

Project Inclusion: Development of a Cross-Cultural Course Comparing the Education and Inclusion of Persons Who are Deaf in the United States, Sweden, Greece and the Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper describes the genesis of Project Inclusion, the first-ever comparative cross-cultural course that examines the educational inclusion of deaf students in the United States, Sweden, Greece, and the Netherlands. A background for the project is provided as in a discussion of educational strategies, including the development of the course curriculum, delivery through web-based technology, and the format of a two-week capping experience. Initial outcome data are examined and future directions are explored.

Background

Project Inclusion is the first-ever comparative deaf education course offered on an international basis. The project is funded by the United States Department of Education and the European Union through a three-year grant from the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) program in the EC/USA Joint Consortium for Cooperation in Higher Educa-

tion and Vocational Education. Project Inclusion provides a forum for comparing the educational inclusion of persons who are deaf and hard of hearing from the perspective of individual countries. European Union partners include Örebro University in Sweden, the University of Patras in Greece and the Instituut voor Doven in the Netherlands. United States affiliates include the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, the University of Tennessee, and the American Society for Deaf Children, a parent organization. Northern Illinois University has also been involved with the project as has the country of Germany on the EU side. Project directors on the U.S. team include Professors Kenneth Nash and James DeCaro, both from the Rochester Institute of Technology and Professor Berth Danermark from Örebro University in Sweden.

The overall goal of Project Inclusion is to assist persons who are deaf to realize equality of opportunity in education and society. Project Inclusion was designed to identify "universal" design principles, effective strategies and practical programs related to the inclusion of deaf people in each partner country. The information has been organized into the first-ever course on the subject of comparative deaf education.

Approach

The instructional approach for this course includes a curriculum developed by the multi-national faculty team. The curriculum was developed by a multi-national design team composed of faculty from the project partners organizations. During an eighteen-month period from June, 1999-December, 2000, the project team worked closely together and grappled with the many issues involved in creating a cross-cultural course. The team met three times, twice in Europe and once in the U.S., to develop the course material. Numerous phone calls and e-mail exchanges also facilitated the development process.

Many discussions occurred in the course of developing these materials regarding cultural differences in values and understanding related to the education of deaf students. The focal issue, however, remained that of cross-cultural meanings of inclusion of deaf students as reflected in the participating country's model of education for these students. Inclusion was discovered to be a culturally relative term in that the definition of what is, indeed, inclusive varies greatly from one coun-

try to another. The faculty spent long hours exploring the meaning of *inclusion* within the context of the participating countries.

They even began to question whether or not a search for universal principles was possible or even desirable. It became clear that, even when educational outcomes were similar, the outcomes were grounded in the context of very different cultural perspectives and historical backgrounds. These discussions led to the beginning of an understanding of the nature of inclusion within different countries and the creation of the curricular materials for the course.

Curricular units include: Human rights, diversity, language, social history, politics, and the family. While the introductory, human rights, and diversity units apply to all countries, the remaining topics were addressed separately by each participating country. The course is delivered using web-based technology, specifically, BlackBoard. Students from all countries log on asynchronously and read the assigned materials. Discussion questions are provided at the end of each unit to further stimulate discussion and integration of learning. Discussion occurs between faculty and students from each country as the course proceeds. Discussion is also facilitated on-line through posts to BlackBoard and responses. Text readers containing the curricular materials placed on BlackBoard are also made available to all students.

Students who enroll in the course are preparing to work with deaf pupils in the participating countries. Most are traditional pre-professional students in deaf education although exceptions have included students majoring in deafness rehabilitation counseling and speech pathology or audiology. Students are selected by criteria developed by the university they attend. Differences in educational strategies across countries are evident in the selection of students to participate in the project. The United States schools, for example, tend to select traditional pre-professional students while other countries, like the Netherlands, employ more of a place-and-train model and, thus, select practicing professionals who are returning to school for further education.

Following the distance-learning segment of the course, students gather for a two-week capping experience during which they learn from each other and further their understanding of the inclusion of persons who are deaf into society in the host country. The first capping experience was held in Rochester, New York and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. In addition to the individual country presentations, students learned about the inclusion of persons who are deaf in the U.S. by studying other issues of inclusion such as those related to civil rights, women's rights, and the rights of Native Americans. An array of speakers from the host area contributed to the stu-

dents' learning as did visits to a local school for the deaf and to places that highlighted the United States' struggles with issues of equality. These included sites important in the woman's suffrage movement (such as the birthplace of Susan B. Anthony), locations where the underground railway once flourished during the abolition of slavery, and a replica of Native American village.

The second capping experience is to be held in Örebro, Sweden in June-July, 2002. There, students will focus on inclusion of deaf persons in Sweden and on learning about the country's unique system of education for persons who are deaf. The Swedish National Association of the Deaf will be holding its annual conference in Örebro at the same time that the capping experience occurs, allowing the students to interact with many deaf people from different parts of the country.

Instruction for the on-line portion of the course is provided in English as is the book of readings which offers the material as text, rather than electronic format. Instruction during the capping experience is provided in English and in the signed languages of the participating countries. Countries with deaf participants provide their own cadre of interpreters at the expense of the project.

Expected Outcomes

Expected outcomes from the project include the expectation that each participating student will compare deaf education practices in the context of human rights, diversity, language, politics, social history and the family. Each multinational team is expected to compare, contrast, analyze and make recommendations regarding the policies and practices of each country. All efforts are directed toward answering the central question of study, "What are the implications of deaf education practice and policy for the inclusion of deaf individuals in society?"

Student learning goals include generating concrete ideas that can be applied to their home country toward the ultimate goal of improving deaf education and the inclusion of deaf persons in society. Learning outcomes include an understanding of the United Nations declaration of Human Rights as it applies specifically to deaf people, an understanding of the diversity of deaf people in each country, a knowledge of the educational system(s) of each country, and an understanding of influences that impact of the educational system as it relates to persons who are deaf. Students participate in country teams to develop comprehensive presentations on deaf education in their home country, which are given at the capping experience. Students are also expected to create individual papers comparing deaf educational practices among the participating countries and identifying principles of universal design gleaned from the course and the capping experience. The

overarching intent is to have positive impact on deaf education policies and practices in each of the participating countries.

Project Inclusion is now entering the third and final project year under the federal grant. The design team collected extensive evaluation data on the first year's offering of the course and will do so again for the second year. Data include an evaluation of the curriculum, an analysis of instructional methods (BlackBoard and reading text), evaluations of each individual speaker and/or learning activity offered during the capping experience, and an overall evaluation of the project. These data will be analyzed and presented in the form of a final comprehensive report containing recommendations regarding the conduct of future cross-cultural comparative courses.

Preliminary evaluations from the first project year suggest that students rated the course positively (5.3 on a 7-point scale with 7 as most positive). Individual curricular units and activities that constituted the capping experience were generally rated favorably as well. An evaluation of the use of BlackBoard as an educational tool during the first project year was somewhat mixed. Many students experienced technical difficulties while accessing BlackBoard during the first year. It is hoped that these problems have been reduced by moving to an upgraded version of the course delivery system and providing adequate technical support. Most students found most of the features of BlackBoard to be useful, including the announcement section, course documents, course material, discussion board, e-mail contact with other students and faculty and ability to group students. In evaluating the curricular content on BlackBoard, most students ranked the amount, organization and content as "about right", "organized" and "helpful."

Current discussions among the design team are centering on the future of this project and the feasibility of continuing it in some manner after the grant expires. Considerations include the possibility of a European Union conference on inclusion, perhaps to be held in Greece in 2003.

For further information, please visit the web site for Project Inclusion at <http://www.rit.edu/inclusion>.