. Experts gave lectures on indigenous topics, such as the Ghanaian Fulbright Scholar who spoke about the history of slavery. Field trips included visits to a refugee camp for Liberians, a primary school in the shanty town of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Osu Children's Home orphanage, and faith-and-humanitarian-based NGO's, such as a respite site for the disabled called Bethany Projects' Hope for Life, CARE International, and Centre for Community Study, Action and Development (CENCOSAD). The learning experiences of these students were enriched by Ghanaian and American colleagues and former students as cultural guides.

**Campus Life: Students and Faculty**

In 1948 the College of the University of London established the University College of the Gold Coast. In 1961, its name was changed to the University of Ghana. The campus in Legon is located on a sprawling campus that overlooks Accra. In addition to many colleges, schools, and departments, there are also programs that address Ghana's culture and social problems such as indigenous language classes, and programs in ethnic dance, art, theatre, music, and drumming. There are also specialized departments and institutes that reflect the needs of West Africa, such as public health, nutrition, wetland preservation, malaria research and mosquito control, and economic development.

The campus had changed vastly between my first visit in 1999 and my last visit in 2010. There are additional colleges (especially graduate programs) and many more classroom buildings, dormitories, and an impressive state-of-the art recreational facility with an Olympic-sized outdoor pool and diving board. All

facilities are air-conditioned and modernized—including the historic buildings—with students having access to on-line courses. All dorms house Internet cafés for a fee (few free sites on campus), and one can access materials on-line from the Balme Library. Currently, the campus has an enrollment of more than 32,000 students (26,000+ are undergraduates). Due to increased enrollment, many more courses are now offered through distance learning at sites throughout the country. Cohorts come to campus for short stays to take exams; local experts have written textbooks that reflect indigenous life, needs, and solutions. How things have changed!

The Legon campus was originally built to house only a few thousand elite students. During my tenure (2001–2002), the approximately 15,000 students overwhelmed the infrastructure and academic resources. Consequently there were frequent power outages, as well as inadequate waste disposal, running water, transportation, and housing (five or more students sleeping in two-bed dorm room), etc. General nutrition on campus was poor because few students could pay for adequate food; some ate only one meal a day. Teaching resources were overextended with inadequate computing or teaching technologies. The library lacked current periodicals, textbooks, or other collections that were adequate. Large class sizes were normal and faculty rarely had the help of teaching assistants. For example, one of my colleagues taught 800 psychology students in one class, a single section, with no assigned T.A.

It is under these conditions that my students studied and prepared for class, often huddling together reading a single copy of a textbook. In many ways, they were more motivated and personally equipped to face the global world than many of my American students. Most Ghanaian students are aware that their success could be determined by their ability to work in a different country—especially western— to support their families and communities. Their cultural sensitivity, language skills (indigenous, English, and foreign), adaptability, and international awareness were always impressive.

I can hardly complain. I lived on campus in free and adequate housing, as did all faculty, along with my family which included a 7th grader who attended (Abraham) Lincoln International School (K – 12th grade). However, I must confess that I was challenged during my teaching experience even though most of the time things went very well for us. Like the students, we had to deal with frequent power outages, water stoppage, and slow (if any) Internet. In very hot weather (11 a.m. – 1 p.m.) I walked about a quarter of a mile, across a campus that was not designed to be pedestrian-friendly, to teach a two-hour, 15-week course. I taught my class standing behind a lectern on a platform in an open lecture facility with no doors or windows, with an old black board that could not be written on. Ineffective ceiling fans moved the hot air around when the power was on, and most of the time the microphone was useless. My students sat in antique wooden desks placed in regimented rows; often other students, taking notes or just listening, would crowd the space, standing on either side of the formal lecture room. None of this stopped me from being excited every time I walked into the presence of my students!

**First Day in Class: Playing to Win!**

Even before the first day of class I felt that teaching "Philosophy of Social Work - 202" would be a mutually challenging experience for the students and me. No matter what, I wanted to "play to win" and have the best class ever! I was a bit nervous thinking about teaching students with such diverse backgrounds in my ancestral home. And I especially thought that my accent and interactive style of teaching, where I encouraged and expected input from the students, may be a problem. My style of teaching, engagement, and collaboration, was radically different from any of their previous classroom experiences. I knew that the students had most likely never experienced a learning/teaching partnership, especially since their educational system mirrored traditional English domination (since Ghana was colonized by the British). Thus, many of their practices still reflected these influences. They learn by

taking meticulous notes; often never looking up during a lecture. For the most part, this practice was at odds with my methods, as I encourage active participation, daily attendance, and critical thinking with significantly less note taking and memorization. Furthermore, I had no idea what the students thought of me, their fears, concerns, and what they wanted to achieve. It was clear that I was right about my accent being a problem, as one can ascertain from this vivid reflection by George:

> *"Surprisingly, however, the students started murmuring soon after she had started teaching! One student sitting closer whispered, rather dejectedly, 'Hmmm! this Professor will definitely make things even more difficult than they were last semester.' Then a lady, whose name just came to mind (Anita Adjei), an Ashanti like myself, shouted and complained in Twi to me "asem ni! enti wote!" Literally, she meant, 'What a problem! Do you get a bit of what she is saying?' I must confess, that was how I got to appreciate the ensuing 'pandemonium' and an expression of hopelessness among the majority of students. Even though I could hear the professor loud and clear, I wished she had slowed down a bit! Then after about five minutes into this seeming confusion, a student shouted in Twi, "yenti hwee" (literally means, 'we do not hear anything'). Then spontaneously, the whole class burst into laughter. I could see expression of confusion written on the face of the professor.*
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> *"As a teacher myself, I thought I could help! I raised my hand and when the Professor granted the platform, I pleaded with her to talk slowly as most of the students were not comfortable with her 'American slangs [accent].' Soon after, we started experiencing the best of her when she started speaking like the British! Admirably, by the close of the day, she was almost speaking 'Ghanaian English'. Her ability to adapt quickly was unique; students were all over her even after the first day of encounter!"*

It was good for George to share this reflection. I had no idea how they perceived my first interaction with them. However, my social work skills kicked in, and I did pick up on their seemingly abrasive (nonverbal and verbal) behavior. What I learned from this experience is that one should be humble, a good listener, and willing to accept constructive criticism from students while being flexible and adaptable. Not taking their behavior personally, I got off to a good start! Listening to George, I got down off the platform and, walking through the aisles in this very hot and over-crowded room, I listened and received instructive feedback from the class. This one decision, thinking fast on my feet and changing on a dime, made the rest of the semester a success for all of us! This significant event, or "oh-my-gosh" moment, also established lifelong relationships with many of the students. George was right, and from then on the students competed to carry my books, briefcase, and newspapers to and from class while engaging me in small talk for as long as possible. Out of great respect they not only called me "Prof," but also "Auntie" This was a community, and I was learning from them. I realized that if I wanted this to be a mutual, collaborative exchange, then I would have to *walk the walk* and *talk the talk.* How could this be a mutual exchange if I did not listen to them? Now in reality I was not totally out of the woods, but I had gained my footing and the confidence of the students. A great achievement for the first day of class. The next hurdle was to develop the course content for the syllabus.

## Collaboration: The Teaching/Learning Model

> *"During the first day, she neither introduced a topic nor gave out course outline, a known*

*tradition at the University of Ghana. At the University of Ghana, during the first lecture of the semester, a lecturer will usually give a course outline to students. This is followed by discussions on where and when to get appropriate learning materials. Students never miss such meetings for anything! After this meeting, some students will never enter the class again[3] until the last meeting when the lecturer meets to tell students areas where questions should be expected (for the 'long-essay'; the final exam). She rather told us briefly about the course and how social work in general is handled in American institutions."*

George's account is fairly accurate and corroborates my memory of this event so many years later. My decision not to distribute the syllabus that first day was intentional. I was challenged by the fact that I knew my teaching style and lack of cultural knowledge as described earlier would most likely conflict with theirs. In fact, I wanted to ensure that the course content and assignments were relevant and authentic for Ghanaian social work students. I needed to find a way to integrate their culture, indigenous personal experiences, knowledge, values, and problem solving strategies for ethical dilemmas with those prescribed for best practice by international humanitarian organizations and western social work accreditation bodies.

Of particular importance was the extent to which the course could reflect the professional ethical codes and standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and Discrimination Against Women, and the Ghanaian Constitution, including laws protecting the rights of women and children. Additionally, I needed to weave traditional practices into the course because these would be the indigenous standards for the students. So, as we all learned in our first clinical course: to conduct an effective assessment, start where the client is at! I had to get to know the students and their personal perceptions of traditional concerns and social problems in Ghana.

*"She then shared with us how Americans cherish our (Ghanaian) extended family system and even advised that we get prepared to share with the class so many things on our different cultures. (The class was made up of students of diverse cultural backgrounds). I drew from her that she wanted to encourage us to respect certain things of our own. All the while, students were not impatient; we have already developed confidence in her!"*

During this meeting, I expressed my strengths and limitations teaching the course by telling them that, although I was from the west, I did not have the ability of indigenous problem recognition or the answers to solving them. I told them that they, themselves, had the wherewithal to define, assess, and to solve social welfare problems effectively and to investigate the ethical complications of such problem solving. I assured them that I was a good facilitator and educator, and would invest my experience, values, knowledge, and skills in their learning. Valuing input from everyone, I encouraged the students to bring their knowledge, skills, values, and experiences to the table.

This is how George reflected on their potential role as collaborators, full participation, and freedom of speech:

*"In her class, everybody was a 'lecturer' and nobody was ever wrong! Students were free to share their views on how and why certain traditions and cultures were observed by their tribesmen."*

Now that I had their confidence in me, I could move on. I took an additional session to gather necessary information from them before I distributed the syllabus and assignments. This is what I did, as described by George:

*"In the subsequent meeting, she asked us to write our names, age, tribe, gender and occupation. The class became lively as we started talking about our occupations and their accompanying problems."*

**Profile of Students in the Social Work Course**

Of the 134 multilingual students enrolled in the course, more than half the class was male (55%), which would be highly unusual in an undergraduate social work class in the U.S. The students' ages ranged from 21 to 48, the median age being 26. They were mostly sophomores, many of whom were working on their second degree. The majority were Christian (75%). Twenty-one ethnic groups were represented: Ada, Akan, Akim, Ashanti, Bono, Dagbani, Dagao, Ewe, Hausa, Fante, Frafra, Ga, Ga-Dangbe, Guan, Konkomba, Krobo, Kusasi, Mende3, Nzemal, Twi, Tampulma from the major regions in Ghana (Ashanti, Brong Ahafo, Central, Eastern, Fanti, Greater Accra, Northern, Upper East, Upper West, Western, Volta). Within the class were recent graduates of secondary schools, school teachers, military personnel (training in the U.S.), government ministry administrators, future tribal chiefs and queen mothers, a refugee and internally displaced person, persons with disabilities, villagers, urban residents, children and wives of politicians, professors, medical doctors, and the wife of a former Ghanaian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. There was also representation from the extremely impoverished and wealthy communities.

Sadly, three prominent students in this class have died, all of whom were greatly admired by their classmates and our family. One, a stand-out in class, presented as a student who persevered against all odds to get an education. Blinded at an early age when stricken by measles, other students and young boys guided him to class. Robert was the first person in his village to attend university, and he was a champion of women's rights. He was a small man, short in stature, outspoken, humorous, honest, and spiritual. He had an infectious smile and fantastic memory; hundreds of phone numbers, addresses, and quotes were stored in his brain.

The following passage is from the journal of Brenda McGadney-Douglass, detailing her last visit with Mr. Abukuri before returning to the States. It is from these conditions that he returned to school every year:

June 12, 2002: *He is staying with Inspector _____ at the Osu Police Station since his dorm is closed 'til classes resume in September. This community looks like an Army barrack ...There is a large horse corral and barn...dilapidated, dirty, smelly, and unpaved streets...staying in a single room ... practice on a new and faster Braille machine...sleeping with six other students on two chairs...I give him a pair of Jelani's pants... He tells me he will be going to his village, Sandema, at the end of the month...Upper East Region... housing in the village is a mud hut; the roof is in great need of repair ...no money to repair it and during the rainy season, sometimes he can't lie down and sleep at night. Often, it rains all night and to have some peace about not having the walls collapse on him and being buried, he sleeps in the middle of the room in a chair...taking care of his retarded brother with an amputated arm ...responsible for feeding and clothing him...due to a lack of rain in the region this year there is a shortage of food and fresh water and the water outside has flies on it. There has been an outbreak of cholera in his village. He wants help to repairing the roof. His parting comments to me: 'I know my situation, if I think about it I can't learn' '...meeting you is God's work. Momma[5], I am still living on the money that you gave me weeks ago.' He asked fondly of my family, wishing us good travels!*

**Development of Indigenous Course Content, Assignments, and Cases**

George narrates how I engaged him and his classmates in collaboration:

> *"She then followed with a question, 'How will you deal with some of these problems as a practicing social worker?' Divergent opinions expressed on this question even made the class more lively."*

Specifically, I asked the students to respond to the following questions:

- When you graduate, what do you think will be the most pressing social problem facing Ghanaians that you will have to address as a practicing social worker?"
- How do you propose to handle the problem?

Following a content analysis of the student-identified social problems (or presenting problem), 14 social problems emerged:

1. Trokosi System (defined and discussed later in this narrative)
2. Female Genital Mutilation
3. Kayayoo girls (head porters/child labor) – a term used by the Ga people, an ethnic group in the Greater Accra region, to describe women who engage in carrying loads on their head for a fee: "kaya" from Hausa meaning wares or goods; "yoo" from Ga meaning woman
4. Streetism or hawkers (children selling wares on the street/child labor)
5. Widows' rites (mandatory participation in rituals when husband dies, such as shaving of head, beatings, drinking water to wash corpse, etc.; elderly women are frequently abused in this fashion)
6. Crime (frequent false accusations and imprisonment of non-Ghanaian, African foreigners)
7. Self-abuse (drugs, alcohol, and prostitution)
8. HIV/AIDS (especially family-to-family member transmission)
9. Poverty (the mandatory "Cash-n-Carry[4]" system of purchasing medical care prior to treatment)
10. Rape (incest)
11. Municipal sanitation and leprosy (displaced and poor persons living in squalor and relationships to growing health problems and disease)
12. Teenage pregnancy
13. Polygamy (multiple wives and battery/domestic violence)
14. Vernacular illiteracy in local ethnic languages (refugees, mostly Liberians)

Throughout the course, their answers allowed me to engage them in an ongoing interactive and dynamic partnership and the development of content by addressing authentic indigenous ethical dilemmas identified by them.

Given this background, I assigned students to one of the 14 social problems based on data I obtained from the attendance roster I created. Each group had betwen 9 and 11 students. Student self-selection would not have consisted of diverse groups due to hierarchy, class, gender, ethnic tribal group, land vs. landless, region of birth, languages spoken, etc. Years later, I was informed that I made the right decision. For example, in 2005 I learned from my research assistant Ms. Nibewun-Tarko (a student in 2002) that due to her ethnicity as a Konkomba, she was very quiet in class. She had been displaced as a teenager, never to return to Northern Ghana. Due to a multi-ethnic war, she "passed" (changed faith from Christian to Moslem, spoke indigenous languages in dialect of majority groups) to avoid further discrimination. This is her written narrative of that experience:

> *"I remember, during my primary and secondary days, when I sometimes had to hide my identity as a Konkomba, and I made very few friends for fear of intimidation.*

*There were occasions when we were on a school farm, all the school children of the Nanumbas talked about is abusing and despising Konkombas regarding them as people who are uncivilized...Other Konkombas denied their identity and want to be like the other person who feels superior (some Konkombas cannot speak the language to pass as a non-Konkomba). Nevertheless, the merchants married Konkomba women because such women are reputed to be hardworking and loyal to their spouses."*

The broad objective of the assignment was for each group to respond to a hypothetical client's presenting social problem (or case) and to solve a specific ethical dilemma; namely, "What should the social worker do?" Students were given instructions: Their primary assignment was to develop a problem resolution strategy that would do no harm to the client (physical and mental abuse, death, abandonment, displacement) by assessing the client's presenting problem from three alternative or philosophical perspectives available, to practicing Ghanaian social workers: western social work ethical codes; governing laws including the Constitution of Ghana, customary or traditional practices (Chiefs, Queen mothers, village authorities and other community-based stakeholders); and codes representing international human rights. Specifically, groups were required to complete the following:

1. Paper: case, comprehensive assessment, and proposed resolution
2. Provide evidence of interviews and field visit(s) (photos, brochures, audiotapes, letters)
3. Present evidence documenting and validating the severity of the social problem (brochures, and journal, newspaper, and magazine articles, etc.)
4. Group photo
5. Oral presentation

Groups were given a structured rubric, including the number of paragraphs for each section. I also authored 14 indigenous problem-specific cases for each group; authenticated through consultations with faculty, experts, and students (such as the one below about widow's rites) with the aid of George as the expert.

*"One day, when I had an opportunity to 'lecture' the class on the tradition of widowhood rites as observed by the Ashantis, many students had to follow me to my dormitory for more information. The teaching style of the Professor had made some of us 'lecturers,' and in the class I had the following as my trusted students: Miss Anita Agyei, Mrs. Kuffour, Mrs. Doris Oti-Dankwah and the late Judith Asibi Tarko (May her soul rest in peace). I never missed any of her lecturers; it was so interesting to miss! I always had a new story to tell. On few occasions, the Good Professor invited experts to talk to us on issues she considered technical."*

Here is a typical widow's rites case as an example of an ethical dilemma:

*A fisherman drowns and his wife and four children make preparations to have his funeral in three months. Relatives and friends have given the wife funds to keep the husband's body in the freezer at the morgue in Korle-Bu Community (near Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital, Accra, Ghana). The wife seeks counseling from a social worker because she is depressed about undergoing the traditional 'widow's rites.' She is also concerned about potential conflicts over the distribution of her husband's wealth and property. She is the first wife. A second wife with two children left him two years ago and moved to the United States. However, the second wife is*

*expected to attend the funeral with her children. Your spouse (you are the social worker) died last year and you were subjected to such rites. What advice and counseling would you give to the first wife and her family?*

To help the groups begin their work, I gave a printed copy (too costly at that time for most to do it themselves) of the rubric to each group at our initial meeting when I introduced myself as their "personal consultant." At their invitation, I met with groups as often as possible outside of class, ranging from once to twice weekly for most groups. In this role, I critiqued the team's progress, made referrals to University faculty, librarians, community representatives, governmental Ministries, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), or International NGOs to obtain authentic information, published and media resources. This role required me to do my homework, too, as I needed to find and evaluate such sources for my students while they were beginning their assignments. During the semester, more than half of the groups invited me to accompany them in the field when they interviewed potential victims, government officials, or other sources. Because the teaching environment was severely limited in terms of technical resources that American students would take for granted, I often supported the completion of my student projects by providing access to my own laptop computer, tape recorder, camera, and funds for travel and food.

Because secondary, published sources for research were often very limited, I requested that students authenticate and evaluate their assigned social problem by conducting interviews with individuals and groups in their own communities, and to document their efforts with photographs, popular print media, and to provide references to specific international and Ghanaian laws. In order to assure the acceptance of my students and to certify the legitimacy of their work, I gave all groups letters of introduction on University of Ghana letterhead that explained the objectives of the assignment and how respondents could contact me directly. Relative to confidentiality, privacy, and adherence to standards set forth for the protection of human subjects in the U.S., the standard differs to some degree. The details of this student/teacher based project were discussed with the Coordinator of the Social Work Department and Director of the Centre for Social Policy Studies, and their blessings were given. Although the University of Ghana does have a human subject-review process, I was not referred. Thus, to address exploitation and ethical concerns, certain safeguards were put into place. I discussed issues of informed consent and stated that everyone (including myself) had to ask permission of persons to be interviewed and have their picture taken (names nor pictures distributed). All consents were given orally. In addition to being told what the purpose of the project was, participants were told how the project would benefit student learning, and that they did not have to answer any questions that they chose not to. I paid all interviewees in Ghanaian currency. It took the students weeks to arrange the field interviews; due to lack of phone service, several trips had to be made by *tro-tro* (a cramped commuter van). Finally, I believe that to avoid the appearance of exploitation in emerging countries, the approval of research and/or instructional projects using human subjects should be approved by a committee representing scholars, stakeholders, and traditionalists so that indigenous persons can be protected.

### Lessons Learned and Teachable Moments: Personal Risk and Tolerance Assessment

This project was based in reality, and in the zest and zeal to effectively complete all aspects of the assignment, I had to come face-to-face with assessment of personal risk and tolerance. Several events occurred in and outside the classroom which became teachable moments. All four of these situations took tremendous acts of courage and maturity on the part of everyone involved.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Self Abuse (drugs, alcohol, and prostitution) were two subjects that placed some or all group members attempting to complete the projects

at personal risk of physical harm. Relative to FGM, two male students took a 34-hour trip to Northern Ghana (near the border of Burkina Faso), to collect data on the practice. On the return trip, the students were physically beaten when they discovered their bus driver's criminal behavior in girl trafficking (soliciting for sex trade). When the students on the State Transport Bus witnessed the driver picking up five young girls (14 or 15 years of age), they taped the conversations and informed the driver that he had been recorded and was breaking the law. After being discovered, the driver stopped at a bus station many miles from Greater Accra, then he and a fellow bus driver destroyed the recorder and severely beat the students. Although their interviews with the FGM practitioners were lost, the students were able to save high quality photos of the elderly women, including their traditional homes (mud huts) and surgical site. One was still conducting the surgery on girls mostly from Burkina Faso, while the other had ceased, admonishing her daughters not to have this practice done on her granddaughters. Following documentation of their injuries at a hospital, the students reported the incident to the police. The Minister for Women and Children filed a police report as well and, in a written letter, sought my support to prosecute the drivers. Unfortunately, since the date was set for me to return to the United States, I was unable to remain in the country to testify and the case was dropped. However, we did use this as a teachable moment in class, discussing under what circumstances (ethical and practical) does a student on assignment become involved in identifying criminal behavior and, if one chooses to do so, what preparations are needed for personal protection and security.

In another incident that took us in harm's way (yes, I was there), a group completed their project on Self-Abuse by interviewing alcoholics, drug abusers, and prostitutes in an obscure and very depressed "drug market" adjacent to a squatters' area of Accra called Sodom and Gomorrah, or Old Fadama. I later discovered that most of the students had never been to this area and only knew of its existence from news accounts of poor, displaced squatters living on ground polluted by human and industrial waste. So for the most part, they were unfamiliar with the dangers that they/we were walking into. This was a place with overwhelming filth, trash, and lots of drug-making activity. A classmate of George's, Mr. A., became a self-appointed expert when he volunteered as a cultural guide for our group, walking us through Sodom and Gomorrah and introducing us to noncriminal residents. As a student working on the sanitation project, Mr. A. became interested in communities like this, and to this day continues in his civic work as a banker to advocate for the plight of displaced persons. Below is an excerpt from his 2002 handwritten, six-page narrative which best describes Sodom and Gomorrah and why travelers to the area should be self-aware:

> *"It is a place which is very densely populated with about 18,000 people* [2009 report exceeds 55,000] *occupying the landmass of 2 hectares [5* acres*]. The people found there are mostly migrants from rural Northern Ghana who came to Accra to make a living... The condition of the area is so deplorable that in the strictest sense of the phrase, no human being is supposed to live there. The structures found there are mostly wooden and have been erected on every available space. Drainage is nothing to talk about. There are no gutters in the area and one could see stagnant and dirty water all around. There was an instance where we found one pregnant lady who has to jump a pool of water before she gets to her bedroom... people throw their waste at any available space... The most repudiating filth to the eye are women who are cooking and selling by gutters and people rushing to buy these foods. Children are found walking in this dirty environment barefooted and hardly wearing anything. They have to make up bathrooms where the residents have*

*to pay 500 Cedis before they can take a bath....*

So picture this: it is hot and we are in an open area with a narrow exit, with nothing but a plank to walk over a gutter filled with filthy water below us. Just as we completed the interviews with drug sellers/users and one of the young prostitutes, the local drug kingpin—who was clearly armed and wearing a long buttoned-up trench coat—approached the group gesturing to his mouth with his hands, stating that he wanted "chop, chop" meaning he wanted money for food. This is a password for bribe. I introduced myself and looked at him face-to-face, and without flinching I told him that I would not be giving him "chop, chop." He was not a happy camper. Fear was not an emotion I could give into. Sensing the potential danger we walked away fast, quickly passing tin shacks, open sewers, and rough-board walkways without looking back!

Later that week in class, we talked about the perils of getting assignments completed in the field and the need for advanced preparation, anticipation of threats to personal safety, and the need for complete disclosure to legitimize our roles in communities that might be hostile. Although the students collected remarkable interviews, I informed them that our experiences demonstrated that we were all a little bit naive and that we probably should have developed methods for completing the assignment without exposing anyone to personal risk. Students' naïveté may have stemmed from sheltered and isolated backgrounds due to schooling, socio-economic status, and/or living in rural areas. I made a note to myself that I would never again expose students to risk because of my own naiveté or students' enthusiasm.

As noted by George relative to the indigenous cases:

*"On the whole, we learnt a lot, especially the religious and cultural practices that were hereto 'a non-talk-about-issues' at our various homes ...we advanced our level of cultural and religious tolerance, we ended up appreciating even why a mad person behaves the way he does."*

Tolerance relative to the Sharia Law and Trokosi System were also teachable moments for us. Discussions about these practices were very lively, combative, and informative when addressing ethical dilemmas and social work practice. Keep in mind this was a diverse class of students, 99% Ghanaian, who may have been the victims or perpetrators of intolerance and discriminatory practices. In emerging countries like Ghana social work practice is often restricted by the presence of cultural dimensions and traditions that are designed to sustain the community's ability to maintain autonomy, self-determination and hierarchical roles. This means that a member of a family or village is obligated to adhere to traditional values and mores, or risk facing dire consequences (banishment, isolation, death, etc). This community orientation is in contrast to the individual-orientation and the value of personal autonomy and responsibility of social work as practiced in the United States and most western cultures.

The issue of Sharia Law was a hot topic, especially with the importance of religion among mostly Christian Ghanaians. Although there are religiously mixed marriages, there does not seem to be widespread appreciation of religious diversity. As the professor, I could not walk away from it; thus we all learned a lot from the experience even though most were not converted. One student, Mrs. Kadri—a devout Moslem, mother of five, and wife of former Ghanaian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia—stood up as another expert on Sharia Law following a rousing and heated discussion on gender rights, especially in the Islamic community of Northern Ghana. Also keep in mind this discussion took place approximately six months after September 11th. After this lecture, Mrs. Kadri asked my permission to share her understanding of the practice in the form of a presentation. Below is my own recollection of Mrs. Kadri's presentation to her classmates:

*"When Hajia Meri Abukari Kadri, a stately, tall, and strikingly*

*beautiful Islamic student, presented the Moslem practice of Sharia to the class, which was comprised of 75% Christian students, there was an uproar (British-style court room yelling and jostling). Calmly, she discussed the relationship of Sharia Islamic laws to the case of a Nigerian woman, a mother, who was convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. (The case was overturned in 2004 by Islamic clerics due to a technically.) Although not necessarily convinced that the practice did not violate humanitarian laws, I (we) walked away with a greater understanding of the practice. We understood that not all Moslems practice it and that there is a long history and aspects of the law that are unique. She explained that there is a lack of involvement of women in decision-making and implementation of Sharia Law and that empowerment efforts that include women are being attempted to help them. At the end of the presentation, the dominantly Christian class looked up to Hajia as a leader in her group project and community."*

Mrs. Kadri's unselfish leadership, intelligence, caring style, generosity, fairness, and ethics were well appreciated as she led her group through a greater understanding of the plight of non-Ghanaians being falsely accused, arrested, and convicted for crimes generally said to have occurred in upscale communities in Ghana. I admired her because of her stance on the rights of women and children, and that she did not fit the typical stereotype of a Moslem woman. She attended college with her daughter, wore stunning outfits with various styles of head wrap, and she drove a car! She was a mature adult earning honor degrees in Religion and Bachelors Degree in Social Work and Sociology. She was very outgoing and, at her invitation, my family along with several students attended the wedding of one of her family members at her compound in May of 2002. It was a wonderful opportunity to witness an Islamic celebration of marriage. Sadly, a few days after my arrival in 2005, I was invited to her residence—along with former President of Ghana, Jerry Rawlings, numerous dignitaries and women representing groups founded by Mrs. Kadri—to speak at her Du'a, a customary Islamic celebration of life, which occurred 40 days after her untimely death in a car accident. She was 42 years old.

For me as an African American, the most challenging visit in my ancestral home of Africa was the group's interview with animist priests who adhered to the rites of the Trokosi System: a form of slavery. In this religious practice, young girls are held in bondage to atone for offenses or crimes (real or unreal) committed by a family member against the animist deity. Although this form of slavery has been outlawed by the Ghanaian constitution since 1992, it is still practiced in several districts. We traveled nearly two hours outside of Greater Accra to interview18 – 25 animist priests at an outside community center. We all had to set aside our disdain for this practice. Showing great restraint and respect for the priests, I modeled an out of body disconnect, demonstrating what social workers have to do when facing a client whose values are in contrast to your own. We were not allowed to see or interview a Trokosi. The priests, ranging in age from what appeared to be a young teenager to an elder, did not believe that the practice was wrong and repeatedly said that it was a calling. If they did not adhere to the gods and willingly become animist priests, then they would die or become ill. Although the practice continues, several international NGOs have been instrumental in liberating and retraining some girls and women who were Trokosi.

**Assignment Completed: Paper and Presentation**

On the last day of class, 14 student papers describing decision making strategies for solving ethical dilemmas for indigenous social problems were presented by each student group. Groups submitted an authentic but fictionalized presenting problem (or case

example) of an ethical dilemma, such as the following from the group that assessed the Trokosi System:

> *Mercy S., now 31, was sent to a Trokosi shrine at the age of seven. This shrine is located at Takpo near Adedome in the North Tongo District of the Volta Region in the Republic of Ghana. She was sent there by her parents to be a Trokosi as a reparation/atonement for a crime committed by her grandfather. The grandfather was accused of stealing a fowl. The owner of the fowl went to a shrine and cursed the family as a result of which mysterious deaths began to occur in the family. A local priest, who was consulted, revealed the crime.*
>
> *To stop the deaths, the family was asked to bring a young virgin girl to the shrine to appease the gods. Trokosi in the local Ewe language is translated "slave wife of the gods." As a Trokosi, Mercy was expected to offer free lifetime labour for the economic benefit and sexual gratification of the shrine or fetish priest.*
>
> *Mercy reported that she was defiled (raped) at the age of 11, and subsequently had four children with the priest. She reported that as typical of shrine chores, she worked on the farm of the priest together with other Trokosis, but had no share in the harvest.*
>
> *Even though her parents were supposed to provide her needs, she was totally abandoned. No assistance came to her. She had to work on her own to fend for her children. The priest had no hand in their upkeep. She also could not read and write as she was denied access to education. On one occasion, when life became unbearable, she ran away to her parents but they refused to accept her back for fear of incurring the wrath of the gods. With no alternatives at her disposal she returned to the shrine to continue in her servitude. Having heard of an NGO working on the liberation of Trokosi girls, she ran away from the shrine to seek help. What should the social worker do?*

I showed the Power Point presentation which included field photos documenting each of their indigenous social problems. Teaching this class was a very rewarding experience. The students and I learned a lot about Ghanaian culture and lifestyle. During "up close and personal" field visits and interviews, we learned about the impact of social problems, many of which were unfamiliar. Their learning reflected exposures that extended far beyond the classroom; visits to such places as the leprosarium provided startling new knowledge, raw emotions, fervent despair, and resilient hope. What we did discover is that, despite the deplorable circumstances that some of the folks we encountered were living in, some had a different take on life.

In 2001, Kwasi first introduced me and his peers to a man who called himself "Mr. Love." Here is Kwasi's description of Mr. Love's life in Sodom and Gomorrah:

> *"...we came across Mr. Love and his family who offered to talk to us. Mr. Love is a 45-year-old man with a wife and nine children. He migrated to Sodom and Gomorrah in 1992...amongst the first residents...the electronic technician of the area and does most of the wiring and also repairs...Through this work he has been able to acquire four trucks, which are manned by people, and he also had a taxicab which was sold about three months ago...a semi-literate as he can express himself in the English language and was once working for a security agency...claims his living conditions are now economically*

*better than before and that he has been able to send all the children to school...he calls himself 'family of love...'"*

In 2005, when I introduced him to my study abroad students, Mr. Love was still thriving and his family was intact.

On a different level, I learned that western academics can tap into the lives, experiences, and highly motivated desires of students in an emerging nation to learn along with students; especially when the students have never been enlisted as co-learners with a professor. My students and I learned about mutual respect and the realization that in order to fully understand social problems, it is necessary to see the world through the eyes of those who live them.

### Mission Accomplished? George's Evaluation of the Collaborative Experience

At the end of this experience, students had to be evaluated beyond the project. Thus, as required by the university, I had to develop examination questions for the "long" (final) examination which had to be submitted several weeks before the exam. All this was foreign to me and I resisted a bit; I just did not want to release the questions for fear they'd be stolen. Then I realized it was a no-brainer: all questions would be correlated to each section of the assignment. Students would have to respond to the indigenous social problem their group had assessed. If they had missed class frequently, not asked me for consultations on a regular basis to clarify and discuss major issues, and failed to go in the field with group members, then they would most likely be challenged to respond effectively to the exam questions. As I recall, the only thing that I reviewed with the students was content they learned from their projects; critical thinking would be assessed in the long exam, not their memories. They were very anxious, especially since throughout the semester I frequently walked down the aisle to engage them and would not let them take notes. I had confidence in them because I knew which groups and individuals had made a commitment to this collaborative teaching/learning model. Finally, some students had not expected me to come on exam day. Of course I did, only to be surprised that they were separated into three different rooms. Oh boy, did I run around to answer any questions other than provide them with answers to the exam questions!

In the final analysis, did I succeed in developing an effective collaborative experience? I will let George have the last word:

*"Nevertheless, after the enjoyment, the class became confused again! We were completely at a loss how and where the Professor will set her questions [final exam]. As tradition demands, we needed to know which areas or theories to 'chew' [memorize] so we can 'pour' [write], pass (the course) and possibly forget [everything teacher taught us about]. But alas! The Prof. never gave areas or theories to chew. I remember a few days before the examination day, friends had asked 'Which areas are coming in the examination?' I simply could not tell since I had no clue!*

*"However, there was a spontaneous jubilation at the examination hall as soon as the invigilator had said 'stop work, pens down.' Professor Brenda McGadney-Douglass had surprised us again with her intelligence and scholarship. The examination was meant for those who observed regular attendance of lectures!*

*"I never missed any of her lectures; it was so interesting to miss! I always had a new story to tell.*

*"The few 'chew' and 'pour' experts were however disappointed. Quite unusually, about 80 percent[6] of the class had an 'A'. Not only did I have an 'A', most of the discussions we had are*

*still fresh in memory. I wish I one day become a good lecturer as Professor Brenda McGadney-Douglass. May the Good Lord grant her comfort and prosperity in all her endeavors."*

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**Footnotes**

1 Senior, Political Science-International Affairs Honors Student, 2011–2012 Student body President at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI; Trilingual – Japanese, French, and Spanish.

2 Fulbright-Hays. (1979). Faculty Research Award: Cross-cultural oral history project. Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO). U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare: Washington, DC.

3 Three students were terminated from the course and from taking the exam, having not been on my roster when they showed up the 7th week and final lecture respectively. All did the usual Ghanaian-style begging: "Madam, Madam, I beg you, I beg you!" As they say this they clap their hands together – hitting the back of their right hand into the palm of their left hand... repeating this process and phrase over and over until you give in!

4 Unknown causes, age 44; known to be able to recite speeches by President Abraham Lincoln. Graduated 2004 degree in Social Work, taught at Osu Social Work School, and continued to seek admission to Law School (wanted to be second blind Lawyer in Ghana).

5 Always called me "Momma"; called me and family almost monthly from the time of our 2001 departure through January 2009.

6 University of Ghana has a standard expectation of percentage of class who will pass or fail the course.

**Endnotes**

1 Chancellor His Excellency Mr. Kofi Annan, 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations (1/1997 – 12/2006).

2 Internally displaced person from ethnic conflict in Northern Ghana.

3 Refugee from Sierra Leone; graduated in 2004 resettled to Australia.

4 Replaced by the Ghana Health Insurance Plan.

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