TEACHING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: a partnership between college and field

JUDITH RUMGAY

Although CCETSW's recent training proposals have met with little support in the Government's response, the author considers that the issues raised concerning the relationship between colleges and field agencies in the delivery of social work education are of continuing importance. This paper considers the problem of the college-field relationship and the meaning in practice of the idea of partnership. In the light of this it defines the different roles of college and field in social work education and considers possible implications for the quality of their partnership.

The effective teaching of good practice to social work students, by harnessing together the different contributions of agency placement and college is a complex and contentious issue. This is not because anyone disputes that students' experiences in college and placement should be mutually complementary, but because the means to achieving this goal are fraught with difficulty. The college-field relationship is perhaps more often discussed in terms of 'split' and in tones of mutual suspicion than by evoking ideas and feelings of partnership. This issue should be addressed, not only to improve the training experience of students as it is presently conceived, but because CCETSW's recent moves to forge explicit links between colleges and field agencies as course providers under the proposed reorganisation of training make the oft quoted, little realised, principle of working in partnership an imperative if they are to succeed. This paper reviews the elements of the relationship between field agencies and educational institutions which make the principle of partnership so problematic to implement considers what 'partnership' actually means in the context of social work training and sketches the different roles of college and field in this light. It then draws out some possible implications for partnership in the light of the CCETSW training proposals. Although far reaching changes in the structure of training in the near future must be in doubt following the Government's unsupportive response to the proposals, this issue remains live and pertinent to the quality of social work education.

The particular perspective which informs the ideas and comments in this paper should be stated from the outset. It is that the teaching of social work practice is not only about the transmission of technical skills, nor is it content with the theoretical understanding of counselling and models of practice. Good practice is informed by a grasp of broader theoretical principles and knowledge, contained in the subject matter of, for example, social policy, psychology and human growth. This wide view of what is implied by the expression 'social work practice', in terms of knowledge and skills, is adopted throughout the discussion.

The college-field relationship

The tensions between college and field can be identified at the broadest level of the 'split' between social work theory and practice, at the more concrete level of the differing functions and perspectives of educational institutions and field agencies and at the personal level of the triadic tutor-supervisor-student relationship.
The much vaunted disjunction between theory and practice lies at the heart of this discussion, since practice teaching aims at their integration. Much has been written on the nature of social work theory, a topic which seems to arouse great feeling among those espousing different and opposing viewpoints. Among the best known are Sheldon (1978), comparing unfavourably the status of social work with medical knowledge and deploring social work's "considerable resistance to the idea of specific approaches to specific problems", countered by England (1986) asserting that social work is art, not science. The student, eager to feed the hunger for a theoretical base with which to inform his/her practice (which is, after all, the motivation cited by most applicants for seeking training), may well begin to feel, on searching such literature, that social work is actually proud of the theory-practice gap. Indeed, it appears at times to celebrate it, debating it for its own sake rather than to guide the needy student. On the thorny question of integrating theory and practice, for example, Pilalis (1986) explains:

"... 'integration' may more usefully mean an understanding of the processes that result in the gap between reflective thought and purposeful action and an ability to put that understanding into practice, in a way that increases the consistency between their, purpose and action".

The anxious student may well wonder how such illumination is to help in the attempt to implement a behaviour modification programme with the parents of an enuretic child.

Sheldon (1978) located his two 'sub-cultures' the theoretical and the practical, in the educational institutions and field agencies respectively. Indeed, in many people's minds, the difference between these organisations is equated with the theory-practice gap. However, the differences in function and perspective between college and field are more complex. Sheldon elaborates by pointing to the different pressures of establishing 'academic respectability' and of professional survival in a society grudging in its acceptance of social work, with consequent differences in approach to research and analysis. A thorough comparison of the concerns of college and field is provided by Bogo and Vayda (1987), who identify six contrasting features. Clear differences follow from the observation that the organisations have quite separate primary objectives:

"The purpose of the university-based school is to educate for practice, and contribute to knowledge building. Valued activities are research, scholarship, and teaching. The university's time perspective is primarily future-oriented. Schools' primarily focus is analysis and critique of current forms of practice, and experimentation leading to new intervention approaches.

The purpose of the agency. is to provide services to people in need. The valued activity is the delivery of effective and efficient service. The agency's time perspective is primarily present-oriented concerned with maintaining and enhancing programs" (Bogo and Vayda, 1987).

It follows, further, that the organisations neither expect nor reward the same behaviour in their staff. The educational institution demands the development and testing of new ideas, with critical analysis by staff functioning with autonomy. The field agency defines the functions of its staff working interdependently to maintain and
improve systems of service delivery.

It can be seen, then, that educational and field staff approach social work from different orientations, with different perspectives on common concerns and bringing different skills to bear in their contributions to the discussion, is that they bring different approaches to the particular goal of teaching social work practice.

Social work practice can be seen to be essentially a problem solving activity, whether at the personal, organisational or policy making level. Practice teaching is therefore concerned with the development of problem solving abilities in the student. Approaches to problem solving, however, range from the abstract consideration of the general principles and issues at stake in any given problem, to the concrete, practical application of a solution to a particular problem. The functions and perspectives of the educational institution draw its staff's attention to the former approach, while those of the field agency demand the latter from its employees.

The means by which these two approaches to Issues in social work practice, embraced by college and field, may be used to complement each other and thus to enhance student's learning will form part of the later discussion. At present, it is important to note the reflection of the theory practice split in the general, abstract and specific, concrete approaches to problem solving in social work. For the student, constantly required to direct attention alternately to the academic and practical input, these contrasting approaches may feed the belief that theory taught at college is impracticable in placement, that the college is 'out of touch' with the preoccupations of field service delivery and that the practice observed in placement is a theoretical, driven by pragmatic and economic concerns.

The student's scepticism is, perhaps, vulnerable to encouragement by overt tension in the college-field relationship. One example of the way this can occur may be found in the comments of some authorities on student placement supervision, which do not always clarify the college's perspective in terms which enable supervisors to perceive how they fulfil part of its function, as opposed to being an adjunct to the main body of academic teaching. Worse, some appear to encourage suspicion. Ford and Jones (1987), for example, warn supervisors about colleges' lack of placement preparation:

"... hastily arranged, last minute preparation, or students being could disappointed that they didn't get a preferred choice of placement or the aspect of a placement which they wanted".

Such remarks convey a misleading suggestion about the apparent priority given by colleges to practice learning. This is not to condone poor planning where it occurs, but to suggest that a recognition of the pressures of placement shortages, break-down of prior arrangements, and changes in students' needs, illuminates the college's constraints rather than its seeming disregard for the field.

Given such tensions between college and field, and the student's identification with each, the triadic relationship at an individual level between college tutor, fieldwork supervisor and student is a delicate one. Elements in the relationship between any two members of the triad will have repercussions for the third. Kadushin (1968) identifies a series of problematic encounters between supervisor and
student, each of which, although he does not explore this, will have a consequential effect on the exchanges between tutor and both supervisor and student. Similarly, Davies’ (1984) observation that:

"... students frequently seem to see conflict as a normal part of the educational process in social work, but for the teaching staff, it can be harrowing"

Has implications for the effect on college-field and tutor-supervisor relationships. This potential imbalance in a triadic relationship which is intended to be constructive, furthering the students’ learning and assessment requirements, heightens the need for clarity and sympathy in the college - field relationship.

The meaning of 'partnership'

It can readily be seen, from the foregoing account of the complexities of the college-field relationship, that the notion of a 'partnership' between the two in the teaching of social work practice needs careful attention. The different functions and perspectives of college and field provide a framework of separate responsibilities and roles within which this partnership must operate.

The final outcome of practice teaching is the assessment of the student's development in the practice placement. It is useful to consider this issue here because the separate responsibilities of college and field are sharply drawn, although the process by which this is formally accomplished appears somewhat paradoxical at first sight. The placement supervisor, as the person with most detailed and direct knowledge of the student's progress, reports with a recommendation for pass or fail, but "the machinery by which a final recommendation is made either to award or withhold the CQSW is in the control of the educational institution" (Brandon and Davies, 1979).

Such a sharp division in the boundaries of responsibility between college and field should imply equally clear roles for each. Brandon and Davies (1979) distinguish between two separate components of fieldwork assessment. Assessment as a 'process' is carried out essentially for the benefit of the student, to aid and guide his/her learning and development. Assessment as an 'event' consists of the evaluation of the student's progress and attainment. The former is a shared task between college and filed, although the methods used by each to accomplish it may differ. The latter falls within the ultimate responsibility of the college, via the tutor's role, although clearly this decision will draw substantially on the fieldwork supervisor's contribution. Brandon and Davies' distinction can be developed by drawing on Morrell's (1980) identification of primary and secondary purposes of assessment. The primary purpose of setting and safeguarding of professional standards, takes precedence over the secondary one of pointing out to the student his/her strengths and weaknesses in order to bring about learning and change.

Whatever their individual perspective, all commentators (e.g. Brandon and Davies, 1979; Ford and Jones, 1987; Morrell, 1980) seem agreed on the college tutor's:

"... Pivotal Position in facilitating an assessment decision, having to achieve a balance between justice to students and the need to maintain a standard which would protect clients and not devalue the qualification" (Brandon and Davies, 1979).
Here, then, we see that the college’s ultimate responsibility for the assessment event carries with it the roles of securing and monitoring general standards of professional competence for newly qualified entrants, and ensuring fair and reliable assessment of individual students within these standards. The field enables the college to do this by contextualising the student's performance within the functions and perspectives of agency practice, identified earlier, to which the student will be required to conform on qualifying.

These roles are not unproblematic for individual tutors and supervisors to fulfil. For example, Brandon and Davies (1979) note the attraction for tutors of involving themselves in the creative assessment process while avoiding the discomfort of the assessment ‘event’. Levy (1965), on the other hand, draws attention to the supervisor’s potential difficulty, being immersed in agency dictates, in discriminating between the agency’s internal capacity for accepting staff's limitations in skill, and the need in professional education for a definable and absolute minimum standard of competence. The consequence of role confusion, however, is to blur the proper evaluation of the minimum standard of competence in individual students, and thus to effect ‘an apparent see page into social work of a minority of incompetent practitioners” (Davies, 1984).

The teaching roles of college and field

The identification of the respective contributions of college and field to practice teaching centres on the integration of theory and practice, which has been seen to be a vexed issue. It is first necessary to locate the practice placement correctly within the educational process, in order to illuminate the contributions of college and field in terms of roles and methods of teaching.

The theory-practice gap is perpetuated for students if the academic and practical experiences are themselves perceived as having separate identities. Students may:

"...designate the practicum as their skills laboratory. The danger lies in the separation of theory and practice residing in this narrow definition of the focus and purpose of the practicum. Unity of social work theory and practice should be a practicum goal" (Bogo and Vayda, 1987).

In similar vein, Levy (1965) tells us that:

"... field instruction is (or, rather, should be) an integral Component of social work education and, to that extent, is one of the interrelated media through which the objectives of social work education are implemented”.

The implication of this conception of the practice placement within the educational process is to draw the field contribution into the college setting. This in turn identifies the supervisor as belonging as much to the educational institution as to the field agency. This location of the field experience within the boundaries of the educational institution (notwithstanding geographical separation) arises because:
"The primary Purpose of placement in the agency (for field instruction) is not to learn the tasks of a particular agency, nor to become acquainted with a given agency program, nor to understand the problems of a given clientele. The agency is used primarily to provide the student with an educational experience, and not (primarily?) as a means of helping the student to render service as a staff member" (Boehm, 1959).

Levy (1965) defines three objectives in social work education: 'academic proficiency', which demands the development and demonstration of the student's 'Intellectual competence; 'professional development', which demands the development and demonstration by the student of appropriate professional attitudes and discipline; and professional skill" which demands the development and demonstration of the student's competence in practice. The placement supervisor's role is frequently conceived as dominated by the last of these objectives. However, locating the field experience, and thereby the supervisor's role, with the educational institution, implies that the supervisor is concerned with each of these objectives within the framework of the practice placement. Fieldwork supervision thus plays a central role in the student's educational experience and is the focal point of the active integration of theory and practice.

It has been seen that college and field have different approaches to the task of problem solving in social work. In the fieldwork setting, the student's starting point is the specific problem and the tasks of understanding it and attempting intervention. In order to make sense of the experience and to learn from it, the student needs to be able to retrieve the facts of what occurred, to reflect on the effectiveness of the intervention and the influence of personal values, attitudes and assumptions on his/her actions, to link this to a professional knowledge-base which explains these phenomena and to select a professional response which addresses the problem appropriately (Bogo and Vayda, 1987). The supervisor, in facilitating this exercise for the student, will be providing the field contribution to the assessment 'process'.

In college, the approach to problem solving is general and abstract, exposing the student to different perspectives on how problems may be analysed and understood.

Social work's knowledge-base is not static, nor are the problems which it addresses. Sheldon (1978) points to the expansion 'both of the academic disciplines on which social work draws for its professional knowledge base and of the number and range of professional tasks undertaken. If college teaching were to seek to transmit all this information piecemeal to its students, not only would it be overwhelmed by sheer quantity, but it would fail to equip students to cope in their professional life in an environment which will continue to change. What is needed, therefore, is not simply a stockpile of knowledge, but the means to access effective problem-solving strategies.

Sheldon (1978) further upbraids social work for its reluctance to discard theory which is no longer useful, in the light of expanded knowledge and, the tendency, therefore, to teach competing theories alongside each other as if all have equal status, leaving the student to make a personal choice between them. Davies (1984) also observes the absence of a clear theoretical identity in most courses in the
opinions of former students. Whilst it would seem a clear abdication of responsibility for colleges to avoid any judgements about the relative status of different theories, this issue is more complex and cannot be resolved by a simple decision to promulgate a particular theoretical perspective at the expense of all the rest. At a pragmatic level, it must be acknowledged that in a time of placement shortage, colleges may be unable to avoid the use of placements working from theoretical standpoints not in their favour. Nor does it seem reasonable, then, to refuse to teach that theory, if the student is to be helped to utilise the practical experience in learning. At a wider level, the college must enable students to apply critical thought to theoretical perspectives and to recognise that ‘eclectic’ does not mean undiscriminating. As knowledge and theory continue to expand in the social sciences, students needs to be equipped with the capacity to make effective selections between different explanations of phenomena and approaches to problem solving.

A difficulty of social work education is that it demands personal change in the student (Kadushin, 1968; Bogo and Vayda, 1987). This is facilitated in effective supervision. The college’s contribution at the general level should also influence this process of personal change, by informing and expanding the student’s understanding and absorption of professional values and discipline. Values and attitudes are not static simply because they are personal. The college should contribute to shifts in the student’s responses when reflecting in supervision on these aspects of his/her behaviour in order to consider how to control them.

Conclusion: some implications for future training

CCETSW’s proposals for a new training course leading to a Qualifying Diploma in Social Work had far reaching implications for the structure of social work education. Confining itself to the issue of partnership in practice teaching, this paper will conclude by looking briefly at the still pertinent questions of student assessment and possible developments in the relationship between colleges and field agencies as course providers.

Since the point of CCETSW’s proposals were to improve training and thus to raise the quality of social work practice by trained personnel, student assessment must play a crucial part in demonstrating that this has been achieved. The rigour of the assessment procedure should therefore serve to safeguard professional standards of competence and to encourage public confidence.

Brandon and Davies (1979) argue that:

“... although the onus is presently on courses to prove incompetence in its students, there appears to be no good reason why the expectation should not be reversed, with the onus being put on students to demonstrate competence”.

They also observe, however, that difficulties in achieving this are linked to differences in opinion as to the appropriate skills in social work. Such a state of affairs needs to be addressed. Furthermore, partnership between college and field implies greater clarity of understanding as to the areas to be examined and the means by which assessment will be carried out. This will require from colleges greater rigour in the specification of aims which are often broadly defined. It may no longer be acceptable that the college
'concerned with the totality of the discipline of social work, defines practice in general and abstract terms (Bogo and Vayda, 1987), leaving it to the field to interpret the practical meaning of global objectives. Indeed, given the educational institution's final responsibility for the assessment 'event', it would appear to be an obligation for colleges to become active "in concretising and specifying the learning objectives in field setting" (Bogo and Vayda, 1987).

Equally, however, Morrell (1980) notes that whilst field agencies have complained about CCETSW's and colleges' attempts to define and clarify areas of assessment, they themselves have not contributed substantially to this. As course providers field agencies may become involved in this endeavour, since their role in facilitating the college's fulfilment of its assessment responsibility requires the clear mutual understanding of what areas are to be assessed and how, within the placement setting.

Moves towards such specificity in college and field can be seen in the work of Brandon and Davies (1979), identifying eight major problem areas for marginal students and the ways in which these may be manifested in the fieldwork setting, and Curnock and Prins (1982), defining five critical assessment criteria and the means by which they may be examined in the practical placement.

A working relationship between colleges and field agencies may be exploited to provide benefits for each contributor. Developing links with field agencies may facilitate the need for colleges to stay close to the field and thus to apply critical and evaluative analysis to the current concerns of practice, avoiding the temptation to indulge in the abstract celebration of knotty mental problems.

The role of fieldwork supervisors has been identified as a knowledgeable and skilled teaching function, located properly within the educational institution. Many potential supervisors might find this a tall order in itself, and particularly so when combined with the demands of agency employment. Practice teachers in the field need help to develop their abilities as teachers, and it would seem that here is an important potential role for colleges, since education is their vital function.

A development of this role might lie in CCETSW's proposals to institute the accreditation of fieldwork supervisors. Training and support for supervisors, as an integral part of the college's function, could be extended to create the provision of accreditation facilities, thus recognising the crucial educational role of field agencies in practice teaching and contributing to its enhancement.

REFERENCES


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