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Social Work Education in Conflict

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edited by

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INTRODUCTION

The five chapters that comprise this volume were written independently of one another, and were not planned from the outset to dovetail into any pre-determined scheme of presentation. Nevertheless, while each of them deals with a different aspect of qualifying education for social work, they all share one concern in common: the impact of ideology on the way social work practice and social work training are conceptualised.

That we live in a world of competing ideologies, economic, political and personal, is a truism as stale as last week's loaf. Not all ideological conflict need be socially destructive; indeed it can be both healthy and creative, provided the champions of rival systems of belief recognise that what each of them is upholding is not revealed and irrefutable truth, but a set of propositions that may be false and must, therefore, remain open to challenge. The first step is to acknowledge my ideological stance for what it is, the second to approach it - and those with which I disagree - with a certain critical humility. This does at least open up the possibility of honourable compromise, and without compromise there is a risk that neither I nor my competitors will survive to make any further attempts at it.

There are two reasons why proponents of rival ideologies in social work need, rather urgently, to take the two steps just proposed; two reasons, in other words, why we can no longer afford either to remain confused about our values or to luxuriate in sniping at each other from well-stocked shooting butts - one marked "social control", the other "social change". The first reason, (now well-

established), is the profound scepticism evinced not only by the older professions (such as medicine and education) with axes to grind, but also by increasing numbers of the general public, as to whether social work has any substantial benefits to offer anyone, let alone an entitlement to consider itself a profession. The second (and more recent) reason is the present very real economic depression and stringency - these coinciding with a political climate ill-disposed to the continuation of welfare services at their present level, leave aside the question of expanding them. We are rapidly approaching the point at which social work, if it is to survive, is under the necessity of making out a much more cogent and coherent case for itself than it has been seen to do during the recent past.

If social work education is to make an effective contribution to this essential process, its practitioners, like their colleagues who provide services to the public, need not only to be clearer than they currently are about the conflicting social work and educational values they hold, and why they hold them, but be prepared also to articulate these views with conviction to employers, prospective entrants into the profession, members of allied professions, and to the public at large. Conflict between different purposes and between alternative methods in social work education is always painful, but if the different ideological stances that underlie the conflicts are first acknowledged, (as they seldom are at present), then formulated as carefully and honestly as possible, and finally exposed for debate and possible modification, the prospect of attempting a resolution of conflicts themselves will look much more hopeful.

The papers that follow constitute, it is hoped, a modest contribution to the classification of competing ideologies in present-day social work education - particularly as they affect long-term planning, curriculum design, skills training, and the evaluation of practice learning. They can have little direct influence on the development of the "cogent and coherent" case for social work mentioned above as an urgent need of the times - but the authors will be content if they have succeeded in doing a little preliminary clearing of the ground.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Peter Righton

THE CRISIS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

As Werner Boehm (1) has declared in a recent paper, social work education is at present in a state of crisis. Boehm locates its origins in the current twofold expansion of social work: first, a widened definition of practice to include not only the work of traditional direct service professionals, (caseworkers, group workers and community workers), but also the work of administrators, social planners and policy analysts; secondly, the vast increase in professional personnel both in numbers and categories - the latter ranging from top élites, (heads of agencies, teachers, researchers), through middle managers and qualified practitioners, to aides and para-professionals drawn, with increasing frequency, from the ranks of service consumers. Social work educators have generated neither the fresh thinking nor the resources needed to keep pace with these fast-moving developments, with two results: a crippling uncertainty about both the 'what' and the 'how' of teaching social work practice, and considerable fuzziness as to how the tasks of one category of worker may be distinguished from those appropriate to another, and how, therefore, their respective training programmes should differ.

While Boehm is writing specifically about social work education in the United States, what he writes is equally relevant to the corresponding scene in Britain, and is

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unlikely to be wholly strange to social work educators in other highly industrialised countries. The crisis he mentions has other components, which are also international in character. Among these the most salient include such ideological conflicts as whether social workers are in business to change people or the systems which bear upon them, and (within social work education itself), whether the notion that students are "equal" to teachers is incompatible with "authority", either in a teacher or a so-called body of knowledge; and conflicts that incorporate both ideology and technique, like the debate about the appropriate balance on courses between generalist and specialist teaching, and what blend of academic/practical content and teaching methods is most likely to produce this balance.

Summing up, Boehm writes:

> "Social work education appears to be beset by so huge a number of demands and opportunities that it can hardly avoid being overwhelmed. Not only are the problems numerous but they occur simultaneously. The need to plan soundly for change in quantity, quality, direction and scope at the same time is more than any group of persons or institutions can digest, let alone find appropriate responses for."(2)

It is scarcely surprising that the prevalent response appears to be one of defensive paralysis, with the majority of social work schools continuing to do, broadly, what they did last year, but making successive piecemeal modifications of their curricula that may well incorporate a half-digested version of the latest vogue in social work practice, yet always lag well behind the major social changes taking place outside their institutional walls.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH

How far can recent or current research be of help in resolving the crisis? Whatever its quantity or quality,

(and the demand for more and better research seems always to exceed our willingness to act on what has already been published), it is vital that we should recognise the limits of what it can achieve. Descriptive research, for example, can give us new information, but cannot tell us what to do with it. Evaluative research can estimate for us the relative effectiveness of one course of action as compared with another in certain specific circumstances: it cannot provide magic, mistake-proof prescriptions for all future occasions. Neither category of research is capable of removing from us the necessity of making difficult choices (and not only when two or more research studies come to incompatible conclusions); neither can absolve us from the responsibility of asking how far the (sometimes hidden) ideology of the researchers has coloured both their methodology and their results.

Let us illustrate each category of research in turn. There is now a growing number of studies concerned to elicit information about what social workers do, (as distinct from what employers, teachers and others fondly imagine they do). The examples from Britain are the work by Olive Stevenson and Phyllida Parsloe on current social work practice in social services departments (3), and the studies by Tilda Goldberg and her colleagues at the National Institute for Social Work (4). Both inquiries have yielded new knowledge about the striking discrepancies between the tasks on which social workers spend most of their time, and the tasks for which the majority of qualifying courses are preparing them. Such information is clearly of cardinal importance for social work educators, (as, indeed, would be information, not yet available, on the specific tasks which discriminate accurately between what is done by social workers and what is done by social work aides and such para-professionals as day-centre instructors and home helps); but even if it was exhaustive,

it would not serve, of itself, as an unambiguous message to the educators about the content of their teaching. As the researchers themselves are aware, their own findings are just as likely to mean that social workers are employed on inappropriate tasks: and deciding what is appropriate is a value question, not a matter to be settled by research methods, (though the views of researchers may well be helpful).

The types of evaluative research that seek to assess the effectiveness of a social work education curriculum by measuring the success of its students in subsequent practice, (or even the impact of a more limited learning experience on one student's field performance), pose well-known methodological difficulties: for example that of achieving adequate operational definitions of learning experiences on the one hand and successful practice on the other, and that of eliminating, or allowing for, the influence on practice of hosts of variables other than the learning experiences under investigation. Martin Bloom (5), analysing fifty evaluation studies of this kind, makes a useful distinction between judgmental solutions, (in which both definition and measurement of student performance remain "in the mind" of the judge or researcher, and tend to be global in character - e.g. "this student displayed empathic sensitivity"), and behavioural solutions, (in which the criteria for measurement are set out in terms of specific behaviour, and designed to be replicable). Bloom tells us, revealingly, that no fewer than 80% of the studies he analysed were of the judgmental type - not to be condemned on that account, but indicative of the subjective factors powerfully at work in this sphere of research. As before, any quest for definitive answeres is doomed to disappointment; research can be a useful addition to, but is never a substitute for, clear thinking, honest self-examination, and patient listening to his students, on the part of the teacher.

Let us turn now to those aspects of the crisis in social work education concerned with the relationship between teacher and learner (the authority/equality dilemma), and the problem of how to organise curriculum design and content to cope with (a) the knowledge explosion in the social sciences, and (b) the expanding definition of what is to count as social work practice. As far as teacher-learner transactions are concerned, there is a wealth of research (both descriptive and evaluative) on how people learn, and on how teachers and learners can most helpfully work together to promote learning. In an important paper, Mary Louise Somers (6) reminds us that research conducted from different (and often conflicting) theoretical standpoints has underwritten a number of principles on which the majority of learning theorists are now in substantial agreement. Behaviourist theory, for instance, has highlighted the importance of the learner's active participation in the learning process, as well as the need for teaching institutions to deal openly with conflict and frustration. Cognitive theorists lay stress on goal-setting by the learner, (as opposed to goals set for him by the teacher), and on the development of divergent thinking. From personality theory comes the recognition of how a learner's past and present life experiences (extraneous to the classroom or field placement), affect his motivation to learn, and how satisfaction in learning can be promoted or destroyed by the leadership style of the teacher and by the "climate" of the student group.

These principles have a close kinship with those already familiar to social workers in their transactions with clients and consumers of the social services, and it is scarcely surprising that they tend to be put into practice with considerable enthusiasm, (though often with an inadequate understanding of their application to teaching/learning situations), by those social work educators who were formerly social work practitioners. It should perhaps be

noted that none of these principles, to whatever extent they may recommend democratic procedures and structures in teaching institutions as useful aids to learning, gives any warrant to the teacher to abandon the authority and responsibility conferred on him in virtue of his role. Precisely how a teacher should exercise his authority, (as distinct from his knowledge and skill), is not a matter that research can exclusively determine; but whether he acts as didactic pedagogue or, more subtly, as one of a number of resources, personal and material, that enable the learner to get on with the job of learning, he cannot avoid being perceived by students as a central person in the teaching-learning process. For him to pretend otherwise amounts to bad faith as well as almost certainly ensuring ineffectual performance.

An issue that constitutes both a technical problem and a source of perpetual anxiety for social work educators is that, while the time-span for teaching students remains constant, (the length of full-time qualifying courses in Britain is seldom longer than two years), there seems to be no limit to the rate of expansion in the volume of knowledge to be acquired and the range of skills to be mastered. In part (though it is no comfort to the educators to say so), this rate of expansion is illusory. As Popper (7) makes clear, every fresh theoretical generalisation that has survived strenuous efforts to refute it renders obsolete those earlier hypotheses that have failed to pass this test; and there is little point in continuing to teach dead or dubious theory. But in the social sciences, (not least in those which have most to contribute to the theory and practice of social work), it is by no means easy to determine what stage of obsolescence any particular theory has reached - particularly when the criteria for verification and falsification are as fuzzy as they often are, and when the motivation for clinging to certain explanatory or predictive frameworks is frequently rooted in ideology rather than science. Shall we abandon the insights of psychodynamic theory because behaviourists claim it does not yield testable

hypotheses? Or those of the structural/functional school of sociology because Marxists dismiss it as an instrument for justifying continuing capitalist oppression? Should we not rather acquaint our students with all relevant theoretical perspectives, and help them to work through the consequent uncertainty and conflict? (In any case, Popper is no help when we are confronted with net additions to required knowledge and skill, such as those resulting from an increase in the very territory of social work). But on what basis, then, should we select and order what is to be taught without reducing its content to a skeleton or a caricature?

Research is of restricted help in answering such a question - partly because we are here in the realm of value-laden choices, partly because of the magnitude and complexity of both the input and outcome variables that would need to be operationally defined and measured. There are, however, some useful clues in research derived from learning theories: in particular from cognitive theory, with its emphasis on helping students to learn subjects and topics by relating specific elements to structural wholes, rather than in a piecemeal fashion by adding part to part in the absence of a framework that reveals the connectedness of the parts. (8) Of cardinal importance in support of this perspective is a major piece of research undertaken in 1971 by Lowy, Bloksberg, and Walberg (9), who designed and tested a number of courses, that used the concept of an "integrative thread" to string together elements taken from a <u>cross-section</u> of traditional disciplines, (as an alternative to teaching the disciplines "neat"). A similar project was undertaken in West Germany in 1974 (10) ; and in Britain Bessie Kent (11) has published the results of an interesting and successful experiment in theme-teaching which closely resembles the two studies just mentioned, though it was conceived and carried through independently. Further observations on the notion of an integrating principle are offered later in this paper.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONCEPTUAL MODELS

Important as it is to test hypotheses in rigorous research and gain hard (or even "soft") evidence of their validity, it is equally vital (and often more difficult) to generate hypotheses for subsequent testing. The construction of models - schematic frameworks which present familiar phenomena and problems in a new light and open up hitherto unexplored (or only partially explored) avenues of action-has often been a fruitful source of hypotheses and experiments. A note of caution is necessary: new models, however exciting or seductive in appearance, do not necessarily turn out to be improvements on those they seek to replace; conversely, there can often be a powerful tendency for last decade's well-tried model to become this decade's ossified conventional wisdom, and a barrier to the consideration of fresh perspectives.

Until quite recently education for social work in America and Britain has been dominated by two major models of adult education - though neither was conceived with social work exclusively in mind. One is the model of learning and teaching initiated in the United States in the 1940's by Bertha Reynolds (12) and her colleagues, and reaching its most developed form in a justly famous book by Charlotte Towle (13); the other is the model of curriculum organisation chiefly associated with the name of Ralph Tyler (14). The first of these is a model of learning as an outcome of creative tension - between the learner's anxiety and his coping capacity, (on the affective level), and between the integrative task facing the learner and his integrative capacity, (on the levels of cognition and action). In this model the learner is seen as free to devote his energies to learning, (rather than expend them on mobilising defences against learning), when his anxiety level is sufficiently high to motivate him but not so high as to paralyse him, and when the integrative tasks set him by his course are perceived by him as just within (but not too far within), his capacity

to master them. If anxiety is overwhelming or if the integrative task appears to be impossibly difficult, the learner can scarcely help striving to ward off what he feels to be a painful threat to his inner security. He may well "go through the motions" of learning, and even be remarkably successful in parrot-like repetition of what he has heard or read, (a deceptive ability, which has been known to satisfy examiners); but he will not be in a state to internalise new experience, to "make it a part of himself".

Following Rothman and Vigilante (15), we may characterise Ralph Tyler's work on curriculum organisation as a "rational-linear" model of planning. He envisages the task as a logical and progressive development in three stages, starting with a clear statement of the objectives of a course, set out in terms of the specific behaviour to be expected of a student at the end of it. Following this, curriculum planners should seek to identify, as unambiguously as possible, the learning experiences that students need to have in order to attain the stated objectives. The final task is the organisation of learning experiences according to three major principles: continuity, (a gradual and ordered progression through each particular learning experience, practical or academic), sequence (which learning experiences should come first, which be postponed till later?), and integration (what links need to be made between concurrent learning experiences?).

Both Towle's model of teaching and learning and Tyler's model of curriculum planning have one outstanding merit: they focus attention firmly on the environmental conditions and organising principles which appear to meet the needs of the learner rather than those of the teacher. Towle's sensitive concern to identify intellectual and emotional blocks to learning, and to suggest ways in which teachers can help learners to overcome them; Tyler's insistence that curriculum planners should translate statements of objectives into appropriate learning experiences (from the

standpoint of the learner), in preference to academic subject matter, (from the teacher's standpoint): these are of continuing importance at a time when secondary and higher education is still for the most part planned and delivered on contrary assumptions. This said, however, it can none the less be argued that neither Towle nor Tyler pursue the logic of their premises more than half way to their conclusion. While their models emphasize the learner's anxieties, the learner's capacities, the learner's experiences, it is finally the teacher who is to decide what these are (or ought to be), and how to minimise, maximise or mobilise them. At the heart of Towle's work is a conception of the controlling (but benevolent) teacher, deriving status from his authoritative knowledge of the difficulties faced by his students, (how one misses, here, any recognition of joy and zest in learning!). Tyler's model, for all its rigour and elegance, (indeed because of these characteristics), connotes a certain rigidity. His ideal curriculum planner is as benevolent as Towle's teacher, and just as firmly in the saddle. Clear and unambiguous in the learning objectives he sets, secure in his mastery of his own subject or practical competence, (for all that he will skilfully plan the teaching of it in such a way as to ensure that his students gain - in his perception - a "good learning experience"), he seems to be plagued by few doubts about the continuing validity of the objectives, or about what is to count as knowledge or skilled performance. In neither writer do we get a sense of the learner as a freely-sharing and seriously-regarded participant with the teacher in the teaching-learning process.

It is a good deal easier now than it was twenty years ago to perceive the authoritarian assumptions concealed beneath the libertarian clothing woven by Towle and Tyler. In a time of relative economic stability and social consensus this contradiction was no great matter. Our current situation of acute economic uncertainty and manifest conflict of values,

politically and socially, (which the crisis in social work education inevitably reflects), calls for educational models that incorporate within their structure an open acknowledgement both of the absence of taken-for-granted certainties and the existence of value-conflict. Such models can be of two opposite types - those which suggest resolutions of the conflict in favour of traditional but threatened values, and those which envisage radical changes in the way we conceptualise and practise education. An example of the first, (though it is not yet formulated as a thorough-going and consistent model), is the approach recommended by the authors of the British "Black Papers" (16). The second type is illustrated by Paulo Freire's (17) dialogical model of education: from the standpoint of this paper a particularly fruitful conceptual framework for educational practice in an age of conflict. It is impossible in a few lines to do justice to the richness and complexity of Freire's thinking. We can do little more than draw attention to his starting point - that the history of education up to the present day has been largely an exercise in "dehumanisation", because formal schooling has so heavily emphasized and reinforced the dependence of the learner. This dependence leads not to authentic learning - that is, thought and action, continually renewed, that belong to the learner and enable him to act upon and transform his world - but to the "housing" within the learner of those "alien" thoughts, values and capacities for action considered by his teachers to be both appropriate for him and compatible with the existing social order. In vivid metaphors, Freire likens the victim of inauthentic learning to one who receives communiqués but does not communicate; who hears narrations but does not engage in conversations; who accumulates in his mind bank deposits of knowledge placed there by teachers, but cannot relate them to any problems felt to be of vital concern to himself.

Authentic learning, by contrast, can take place only when teacher and learner together, respecting each other as free and equal human beings, work in partnership to resolve problems felt by both to be real and urgent. It is this process that Freire calls "education as the practice of liberty", and it is important to note that the encounter between teacher and learner which it implies is very far removed from cosy chat or discussion. Mutual "respect" implies acknowledgement by the learner of the special gifts brought by the teacher to the situation, (without according them superstititious reverence), as much as it does acknowledgement by the teacher of the learner's life experience and critical powers, (without tamely submitting to them). The substitution, in the teacher-learner transaction, of two-way communication for one-way communiqués, of dialogue for narration, of "problem-posing" for "banking", not only demands the utmost commitment from each, but implies a dialectic relationship in which each continuously modifies, but does not pre-determine, the thinking and practice of the other. It follows that the student is unlikely to emerge as a carbon-copy of his teacher: what he learns may be very different from what the teacher intended at the outset, while those same intentions may well undergo substantial changes as the teacher's relationship with the student proceeds. This fluidity is, paradoxically, a good deal tougher for both parties than may appear: for the learner is continually weaned away from the submission to his teacher which a part of him may crave, while the teacher can no longer rely on the comfortable infallibility either of himself or the curriculum.

It is not suggested here that Freire's model of education can wholly replace more traditional models. In particular it calls into question very sharply the role of bodies whose prescribed task it is to examine and approve

written curricula in advance, (when the plain implication of Freire's approach is that students and teachers should develop and modify them as a course progresses). It proffers a radical challenge to the received modes of student assessment and evaluation as currently practised in most centres of higher education. It suggests a profound transformation in almost all the patterns of teacher-student relationship that exist in these centres at present.

Moreover, the model confronts us with a dilemma which we must not gloss over: is it possible to reconcile the wholly open-ended view of education it advocates with the existence of relatively non-negotiable standards of practice on which it could be held that bodies external to the educational process, (such as employers and professional associations), have some right to insist?

Nevertheless, as far as social work education is concerned, the dialogical model reflects many of the values which are held as an ideal, (even if seldom embodied in practice), for the relationship between the social worker and the consumer of social services. The relatively recent notion that "service delivery" should be based on a freely-negotiated contract between worker and client, (while it ignores with lamentable frequency the power-gap that separates them), is one attempt to give substance to these values. If contracts of this kind, (despite all the obvious pitfalls), became common between centres of social work education and their students - with consumer and employer representatives frequently included as valued parties to those contracts - we might come appreciably nearer to narrowing the critical gaps between what teachers teach, students learn and practising social workers do.

CONCLUSION

This paper has concentrated, intentionally, on those aspects of the crisis in social work education which are concerned with the teaching-learning process. The research studies and conceptual models we have considered all throw some light on the question how teacher-learner transactions might be conducted and educational programmes constructed - though we cannot rely on them exclusively to solve our problems for us. By comparison, neither the studies nor the models give us much help in deciding what it is that teachers - or teachers and learners together - should select, out of the vast and growing mass of knowledge and skills associated with social work, to be taught and learned at successive stages of professional education. While it is reasonable to insist that the required learning, both of intellectual understanding and of competent performance, should be derived from the demands of practice, it is clear that those demands, taken as a whole, are much too voluminous to act as a useful principle of selection. Most qualified social workers in post know to their cost that no single course can equip them to become adequate (let alone expert) caseworkers and group workers and community workers and residential workers with every category of client struggling with every definable problem. In fairness it must be said that courses seldom attempt to achieve such an outcome; yet there must be few social workers who have not encountered, during their first few months of employment, expectations that they are competent to undertake work for which they have not been prepared.

There is no simple solution to this dilemma; but one way forward may well be to explore how far recent work in re-conceptualising social work practice from a unitary perspective might be extended to re-conceptualising social

work education. The best-known "unitary" model (18), cutting across the traditional "methods" distinctions in social work practice, presents the fundamental job of the social worker as that of linking the client, (or client system), with those resource networks in the community which are most relevant to resolving his difficulties. This entails that all social workers must develop knowledge and skill in identifying both the difficulties and the appropriate networks: having done this, there is some likelihood that they will be able to distinguish between the intervention the client needs directly from themselves, (in so far as they are competent to undertake it), and the interventions they should seek to mobilise from other parts of the helping network, (including their own team or agency), as they develop action systems. Such a model suggests that qualifying courses might aim to combine "generalist" learning experiences for all their students, (that is, develop their capacity to take an "overview" of the client - problem - resource network, and their skills in diagnostic assessment), with learning experiences designed to make them feel reasonably competent in one specialism, (however defined), from a range of available options. If the specialisms on offer were made widely known in a course's publicity material, to the public, to prospective course applicants and to employers, it would then become considerably easier than it is at present for agencies to plan in-service programmes that genuinely filled the gaps in a social worker's first professional education, and for post-qualifying courses to develop programmes based on accurate knowledge of what had been taught (or omitted) at the qualifying level of training. Above all, the clues offered by a unitary model of practice to the boundaries within which a qualifying course curriculum might reasonably confine itself, would help to free its teachers from the present harrowing pressures to "teach everybody everything".

The model might also encourage course teachers to treat the learning environment itself as a resource network, (to include practice teachers as equal partners with themselves), with which students need to be linked. Doing this would help not only to encourage greater indpendence and autonomy in the learner, but also to bridge the split that still exists between "first rank" college teachers responsible only for theoretical learning, and "second rank" agency teachers responsible only for the improvement of practice skills.

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