PRIFYSGOL glyndŵr UNIVERSITY

Glyndŵr University
Glyndŵr University Research Online

Social Inclusion Research Unit | Social and Community

1-1-2008

A Cross Cultural Virtual Learning Environment for Students to Explore the Issue of Racism: A Case Study involving the UK, USA & SA

Julian Buchanan
Glyndwr University, julianbuchanan@gmail.com

S T. Wilson

N Gopal

Follow this and additional works at: http://epubs.glyndwr.ac.uk/siru

Part of the Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Social Work Commons, and the Special Education and Teaching Commons

This is an electronic version of an article that was originally published in the Journal of Social Work Education in 2008 published by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. The definitive version is available at http://www.informaworld.com Copyright © 2008 Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

Recommended Citation
Buchanan, J., Wilson, S.T., & Gopal, N. (2008)'A Cross Cultural Virtual Learning Environment for Students to Explore the Issue of Racism: A Case Study involving the UK, USA & SA'. Social Work Education, 27(6), 671 - 682

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social and Community at Glyndŵr University Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Inclusion Research Unit by an authorized administrator of Glyndŵr University Research Online. For more information, please contact d.jepson@glyndwr.ac.uk.

A Cross Cultural Virtual Learning Environment for Students to Explore the Issue of Racism: A Case Study involving the UK, USA & SA.

Julian Buchanan, Stephen T. Wilson & Nirmala Gopal

This article draws upon the experiences of three academics who collaborated online to engage students from the three respective higher education institutions (the University of Wales, United Kingdom; the University of Washington, United States of America; and the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa) to participate in a Virtual Learning Environment using Blackboard software to examine the issue of racism (past and present). This article reflects upon the nature, context and format of the online learning environment, explores the staff and student experience of participating and engaging in the conference, and considers its effectiveness for learning and teaching. The article also highlights some of the cross cultural insights that emerged concerning language, culture, and social context in respect of the issue of racism and related issues of discrimination. The creation of a virtual learning environment across three continents raised interesting challenges and exciting opportunities in respect of academic collaboration and the development of learning and teaching strategies. The article concludes by suggesting that there is pedagogical merit in using both cross cultural and virtual learning environments which may be particularly well suited to enable students to grapple with subject matters that have historically been fraught with ignorance, prejudice and pre-conceived ideas.

Keywords: E-Learning, Virtual Learning, Online, Race, Racism, International Social Work

Introduction

In September 2002 the BA (Hons) in Criminal Justice was launched at the University of Wales (NEWI) Wrexham, UK. What was distinctive about this justice orientated programme was that half of the modules were taught entirely online using the Blackboard (www.blackboard.ac.uk) Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Online learning sometimes referred to as e-learning, is the process of accessing the internet, going to the web site where the VLE is located, and using a unique username and password to log onto a particular programme of study. The Blackboard VLE used for the BA (Hons) Criminal Justice programme involves students engaging in synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning taking place when all the students are present online at the same time, whereas asynchronous learning occurs when the students are accessing lecture reports, PowerPoint presentations, audio, video material, web sites, and/or contributing to discussion boards - but not necessarily at the same time. For example, a students and a lecturer may post replies to threads of a discussion board at different times, and return to the discussion periodically to catch up and contribute further to the debate.

Online learning has been integrated widely across higher education institutions (Wallace 2003) using a range of specifically designed software such as FirstClass, Blackboard, WebCT, Learnwise and Moodle. While each software package has particular strengths and weaknesses what is more interesting is the way in which in which VLEs are used differently in learning and teaching. Within the BA (Hons) Criminal Justice programme Blackboard wasn't used to supplement traditional face to face lectures by providing additional resources, instead it was used as the main learning and teaching environment for half of the modules on the programme, although staff and students still had regular weekly face to face contact when studying the other modules on the programme. One module in the second year 'Social Difference and Inequality' required students to explore issues of discrimination and learning outcome concentrated particularly upon knowledge and appreciation of inequalities in respect of race, class and gender. The issue of race was addressed by way of a four week online conference.

A link was established between the University of Wales, NEWI and the University of Washington, Seattle, USA during a Social Work Conference held in Washington. This allowed two of the authors to collaborate and broaden the online race 'conference' to incorporate staff and students from both universities.. Examining the issue of racism together and combining staff and students from the UK & USA became an established and much valued part of the 'Social Difference and Inequality' module. A year later while the lead author was presenting a paper at a World Congress of Criminology Conference in Philadelphia an opportunity arose to broaden the collaboration to also involve staff and students from the University Of KwaZulu Natal South Africa. Bringing staff and students together via international staff/student exchanges requires considerable time and effort (Mathiesen & Lager 2007), but this arrangement had at minimum cost, enabled some degree of student exchange albeit in a 'virtual' world.

The International Online Race Conference

Admittedly the description 'International Online Race Conference' is a little grandiose, but it was chosen deliberately to communicate to students that this was a specific, time limited and privileged opportunity. The key focus was centred upon the conference papers and asynchronous discussions Synchronous discussion has not been used partly because of challenges posed by time difference and possible technological difficulties, but this is a possibility worth considering in the future that could have educational merit (Kirkpatrick 2005). The 'conference' took place on its own dedicated Blackboard area separate from the main BA (Hons) Criminal Justice area, and each student accessed it via a unique username and password. The Blackboard environment was simplified and customised (see Fig. 1) to provide a virtual environment similar to what students may find if attending face to face conference (papers, formal seminars, informal discussions, meeting places, and additional resources and handouts):

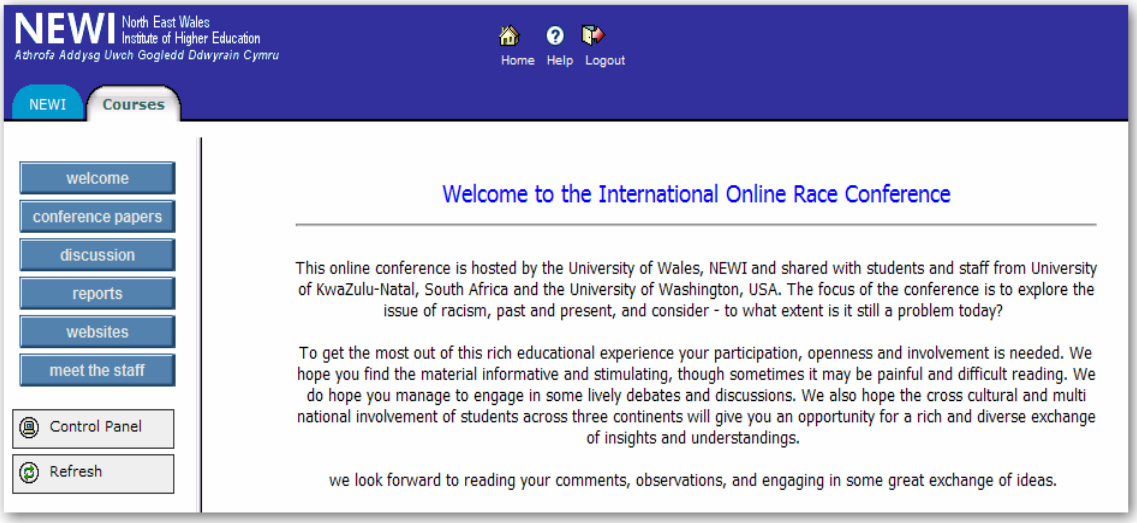


Fig. 1

To simulate a conference environment and engage the students three sets of 'conference papers' were written and prepared by the UK author. The first involved racism – 'learning from the past', the second racism – 'reflecting upon the present', and the final paper 'theory and practice issues' sought to conceptualise and explore the policy and practice implications. As the conference was established independently and collaboration with USA and SA occurred afterwards, the material is inevitably a little Eurocentric - although since it's inception adaptations have been made to incorporate USA and SA perspectives. Had the conference been planned from the outset to include staff and students from all three countries then the material would have been written and devised collaboratively from the outset.

Learning from the past examined the history of transatlantic slavery which affected all three continents, and looked at more recent history concerning the lynching in the USA. In addition to lecture notes these papers included short video, audio, music, poetry and web links from a range of sources including: the Liverpool International Slavery Museum, BBC, Without Sanctuary Memorial, and Billie Holliday singing 'Strange Fruit'. Discussion Board debates centred upon making sense and learning from the past, how and why such atrocities happened, and what issues it raises for today.

The second set of conference papers involved students examining racism in more recent times and included: the death of Stephen Lawrence and the MacPherson Report; an examination of case studies to explore UK deaths in police custody & prisons; the murder of Anthony Walker; and recent examples of racism in football. This included poetry by Benjamin Zephaniah 'Too Black Too Strong', video clips from YouTube http://www.youtube.com concerning the USA Jena Six, various case studies and newspaper articles, and an online questionnaire. The Discussion Board debates encouraged students to explore how and why such things happened today, what common themes and issues emerged from their reading, and when are boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour crossed.

The third and final set of conference papers looked at: statistics of the disproportionate experience of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups of the criminal justice system in the UK; the use and abuse of humour to promote racism; the constructs of personal, cultural and structural discrimination (Thompson 2005); notions of discrimination, non-discrimination and anti-discrimination; the abuse of power and privilege; positive action and positive discrimination; and the importance of seeing difference so that people can be treated more equally. Again this involved a range of

multimedia techniques including a short video lecture synchronised with PowerPoint. Discussion Board debates involved students considering a range of policy and practice issues including: whether we should treat everybody the same; whether it is important to see difference; whether prejudice is something we all suffer at some level; how and why is racism any different; whether it is best for service users and workers to be matched according to colour, gender, disability etc.; and asking students to explore whether slavery was still a problem in the 21st century.

The three conference papers were supported by additional material found under 'Reports' (fig. 1) which included access to a wide range of online reports regarding racism, slavery and broader issues of discrimination. The 'Websites' button (fig. 1) gave access to over forty carefully selected websites, while the 'Meet the Staff' (fig. 1) provided a photograph and background information on the three staff managing the online learning community. The Discussion Board area also included a 'virtual coffee bar' area for staff and students to chat more informally.

The Student Context

The thirty-one BA (Hons) Criminal Justice students from the University of Wales (NEWI) tended to lead the conference - perhaps understandably because it is hosted by them and has been an established integral assessed part of their programme. NEWI students were required to submit an online 1,000 reflective account with a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate their learning in respect of three conference aims: to develop a critical understanding of the issues of race, inequality and discrimination; to develop an appreciation of the historical and contemporary manifestations of racism today; and finally to develop an insight into the different issues of diversity, language and power.

The thirty-one students from Wales were predominantly female and white (six male students and one Black student). In contrast the seven students from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa were Black or Indian with just one white student and just one male student. These students participated on the conference as part of their Victim Studies module as part of their Honours Degree in Criminology. The three students from the University of Washington studying on the Social Work for Social Justice Programme were one Caucasian Female, one muiti-racial female with Native American and Caucasian heritage, and one Hispanic Mestizo male. In total 41 students from the three countries took part in the conference. Interestingly, the three staff reflected a degree of diversity that was probably helpful in managing and informing the conference - Julian Buchanan is a white English speaking male with Irish/English nationality working in Wales, UK, Steve Wilson is a Black middle class, Christian, male living in the United States, and Nirmala Gopal is a South African Indian female working in South Africa.

The Student Response

Generally, students engaged actively and enthusiastically to the conference material. As with face to face learning and teaching there are always some students who remain quiet and don't contribute although this doesn't necessarily mean they are not engaging and learning. The three separate discussion boards for each of the three conference papers (referred to above) yielded 174, 168 and 178 contributions respectively involving a total of 38 different students. At the end of the conference all students were asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire to evaluate their learning and experience of the conference. The questionnaire was completed by 26 students (18 from UK, 6 from SA, and 2 from USA). The questionnaire largely involved the

students responding to questions with answers on a five point likert scale but the questionnaire also included some open ended questions to elicit student comments and feedback (see Apendix 1). The data and student comments in particular provide some additional rich insights, although given the small scale nature of this survey the results should be treated with an appropriate degree of caution.

Over 92% of students found the Blackboard VLE for the conference accessible, rated good or very good, no student described it as poor or very poor. Similarly ability to use computers was rated okay or above by every student. The expectation was that students would spend approximately eight hours over the four week period engaged in the online conference - the graph below (Fig. 2) indicates that the majority of students well exceeded this amount of time - some appeared to find it compulsive as one student explained:

> *'The conference papers available over the three weeks were extremely well structured bringing about a continuous flow of debates. People were able to talk openly and honestly about how they felt. The only drawback is that it has become a slight obsession reading the comments all the time and reflecting on other peoples experiences.'*

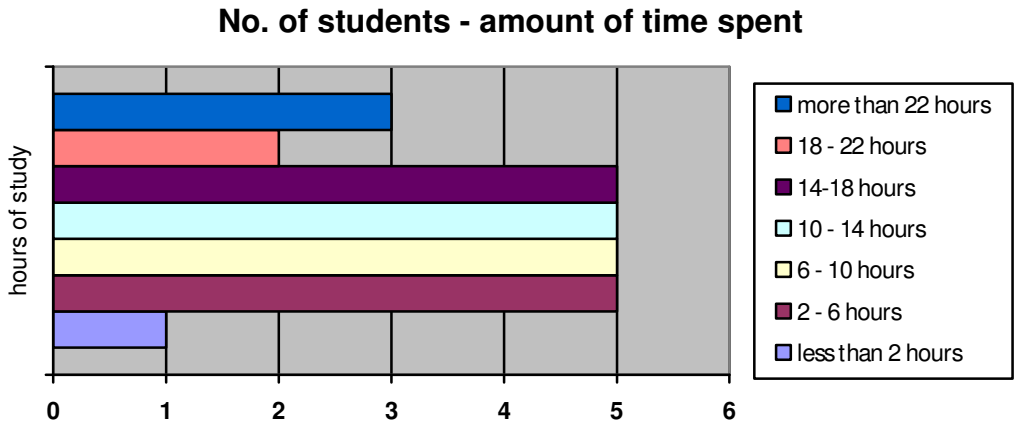


Fig.2

Responses from students indicated that being online not only made it possible to hold a race conference involving students separated geographical by thousands of miles but it also afforded students additional flexibility to study at times and places that suited their lifestyle and other commitments. Students were asked to indicate the different times of the day they had accessed the conference with 70% studying the conference material in the evenings, although the most popular time was the afternoon which was used by 73% of students, perhaps surprisingly 20% of students admitted to engaging with the online conference after midnight. This level of flexibility is important for students who have employment or other domestic commitments, but it also useful educationally as it allows students to engage with study when they are ready to do so. Some students also appreciated being able to re-read, reflect and re-consider the material and comments before forming an opinion and responding. When asked what aspect of online learning did they value most, responses (n=22) highlighted these benefits:

> *'the fact that you can go over the work as much as you want and at your own pace'*
>
> *'the convenience of timing'*

'being able to read other's comments'

'Having the time at home to mull over the conference. I needed quiet time to really take it in and there are no distractions at home at night time.'

'the learning environment was good because even if you have language difficulties you just have to write your views without feeling shy.'

'The ability to do the work at my own pace and also be able to revisit difficult (issues) or those topics that most interested me'

Also valued by students was the opportunity to debate online, read the comments and responses from others. The international dimension and the richness afforded by receiving comments from fellow students in very different socio political cultural contexts were particularly appreciated:

'I really liked learning about racism in different countries and from the perspective of people in other countries. This helps me to remember that issues are similar outside of "my world" and that true solutions need to include everyone struggling with these issues.'

'firstly, I valued the responses I received for my answers, they were helpful in allowing me to understand better. Second, I found it interesting to be able to see the way others, from different parts of the world, with different academic experiences answered the questioned.'

'I liked debates because they tend to draw inner thoughts and perspectives from a particular person and commented on in terms of international perspectives.'

'the fact that we were getting the points of view from other countries was particularly valuable'

'I enjoyed reading the comments of students from other countries, as I gained a broader view of other people's opinions.'

'I valued the discussions as I have gained a fuller understanding of the victimization of minority groups and racism'

Students were asked what aspect or aspects of online learning they didn't like and why this yielded seventeen responses. One common theme was a problem accessing the internet - a particular issue for students in South Africa:

'I liked every aspect except that the computers that we used were very slow and time consuming and we ended up not engaging as long as we would have liked to'.

'the conferences were informative but the setback was that i have wait in a line to get internet access, and it is very slow to respond'

'The only thing about it that I didn't like was the fact that it sometimes took a lot of time to access the site'.

Another key theme for some students was the nature and amount of material which at times was difficult to digest:

'the volume of reading as well as other subject reading'

'No aspects of online learning did I dislike - just some of the content was hard to take'

'the volume of material there is to read online. There just isn't enough time to read everything that I would like to'

'Some of the slavery articles were difficult to read - although essential to the course'

The third and final area of criticism was that while students valued the debates some were frustrated at not being able to see and meet the students from other countries, and sometimes the anonymity and sensitive nature of the subject matter and fear of offending others was an issue for a few students:

'There was too many people to engage in an in-depth conversation. Part of this feeling might be a result of starting late. I learned a lot from the others but I learned very little about who I was learning it from and where these feelings came from within them.'

'disconnect with people, unable to read tone, body language etc'

'There's nothing I don't enjoy about online learning, but now I've read some of the comments I want to put faces to the names of the other students'

'felt as though could not talk about inner opinions for fear of upsetting others or reprisal'

This issue also related to the desire to appreciate the race, ethnicity and context of the person with whom debate was taking place:

'The nature of the on-line environment created an anonymous space. I would have liked to seen more self reflection, maybe a space to explore the context of where people were coming from. The general feeling I got was that there were a lot of white perspectives ...I don't know if that's true or not. I would've liked to see something about participants statistics, if not personal disclosure. Also would've liked a space specifically to explore the different perspectives of the three countries participating. Maybe it was there and I missed it. Definitely possible.'

Asked whether it made any difference studying the issue of racism with student from other countries three students were not sure that it made any difference compared to 22 students who spoke positively (sometimes very enthusiastically) about the experience. Students particularly valued the diversity but also discovered a commonality that experiences in different countries were sometimes similar:

'yes! I cannot begin to explain how much suffice to say it was a wonderful opportunity! I now know how racism affects the different types of people and their responses to racism'

'definitely! it was my favorite part. I enjoyed learning where others are at with this topic and was surprised by how many were "shocked" at some of the things we read. I also found value in learning about racist issues in other parts of the world and found comfort that people are struggling with finding solutions and identifying problems in other countries.'

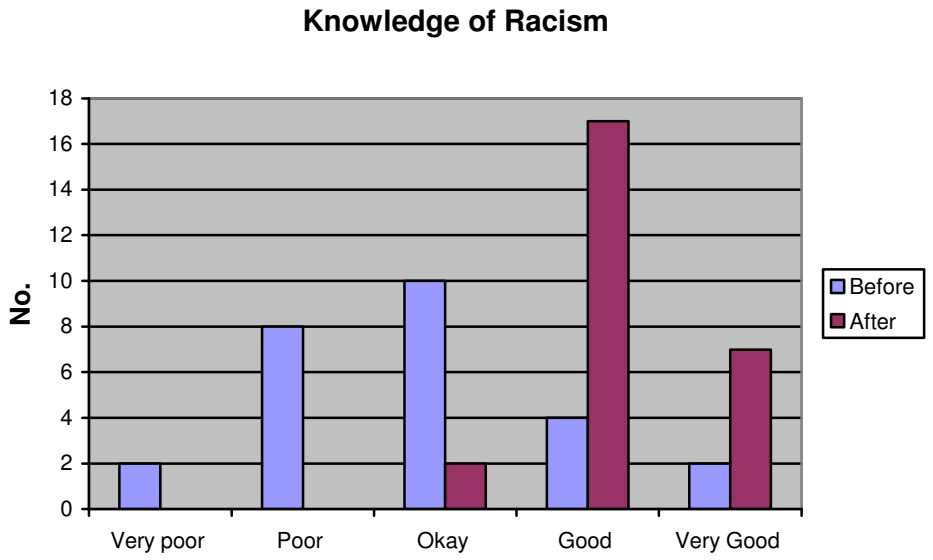
'Yes, because I gained a deeper understanding of racism and learned a lot from other peoples perspectives, in terms of how they feel and their understanding of racism.'

'yes because anything you didn't understand somebody else would. It was good to have other peoples view it makes you question yours.'

'absolutely - a difficult aspect was the different assumptions of knowledge from other countries, things we take for granted such as common history, also language differed quite a bit-different connotations. Positively, I found it powerful to see we (Americans) are not alone in issues of race-both encouraging and depressing.'

'Yes a massive difference. It gave peoples different interpretations and experiences of racism. I found it absolutely amazing speaking to people in other countries.'

A key purpose of the conference was to broaden student knowledge and understanding in respect of the extent and nature of racism past and present. At the beginning of the online questionnaire students were asked to recall and rate their knowledge of racism *before* they began the conference using a standard likert scale from very poor to very good, towards the end of the questionnaire the question was repeated asking students to rate the knowledge of racism *after* completion of the conference. The self assessment results below indicate good improvements in knowledge overall:



More than 90% of students felt that an online conference was a good way to explore social and cultural issues and would welcome further opportunities

'This conference has really opened my eyes and made me totally aware of racism and the problems it can cause, I have thoroughly enjoyed reading, learning and corresponding with old and new staff and students. This experience has been a real eye opener.

'I found the online conference a valuable learning experience which has opened my eyes to racism and has changed my views on certain aspects

I have never enjoyed any academic learning as much as this; interacting with so many people was amazing. Thank you for the opportunity

I think it was a good experience to engage with other student from international perspective. It really allows one to develop an understanding and knowledge based on international experience. It allows one to think outside the box and not only according to the particular country where he/she grew from. So it really was a good experience I must say.

Discussion

Encouraging students to critically explore issues such as racism which are deeply embedded personally, culturally and structurally is a considerable, but important challenge to educational institutions - arguably it is crucial for students who hope to seek employment in the human services sector such as social work and criminal justice agencies. Exploring such issues through an intensive and time limited international online conference that brings together students from similar courses in other countries/continents clearly has many benefits and synergies. Exposure to other students from other parts of the world over a four week period appears to enable students to be more open to ideas and perspectives, to be more willing to think 'outside the box'. Reading and appreciating the experience and narrative of others has appeal, and students appear to find this educationally stimulating and affirming. The four week period possibly allows students to reflect and reconsider in a way that may not be possible had the conference taken place face top face over a four days...

Seeing the world differently from the point of view of others and the debates that followed was a highly valued aspect of the conference. For example debates concerning ethnic/race identification illustrated the rich diversity and complexity of the issue. North Wales has historically had few people from a Black Minority Ethnic (BME) community, and when exploring appropriate terminology the debate may sometimes begin by explaining why in the UK the term BME is preferred to 'coloured', however contributions from the US moves the debate on to explore why the term 'people of color' is preferred and celebrated, and in SA why terms such as Indian and Black are preferred. Together students are learning about different national, political, cultural and historical experiences of racism with a shared desire to understand and hopefully a shared desire to take action to bring about change. While some success has been achieved through the use of a virtual learning environment whether students would have been more or less open to ideas about racism through a more traditional face to face conference is not known

Another example of diversity of approach concerns tackling the inequality caused by racism. The conference seeks to make clear how and why this inequality exists, before then explaining how positive action can help redress some of this imbalance, but positive discrimination is illegal (in the UK) apart from particular exemptions. However, in the US and SA positive discrimination is legal and is seen as an important way of addressing centuries of structural inequality rooted in racism. Such differences in policy and perspective provide for a rich and informative debate.

While the conference focuses upon race, students are encouraged to make links with other forms of discrimination, for example the experiences of women, travellers and people with disabilities. Interestingly, connections are regularly made with the experiences of disenfranchised indigenous people participating in the conference - Native Americans living in the US, Black and Indian South Africans in SA and that of first language Welsh speakers in Wales (see Madoc-Jones & Buchanan 2004 for further reading on this issue). The extent to which there are similarities in the use and abuse of power throughout the history of different nations often comes as a surprise to students.

Conclusion

The conference is still at a developmental stage and more work is needed concerning: a shared curriculum that better reflects the history and experience of all three countries; greater integration within the respective course programmes; improved opportunities for visual communication between staff and students; a review of the material in terms of the experience and benefit for students from BME groups; a review of the way in which Blackboard is currently configured; and generally improving access to students.

However, the method of integrating students from different parts of the world online to cross-culturally explore issues such as racism appears effective, cheap and relatively easy to attain. It's an educational opportunity that could lend itself to other related issues such as HIV/AIDS awareness, sexism, disablism, domestic violence etc. Further conferences such as these could lend themselves to increasing opportunities across multiple differences. Potentially this medium could lend itself to exposing students to multi-identity discussions across differences in ways they otherwise would not be exposed to in their respective University settings. In addition, this work across differences could support their work as they leave education and enter their chosen fields.

References

Kirkpatrick, G. *(2005)* 'Online 'chat' facilities as pedagogic tools: A case study', Active Learning in Higher Education 2005; 6; 145

Madoc-Jones, I. & Buchanan, J (2004) Indigenous people, language and criminal justice: the experience of first language Welsh speakers in Wales in Criminal Justice Studies, Volume 17, Number 4 / December 2004 pp. 353 - 367

Matheson, S. G. and Lager, P. (2007) 'A Model for Developing International Student Exchanges', Social Work Education, 26:3, 280 -291

Thompson, N. (2006) 'Anti-Discriminatory Practice', 4th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Wallace, R. (2003) 'Online Learning in Higher Education: a review of research on interactions among teachers and students', Education, Communication and Information, Volume 3, Number 2, July 2003 , pp. 241-280(40)

Acknowledgement

We would like to thanks the students from the University of Wales, NEWI; University of Washington and University of KwaZulu Natal who engaged enthusiastically and openly in the International Online Race Conference and for completing the anonymised questionnaires that have informed this article.

Appendix 1: Online Questionnaire

1. Where do you study?

2. In terms of finding your way around what did you think of the Blackboard Learning Environment?

- Very poor
- Poor
- Okay
- Good
- Very Good

3. How would you describe your ability to use computers?

- Very poor
- Poor
- Okay
- Good
- Very Good

4. Looking back how would you describe your knowledge of Racism BEFORE doing the conference

- Very poor
- Poor
- Okay
- Good
- Very Good

5. What aspect or aspects of online learning did you value most? And why?

6. What aspect or aspects of online learning didn't you like? And why?

7. What times of the day/night did you access this conference? (Tick ALL the options that apply)

- [ ] morning
- [ ] afternoon
- [ ] evening
- [ ] after midnight

8. Roughly how many hours would you say you have spent on the Blackboard Conference?

☐	less than 2 hours
☐	2 - 6 hours
☐	6 - 10 hours
☐	10 - 14 hours
☐	14-18 hours
☐	18 - 22 hours
☐	more than 22 hours

9. Did it make any difference learning with staff and students from other countries? If so what?

10. What (if anything) have you particularly learnt about racism from this conference?

11. What do you think are the benefits of online learning?

12. What do you think are the drawbacks of online learning?

13. How would you describe your knowledge about Racism AFTER doing the conference?

- ☐ Very poor
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Okay
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Very Good

14. `An international online conference is a good way to explore social and cultural issues'
Please indicate how you feel about this statement

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ not sure
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

15. Finally do you have any feedback you'd like to give about studying the issue of Racism through an International Online Conference?

Complete Survey