

Social Work Skills Laboratory in Action: Integrative and Reflective Learning through Students' Participation

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A b s t r a c t

The Social Work Skills Laboratory underwent a reform to strengthen integration of theory and practice through experiential and reflective learning. In addition to the conventional in-house skills training, students were divided into small groups, each of which worked with a specific target group and organised a field project. Adopting both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the Action Learning Research, the dual perspectives of teachers and students were systematically examined. Utilising a 40-item instrument to measure students' self-perception of competence in, and aptitude for, social work, the pre-test and post-test comparison indicated significant improvements along the six dimensions of knowledge, social awareness, communication skills, leadership skills, values and self-concept. Some of the key themes of the learning outcomes and process were also highlighted and discussed.

Introduction

In social work education, researchers (Caspi, & Reid, 1998; Raschick, & Maypole, 1998; Vayda, & Bogo, 1991) have repeatedly emphasised the importance of developing teaching models to enable students to reflect and integrate conceptual knowledge with field experiences. In the local context, social work skills laboratory training is usually structured in the curriculum as a prelude to field placement. It serves to help students to identify with social work values, equip them with practice skills and sharpen their clinical sense in assessment and intervention. In its early format in the 1980s, the social work skills laboratory of the University of Hong Kong mainly conducted in-house simulation and role play activities so that experimentation and practise of clinical skills took place in a safe environment. However, due to the lack of social exposure and direct contacts with service recipients, the students' understanding of clients' concerns remained superficial. The complexity of human dynamics and emotional responses cannot be fully replicated through role plays and hypothetical situations.

The Reform

The Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong have undertaken a fundamental reform in the skills laboratory since 1997-98. In addition to the conventional skills training package consisting of in-house role-plays and workshops, we divided the whole class of students into small groups, each of which worked with a specific target group of clients and organised a field project. Experiential and reflective learning were emphasised. Students must gather relevant information, perform a needs assessment, formulate the project objectives, draw up the programme plan, implement the project as a group, and finally evaluate their total achievement and effort. Students learnt best when they were in real-life

settings and engaged in specific tasks and missions of helping. Opportunities to engage in skills practice and have contact with clients, generate a greater sense of commitment and responsibility.

The range of activities in the field project included individual interviews with clients, group observation, and community activities. Classroom teaching was still a core component and 6 days of in-house skills teaching and demonstration were structured to prepare students for the field project. The course covered 24 weeks throughout the school year and different teaching emphasis and content were structured in preparing the students to have mastery of practice skills and competence in implementation of the field project (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Timetable of the Skills Laboratory and Action Learning Project

Weeks	Teaching Emphasis	Content	Research Emphasis
1-2	Group building Basic communication skills	Clarification of expectations Observing; attending and listening	Baseline assessment; Participant observation
3-4	Preparation: Clients, contacts and entering community	Engaging and empathetic responding	Participant observation
5-6	Getting to know the community and clients	Agency visits; informants visits and clients contacts	Participant observation Students' visit reports
7-8	Exploration and needs assessment	Case enquiry; data collection and problem assessment	Participant observation Interviews with teachers and students
9-10	Macro-level analysis	Policy analysis; socio-economic political factors of human problems	Participant observation
11-12	Dynamics and intervention	Handling group dynamics; power and influence	Participant observation Mid-term evaluation Teachers' and students' focused groups
13-14	Partnership with agency	Proposal endorsement and group cooperation in tasks management	Participant observation
15-22	Project implementation	Carrying out the project with guidance from teachers	Participant observation Interviews with teachers and students
15-22	Action reflection	Coaching and guidance on managing challenging situations	Participant observation
22-24	Project evaluation	Evaluation on achievements, learning outcomes and group process	Participant observation Post-lab assessment Students' self evaluation reports; Teachers' and students' focused groups
25-40	Consolidating the research findings	Modifying and compiling the training package	Sharing, reflection and writing up reports

The eight students groups, targeting different client groups, each launched a project of a different nature from their counterparts. The eight projects included a social networking project for the elderly, new immigrants, sex education for the mentally handicapped, children of single parent families, ophthalmic patients, social integration for the mentally handicapped, a friendship group for the elderly, and urban redevelopment.

To illustrate the range of activities, one of the skills laboratory groups is described in greater detail. One of the groups worked on the redevelopment issue in one of the old urban areas in Central District. The area covering eight streets was affected by the redevelopment programme of the Land Development Corporation. Many of the tenants were new immigrants, single elderly people, or low-income families. They were anxious about changes brought about by redevelopment, especially the housing needs and adjustment during relocation to another district. The students explored the needs of the residents, identified their intervention objectives and implemented a short community project. During weeks one to week four, the group of students received some basic communication skills training in the classroom. They were also oriented to the general characteristics of the agency, the nature of the project and the target group. During weeks five to six, they met the agency worker and paid initial community visits to learn about the characteristics and needs of the community. In the following two weeks, they paid home visits to residents and visited relevant organizations such as the Land Development Corporation and other community development projects having experiences in redevelopment issues. They searched for information such as policies about relocation and compensation for tenants in redevelopment areas. Based on the information, they discussed the policy environment and the power structure in relation to the political factors and resource allocation in the redevelopment process. Some in-house training sessions were held to equip students with skills in community exploration, group leadership and programme planning. Then the students developed the project plan in consultation and collaboration with agency workers.

From the 15th week onwards, the students were mainly involved in implementation of the project with constant instruction and guidance from the teacher. The students decided to conduct a survey to locate the household information and needs of the residents in the first phase of the project. In the second phase, they aimed at educating the residents about the policies, residents' entitlements and channels of communication in the redevelopment issue. They held a mobile exhibition together with enquiry booths on the side of the street. A seminar was also organized to invite representatives from the Land Development Corporation to meet and share with residents about their concerns in redevelopment. A residents' forum was then held to identify potential resident representatives to form a Residents Committee to deal with the redevelopment issue. They publicised the events through pamphlets, posters, and home visits. Throughout the project implementation, the teacher helped to consolidate their skills and facilitate the reflection of experiences through feedback, group sharing and evaluation. The constant reflection on skills and experiences of students would thus help to enable them to differentiate the appropriate use of case, group and community work skills in relevant situations, and develop their use of self in an integrative and flexible manner.

The reforms of the skills laboratory are innovative both in terms of the structure of the course and the role of the teachers. Integrating classroom teaching with actual experiences in the field projects redefines the responsibility of teaching and learning as a partnership venture between students and teachers. Students are held accountable to agency and clients for their performance and competence. In the real service situations, there are ample opportunities for the conceptual integration of theory and practice in terms of problem analysis and intervention approaches. Utilising the experiential and participatory approach in teaching, students can reflect constantly on their experiences, while group sharing can facilitate co-operative learning and exchanges of perspectives and personal values. The role of teachers is significant since their participation in guiding and monitoring the field project enabled direct access to students'

performance and crucial incidents in the learning process. It facilitated the richness and depth of information for retrieval and reflection by the students. Partnership and trust between the agency and the student group can also be ensured because of the active supervisory role of the teacher.

The Action Learning Project:

It is hoped that students can have a basic mastery of the basic social work skills after attending the year long course in the skills laboratory. Furthermore, they should gain an increased understanding into social work values, and identify themselves with the social work mission of helping those in need through individual and collective efforts. They should be able to analyse social issues and human problems from different perspectives and commit themselves further to work towards social justice and the betterment of society.

In line with the reforms of the skills laboratory, the research objectives of the action learning project aim to understand and improve the learning process of students in experiential-based learning, especially related to the factors conducive to integrative and reflective learning of students. The research objectives of the Action Learning Project are summarised as follows:

- to systematically document empirical evidence of students' perceived learning in the six sub-domains of social work competence and values;
- to make comparison between the different sub-domains of learning to further our understanding about the relationship between the different constructs in learning outcomes;
- to emphasise reflective learning in students, and
- to explore the learning outcomes from the perspectives of the students;
- to gain an understanding into the effectiveness of group experience as a vehicle of learning.

Methodology

The subjects of the study were 90 second year social work students in the year 1997-98. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodology was adopted. An assessment instrument was used to measure the pre-laboratory and post-laboratory perceptions of students about their own learning along six domains of social work competence. The scale was modified from the previous competence and aptitude assessment in community work scale (Chan, Chui, Wong, Tam, Wong, & Law, 1997). The scale was originally developed to measure the students' perception of their ability and potential to be community workers. The scale was proven for its reliability both in its internal consistency and test-retest consistency in the previous action learning research (Chan, Chui, Wong, et al. 1997). Its psychometric properties were also affirmed with factor analysis and correlation analysis. Since the six sub-scales of the original scale represent the behavioral, cognitive and value domains in community work as well as social work, the present research adopted the full scale, and replaced 'community work' with 'social work' in a revised version. The six sub-scales included knowledge, social awareness, leadership, communication, value and self-concept. Altogether 40 questions were asked and students had to rate themselves on how they perceived themselves, using a 10 point scale. Sub-scales have high reliability as reflected by their Cronbach alpha (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reliability analysis of the instrument

Domains	Cronbach's Alpha
Knowledge	0.81
Social awareness	0.86
Communication skills	0.87
Leadership skills	0.91
Values	0.87
Self-concept	0.89

Focus interviews and focus groups were conducted separately for students and teachers to reflect on the teaching/learning process. Altogether twelve student focus interviews and four teacher focus groups were conducted. Participant observation by the research assistant was made. Some of the themes or issues identified during the observation were further probed and explored in individual interviews with students and teachers. Students' self-evaluation reports were also taken as qualitative research data to substantiate our understanding about their feelings, struggles, value reflection, sense of achievement, and competence in their involvement in the field project.

Results and Discussion

Comparison Using the Competence and Aptitude in Social Work Scale

Paired t-tests between the pre-lab and post-lab assessment of the scores clearly revealed significant differences in the self perception of students' learning in the skills laboratory (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Pre-test and post-test comparison along the six domains

	Pre-Lab		Post-Lab		t-value
	Mean ^a	SD.	Mean ^b	SD.	
Knowledge	4.95	1.42	7.13	0.94	12.4***
Social awareness	5.00	1.28	6.12	1.18	6.9***
Communication skills	6.27	1.17	6.97	0.99	5.1***
Leadership skills	5.83	1.15	6.67	0.95	6.2***
Values	7.09	1.10	7.60	1.03	4.5***
Self-concept	6.46	1.34	6.84	1.76	2.7**

** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

^a range from 1 (extremely low) to 10 (extremely high),

^b range from 1 (extremely low) to 10 (extremely high)

Students rated themselves higher across all of the six sub-scales in the post-test measurement. They regarded themselves as having increased knowledge, social awareness, communication

skills, leadership skills, self-concepts as well as social work values. The mean score on the value sub-scale is the highest among all sub-scales for both pre-test (7.09) and post-test scores (7.60). Students apparently had high identification with social work values even before they went through the skills laboratory training. Nevertheless, they have also significantly increased their identification in the value sub-domain at the end of the course as shown by the t-test comparison ($t=4.5^{***}$). However, the mean score on the knowledge sub-scale in the pre-test was the lowest among the sub-scales (4.95) and yet it changed dramatically to a mean score of 7.13 in the post-test. The t-value (12.4^{***}) indicated that the change in knowledge had the greatest magnitude among the sub-scales. Of the six sub-scales, self-concept yielded the least gain, reflected in just a marginal increase in the change in mean score in the post-test, and the smallest t-scores as compared with other sub-scales ($t=2.7^{***}$). Self-concept is a more stable construct and students tended to perceive themselves as more or less the same although they made significant improvements in terms of knowledge, skills and value in social work.

Integration of Theory and Practice

Results of the quantitative analysis were mainly based on the students' self-rating of their perceived competency level and attitudes towards social work values. With the impressive significance between the pre-test and post-test scores, it can be seen that students rated themselves as having substantially improved following the course. Further cross-validation would be necessary to ascertain the accuracy of such self-perception. Nevertheless, students saw themselves as having made gains most significantly in terms of knowledge and also, to a lesser extent, in the area of skills and competence. The least changes were perceived in terms of self-concept. From their self-evaluation reports and focus group interviews, they placed a high value on the benefits of the skills laboratory. The application of knowledge and skills in a real setting was considered beneficial to their personal and professional growth. It could be postulated that students gained knowledge and skills in their practice experience in an interactive and simultaneous fashion. Together with the qualitative analysis, the findings supported the advantage of field project experience in the integration of theory with practice. The cycle of the learning experience of the skills laboratory resembled the model of the Integration of Theory and Practice Loop (LTP of Vayda, & Bogo (1991). Confronted by a specific target group situation and agency setting, the skills laboratory experience could facilitate the retrieval-reflection-linkage and professional response cycle as elaborated in Vayda and Bogo's model of learning.

Reflective Learning

Students' reflective learning was a key component and strategy in the skills laboratory. With the experiential nature of the field projects, students readily shared and reflected on their experiences and encounters with clients, social workers and other professionals or informants. Because the teachers were usually present during the various field activities, the retrieval and sharing of experiences was more direct and in-depth. The professional linkage and theoretical integration was easier to establish when the teachers could have direct observation and access to students' performance and responses in different field situations. The process oriented reflection strategies were often adopted by teachers and considered beneficial both from teacher and student perspectives.

I focus more on reflective teaching. I intentionally pushed them to do home visits. Then I had devoted much time on the discussion after the visits. The students had raised many stimulating questions which were not in my agenda. Then during that process, I need to think and reflect on my teaching role. I had not used much structural tools. I had geared my teaching towards self-reflection of students.

Value Reflection

In reviewing the self-evaluation reports of students, one of the key themes was the increased motivation and interest in serving the target groups. Perception and value changes resulted from close contacts and constant reflection over clients' needs and problems.

At the beginning, I had a rejecting attitude towards the new immigrants. I don't like them because I think they are troublesome. ... My initial interest is around 3 to 4 (out of 10). Now since I have more contact with them, I have changed my impression. I discover some of the shortcoming of the present policy and I could try to do more to help them. Now my interest is around 7 to 8.

I am very interested in the urban renewal project. From exploring the community to identifying their difficulties in the renewal process, we discovered they are in need. My interest gradually increases. We have gone through the process of confusing to now understanding their common problems. The focus became clear and my interest increased.

I have developed a positive image towards them after face-to-face contacts. They are friendly and nice. They always express their real self and share their feelings with us. My interest increases from 5 to 8.

Increased Confidence and Sense of Achievement

Another major benefit of the skills laboratory from the students' perspectives was the increase in confidence after they had 'hands-on' experiences. They essentially built up a sense of accomplishment after completion of the project and obtaining feedback from agency and clients served.

I feel that we have made a little contribution to our target group and agency. It is a starting point.

We were anxious and lacked confidence to do the activity. But when we tried, we became confident. The worker's support was good and made us more secure.

In the programme, I feel quite happy and get great sense of achievement. We were the in-charge and had experienced the process throughout planning to implementation by ourselves.

Structure and Process of Learning

In reviewing teachers' reflections in focus group interviews, one of the key issues teachers mentioned, as can be seen from the following quotations, was how to strike the right balance between structural and process components in their teaching.

Insufficient micro-skills training is the general feedback from students. But the dilemma is how much room we can have for the structured components if our main focus is on learning through real life participation in the project. The experiential learning emphasis and the structural learning components such as audio-visual presentations and role plays are competing throughout the year.

I think the main focus of the lab is still on experiential learning. All those we expect them to learn cannot be covered in one single project. That will have to be supplemented by structural learning. Actually, experiencing does not necessarily mean learning and digestion. Therefore, classroom re-conceptualisation is very important.

Evidently teachers had their own styles in tailoring the curriculum to the learning needs of students and requirement of the project. Individual variations among teachers might be advantageous, and flexibility in adopting the structural components allowed teachers to be more student-centred in the process. Such an approach requires the dynamic use of self, and judgement of the teachers in structuring time and opportunities for sharing and reflection while keeping a balance over the tasks' goals in accomplishment of project activities.

Group Facilitation

The intensive group process taxed teachers' resources and dynamic use of self. Teachers were conscious of their roles and influences in addressing and handling some of the problems in the group process. Teachers had to clarify their roles, set boundaries for students' expectations on teacher support and maintain group morale and co-operation.

After the programme, we became closer to each other. Some groupmates who used to be less active also become involved in the programme. The programme fosters our cooperation. We have good division of labour and all members are very responsible.

My group was the most dependent one I have ever met. They always could not compromise their commitment and I had to be the mediator. The ownership of the issues also varied. I felt quite harsh in such a heterogeneous group. In the later stage, I needed to push them along to finish the tasks so that I reinforced further the dependent and directive pattern.

The student groups were a good venue and platform for co-operative learning and mutual sharing and support. But they also involved skilful handling and commitment from the teachers to steer the group throughout the learning process. The teachers took up the facilitative and mediating roles, apart from teaching and instructing. Their participation and demonstration of the professional roles in the liaison and supervision process served as good models for students. Their leadership styles and use of self were crucial in facilitating group co-operation, task accomplishment and reflective learning in the skills laboratory.

Conclusion:

This paper has summarised some of the findings of the outcomes and process of the social work skills laboratory. Both qualitative and quantitative results have demonstrated clearly the effectiveness of the skills laboratory in being a vehicle of experiential learning. But for such experiential and process-oriented teaching to be effective, teachers and students both become the key players, and their interaction and commitment are the cornerstone for a fruitful learning experience. The teachers' own flexibility, sensitivity to students' needs, and effectiveness in problem-solving are the crucial factors in bringing about students' learning. The dynamic nature of the field project and the reflective teaching process pose demands upon the teachers to be good facilitators, models, mediators, motivators and trainers in the teaching process. On the other hand, the students' own motivation, their willingness to devote time and effort, and the group dynamics also play a key role in the course of their own learning.

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