Chapter 6

Examining Race Hate Crime with Students Using a Cross Cultural International Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to bring together students in criminology and social work from three universities across the globe (the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa; the University of Washington in the United States of America; and Glyndwr University in Wales, United Kingdom), to examine the issue of racism and hate crime. The chapter provides a detailed case study of an online learning environment constructed to facilitate a four week international student conference. The chapter draws strongly upon the student experience and voice, extracted from the anonymous completion of online questionnaires at the end of the conference. The student narrative is supplemented by the experiences of the three authors who facilitated and managed the online learning process. The chapter explores the educational opportunities and limitations in respect of: online learning generally; the cross cultural shared experience; and in terms of engaging students in investigating global social issues.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid and constantly changing technological advances provide new opportunities for criminals to develop ever sophisticated strategies to plan and manage criminal activities, while also providing law enforcement agencies with new technology to tackle crime. In this spiraling advancement of new gadgets and gizmos, both law breakers and law enforcers need to keep abreast of the latest technological developments. However, technology has also provided new opportunities in respect of crime prevention, collaboration, sharing knowledge, intelligence and ideas. This chapter explores the way in which academics from three continents (Africa, America & Europe) used a Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard) to collaborate and establish an annual online 'conference' that enabled students from their respected universities to examine the issue of racism and race hate crime. The issue of racism is important to the authors personally and professionally. Interestingly, the three staff reflect a degree of diversity beyond that of geography, Julian Buchanan is a white, English speaking male with Irish/English nationality working in Wales, UK who teaches on criminal justice programmes, Steve Wilson is a Black, middle class, Christian, male living and working in the United States who teaches on social work programmes, while Nirmala Gopal is a South African Indian female living and working in South Africa who teaches criminology.

The issue of racism is important for students to study in all three degree programmes particularly as most students will eventually find employment in the criminal justice and social care sector. Once graduated these students choose professions as police officers, youth justice workers, social workers, drug workers, probation officers, housing officers, etc. The purpose of the conference was to raise students' awareness of the broader issues of discrimination, the abuse of power, stereotyping, hate crime and racism. While the context and culture in three countries is considerably different

they all share a history of colonialism and racism. It was therefore felt particularly important to provide students with a historical insight to racism, as well as examine present day understandings of the nature and context of racism in the three countries, and explore the implications for future professional practice as many students will eventually find employment in the human services. The conference had three key learning objectives:

1. To develop an appreciation of the historical and contemporary manifestations of racism today.
2. To develop a critical understanding of the issues of race, inequality and discrimination.
3. To develop an insight into the different issues of diversity, language and power.

Underpinning the conference is the assumptions that unfair discrimination occurs in every society and most, if not all, people will be subject to some form of prejudice at some time in their life. All forms of discrimination warrants concern. Discrimination involves the use of power (by those who are in a position to possess or inherit power), to maintain their privilege and benefits at the expense of others by the perpetuating prejudice and stereotypes to validate their behaviour. Racism is a form of discrimination. Racism then involves the use of power by those who are in a position to possess or inherit power (most commonly white people) to maintain the privilege and benefits at the expense of others (most commonly people who may be seen to belong to a Black and Minority Ethnic group), by perpetuating prejudice and racist stereotypes. As a form of discrimination racism can be particularly damaging, because it is based upon the color of a person's skin, which is not only fundamental to their being and identity, it is something that is always visible, so racism remains an ever present risk which cannot be avoided. This unfair and discriminatory action (racism) is usually upheld by a combination of ignorance, prejudice and stereotyping by those in power. Racism can

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