The Higher Education Academy

Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

Using chat rooms within Social Policy education

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Origins

- Developed for use on two level 3 modules: 'Children's Rights' and 'Children's Rights Project' (semi-independent study)

- Responding to institutional developments in the use of Virtual Learning Environments

- With technical assistance, rooms in a university developed 'virtual building' were established - 'I realised that there could be discussion rooms corresponding to different aspects of the topic/module which might usefully add to the students' learning and their argument skills'

- An electronic dialogue where tutor and students leave messages responding to an initial question or statement and can begin new threads of discussion

Module in action

- 'Children's rights' module entirely taught in seminar format with groups of approximately 10 students

- 1½ hour sessions sometimes led by module tutor giving a paper but discursive with space for student questions 'it's very organic….you've got to respond to the students'

- sessions also include 10 minute assessed student presentations (weighted at 10% of final mark) followed by group discussion

- choice of exam or essay for remaining 90% of final assessment mark

- online component not assessed but compulsory for 'Children's rights project'

- online contributions are confidential to the tutor and students on the module but are then archived for future

- student use

Benefits in terms of students' learning?

- Study skills, improving familiarity with the internet and with this method of communication

- Debating skills, developing abilities to link ideas within a module and to link ideas with current issues

- Allowing students who are more reticent in a group discussion a safe environment in which to express their views and ideas (although sometimes online discussion may appear to students as a more public forum and thus less safe)

Benefits for teaching?

'Some feedback on what students are thinking and how they understand things - it is more informal than an essay, perhaps even than a tutorial.'

Feedback

Two quotes from students on Children's Rights Project this year:

"The chatrooms in the NB building are a good idea, and they helped me with some of the ideas for my work!

"I thought the online contributions were good but was difficult to sustain with so few members of the group."

Reflection

• Records show that mostly students enter the rooms and read the contributions without themselves contributing so although they are improving ICT skills and familiarity with the discussion room framework they may not be practicing their own debating skills in this medium.

"It's not straight forward this online work and it's not a simple substitute for face to face contact either…but it can have its place and it can be entertaining".

Excerpt from student guidelines: ROOMS IN NATHAN BODINGTON BUILDING

Please visit the Children's Rights module rooms in the Nathan Bodington building. This is accessed through the Department's home page, to Nathan Bodington Building (online teaching resources), to Private access to Sociology and Social Policy floor (user name and password required), to UG Module Resources, to SLSP3790 Children's Rights.

As well as the usual reading room, there are five discussion rooms which I hope you will use for debate. While this is an entirely optional part of the module, (although it is compulsory for 'Children's Rights Project') it is, I believe, an interesting one, and one which will develop your online skills.

The five discussion rooms are:

The John Holt Room

The John Holt Room is for those who wish to debate a liberationist approach to 'children's rights'. It is named after John Holt who in the mid-1970s published a book advocating a strong liberationist approach: 'Escape from Childhood'. This may be seen as belonging in a 1970s tradition of protest and anarchism. But the ideas are by no means dead today. Two collections by Franklin in 1986 and 1995 (latest ed. 2001) continue the line of argument - that children's greatest need is for empowerment in a world controlled by adults. Taking part in discussions in this room should help you to understand this viewpoint and its implications.

The Malfrid Flekkoy Room

The Malfrid Flekkoy Room is a room for pragmatists and reformers, for those who are interested in putting children's rights into effect, in both a protection and a welfare sense, and in an autonomy/liberation sense where appropriate. This aim could be achieved in part by the establishment of appropriate government structures to defend children's interests, and the room is named after Malfrid Flekkoy, the psychologist who was the first Children's Ombudsperson, during the 1980s in Norway.

The Philippe Aries Room

The Philippe Aries Room is named after the famous historian of childhood, Philippe Aries, who argued that the notion of 'childhood' we tend to take for granted in western societies today was essentially a creation of the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation world. While perhaps not accurate in every respect, his work usefully focuses thinking on the variety of concepts and meanings of childhood in different societies, on historical change, and on whether children are everywhere and always separated out from, and treated differently from, adults. This room is for those who would like to debate issues relating to the history of childhood, including whether we can ever really know what childhood in the past was like.

The United Nations Room

The United Nations Room is set up in recognition of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, which was ratified by the UK in 1991. It is for those interested in an international and human rights dimension to the children's rights issue. What, if anything, can such an international legal instrument achieve? Is it defensible to argue for children's rights in some universal sense which crosses boundaries of nation and culture? Specifically, how can the Convention be used in the UK to improve the situation of children? Can it be used as a lever against government and to argue for better policies for children?

The Victoria Gillick

The Victoria Gillick Room is named after the mother who attempted to block under-age contraception without parental consent in the 1980s, and is for those who wish to debate concerns about undermining parental responsibility through campaigns for children's autonomy rights. Without necessarily belonging to the traditionalist camp in general, or supporting Gillick's specific campaign, you may wish to consider whether a weakening of parental authority over children may actually be damaging to them in some respects, and whether an emphasis on children's rights may legitimate a degree of adult opting out of responsibility for children - after all, if children can look after themselves, why should adults need to look after them?

Please contribute to these rooms.
Email me with any problems; l.m.harding@leeds.ac.uk
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