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Putting Practice into Theory — an In-college Skills Training Programme

Maurice Vanstone and Peter Raynor

Abstract

CQSW courses are often criticised for paying insufficient attention to the development of practical job-related skills. This paper describes an attempt within a one-year postgraduate CQSW course to introduce an element of systematic skills training through in-college skills workshops. These are linked to more formal teaching through a common syllabus and through the joint involvement of a lecturer and a practitioner as co-leaders of the workshops. The paper outlines the content and methods of the workshops and the principles underlying their design and conduct. It also suggests, on the basis of three years' experience, that working in this way has substantial educational advantages, offering opportunities for effective learning which can usefully supplement what is available from conventional teaching and supervision.

Background

Social work training, particularly in CQSW courses, has often been criticised for an over-emphasis on theoretical or "academic" teaching at the expense of training in practical job-related skills. Such criticisms have been made throughout the history of CQSW, and reflect some of the problems of devising a "generic" training for a profession whose members' actual jobs vary considerably; they also, perhaps, reflect a fear that the location of training in academic institutions leads to distancing from the "real world". Much has been written about the problems of designing curricula to give sufficient emphasis to skills[1] and the difficulties of assessing practical competence[2]; courses have been accused by no less a person than the Assistant Director of CCETSW[3] of "giving an increasing emphasis to broad generalist education . . . *about* social work" rather than teaching people to do it. The debate has been sharpened recently by a campaign to force social work education into a more agency-based and job-specific pattern on the lines of the current Certificate in Social Service. Some of the debate seems to rest on a rather false and artificial distinction between "education" and "training": it would be a strange kind of education that had nothing to do with developing competence, and a strange kind of training that had no concern with knowledge and ideas. It is, however, also true that any form of professional education which gives little emphasis to effective practical skills is, and should be, difficult to defend.[4] This paper describes attempts to face some of these issues in a practical and constructive way in the context of social work methods teaching on a one-year postgraduate CQSW course. The focus is deliberately descriptive, and does not attempt to review the "state of the art" nor to argue the merits and demerits of other approaches. However, we hope it may prove of interest as one example of responses to a common problem.

The local background to these particular initiatives is that three years ago, following the departure of staff members formerly responsible for a "Social Work Method" course, we needed to develop new courses and this offered an opportunity to re-think this area of training. The pattern which has emerged for social work

students involves a shared course with community work students and a course of their own, entitled "Methods and Effectiveness in Social Work", which for the first half of the year follows the pattern of linked teaching and workshop sessions described in this paper. This then acts as a foundation for more specialized experiential learning on groups and families later in the year. The main focus of this paper is on the seven afternoons of skills workshops, but care has been taken to link these with the content of the taught sessions in the morning and with consistent principles of syllabus design which provide the underlying rationale for both components. In our planning of the course, these principles were originally summarized as follows:

First,   client need should be the main determinant of the service offered. This leads, for instance, to an early emphasis on consumer studies, on clients' perception of problems and on helping people to articulate needs in such a way as to provide a focus for agreed social work help.

Second,   practice should be self-correcting. This emphasizes planning, review and evaluation as components of helping, and the conscious eliciting and use of feedback as a training resource.

Third,   skills in work with individuals should be learned first as a basis for acquiring other skills later. Whilst this may not be the only possible order, we think it a feasible approach reflecting current patterns of practice in many agencies.

Fourth,   learning by doing. As far as possible, issues raised in a theoretical or research-based way should be linked to opportunities for live practice of related skills, and vice versa.

Fifth,   no "theology". Both teaching and workshop time should concentrate on methods and skills which have been shown to be effective both in research and in practice experience.

Sixth,   we deal with issues affecting the quality of the worker's *response* to clients before moving on to those in which the worker is leading and initiating the interaction. So, for instance, client-centred interviewing is covered before task-centred casework, and skills of listening and empathy before contract-making and confrontation. (This principle emerged rather than being consciously selected at the beginning).

We do not claim any startling originality for these principles, nor for much of the theoretical and practical content which follows from them. However, good intentions often fail to survive the pressures of timetable space and limited resources, and this paper represents a progress report on the implementation of these ideas among all the pressures of a short and crowded CQSW programme. The new course has run for three years and involves the close collaboration of an agency-based practitioner and a college-based lecturer. The practitioner (Maurice Vanstone) is a senior probation officer who leads the staff team at a probation-run Day Centre operating as an alternative to custody. His probation experience goes back fifteen years including seven years in conventional probation fieldwork. The learning methods and principles used in the skills workshops are drawn partly from experience of social skills training in the Day Centre and from staff development work in the Probation Service. The lecturer (Peter Raynor) is a former probation officer,

university-based for the last nine years and responsible for co-ordination of the social work training programme. In the first year of the new course, the lecturer covered the conventional teaching and the practitioner led the workshops; it subsequently emerged from student feedback that although we were aware of the planned links between the two components, the students were not, or recognised them only retrospectively. Since then we have acted as joint leaders in the workshops, so making the links much clearer as well as creating more options in the handling of the workshop groups.

Aims, methods and content of the workshops

The main purpose of the skills workshops is to forge a link between the theoretical part of the course and the field work placements: in other words, to create a relatively safe situation in which the students can practise and experiment with technique. The aims of the workshops are first, to introduce the notions of practice and rehearsal of methods; second, to give the students the opportunity to assess their performance as workers; and third, to assist them to develop their practice by using colleagues as a developmental resource.

In the process of encouraging students to involve themselves in the practice of methods we are also concerned to encourage them in a self-examination which will focus on motivation, values and self-awareness. However, the primary focus is on skill development not personal growth. We try to de-mystify the process of helping and expose it as an activity which lends itself to being broken down into learnable skills. To this extent our approach owes a good deal to developments in social skills training (particularly the work done with social workers and related professions by Philip Priestley and James McGuire[5]) and in "microteaching",[6] but we have tried to adapt our various sources to our particular syllabus and environment: for instance, the content of the workshops is influenced by the fact that they are mostly concurrent with fieldwork placements so that the student can draw on immediate practice experience. We make little use of the high-technology aids which are often recommended for this kind of work, as we aim to create a pattern of learning which students can use in agencies with little equipment and where the main learning resource is people. Thus we have used video very little, and one-way screens not at all. Our exercises are partly invented, partly adapted from a wide range of written sources[7] and practical experiences, but in all cases we have found it necessary to develop our own formats and guidelines to link the material and relate it to theoretical teaching.

The workshops themselves concentrate on giving students the opportunity to practise various techniques and sharpen the focus of their work. The opportunity to learn in this way depends on feedback from fellow students. The process of observing performance and giving specific and critical feedback is difficult and requires skills that themselves have to be learned; we therefore devote time to the principles of effective observation and feedback. It is stressed that for feedback to be effective and its message to be usable it has to be specific, concerned with tangible components of behaviour that can be worked on and altered, and should include positive as well as negative messages. The sessions as a whole are underpinned by the principle that self-disclosure and risk-taking are important and indeed essential

facets of learning. Implicit in this is the contention that both are essential to effective helping. The sessions are also intended to simulate aspects of team development and to involve the students in a critical culture as devoid as possible of collusive, uncritical working relationships. To this extent the workshops are influenced by team development methods used in the Day Centre. For a number of years staff at the Centre have participated in team development meetings in which they have critically reviewed the structure of, and the methods used in, their programme. This has involved evaluation of performance and practice of methods through role playing that focuses, for example, on group leadership and interviewing technique. Staff have also from time to time used their own problems as material for such practice.

In the student workshops a variety of methods is used: they include group discussion, formal input from the workshop leaders, scripted as well as spontaneous role-plays, handouts and "live interviewing" in which participants interview each other about real problems which are actually present in their lives. We think that this methods is of crucial importance because it not only aids skill development, but also encourages trust and accelerates the process of risk-taking. It must be stressed that the students are not coerced into revealing painful personal details but are given the opportunity to choose what it is safe to talk about. Our experience has been that students are quite willing to use themselves honestly and effectively in the interests of their own and each other's learning.

At the moment seven workshops cover the following areas. The first workshop is used to underline aims and methods, to introduce principles and then to give the students a foretaste of active learning through exercises which also highlight some basic aspects of communication. We emphasize that effective helping is dependent as much on the basic skills of communicating as on more refined and sophisticated skills. Attention is paid to observation of body language, speaking clearly in approrpiate language, and listening. We stress the legitimacy of the client's view of the world and the importance of checking out observations, judgements and interpretations with the client.

The second workshop focuses on empathy, on other facilitative skills and on the introduction of peer evaluation through rating scales. The workshop leaders demonstrate "live interviewing" and the students are given the opportunity to evaluate our performance by using a rating scale which covers specific and observable evidence of empathy, concern, concreteness and credibility. (This is loosely based on, and much simplified from, the various scales published by Truax and Carkhuff.[8]) The students then form into triads with an observer, an interviewer and an interviewee and perform three rounds of "live interviews", using the rating scale to assess each other. The completed rating scale is fed back by the observers and each round is completed by discussion.

The skill of summarising is introduced in the third workshop. Although this is basic it has been cited as particularly useful by students who have applied it in their fieldwork placements. We emphasize that summarization helps the interviewee put facts together, acts as a stimulus for further work and provides a perception check for the interviewer.[9] Students are advised that it can be used, for example, in situations where they are stuck and unclear about the focus that is required or when agreement needs to be reached about what has been learned so far. The learning

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format is similar to the previous workshop although in this instance scripted role-plays are used; students are encouraged to improvise on the written role-plays in order that they can begin to exploit the spontaneity of role play.

At this stage in the series of workshops the students are ready to learn more sophisticated and intricate skills, such as reflective technique. We regard this as a useful skill in itself and as an effective way of heightening the students' level of discipline in the application of helping skills. Our input outlines reflective technique as a way of helping people to express their main anxieties and move towards a greater self-awareness. We emphasize that it is about being sensitive and responding to the feelings being expressed; the following guidelines are given:—

1. Nods and "Uhhms" are appropriate responses.

2. The interview should be interviewee-centred so that the interviewee is undertaking self-exploration.

3. The interviewer should concentrate on helping the interviewee to explore his or her feelings.

4. The interviewer should avoid attempts at interpretation.

5. Responses should be timed carefully thus creating appropriate space for the interviewee.

6. The feelings stated or implied by the interviewee should be restated in language that he/she understands.

7. The interviewer should not only listen but observe non-verbal cues.

8. Responses should be tentative so that they act as a perception check.

The technique is modelled by us in a demonstration "live interview" and the students each have the opportunity to practice the skill and receive critical comment on their performance. The main block to learning appears to be the strong inclination to diagnose, and this kind of practice appears to inculcate a much tighter approach to the helping process.

In the fifth workshop we introduce the idea of agreements or contracts, which have obvious links with theoretical teaching on task-centred casework and other structured methods. A longer input from us covers the initial relationship, identifying the purpose of the contract, clarifying the goals and the terms of the contract, and the need for review and evaluation. A detailed handout is used to complement a pairs exercise in which each person in turn chooses one of their current cases and attempts to work out a specific written contract in a simulated interview. Feedback from these pairs is used as a stimulus for discussion and clarification.

The sixth workshop focuses on confrontation. The students are initially paired in order to discuss and identify situations or circumstances in which they find it difficult to confront — this might be in work or life generally. These situations are then fed back to the whole of the group and written up. As leaders we then give information on confrontation and in doing this model a dual worker approach. The students are then organised into fours in which there are two workers, one client or member of their agency (depending on the type of confrontation they wish to develop) and an observer. They are required to choose a situation in which they have

difficulty, brief the rest of the group and then role play it for approximately eight minutes. It is interesting that a number of participants choose to work on confrontations involving agency managers rather than clients, reflecting the need for a skilled approach to negotiating agency policy and resources as well as towards the more obvious targets of social workers' change efforts. On completion of the role play their task is to work together as a consultative group and to use live supervision to suggest, and if possible practise, more effective ways of handling the situation.

The seventh and final session is used for the students to assess their counselling and interviewing skills with the help both of rating scales[10] and their student colleagues. The rating scales cover twenty five different constituents of counselling and ten of interviewing. The students are required to rate themselves and then to be rated by others. This is undertaken in groups of four and although a role play is used as a stimulus, the students are asked also to base their assessment on observations throughout the workshops as a whole. We stress that this kind of assessment is a skill in itself which when practised regularly becomes less collusive and can contribute to the development of a critical culture within a team.

Consistently through these workshops we restate the basic aims and we underline the importance of the students taking practice into their work situations. We argue that conscious practice development of this kind ought to be an integral part of the task of people in helping agencies and not peripheral to it. The workshops themselves can only touch the surface of skill development (we fall far short, for example, of the 200 hours' skill training recommended by some authorities[11]) and it is therefore important that students continue to use the learning methods in their field practice, in later workshop situations in the course, and, we hope, in their subsequent employment.

During the course of the series of workshops there is a discernible shift upwards in the students' confidence and skills. Obviously this reflects the impact of the course and field work placements as well as that of the workshops. However, we feel that the impact of the workshops is likely to centre on increasing the students' preparedness to take risks and perform as workers in front of colleagues. Visits by course staff to field placements often reveal the direct application of techniques introduced in the workshops, particularly where these have offered strategies for situations where the student was previously at a loss. Perhaps the clearest evidence that students find them useful is their active and enthusiastic participation and the high level of attendance throughout the series.

The use of co-leadership in the workshops has proved to have a number of practical advantages in addition to the obvious ones of mutual support and sharing the burden of concentration through a long afternoon. The general requirements of risk-taking and self-disclosure need to apply equally to staff members in groups of this kind, and co-leadership gives us the opportunity to demonstrate techniques and model exercises and live interviewing with each other. We can also compare impressions afterwards about how far a particular session or exercise achieved its objectives and what needs to be changed next time. When exercises require the group to split into threes or fours and one sub-group is a member short, one of us can join in the exercise leaving the other free to move from group to group acting as an extra observer, making suggestions or modelling roles. On other occasions, when we are

lucky with numbers, both of us can circulate and contribute selectively during exercises.

Some general issues have emerged consistently over the three years. For instance, we have often found that relatively inexperienced workers perform as well as, or better than, some of their more experienced colleagues in the workshops, and are less sceptical of the value of self-exposure. This tends to confirm the widespread view that the kind of skills on which we focus the workshops are closely linked to personal attributes and capacities which training can enhance but does not create. By contrast, we are sometimes aware of trained incapacities. Some experienced workers seem to be depending heavily on a rather narrow range of skills and may have developed inappropriate habits of interrogating clients, or offering instant diagnoses and specific advice at very early stages of an initial interview. Others need to develop basic skills like asking open-ended questions rather than inviting monosyllabic answers. Many students feel under pressure to prove their helpfulness by offering solutions when further clarification of the problem would be more useful, and we regularly find ourselves emphasizing the need to allow space for clients to contribute their own perceptions and to participate in choosing possible solutions. Many of us, when not sure what to do next, have a tendency to deal with our anxiety by telling people what is wrong with them and offering "off-the-shelf" prescriptions, and we often see this being done before a problem has been sufficiently understood or the worker's perception checked with the "client". We have also become very aware that in conventional teaching and supervision many of these faults might not receive attention, as they are only really accessible through live observation.

Another feature of working in this way is, of course, the anxiety and "assessment pressure" involved for students in exposing their practice to staff and fellow students. We try to create a safe atmosphere by making clear distinctions between evaluative feedback in exercises and the formal assessment system of the Course, and by relying heavily in the workshops on evaluation by peers rather than by us. We also expose ourselves to the same opportunities of making mistakes and receiving feedback, and emphasise that feedback should take a specific rather than a general form (e.g. "I noticed you did X, when perhaps Y might have worked better", rather than, "What a terrible social worker you must be!") However, students who are concerned to do well still sometimes draw over-pessimistic conclusions from having done something badly, particularly in the early stages before they have seen everyone else do things badly. This is where we sometimes miss the opportunity to spend more time on repeating exercises to give people the experience of doing better, and we become painfully aware of the introductory nature of the workshops and their need for reinforcement elsewhere if they are to be fully effective. In general, limited time is a real constraint; another is the fact that both of us have worked mainly with adults and have less experience to offer in other areas. However, we are on the whole encouraged that students ask for more, even if we cannot always provide it. One planned improvement is the addition of more discussion time to allow students more opportunities to discuss possible applications in their current cases.

To summarize our experience, we are now convinced that regular skills workshops are a viable and effective way of improving links between theory and practice in CQSW training and offer potential for considerable development as time and money

allow. They also expose and test our own skills and deficiencies in a way which happens less often in conventional teaching, and it is instructive to watch an inexperienced student improve on one's own performance. We would certainly not claim to have developed a prescriptive model worthy of general imitation; indeed, we are often struck by the ingenuity and simplicity of other people's solutions to similar problems, and have borrowed freely from them. It is also interesting to see, with hindsight, how closely our own observations and methods reflect developments elsewhere which were not always a conscious influence on our thinking:for instance, to name but a few, arguments for attention to a very similar list of core skills in social work training were advanced some years ago from the National Institute for Social Work[12]; the training courses of the Institute of Social Functioning have included techniques of summarizing and reflection for many years[13], and the practice of live supervision has been developed extensively in family therapy. However, we think the process of finding and developing one's own materials and adapting them systematically to local learning needs and conditions is itself valuable, and the widespread concern about the level of skills teaching on CQSW courses suggests that the enterprise is necessary as well as interesting. We hope this account may be of some interest and assistance to other practitioners and teachers trying to do the same things in similar circumstances. In conclusion, we would be interested to hear from others who are currently involved in similar developments on social work training courses. Sometimes practical teaching methods of this kind seem to be regarded almost as the property of particular institutions or individuals or schools of thought, to be used by approved persons with due deference and acknowledgement. We would advocate instead the principle of active "plagiarism" and adaptation expounded by Priestley and McGuire[14], and hope by this paper to contribute to a wider exchange of ideas and methods in this field.

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8   Truax and Carkhuff, *op.cit.;* also Carkhuff, R.R. (1971) *The Development of Human Resources*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

9   See, for example, Munro, Manthei and Small, *op.cit.*, p.69.

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10   Drawn from Priestley and McGuire, *"Learning to help"*, cc. 3 and 4.
11   Truax and Carkhuff, *op.cit.*
12   Brummer, N. and Richards, M. (1979) "Teaching and learning the skills for social work" in Richards and Righton *op.cit.*
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14   Priestley *et al.* (1978) *op.cit.*, p.5, 171-2.

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