# Developing Contextual Knowledge Arenas in the Global Classroom

## Siv Oltedal

Faculty of social science
The University of Nordland (siv.oltedal@uin.no)
Email: siv.oltedal@uin.no

## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to discuss challenges in the development of contextual knowledge arenas by focusing on: How the contextual perspective is brought into a master's program in social work; How the development of different knowledge areas offer a variety of learning for a group of international students; How to design an efficient and ethically reliable program to be offered for both off- and on-campus students. These topics are explored by analyzing reflections from students.*

**Keywords:** context, knowledge arena, flexible studies

## Contextual Knowledge Arena

The development of distance education can be identified in three phases: 1) Correspondence schools; 2) Online virtual space; and 3) An e-learning environment that supports the sense of place and the transition from space to place (Wahlstedt *et al.,* 2008). This third step is related to flexible studies and blended learning. "Generally, blended learning means any combination of learning delivery methods, including most often face-to-face instruction with asynchronous and/or synchronous computer technologies" (So and Brush, 2008, p.321).

When entering a geographical or virtual classroom some students experience this as merely a physical space, while for others it is a place to promote cultural and social understanding. Hence, we can look at space and place as a continuum between focusing on location and people. In a space the location is emphasized, whereas a place without people is meaningless. However, a place that cannot be located or a space that is not interpreted by humans does not make sense. Spaces such as, e.g. houses, need people to become a home. An arena is a location that resembles a field (Bourdieu, 1979/1995), whose borders are more easily identified than when the term space is used. We can associate an arena with a ring or a circle, in which more activity occurs within the borders of the arena than by crossing borders. An arena can be defined as where actions take place, and can thus be defined as a fixed institutional frame (Jensen, 2005, p. 55).

"Learning and accumulation of (new) knowledge in an organization always starts with the individual" (Jensen, 2005, p.53). In Freire's (1970) critical

learning theory, he underscores that people must consciously develop their world view and a self-awareness rooted in their own social and historical background. A community is a group of people with some common interests, while the creation of knowledge is an interactive and dynamic process in which individuals and communities act within areas or systems of communication. The role of the context is important when focusing on learning processes and the problem of how spaces interact with learning theories (Bligh and Lorentz, 2010). What contributes to a re-orientation and information for a student is dependent on what is regarded as a difference that makes a difference to them (Bateson, 1972, p.315). Knowledge is information that is processed for a certain aim, hence "to create knowledge is to use information for a productive purpose in a certain context" (Jensen, 2005, p.54). Transforming learning into knowledge about experiences is a process in which concepts and language are important. Learning starts with individuals who have developed knowledge in different situations and contexts, and have thus acquired something unique: "Knowledge can be defined as the situation where insight is achieved in a context by pointing out information from data as the difference that makes a difference" (Jensen, 2005, p.54).

When using theories and concepts, we develop competencies in pointing out what matters in a context to help create coherent and meaningful interpretations of a situation. Referring to action theory, which was developed in the Soviet Union by people such as Vygotsky, Jensen (2005, p.55) writes that: "The activity in itself is the context. The context is shaped by the activities involving individuals and artifacts." This can be related to the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966) in which we as human beings both construct a society and are constructed by it. The context is shaping the structure we learn and create knowledge within, and these activities can also be interpreted as processes that create this context.

To sum up the central terms in this article, context, knowledge and arena each have a specific meaning. Context is about coherence and connections and is shaped and changed all the time, depending on what I as an individual interpreter indicate and point out as something I observe and process. Knowledge is related to how I have transferred experiences and information to be used in a specific situation or for a specific purpose. An arena can be identified as geographical and/or virtual, and is an institutional frame in which something can be mediated either within or through. An arena is therefore more stable than a context. In this article, I will use the following description: A contextual knowledge arena can be identified when individuals in specific settings are becoming aware of, taking into account and relating their situation to current or previous surroundings.

## Method and Material

In this article,[i] I will draw on data collected in November and December 2010 of international students' experiences with a flexible learning master's program.[ii] All informants have been studying on-campus in Bodø in the north of Norway in either the second term of 2009 or the second term of 2010, though some of them were off-campus students at the time of the research.[iii] The material consists of three parts: The first are anonymous course evaluations collected as part of the evaluations system at the university. The second are answers on e-mailed questionnaires, whereas the third are answers on an issue in an exam paper.

While writing this article I was confronted with methodological challenges such as the dilemma between how to profit from engagement and the importance of a more distanced critical research perspective (McIntosch, 2010; Willumsen & Studsrød, 2010). I have been part of the establishing process of this master's program, and thus a colleague of the leader of the

program. I was abroad on sabbatical in 2009 when the master's program was started in August of that year.

In 2010, I was leader and internal assessor of a 10 ECTS-credit master's course that was the focus of the Norwegian Open University (NUV) project, "Border Crossing in Social Work." In addition, I was the leader of both this NUV project and a Norwegian Aid (NUFU) project, and we combined these two projects and had a specific focus on the educational and ICT collaboration between Norway and Malawi. The third part of this material is answers on exam papers from this 10 ECTS-credit master's course, and the students received a request regarding participating in this evaluation after they had been informed about the grades on their exam. However, one can argue that students will try to answer politically correctly in an exam paper, thus the challenge when reading and analyzing this material is to look for descriptions of different experiences and less at the normative parts of these answers.

The leader of the international master's program was present in the room when 18 students (11 female and 7 male) anonymously completed the evaluation form. He reported that these students came from Nepal (10), Russia (2), Canada (2), Cameroon (1), Palestine (1) and China (2). The material provided an evaluation with regard to five different courses offered during this second 2010 (autumn) term, and was systemized according to the different questions, and then summarized and presented in different parts of this article.

The e-mailed questionnaires I sent out were answered by students from Malawi (4), Russia (4), Nepal (5), Norway (1), Pakistan (1), Turkmenistan (1) and China (1). Seven out of 14 students gave permission to quote from their exam papers, which included students from Malawi (2), Russia (2), Nepal (1), Turkmenistan (1) and Pakistan (1). Nobody refused, though the other students did not answer on the one request that was sent out. When using quoted material, we identified the nationality of the student and gave them fake names. The answers from Olga and Tatjana from Russia, Tor from Norway and Kelly from China were collected from questionnaires, while the answers from Christel from Nepal, Collen from Malawi and Mikael from Turkmenistan are from their exam papers.

The material from exam papers and questionnaires were coded and categorized into different themes and analyzed according to the research questions. A majority of the quotes in this article derive from answers to the following question: "*You have yourself been crossing borders. Discuss how your experiences, observations and communication across borders or cultures have developed your competence in contextual and comparative social work.*" This question was part of the exam paper and included in the e-mailed questionnaire, while another question in the questionnaire focused on whether they preferred to stay in mixed groups or in their own language group when undertaking group work. Critical views on studying within cross-national student groups are therefore asked for.

The main material in this article is derived from questions that contain an evaluative perspective concerning the program. Since these students had not completed all their courses at the master's program when they answered the questionnaires, we could argue that their answers are biased or that critical students did not answer the e-mailed questionnaires. However, the picture one gets from the anonymous student evaluation is in accordance with the profile of the answers in which the respondent can be identified, and all students present in the class did answer the anonymous evaluation scheme.

The focus of this article is not to evaluate the program, but to develop an understanding in terms of how students approach "contextual learning arenas" within a master's program with an international student group. This article is

explorative; hence, critical answers regarding videotaping an international class has led to the development of other forms of flexible courses, including one 30 ECTS-credit course to be implemented in 2013.

## Why does context matter in social work?

History and structure are contexts that are relevant in meaning making processes. Thus, it is helpful to make a division between what is initiated within the situation and when we need to look at expectations prior to what is being played out in the present situation. "To help keep it simple, we will use two kinds of meanings: *context* and *move*. 'Context' sets an expectation of possible meaning. (….) 'Move' is an active association (often an action), called out by a specific situation" (Harrison & Tatar, 2008, p.110). Collen from Malawi tells that contexts matter as far as the application of theories, and he had to reconsider similarities and differences between countries.

> I also learned that the experiences of my friends from developing countries like Nepal, Cameroon, Pakistan and Malawi were similar. Surprisingly, experiences from Russia and China, which are much developed, seemed to be similar to the developing countries experience.

Collen from Malawi reflects upon the various family structures in different contexts, as well as about the actual move within class discussions, when he was reflecting upon and comparing these different situations:

> Much as one would observe that the social workers in the West and developed countries are better resourced than us from the developing countries, and one would think they have an easy profession, my observation proved otherwise. I observed that being resourced is also not everything. The social workers in the West are facing challenges in their work due to the disappearing of the family unit. The institutions are taking the family place. I observed that in the developing countries the family unit still remains intact, but is also overstretched and can also not cope, and it does not help much the social workers in developing countries with poorly resourced professions. This brought to me the realities and diversities of the social work profession practice.

Through explaining local practices of social work in the global classroom, students often reanalyze their own life worlds and enhance their understandings of their practices based on the feedback they get from each other. Reciprocal and complementary participation by the students creates a fund of knowledge of people from other cultures; consequently, the collaborative learning process has the potential to transform an individual's perspective from parochial to global. This process increases critical reflection on local practices at home, which were often previously taken for granted. Christel from Nepal has acquired knowledge about how human rights principles and social work values can be used as a point of departure to challenge local cultures and customs:

> *The sharing of experiences has provided me with an additional perspective to understand and analyze the widespread existing social problems in Nepal such as gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, caste-based discrimination and child labour among others. I have recognized that social problems have been upheld by social–cultural norms and expectations of the Nepalese society. I can now argue how our culture and customs have become barriers in social work practice. I have gained values and knowledge that can enable me to address the above mentioned challenges. More importantly, I have been able to develop more openness towards reflecting critically on my social work practice.*

The fact that students from less social political developed countries were in majority was stressed as essential in creating a fruitful and encouraging class

ambience. Tatjana from Russia underscores this when focusing on non-Western situations:

> In our case it was just perfect and wise, maybe at random, that the majority of students were from a developing country. It would be worse if the majority were from the "already developed countries"; in our case, we had "minor" majority and "major" minority.

They discovered that context mattered regarding, e.g. economic development and social policy. Tor from Norway tells that: *"I will remember the word 'context' for the rest of my life."* Discussions led to a discovery of the diversity of social work in general depending on socio-cultural contexts, and that we need to be aware of how social work will be changed when taken from one context to the other. That you need to interpret social work theories in different contexts is stressed by Collen from Malawi, while some of the students emphasized that essential tenets within social work, such as social welfare and interventions, were culturally relative. Discussions also facilitated a comparison on more specific topics such as the division of welfare tasks among the state, NGOs and families in various socio-cultural contexts. They discovered that there are a lot of different NGOs providing social services and supporting social spherea in Asian and African countries, but on the other hand, students in some European countries (including Norway) could see a strong position of government in social policy.

As opposed to teachers and nurses, social work does not have a primary institutional base. It is exactly this "deeply contextual nature of social work that differentiates it from other professions" (Healy, 2005, p.4). It is important to enhance social workers' capacity to understand, analyse and respond to the different contexts they are working within, and to take seriously the impact of an institutional context shaping social workers' practice approaches (ibid). To develop the dialogue pertaining to social work in different continents and between minority and majority countries will be very valuable for the general development of social work in an international context. It may provide us with more knowledge about what is general and what is specific to different contexts in social work. Moreover, considerations regarding where people are situated and how to describe their local context are important. Contextual social work is about how local circumstances affect social work practices, and this concept can be thought of as a tautology because all social work must be context-specific and rooted in historical and institutional traditions (Lyngstad, 2012). Why context matters in social work could be expressed rhetorically: Social work without a context makes no sense.

## How varieties in knowledge arenas may enhance reflections among students

Social work is known as a professional field that works with clients of all different types and in many different settings, as the complexity of social work and practice is taught through multiple pedagogical tools and a multi-cultural ambience. This not only increased professional skills in relation to the global world, but also the students' perspective on social work as a profession. When students participate in field visits, they can observe social work practices. Collen from Malawi appreciates being able to obtain first-hand information about social work in Norway: *"In this master's program the element of observations to social work practice institutions in Norway provided hands-on experience to us as students on some of the learnt theoretical aspects in social work."* What moves students make in a situation to pick out what is the important part of a context will differ according to their background experiences. When students are summing up experiences about how social work in a Norwegian context appears, we anticipate that they will develop different contextual knowledge arenas to interpret the situation they encounter.

Studying in an international ambience, the concept of "culture" ceases to be an abstraction, as people from foreign cultures become personal connections to classmates. The multi-cultural ambience sometimes results in an increased empathy and understanding in encountering future clients, with Tor from Norway explaining how he achieved new insights: *"Cultural differences can be transferred to my own field easily. Makes me think twice before I judge anything at all about another person's challenges."* He developed reflections on complexities when learning from students coming from a very different context compared to his own.

Tor from Norway stated: *"I am more humble to social work and its challenges,"* while Kelly from China was very positive regarding all the new knowledge she has obtained in her master's study:

> Before I came to Norway, I was a teacher, so I have not much experience about social work. However, after a period of study and discussion with classmates, I got much professional knowledge and new, interesting ideas. Now, I have a full realization of my shortage and problems of Chinese social work. From my point of view, Chinese social work needs to accept much advanced experiences and change the work system.

The experienced Norwegian social worker and the Chinese newcomer in the field of social work interpret the cross-cultural communication they have been part of differently; Tor sees complexities and problems, while Kelly sees opportunities and solutions. One way of interpreting what the Chinese student said is that she is very enthusiastic about discovering something in a new context. What has exactly triggered this new knowledge is difficult for a native Norwegian to understand because the different arenas she participates within are related to history and background. All learning is context-dependent and transformation processes occur because there must be some correspondence between the individual's old knowledge and the information that should be transformed into new knowledge (Jensen, 2005, p.56). The Chinese student is involved in a multitude of (learning) arenas that can be shared with other people, while her different contextual learning arenas are unique.

The collaboration of students in both the physical- and virtual room, as well as flexibility, is the key to the maintenance of effective interactions (Aspden & Helm, 2006, p.251). Students need variation and differentiation in order to learn and to develop discernment (Stacey & Gerbic, 2007). The courses included different forms for group work, which was appreciated by the students, with some even suggesting the inclusion of more group work, such as project work, in future courses. Being "critical friends" was something that many students enjoyed, which is a method where students work in pairs, and where one takes the time to develop an understanding of the issue and context of the other's work. As a trusted person, the critical friend is supposed to offer a critique of the other student's work, which was an unfamiliar pedagogical tool for a lot of the students. To be considered rewarding, it is important that the criticism is considered as being constructive. The students are asked to take a kind of supervisory role towards each other as critical friends. They are dealing with tense themes, discussing something she/he has produced, which is a challenge because many of the students are not skilled in supervision.

A Norwegian film entitled "Restorative Justice"[iv] was shown to the students, who were then asked to do a role play on a potential restorative justice situation in their local context, thereby creating a vital discussion with regard to the differences between different welfare systems. YouTube was also easily used in the classroom of both lecturers and students, with short movie clips such as interviews working as an illustration of various aspects of social work practice or social issues as kick-off to a discussion.

During the lectures, the students were often encouraged to come up with examples from their own socio-cultural backgrounds. This created a vital dialogue in the classroom, and several students stated that this increased their learning outcome of the program as a result of getting different stories and voices. In particular, the on-campus ambience creates space for informal discussions among the students, which was highly appreciated by several students such as, e.g. Tatjana from Russia: "*Discussions within and after each lecture were very important. It gave us opportunity to digest the topics and how we could apply them in local situations.*" Students discussed a lot during the breaks and gave their evaluation to issues raised during the class. This backstage knowledge arena can provide students with the confidence to be able to raise a question in class, or they can take the floor and ask for another students` time to listen to their individual context-specific reflections.

Cross-cultural communication and understanding also entail certain difficulties. In addition to language barriers, some students also admitted that they sometimes found it hard to understand foreign cultural contexts. Olga from Russia tells that as long as people in a multicultural group respect each other and listen carefully, they manage to communicate. Sometimes they discussed sensitive issues, and then students had to develop skills in how to comment upon others' opinions in a tolerant and careful way:

> During our lectures, we had so many discussions and we have heard so much about the things which are unacceptable in my society for example. Sometimes, information was so "unbelievable" that many of us I am sure got the idea that it cannot happen nowadays.

In the classroom, an intimacy and outspokenness developed, and students shared tense stories with each other. It was almost like opening up a taboo theme to be explored in this learning space. Some students had the feeling that the opinions that were voiced seemed to be controversial, although some of the examples discussed from a local context were obviously alien to some of the other students. The exploration of tacit knowledge opened the possibilities for students to bring onstage contextual knowledge arenas that had formerly been kept silent or offstage.

## How recordings of interactive lectures create possibilities and problems

In advance of offering studies there is the planning and documentation activity, in which it is relevant to discuss sharing, reuse, how technologies provide personalized learning and to evaluating education against costs. A learning design represents a variety of size and complexity from a course to an individual activity, whereas the scope of the design should be determined by the learning objectives to be met (Falconer & Littlejohn, 2007, p.43).

Lectures and seminars at this master's program are streamed and sent by via the Internet in real time. Videotapes are then stored at the learning platform *Fronter,* where access is restricted by username and password. Students can therefore simultaneously follow the program on-campus, off-campus or both. When the University of Nordland started to offer a flexibly delivered Norwegian master's program in social work in 2003, the off-campus students were actively participating (Oltedal, 2006). They sent in comments and questions to the lecturers during the breaks, who were then able to respond to the students in the following lecture. This was made possible in part because a technician working in a half time position followed up with the off-campus students. Every morning, he would log in and greet the students with a "good morning" and have a small chat. Today, different technicians are streaming the lectures and it is not a part of their working contract to communicate with the distant students. Those of us who have been lecturing for this program for many years are aware of this change, and we no longer ask for questions from

the off-campus students. Moreover, there are much fewer distant online students today, and it is even rarer that they actively ask questions. We think this has also happened because it is no longer the responsibility of the technicians to develop contact with off-campus students as they did during the first years of this master's program. To keep students in the virtual room as active knowledge producing participants in real time requires that their contributions are actively asked for by a study facilitator.

The student group at this social work master's program was diverse, not only in relation to their socio-cultural background, but also when it came to language- and academic skills. Some of the students did not have backgrounds within social work, while among the ones who did, these backgrounds differed greatly. Many students therefore needed more time to understand the content. For these students it was very convenient that all the lectures were taped and stored with the learning management system, which made the information available for later review and free from temporal constraints. As Kelly from China expressed it: *"Anytime if I want I can watch the videos, and review again when it is more convenient."* The majority of the students had English as a second or third language, so when English is set as the standard language this imposes not only a linguistic, but also a cultural burden on those who do not have English as their mother tongue (Morse, 2003).

During the course, the students worked partly in separate language groups and partly in mixed language groups. In retrospect, they were asked what they preferred. The reported advantages with the separate language group were that these discussions were less time consuming, led to a better understanding of difficult topics and increased the reflection and interpretation on national aspects of the questions raised. Some also emphasized that they felt more comfortable in these groups insofar as being able to talk their mother tongue with their national counterparts. Advantages reported with the mixed language groups were that the international ambience enabled comparisons of certain situations in different cultural, economic and political contexts, analyses of ways of realization of concrete practices in different national contexts and the development of new skills and competencies.

One knowledge arena activated within this actual program is a competence meeting (Oltedal, 2009), in which a student is presented an issue and the group follows up with a discussion. This meeting will be evaluated as a reflective forum. Arranging online competence meetings was usually set up by involving technical personal at different universities. The majority of the students were satisfied with the technological contribution, though some students emphasized the challenges during, for example, the Skype conversations due to the bad quality of the internet connection between Norway and Malawi. Although primarily regarded as positive, this demonstrates that the use of technology and virtual networks also poses some challenges to the participants. In addition to technology frustrations, these challenges often include coordination difficulties and timing/delay frustrations (Morse, 2003). Using computer-based communication forms implies a vulnerability to technology frustrations, as this reliability has the potential to disrupt the computer-mediated communications environment, thereby reducing the stability of the learning environment (Morse, 2003).

Flexibility can be arranged along many dimensions, giving both students and universities a more beneficial situation. By creating a virtual learning community and integrating both an on-and off-campus program, the universities potentially attract more students. Courses which can be attended by both first- and second-year master's students are less expensive, thus gaining support when education is evaluated in terms of costs. Although much of the quality of this program is linked to the possibility of gathering students in a geographical area, it has created the flexibility to stay off-campus in

certain parts of the study program, thereby creating opportunities for more students to access.

Mikael from Turkmenistan has been able to compare the situation as an on- and off-campus student. He stayed on campus in Bodø for the first year, then moved to another continent and completed his second year off-campus: *"Geographical barriers are eliminated"* and *"What made it possible for me to continue in such a quick pace is the possibility to choose when I could listen to the lectures."* He communicated online with his fellow students, and tells how he was: *"able to communicate with a wide range of students from different countries participating in this program."* Off-campus students who seldom appear on the campus tend to stay more in contact with teachers than fellow students (Oltedal, 2009). Taking into account the learning design of this blended program, it is doubtful as to whether this student would have developed a communication with fellow students of the strength and volume evident in this case without having met face-to-face and developed relationships as students at the same program during the previous year.

Tatjana from Russia raises a critical awareness concerning the use of videotaping in the classroom:

> Too much of taping. It's ok when it is the teacher taped only, he/she tells the theory and doesn't give a subjective, personal evaluation of the incidents. But students were inspired to tell from their context and be subjective. We all started to feel being under control, then as I consider, it is not the cultural differences which are the obstacle, but political contexts, and being critically reflective, students are able to discuss openly politics in their own countries, but "pass the mic" - phrase became the main silencing tool, but it's my opinion. Maybe teachers also were less inspired to give subjective opinions under the control of the taping machine. I say this not because I'm from Russia and we are used to be suspicious, we discussed it with my friends during the breaks.

Tatjana highlights what we can relate to as an ethical concern about our human moral existence. First, we have the meeting and then develop reflections. How is the ethical relationship between students in a videotaped discussion and the unknown future spectators? This is not a play with a predetermined manuscript, as their participation resembles "reality TV" and that maybe students should be made more aware of this image. Although videos are shown within a restricted learning platform, you do not know who will have access to look at these videos. Additionally, there are no restrictions for students to invite visitors to look at videos presented at the Fronter platform.

The University of Nordland is aware of this problem with students being taped and the videos published within the Fronter management system, as technicians are instructed to only use close pictures of the lecturers. Prior to the study registration, the students are informed that the lectures will be streamed and published, though they do not individually sign an agreement. However, the dilemmas that students from Russia and China in particular are highlighting need to be considered in relation to further developments of the blended learning design of this program.


## Concluding remarks

Since the revolution of e-mail and the WorldWideWeb in 1994, universities have changed dramatically in their pedagogical structure, increasingly embracing computer-mediated communication-, learning- and teaching opportunities (Morse, 2003). Since then, a growing and changing globalized scenario, with its different realities and demands – such as student

diversification, student mobility, internationalization and the cost-efficient availability of ICT – have all led to the development of innovative pedagogical experiences and initiatives (Larsen *et al.,* 2008). These new opportunities that technology has brought are said to have the potential to democratize education, connecting people and organizations across cultures (Snyder, 2005), as well as bring educational opportunities to all students regardless of their economic circumstances or geographic location (Cifuentes & Murphy, 2000).

This article has explored student expressions on cross-cultural communication and how they learn and re-orientate when their local context is brought into the global classroom. They have studied in a flexible, blended learning context, although most of them relate heavily to on-campus experiences. Students profit from having lectures taped and stored at the learning platform, thus on-campus students who are not very familiar with social work or English can revisit lectures when convenient. Students located all over the globe where there is net access will be able to access the master's program.

Problems with interactive lectures are related to both synchronic internet sending and to storing the lectures at the learning management platform. Students, especially those coming from Russia and China, are worried about who could possibly be in the virtual audience or obtaining access to the stored videos. From the formal perspective, students who apply for this master's are informed that lectures are streamed, videotaped and sent by the internet and then stored in the learning management platform, Fronter. However, it is possible to imagine the misuse of information or worries about unwanted monitoring and censorship. The challenge regarding ethical reliability leads in the direction of looking for other technical solutions for this international program. In this actual program, a process was started towards replacing the streaming of lectures where students are present with e-Lectures, where only teachers are videotaped.

When teaching is videotaped, it presents a challenge and makes some students become tacit in class. To share tense issues and critical incidences, students need to develop confidence towards teachers and fellow students, as discussions may flourish more when the microphone is turned off. At a general level, students usually profit from a variety of learning designs within a given educational program, in part because students are different and in part because one's attention is usually sharper when something new or different is taking place. Instead of leaning heavily towards a teacher monologue, a dialogue creates a more active learning situation for the students. When exploring local practices, social work students need to develop a safe surrounding for reflecting upon silenced history and taboo issues, which can also be supported by both pre- and after off-stage discussions during recess time. Varieties in knowledge arenas in an ethical reliable situation enhance reflections among students.

Although differences were detected, the students also realized common principles such as human rights and social justice that were made relevant across the borders. They developed reflection pertaining to their own context by understanding, discussing and exploring other practices through stories told by fellow students, in addition to staying and living in a new context. A sensitivity to, as well as an understanding of, political, social and cultural diversity, does enhance cross-cultural communication.

 The majority of students did not come from welfare states; hence, the agenda was dominated by examples and discussions in relation to societies with a lack of material resources. This non-Western mixture of students was experienced as empowering because other topics not dominant in international textbooks could emerge. Furthermore, they experienced that cultural differences could also be transferred to their own field of practice. Students say that from being

exposed to this variety of contextual backgrounds, they learned to think twice before judging or drawing conclusions about another person's challenges. This creates an awareness and social presence when a feeling of intimacy is developed with regard to whether they identify with each other or they get to learn about alien situations. The international program thus promotes cross-cultural communication.

When individuals coming from different contexts meet and discuss, they create important knowledge arenas.

## References

Aspden, L. & Helm, P. (2006): Making the Connection in a Blended Learning Environment. *Educational Media International*. *41*(3), 245-252.

Bateson, G. (1972): *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books

Berger, P.L. and T. Luckman (1966): *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Penguin Books,

Bligh, B. & Lorenz, K. (2010): The Rhetoric of Multi-Display Learning Spaces: Exploratory experiences in visual art disciplines. *Seminar.netInternational journal of media, technology & Lifelong Learning 6*(1) Retrieved from http://seminar.net/index.php/volume-6-issue-1-2010/141-the-rhetoric-of-multi-display-learning-spaces-exploratory-experiences-in-visual-art-disciplines2

Bourdieu, P. (1979/1995): *Distinksjonen (La Distinction)*. Oslo: Pax Forlag,

Cifuentes, L. & Murphy, K. (2000): 'Promoting Multicultural Understanding and Positive Self-Concept through a Distance Learning Community: *Cultural Connections' 48*(1), 69-83.

Falconer, I. & Littlejohn, A (2007): Designing for blended learning, sharing and reuse. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *31*(1), 41-45

Freire, P. (1970): *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.

Harrison, S. & Tatar, D (2008): Places: People, Events, Loci – the Relation of Semantic Frames in the Construction of Place. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work, 17*(2/3): 97-133.

Healy, K. (2005): *Social Work Theories in Context*. Creating Frameworks for Practice. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Jensen, P. E. (2005): A Contextual Theory of Learning and the Learning Organization. *Knowledge and Process Management 12(1*), 53-64,

Larsen, A. K., Sanders, R., Astray, A. A. & Hole, G. O. (2008): E-teacher Challenges and Competences in International Comparative Social Work Courses, *Social Work Education 27*(6), 623-633.

Lyngstad, R. (2012): Contextual social work and internationalizing social work education: Two sides of the same story? *Journal of Social Work*. First published February 21, 2012 as doi: 10.1177/1468017311435202.

McIntosch, P. (2010): *Action Research and Reflective Practice,* London: Routledge,

Morse, K. (2003): 'Does one size fit all? Exploring asynchronous learning in a multicultural environment'. *JALN* 7(1).

Oltedal, S. (2006): Fleksibelt tilrettelagt masterstudium som gjer det irrelevant å skilje mellom nær- og fjernstudent, i: Frå erfaring til kunnskap. Noen lærdommer fra utviklingsprosjekter 2005. *Norgesuniversitetets skriftserie* 2/2006, Tromsø.

Oltedal, S. (2009): Using Competence Meetings as a Practical Reflective Method, *Seminar.net Media, technology and lifelong learning, 5*(2). Retrieved from http://seminar.net/index.php/volume-5-issue-2-2009/123-using-competence-meetings-as-a-practical-reflective-method

So, H.-J., & Brush, T.A.(2007) Student perceptions of collaborative learning, social ..., *Computers & Education*, doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2007.05.009

Stacey, E. and P. Gerbic (2007): Teaching for blended learning - Research perspectives from on-campus and distance students. *Education and Information Technologies* 12(3), 165-174. DOI 10.1007/s10639-007-9037-5

Snyder, K. (2005): The Digital Culture and Communication: More than just classroom learning. *Seminar.net – International journal of media, technologies and lifelong learning 1*(2). Retrieved from http://seminar.net/index.php/volume-1-issue-2-2005-previousissuesmeny-109/44-the-digital-culture-and-communication-more-than-just-classroom-learning

Willumsen, E. and I. Studsrød (2010): Høyere utdanning og praksisnær forskning i profesjonsutdanningene – et eksempel fra sosialt arbeid. *Uniped 33(*1), 25-36.

Wahlstedt, A., P. Samuli and M. Niemelä (2008): From e-learning space to e-learning place. *British Journal of Educational Technology 39(*6), 1020-1030.