Bridging Traditions and Innovations: the First International Social Pedagogy Conference

Abstract
The first International Social Pedagogy Conference took place February 22-24, 2018 in Puebla, Mexico. The conference, Social Pedagogy and Social Education: Bridging Traditions and Innovations, was hosted by Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP) in partnership with the Social Pedagogy Association, ASU, REMPES, and Ceiba. The conference hosted over 350 participants from 17 countries and offered presentations in English, Spanish and Portuguese, representing a wide variety of topics which reflect many of the diverse areas encompassed by social pedagogy research and practice.

Keywords: social pedagogy, social education, cultural studies, cultural pedagogy, SPA, SCP-GO

In 2011, the first social pedagogy masters program in North America - a Master of Art in Social and Cultural Pedagogy - was approved by Arizona State University for the School of Social Transformation in Phoenix, Arizona, United States. Within two years students in that program created a graduate organization, SCP-GO (Social and Cultural Pedagogy Graduate Organization), to connect with each other, organize events, and represent students’ needs and interests to the faculty. As the first of these graduates transitioned from University into a variety of careers and post-graduate studies, a need presented for a professional association to facilitate connections in North America between practical and theoretical pedagogues. Thus, the Social Pedagogy Association was created in 2015. The Social Pedagogy Association (SPA) brings...
together practitioners, academics, students and others to exchange experiences and to share knowledge and resources about social pedagogy theory, research and practice.

The SPA strives to be an inclusive organization that believes in the importance of the free flow of ideas and scholars for the advancement of research, theory and educational practices. We are here to encourage scholarly interaction, collaboration, and debate from diverse intellectual perspectives and countries of origin by bringing together practitioners, academics, students and others to exchange experiences and to share knowledge and resources about social pedagogy theory, research and practice. (O’Neil, 2015)

The SPA recognized a disconnect between academia and practice. While academics often engage in interdisciplinary study, and many practitioners refer to the works and successes of others in their fields, there is often a gap in communication between research and practice. As social pedagogues we bear a responsibility to ensure that gap is minimized as effectively as possible. As the academic discipline and practical application of social pedagogy expands, it is necessary that theoretical and practical pedagogues communicate and work in tandem. In 2004, prominent social pedagogue, Henry Giroux, wrote:

I think too many cultural studies theorists are remiss in suggesting that pedagogy is primarily about schools and, by implication, that the intersection of cultural studies and pedagogy has little to do with theorizing the role pedagogy might play in linking learning to social change outside of traditional sites of schooling. Pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations. Pedagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and settings. (Giroux, 2004, p.61)

Rooted deeply in northern Europe and South America, the field of Social Pedagogy is growing and changing as it spreads and develops in the UK, Central America, and, most
recently, North America. The discipline has more than 150 years of history as both an interdisciplinary academic field of inquiry and a field of practice that is situated in the intersection of three areas of human activity: education, social work, and community development (Schugurensky, 2011).

Hans Thiersch defined the role of social pedagogue thus:

The role of the social pedagogue is to help people to critically analyze their problems, reflecting on the social causes of the individual problems and to find options for successful everyday life. The focus is connecting help for the individual with political action in the context of social justice and well-being, while recognizing social and political resources. (Schugurensky, 2014, p.9)

It is of utmost importance that pedagogues ‘across a spectrum’ listen to one another and aid each other in this critical analysis and reflection. This need for an increase in communication was recognized by members and partners of the SPA soon after its founding. “As a critical practice, pedagogy’s role lies not only in changing how people think about themselves and their relationship to others and the world, but also is energizing students and others to engage in those struggles that further possibilities for living in a more just society.” (Giroux, 2004, p. 64) As pedagogues, we must also energize and engage one another. There is possibly no greater power than that inherent in the exchange of ideas and culture. In 2017, Jan Rothuizen and Lotte Harbo reminded us that “Bridge-building means changing society and not just working with care but also with community development, so as to address the wider and systematic aspects that affect the marginalized groups” (Rothuzian, p.18).

It was with this idea of bridging connections and supporting one another that the SPA organized and planned the first International Social Pedagogy Conference which took place February 22-24, 2018 in Puebla, Mexico. The conference, Social Pedagogy and Social Education: Bridging Traditions and Innovations, was hosted by Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP) in partnership with the Social Pedagogy Association, ASU, REMPES, and Ceiba. The intention of this conference was to bridge differences within the theories of academia and help to unite those theories with the experiences of field-work practitioners, an important connection that is all-too-often overlooked. The conference was held
with the intention of bringing together the various studies and practices of social pedagogy and social education around the world. The conference welcomed any and all researchers and practitioners whose work falls into the realm of social or critical pedagogies and social education, to include topics such as: refugee education, cultural pedagogy, the formation/education of social educators and social workers, technology and social education, pedagogical theory, social pedagogy and social education in schools, and more.

The conference hosted over 350 participants from 17 countries and offered presentations in English, Spanish and Portuguese, representing a wide variety of topics which reflect many of the diverse areas encompassed by social pedagogy research and practice. By forging initial connections between researchers and practitioners, we hope to continue to find and increase ways in which these connections can influence and impact the growth of social pedagogy and social education around the world. The hope of the SPA is that we continue to identify tension fields, share successes and challenges internationally within the field and research, and come to an understanding of social pedagogy advised and shaped by our varied cultures, experiences, and educations. The SPA will be partnering in June of 2020 with the University of Central Lancashire (CLAN) to host the second International Social Pedagogy Conference in Larnaka, Cyprus. We are excited to see the unification of ideas and knowledge and look forward to a future of partnership with pedagogues around the world.

References