# Teaching Field-based Learning: A Reflective Discussion on How We Teach as Practice Teachers

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## A b s t r a c t

This is the third project in a series of systematic inquiries through action learning of the teaching-learning process in social work field training. The aim of this project is to investigate what takes place in a supervisory conference in which a student's field-based experience is processed. With the aid of video re-play, the first two authors re-examined the way they conducted supervisory conferences with their students in a series of reflective discussions with their professional peers (their learning partners). The latter helped them to make explicit their ideological and pedagogical standpoints, as well as their 'practical knowledge' in teaching field-based learning.

## Description of the Project

The project is part of a developing action research programme which aims to improve the field training component in social work education. As experienced practice teachers, we are concerned about the quality of our students' field-based learning because it is crucial to the development of professional competence. The way students learn in field training also significantly influences how they will pursue life-long professional learning. Our past investigations in this area have yielded a broad scan of the dialectic of teaching and learning in field training by tapping into the self-report of students and teachers of their experience and reflection. However, we do not know exactly how a teacher teaches and a student learns as they jointly process field-based experiences in regular supervisory conferences. Presumably, field-based learning takes place within the conversational process. Thus, we embarked on the present project to study what takes place in these supervisory conferences whereby a student-teacher dyad talks about the student's field-based experience and constructs professional learning from it. An inquiry of this nature will furnish practice teachers (and students) with an 'anatomy' of field training.

The first and second authors volunteered to render their practice teaching open to scrutiny in a series of reflective conversations with another practice teacher (the third and fourth authors) in a collaborative 'learning partner' arrangement. The inquiry proceeded through a process of action-reflection extending over the entire span of a fieldwork placement. After obtaining their students' consent to record their weekly supervisory conferences in video, the first and second authors then processed what had taken place in each supervisory conference by engaging in a self-critical, reflective conversation with their learning partner as they studied the video record of it. The focus was on what and how the student-teacher dyad examined the student's field-based experience, the rationale (particularly the attendant values and philosophy) behind what the teacher did, and what and how field-based learning was achieved as a result.

## The First Round of Action-reflection Inquiry

We had completed two rounds of the action-reflection inquiry in this project. In the first round, the first author (Wai-man) studied the supervisory conferences he had with two students in the second fieldwork placement for third-year full-time social work students of the 1997/98 cohort. Both students worked in a secondary school as school social workers. Beginning from the third week of the placement, he began to videotape the supervision conferences with each student, with two joint sessions in the middle as well as at the end of the placement. He worked with the third author (Tak-yan) as his learning partner in a series of reflection sessions lasting well beyond the end of the fieldwork placement. The experience of having the space to reflect and talk about each other's teaching experience and implicit ideology of practice teaching was very fruitful. In the process, they had some thoughtful re-thinking of a number of pertinent issues about practice teaching and social work education in general. They became more self-critical and reflexive about what they did in fieldwork instruction as a result.

## The Second Round of Action-reflection Inquiry

The second round of the action-reflection inquiry was conducted by the second author (Carol), with the fourth author (Cecilia) serving as her learning partner. The action context was different this time. Carol supervised students in a part-time social work programme. They were mature students undertaking continuing professional education. The fieldwork placement was located in the last semester of the programme. All the students had completed social work training at the diploma level and were practicing social workers at the time they joined the programme. The fieldwork experience was not new to them, since it had been a necessary part of their pre-service social work training. These differences were very much in their mind when Carol and Cecelia entered their action-reflection inquiry. They also restricted the study to cover the supervision of only one student because it was found in the first round that conducting a parallel series of reflection sessions for two students was too time consuming. In the second round, Carol and Cecilia were able to synchronise the reflection sessions with the supervisory conferences. Therefore, Carol could make use of the reflective learning in an on-going manner.

## The Data

We had two sets of data to work on after completing the action-reflection process. First, there was a running video-record of supervisory conferences for each of the three students. Second, for each supervisory conference, there was an audio-record of the reflective conversations between the learning partners. With the help of a research support staff member, we compiled a list of the 'critical incidents' for each supervisory conference, accompanied by a transcript of the reflective conversation between the learning partners. The exact locations of the 'critical incidents' in the video-record and the corresponding segment of the reflective conversation in the audio-record were indexed to facilitate later retrieval. We then re-examined the textual record of these 'critical incidents' to study how each student-teacher dyad used the conversational medium to process the student's field-based experience. As practice teachers, our preoccupation was to explore and rethink how best to help our students to acquire field-based learning. By analysing the textual record of the series of reflective conversations on our practice teaching, we could gain critical awareness of the way we had conducted supervisory conferences with our students. In the process, Carol and Wai-man benefited from the opportunities of reflecting on the

issues raised in the reflective conversations with their learning partners. It became obvious that, as practice teachers, each of us took different positions in our approach to field-based instruction.

## Approaches to Field-based Instruction

Carol was mindful that her student (Karen) was both a practitioner and an adult learner, and that the mode of field-based learning was what practitioners should have been doing in their professional life. Thus, she advocated a 'strength orientation' in practice teaching, one that resonated with the 'strength orientation' in social work practice (Saleebey, 1992). Working from her ideological standpoint of rendering the learning experience an empowering one, she shifted the focus from the practice teacher, as the external authority, to the student, who is able to learn and improve her/his practice as a reflective practitioner. Thus, field-based learning is best pursued in a collaborative relationship between the student and the teacher, with the latter acting as a learner partner and a professional peer. Wai-man also questioned the conventional view that practice teachers should operate as an external authority in guiding and evaluating their students' practice in field training. However, contrary to Carol, he did not attempt to construct 'grand narratives'. He did not have a clear framework in mind as to how he would teach a student, other than the awareness that he had a dominant teaching style of probing and encouraging students to be critical and reflective. Rather, he approached every fieldwork placement with a heightened anticipation of knowing the student in the context of an evolving supervisory relationship. In this evolving relationship, a highly personalised and emotionally charged experience for both the teacher and the student developed. He tried to be open to experiences, and responsive to what the situation demanded of him in helping his students to acquire field-based learning in the practice site. As he put it, "How it will turn out, depends on 'our talks' in supervisory conferences (and it is) through such 'talks' that the supervisory relationship flourishes or flounders." He was prepared to be guided by the evolving experience in the 'talks' with his students in the conferences.

Thus, even though we entered the project with a shared commitment to examine the nature of practice teaching, and what took place in our supervisory conferences as a medium for the teacher to construct field-based learning with the student, the two investigative teams ended up pursuing different agendas. Carol used the project as an opportunity for her to put into practice what she believed to be the right way to help students learn from field-based experience. The study of her experience in teaching a student (Karen) in a fieldwork placement at a women's shelter involved field-testing a personal theory of practice teaching, giving shape to it in action, refining it through reflective thinking, and articulating it in reflective conversations with a learning partner. In the end, Carol had constructed a 'grand narrative' that spelt out the 'why' and 'how' of teaching field-based learning to social work students. Wai-man, on the other hand, used the opportunity provided by the project to closely scrutinise the experience he had with his students (Ivy and her partner, Cathy) in supervisory conferences, with the learning partner serving as his 'friendly critic', seeking to engage in reflective learning in the process. In the end, Carol and Wai-man, each in their own ways, had forged a critique of the conventional approach to teaching practice in social work field-training and emerged with, amongst other things, some wisdom about how best to help their students to learn from field-based experience. In what follows, we present the investigation by Carol's team first, followed by the investigation by Wai-man's team.

# Part I: The Work of Carol's Team and What She Has Learned

At the time I began the action learning cycle, I had a crude 'model' in mind about how to teach in-service social workers in the practicum component of a programme of continuing professional education. The model is of my own creation, derived in part from the strength perspective that emerged in recent social work literature, and in part from my ideology of the 'why' and 'how' of continuing professional education for social workers. Hence, I called it the 'strength orientation model' of fieldwork instruction. The model was ideologically driven. It was premised on certain assumptions regarding adult learning, practice teaching and, for a placement at a shelter for abused women, the goal of counseling abused women.

## Carol's 'Strength Orientation Model' of Fieldwork Instruction

I believe that adult learners are active learners highly motivated towards self-development and growth (Knowles, 1970; Knox, 1978). I particularly think that as the students are practicing social workers, they have a wealth of personal and professional strength and experience to draw from as their learning resource. Apart from this, they had previous experience of fieldwork supervision. Thus, I think the role of the supervisor was to reinforce students' motivation and ability to learn by tapping into their assets and strengths, and to encourage self-directed and reflective learning. In this connection, I am ambivalent about my role of assessor as a practice teacher because it may have the effect of creating a hierarchical relationship, resulting in a power differential in the supervisor-student relationship which is detrimental to student learning. When it comes to assessment, both teachers and students tend to foreground weaknesses and mistakes. Therefore, students may want to avoid making mistakes or exposing their weaknesses before their teachers. It is a shrewd survival strategy if our assessor role is perceived to be judgmental. It will be detrimental to experiential learning if students guard against making mistakes. Trying out new experiences is invariably accompanied by the risk of making mistakes.

I try to re-structure the student-teacher relationship as a 'collaborative partnership'. I am not there just to direct, correct or assess the student's performance. Rather, I am both a 'learning partner' and a 'professional peer' of the student. I work side by side with the student in a joint exploration of how best to help our clients. To that extent, I am not an uninvolved on-looker who is there to give out grades. Rather, I have a stake in the student's performance also, acting as I do in the capacity of the student's consultant and mentor. I share my professional experience with my students and make my expertise available to them. I help the student plan his/her learning experience in a way that will provide opportunities for repeated practice in order to support the development of competence and successful learning. As a mentor, I am there to lend support whenever it is needed, and to reinforce professional learning and change, thus sustaining the student's motivation to learn with a growing sense of self-efficacy. I teach in an experiential-reflective way, centering on the student's practice experience, reflecting on it, evaluating it, and teasing out professional learning in the process. The end goal is not so much to 'use theory in practice' as to 'theorise about practice'. I also teach in a didactic way. I think wife abuse is an expression, as well as a product, of male domination over women (Cotroneo, 1988; Rondeau, Lindsay, Beaudoin, & Brodeur, 1997). Therefore, in this placement, I tried to engage the student in a feminist critique of the clinical discourse that has perpetuated male domination through discussion, experiential exercise, and outright confrontation.

## Carol's Story of the Teaching-learning Process in Field-based Instruction

This is a story of what the student, Karen, went through in the placement, drawing upon what I have learned about her and her experience in our supervisory conferences. Like many stories about people and development, the story line has a temporal structure - Karen in the beginning, middle and ending phases of the placement. It also sets the rhythm of my teaching activities in helping her to learn from her field-based experience.

In the beginning phase, I was aware of her anxiety and concerns, and I could empathise with her. She had little experience in counseling, least of all counseling victims of wife abuse. Right from the beginning, she had made explicit her apprehension. "I hope this is already the last day of my placement," she told me in our pre-placement meeting. She was worried that she would not be able to perform well in a specialised service, as she did not have the specialised knowledge and skills. She also worried about the workload. She thought there would be a heavy load of written assignments in the placement. In retrospect, Karen's anxiety had to do with apprehension about her evaluation (Hawkins, & Shohet, 1989). Perhaps I had aggravated her anxiety further by presenting myself as "a strict teacher who demands that students be responsible, self-directing and reflective". I planned to provide her with both the structure and support to acquaint her with the practice setting and the professional discourse about wife abuse. I made a deliberate attempt to engage her in a critical reflection on how her life experience might have influenced her orientation toward the feminist ideology that informed the agency's work in helping battered women. Lastly, we explored how best I could accommodate to her learning style and what she would consider as the most worthwhile learning in this placement. I stressed the distinction between 'learning to perform' and 'performing to learn', making explicit that I would value the latter more, since the crux of field training was about learning. It took us the first few weeks to work out our 'teaching-learning contract'. By this time, Karen was about to embark on her practice assignments. I advised her that the quality of learning would depend on the kind of practice assignments she undertook and how these assignments were sequenced. It would be better to do her practice assignments one at a time to avoid overloading herself.

The work phase began after Karen had started some direct practice work. This was the crucial stage when field-based learning would take place. I had an important part to play in ensuring that quality learning would indeed take place. As it was the 'actual doing' that would furnish the raw material for learning, I gave Karen thorough preparation by guiding her reading, engaging in case discussions with her, and role-play. After she had undertaken the 'doing' part, I helped her to process the practice experience. The quality of experiential learning would hinge on how we processed her practice experience in supervisory conferences. I relied on audio recording to have access to her practice. I read her process accounts to study her in-session experience and thoughts. In our supervisory conferences, we played the counseling tape and paused for a discussion at some 'teaching points' (my initiative) or 'critical incidents' (her initiative). Teachers are usually prone to point out and correct students' mistakes. I acknowledge that our students do learn from mistakes that they may not be aware of until we observe it. However, in Karen's placement, I was careful to balance corrective feedback with generous compliments. I also framed any imperfection in her work as something common to beginners when I gave corrective feedback to her. In the process of viewing the taped interviews in our supervisory conferences, I encouraged Karen to articulate the way she made sense of a practice situation and account for her actions as a result. My aim was to help her develop a reflexive stance and approach practice with a heightened sense of intentionality. I was also concerned about developing her capacity for empathic understanding, a quality fundamental to good counseling and, indeed, good social work practice in general. At first, Karen demonstrated a

biased approach in her knowledge base. Thus, I tried to make her sensitive to the experience of women. In the process, she discovered how her own past was relevant to her practice. At one point, she confessed to me that she felt uneasy when clients expressed negative affect such as grief and anger. She could not respond appropriately. Her own personal values entered into the counseling process also. She held strong negative views about divorce and single-parent families. As we explored the development of her beliefs, she traced back to her childhood experience of witnessing parental conflict at home. "I was ten years old back then. My parents had a heated row. I was horrified. I didn't know what to do. I felt helpless." Thus, processing her practice experience turned out to be a process of self-discovery. In fact, there had been a shift in the character of our supervisory conferences from a didactic-experiential mode to an increasingly reflective and cathartic mode of teaching.

The ending phase began when Karen emerged as a self-directed learner and at the same time more confident and independent in her practice. She showed a broad-based understanding of how to work with abused women and their children. She would initiate consultations with me when she encountered more complicated case situations. I also adjusted my focus in supervision, giving more emphasis to professional autonomy and integrating knowledge with practice. I continued to give positive feedback in a generous way. In the final evaluation session, I made a point of congratulating Karen because she had achieved the status of a fully-fledged professional counselor as a result of her own strength and effort. She had acquired an educated view of wife abuse and how social workers could be of help to these abused women.

## Carol's 'Grand Narrative' of Fieldwork Instruction

 'Storying' the teaching-learning process in this placement has introduced greater coherence to my ideas about field training. After testing the 'strength orientation model' to teach Karen in this placement, I have become even more confident that I have found the approach to practice teaching. I fully embrace the view that fieldwork instruction entails "an intensive, interpersonally focused, one-to-one relationship in which one person is designated to facilitate the development of therapeutic competence in the other person" (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982, p. 4). Thus, field-based learning will be best pursued in a collaborative relationship between the student and the teacher. In this project, I found that the 'strength orientation model' could render the relationship a growth-enhancing one. In this relationship, the focus is no longer on the practice teacher as the external authority, unlike the case in the conventional approach to fieldwork instruction. Rather, the focus is on the student who is given the status of a beginning practitioner capable of learning and improving his/her practice in the same manner that most professional practitioners do in their professional life. The teacher can make a significant contribution to the student's professional learning by engaging with the student in a sustained process of professional exchange that seeks to derive professional learning by reflecting on, and evaluating, the student's practice experience along the way. The teacher thus acts as a professional 'elder', having reflective conversations with a junior practitioner on matters of professional interest to both. Framing the teacher's role, therefore, in terms of a 'learning partner' is a better representation of what really takes place within a supervisory conference. It also helps to de-emphasise the assessor role, since performance is replaced by professional learning as the focal concern in the supervisory relationship.

## Rhythm in the Teaching-learning Process

The series of reflective conversations with my learning partner provided me with the facility to monitor the manner I had conducted supervisory conferences with Karen, and how my focus and

concern had changed over time as the teaching-learning process progressed through the three phases. I learned as a result that there was a rhythm in practice teaching.

In the beginning phase, students need to acquaint themselves with the fieldwork setting and be a part of it in order to identify their learning objectives and explore the practice assignments available. Normally, they will need the help of their teacher to provide them with the structure to learn about the practice setting, the clients, and also the 'local knowledge' in that field of practice. In the work phase, students begin to have client contacts and their first experience of professional practice. What they have learned from their practice experience constitutes the material for reflective discussion in supervisory conferences. This will be the time when valuable learning experience takes place. This is also the time when many students will experience most difficulties in their placement. How practice teachers help students to process their practice experience inside a supervisory conference will have significant influences on the quality of field-based learning as well as their self-concept as a practitioner. In the ending phase, the focus is on helping students to consolidate personally meaningful learning about practice, and about themselves as practitioners. If all goes well in the work phase, students will have a rich pool of practice experience to reflect upon and learn from. They will begin to appreciate the person-situation gestalt that has made life difficult for their clients. They will acquire a more differentiated view of the helping process and how they (and their clients) have a part in shaping it - both by what they learn (the corpus of social work knowledge) and by their life experience. Such practice-based learning emerges both as generalised observations and practice wisdom for guiding future practice. All this constitutes practice-based knowledge with a personal stamp on it.

Thus, practice teachers need to be competent in three major teaching modes - didactic, experiential and reflective. Sometimes, they work in a single mode. At other times, they work in a combination of modes, moving back and forth as the situation requires. Practice teachers also adopt different roles in response to the changing learning needs and the growing abilities of their students. To begin with, the teacher role is a given since they are practice teachers. Students will most likely see them in this role, especially in the beginning phase. However, practice teachers may migrate to the consultant role at some point when their students can work independently and consult them only when the need arises. Practice teachers may also relate to their students as experienced practitioners. In that case, they act as professional 'elders' to their students.

## Making the 'Theory-practice' Link

In the work phase, there are a number of foci that both teachers and students will have to consider:

- first, connecting concepts and theories to practice experience;

- second, processing students' practice experience; and

- third, evaluating students' strengths and weaknesses as practitioners.

The first focus will be the one that concerns students most as soon as they begin to anticipate what they must do in practice. Most of them will have approached the fieldwork placement as an occasion for them to demonstrate their ability to apply theories in practice. This is how they understand the meaning of 'integration' - applying theories in practice, the hallmark of professionalism. It is what counts most in evaluating their performance as student social workers. Thus, from the students' perspective, an important aspect of direct practice involves the conscious application of concepts and theories to bear on what they do in practice. Very often, their

teacher will reinforce such a perspective also, validating what I consider to be a narrow view of the meaning of integration. Because of this, students feel compelled to demonstrate their application of classroom learning. Yet, they also discover that what they know is hardly relevant to what they are going to do, particularly if they practice in a specialised practice setting like the one in which Karen was working (shelter for abused women).

Having completed the core social work courses, students enter into their fieldwork placement with the (distorted) expectation that they have been prepared for real-life practice. However, whatever their campus-based learning is, they will never measure up to the demands of real-life practice, even if they have undertaken the simulated experience of practice in our laboratory training. Once 'inside' the practice world, they will discover that what they have learned has little to do with the 'local knowledge' that people share and use inside the workplace. This feeling of not being knowledgeable enough will be even more acute for those students who work in highly specialised settings since their clients and/or client problems will be novel to them. This partly explains why students often approach their fieldwork placement with apprehension, with most of them encountering many difficulties soon afterwards. It will be desirable for practice teachers, therefore, to help their students fill the knowledge gap. In Karen's case, I tried to help her gain knowledge about wife abuse and battered women through a programme of guided readings (a collection of professional papers, book chapters and case studies), and discussion, at the beginning of the placement. At the same time, I was also aware of the unintended consequence of her developing into a passive and dependent learner by placing her at the receiving end. Therefore, I also asked her to conduct a library research and discussed her findings in our supervisory conferences. Her reading served a practical purpose then, that is, to illuminate her practice.

However, the concepts and theories which inform skilled practice is something that students can only learn in and through practice. As they move from the 'theory end' to the 'practice end', they face the formidable task of translating context-free ideas into thoughts and actions in practice on a real-time, moment-to-moment basis. For this reason, I took the additional step of preparing Karen for practice by providing her with some simulated exercises, followed by reflective discussion. In this way, she was able to acquire knowledge about how to act, and have a better idea of the connection between thinking and acting, knowledge and practice. The didactic/experiential teaching offered in this part of the placement enables students to practice with a body of usable knowledge and skills, and help them feel more secure in real-life practice so that they will have the mental space to monitor their thoughts and experience in practice.

There is very little that teachers can do to help in the interactive phase of practice, unless the teacher joins the student in a co-practice arrangement, or provides in-session consultation through actual supervision. Even with such special arrangements, helping a student to process her/his practice experience in the post-action phase of practice remains crucial. The focus of practice teaching at this point is twofold; first, to guide the student to make sense of the practice experience from different perspectives, both common-sense and theoretical ones, and; second, to help the student reflect upon her/his in-session cognitive processes that mediated what s/he did with the client. In our supervisory conferences, Karen and I analysed the 'here-and-now' situation, determined her intent, and examined how she decided a course of action, and evaluated the outcome. We can have access to our students' practice through two sources: first, written or verbal accounts of a practice session, and; second, a taped record of the practice session. The latter is a better way for us to have access to the actual practice of our students, though it may not be always feasible, and most students may feel uneasy about this.

By the time students have had sufficient immersion in direct practice experience, we may begin to help students develop the capacity for reflexivity in practice. What enters into a practitioner's way of thinking and acting goes beyond the body of professional knowledge and skills to include the person's beliefs, values, attitudes, and past personal and professional experience. Practice therefore embodies the self. Practice is also self-expression. Personal values and beliefs shaped by one's biographical past may impart subtle influence on practice as they are embodied in what they think and do in client contacts. We can facilitate our students to develop greater sensitivity to, and awareness of, these issues through reflective discussion and self-exploration, then move on to examine the impact on one's practice. Only with enhanced self-understanding can students free themselves of 'blind spots' and become receptive to the client's perspective, resulting in greater empathetic understanding of the client. In this placement I made a point, early in the supervision, of fore-grounding the presence of self in practice. In working with domestic violence, students are often found to hold negative views about either male batterers or battered women (McCann , & Pearlman, 1990). They may also have stereotyped conceptions about marriage, divorce, single-parent families, and the gender roles in marriage. Thus, in the beginning phase of the placement, the focus was on helping Karen to clarify her conceptions about marriage, womanhood and gender.

## Empowering Students by Teaching in a Responsive and Supportive Manner

Field-based learning is something new to students who enter social work programmes straight from high school. The idea of taking up a professional role to help other people with all sorts of daunting problems is anxiety provoking. How can they be sure that they can help in a professional way? Yet, field training is also portrayed as the most significant component in the curriculum. Therefore, it is quite understandable that these students will approach their fieldwork placement with anxiety on the one hand and heightened expectation on the other. This is no less true of practicing social workers returning for further study. They too approach their fieldwork placement with apprehension, even though they have had substantial professional experience in direct practice. This is attributed to evaluation anxiety. They feel the burden on them to perform competently as seasoned social workers even though they are once again being trapped in a student role, similar to novices straight from high school.

Students may experience many frustrations, from a variety of sources, in their fieldwork placement. For instance, they will face many uncertainties in real-life practice. They might face client rejection despite their wish to help. They might find it difficult to cope with the demands of practice. This is one battle they have to face. Meeting their practice teacher in supervisory conferences is another. On the one hand, they are expected to report in writing on what they have done in practice so that their teacher can give them corrective feedback. On the other hand, they are expected to perform in a competent manner. Thus, they will be mindful of how their teachers evaluate their performance and adequacy as social workers. Any feedback from the teacher will be received in this light. The majority of students, if not all, will look for recognition and compliments from their practice teachers. Many will find their sense of self-efficacy being seriously undermined by the negative feedback from their practice teacher. As a consequence, learning may be obstructed when the level of anxiety and frustration becomes overwhelming.

Responding to students' affective needs early in the placement will help them feel at ease in meeting the risks and demands of the learner role. Practice teachers who understand the learning difficulties of their students will be in a position to give help by teaching in a responsive and supportive style. In field training, much of the learning comes as 'error-learning' - helping

students to overcome weaknesses and inadequacies. It is reasonable to expect novice practitioners to practice in a less than competent manner. With this mindset, it is also tempting for practice teachers to give 'excessive' negative feedback inadvertently, even though with good will. They focus on processing students' failures and/or pointing out their mistakes, leaving little room for processing students' potential, strengths, and accomplishments. If teaching focuses on 'problem-shooting', it may risk being perceived by students as 'fault-finding'. Be that the case, students will feel threatened and hence will become defensive. In the absence of a supportive relationship, 'error-learning' becomes a risky venture, more so if practice teachers adopt a critical, negative stance toward their students. When that happens, it will sabotage a student's motivation to learn and will also erode the student's self-confidence as a learner and as a practitioner. Therefore, it is advisable to give positive feedback first, before moving on to 'error-learning'. It is also desirable for practice teachers to underscore, and even amplify, their students' strengths, assets, potential, and their progress as well as achievements during the course of their learning. This can help bolster students' sense of self-confidence and competence, and hence their motivation to learn. However, the art of giving feedback to students does not come easily.

Students enter into field training with a personal learning style that they acquired from past learning experience in schools. As practice teachers, we also teach with a dominant teaching style. Any mismatch in the learning-teaching style of a student-teacher dyad will block student learning. For this reason, we need to identify students' learning styles early on in the placement and take responsive actions, either accommodating our teaching style or helping them learn how to learn in field training. However, the focus of learning changes with the progress of the placement and the nature of the learning tasks. It is therefore essential to keep the issue of the match/mismatch of learning-teaching style in view throughout the placement. In this placement, I found it useful to go through a 'teaching-learning audit' with Karen at three points in time: the beginning, middle, and towards the end of the placement. This 'audit exercise' provided the space for both parties to work collaboratively on problems and issues that each had identified in the learning-teaching process. This strategy was developed a few years ago in the context of another action learning project (Kwok, et al. 1997). With the teaching-learning audit in place, both of us monitored how one was teaching and the other learning. Despite the power differential in the student-teacher relationship, the 'audit exercise' enabled Karen to evaluate my teaching style as a part of our collaborative effort to identify and solve problems in the teaching-learning process.

## Carol's Reflection on Her Action-learning Experience

Over the last fifteen years as a practice teacher, I have had the experience of supervising many social work students in their field training. However, I have never before observed myself teaching students in supervisory conferences. This was also the first opportunity I had to scrutinise closely and systematically the way I conducted supervisory conferences. I learned a lot from re-visiting my teaching practice with the support of the video feedback facility and, of more value, the space for reflecting on my teaching practice in dialoguing with my learning partner. It was also the first time that I had rendered my teaching practice transparent to a professional peer. In the beginning, I did not feel comfortable playing the video recording of my supervisory conference in the presence of a professional peer. It was even more uncomfortable to examine it closely, looking for 'mistakes' and 'oversights'. Initially it was rather anxiety provoking. I could appreciate how Karen would have felt in our supervisory conferences. I felt the need for support and positive feedback as I unraveled my thoughts and feelings in the teaching process. The supportive style of my learning partner, Cecilia, made it easier for me to

consider the alternative views and gentle confrontations that she offered at times. The conversational medium contributed enormously to the quality of reflective learning. As I narrated my experience, and Cecilia listened, probed, and commented on what I did, we created a space for both of us to examine our ideologies of practice teaching and to explore different ways of framing a situation or responding to it. I was acutely aware of the need to follow-up the issues raised in the previous session. I reviewed my teaching style more frequently to see how it could match with Karen's learning style and her learning needs in the evolving process. It was a stimulating experience. We emerged from these reflective conversations feeling wiser each time, gaining new insights into field training and what we could do to support or undermine it. Over time, we found ourselves converging on a shared teaching ideology as well as instructional style and strategies. Now I feel even more reassured about adopting a 'strength-building' model in field training, particularly in teaching mature students. I am convinced that initial successful experiences will be crucial to help students develop their competence. It will be reinforcing for students when they have the opportunity to repeat similar tasks and recognise their progress in a fieldwork placement. It is desirable, then, to discuss each new learning task with students in great detail in order to ensure that they can derive useful learning from it.

## Part II: The Work of Wai-man's Team and What He Had Learned

### Storying a 'Teaching Episode' to a Learning Partner

It was Ivy's second placement. It was a placement in a school social work setting. She had a partner (Cathy) in this placement. Both volunteered to collaborate in this project after I introduced it to them. Ivy impressed me as being more cautious about joining the project. She asked me to elaborate more about it before she made up her mind. By the time we had our supervisory conference recorded for the first time, we were already several weeks into the placement. In our pre-placement meeting, which was the first time we met, I had picked up a crude impression that Ivy was of the anxious type. This impression grew stronger after the first few weeks.

In the preceding week, I had a joint supervision session with the two students. Ivy raised a practice issue towards the end of the session, to which I offered her my comment. She looked perturbed because she had done something in precisely the way I had advised her in a previous occasion. Yet, I offered her a very different comment this time. I didn't expect her to react so strongly and negatively. "Probably she is too anxious about her performance," I thought at that point. As I tried to explain the inconsistency, she became even more frustrated. She couldn't understand why she was "wrong again" even though she had tried to follow my advice. By the time I had to wind up the session (because I had a class to go to), she was obviously upset by the confusion. She expressed her displeasure in a rather explicit way. I sensed a problem. It was not so much about being perceived by the student as giving inconsistent feedback, but more about her emotional experience of it. If she was of the anxious type, I might have fueled her anxiety further. However, with time running out, I refrained from addressing her emotional experience, neither did I help her sort out her confusion. I left the session with an uneasy feeling. I was also somewhat worried that she might have had an upsetting experience early on in the placement. What should I do next time when we were to meet?

This event was still very much in my mind at the time of the next supervisory conference the following week. It was the first time for us to have an individual session. In the past, we had had joint sessions with Ivy and her field partner together. It was also the first supervisory

conference being video-recorded for the purpose of the project and was conducted in our Practice Centre - a setting that was likely be new to her. Ivy arrived on time. I led her to the Practice Centre and once settled down, I explained to her that two student helpers would be video-recording our supervisory conference inside the adjacent control room. It might have been due to the novelty of the setting, but Ivy looked rather anxious.

However, I didn't find any sign that the event of the previous week had any carryover effect. On my part, I did contemplate bringing this issue up at an appropriate time, probably towards the end of the session. After briefly reporting to me the work she had done with her casework assignment, she asked if she could talk about "an event" in our last supervision session. She began with an apology - apologising for her "poor manner" in the previous last meeting. She then explained that she had felt a bit frustrated at that time because I had given her "inconsistent feedback". She thought that she had been doing well in counseling since the client had asked for more counseling time. However, from my feedback, she found that she had missed many things. She had followed what I had told her and yet it ended up that she was "wrong again this time". I had given her very different advice. She was a little frustrated because of the inconsistent feedback. However, it was not the inconsistent feedback that she wished to pursue. Rather, she asked for my comment on her learning style - whether she was too dependent on direct guidance from teachers. She wanted to clarify what the student's role should be in field training. I replied that I could sense her frustration and her need for explicit guidance. I explained why I didn't respond in kind. "My difficulty is that in real-life practice, what/how to do is context-bound. There is no fixed rule. If I give you an explicit answer as though this is the way to do things, it may give you an impression that there is a right way." To conclude, I encouraged her to be more confident as she had to risk making judgments in practice.

## Mining for Reflective Learning through Reflective Conversation

In a reflective conversation with my learning partner (Tak-yan) a few days later, I brought up this event as we watched the video re-play of this episode. We exchanged our views on how best to tackle Ivy's concern and also the difficulty in giving specific 'how-to-do' kind of advice to students when practice is by nature context-bound.

 (Abbreviations: Tak-yan = TY; Wai-man = WM)

> TY: Ivy gave me an impression that she was confused and her anxiety level was very high.

> WM: Yes, she was a 'nervous' student. She expected me to give her lots of feedback. She was serious about her work and wanted to try her very best. However, she didn't have much confidence. She was talking about an event in our last supervision session. In that session, she talked about one of her cases. She tried to follow what I had advised her to do in another case. However, she found that I had a different opinion this time. Thus, she found my advice inconsistent. I didn't have enough time to really handle the matter because it was near the end of the session and her field partner was present. So I prepared to raise this matter again in this supervision session.

> TY: She was prepared to discuss the matter. She had elaborated her view about the event.

> WM: She was worried that I might regard her as disrespectful.

TY: Sometimes it happens. When we meet a student who doesn't have enough confidence, s/he may rely heavily on our instruction. The student is worried if s/he couldn't follow our instruction. It's good to have the opportunity to review the matter with her.

WM: She took the initiative in bringing this incident up. It is her strength.

TY: She used the word 'role'. (I think) it is open to many interpretations, such as the format of supervision, responsibility, etc. What in fact is her concern?

WM: At first, I thought she referred to my teaching style. However, when she asked if she was too dependent, I realised that her concern was about how she learned as a student. Why do students perceive 'dependence' as something undesirable in fieldwork instruction? But what 'dependence' means is a question! Ivy wanted to know the student role in a supervisory conference. In fact, she had raised this question again in our mid-placement evaluation.

TY: It is good that you had responded to her need. You had re-processed her experience and empathised with her frustration. I appreciate the way you framed it as "my difficulty". It would enable her to take the teacher's perspective. I think you could lessen her worry.

WM: I understand that she wants to do her best, and she is very nervous. She might have thought that I hadn't done my best to help her. Nowadays, students in fieldwork tend to ask their teachers 'how-to-do' questions. But it is difficult to prescribe 'how to do'. Many things are context-bound. It depends on one's intuitive understanding at that moment. When Ivy told me about her situation, I could only imagine what it was like and offered my advice. However, the situation will probably change next time. I may view the situation differently. So it is difficult to teach practice. Students tend to generalise the learning derived in one context to another context. This is precisely what Ivy had done.

TY: I understand that. The way I approach this is to use my experience to help students. I would highlight some of the crucial points and explore the situations that they may probably face. I hope this will keep them from falling into those 'traps' in their fieldwork settings. However, it will depend on my experience in supervising placements in that particular field … (He cited an example about a placement in a school social work setting.) If I have had the experience of supervising students in a school social work setting, I would be able to remind the student in advance.

WM: There are simply too many factors pertinent to one's understanding of a situation. When students ask me what/how to do in a situation, I can only respond to that particular situation. But students tend to transfer the 'how-to-do' learning from one situation to another. So, they become confused to find what they have learned does not apply in another situation.

Having the benefit of talking about this 'teaching episode' with my learning partner, I wrote a reflection journal afterwards to capture what I had learned.

I am pleased that Ivy had brought this issue on her own initiative. I understand that this would involve risk-taking on her part … I appreciate her strength. Other students may simply sweep it under the carpet once it was a 'past' event. Why did Ivy see it as "bad manners" on her part? Implicitly, she suggested that she shouldn't express negative feelings toward me. I can understand this in a Chinese culture … Also, it may have to do with the power that teachers hold over students by virtue of their role. Does it mean that

it is better for students to keep in the closet whatever misgiving they may have harboured toward their teachers? I had this experience several years ago … A student had misgivings about the way I taught, but she succeeded in keeping it submerged. I tried to put myself into Ivy's position. What would her experience be like in that event? She looked for guidance and feedback. I gave her feedback, but she found it inconsistent with what I had told her last time. It was frustrating. "You were wrong the first time. (He told you.) Later, you did what he had recommended. Yet, you were still wrong the second time. (Again he told you so.) This doesn't make sense. What then is right? How can there be two very different prescriptions on what to do?" It is this last question that highlights the paradox, and also the difficulty, for practice teachers to teach practice in field training. When students look for guidance from their teachers, they frame it in the manner of 'what-/how-to-do' questions. When their teachers give them guidance on 'what/how to do', they treat it as 'the prescription', 'the guideline to follow', and 'the way to practice'.

I had 'protested' in the reflective discussion with my learning partner. "It is difficult to teach practice because it is context-bound, and it depends on how one understands the situation …" However, social work students tend to lose sight of the fact that practice is 'context-dependent'. They approach practice as though it is about doing something correctly according to theories, in a context-free manner. That is why they expect that the right thing to do in one situation will be the right thing to do in another. They look upon their teachers as the external authority to judge what is right to do in practice. Why do social work students pick up such a conception of the nature of practice? I believe that there is something wrong with the way social work practice is being taught in our social work curriculum. We begin with teaching theories. Then, we ask students to apply these theories in practice. As theories are stripped of context, how can our students practice in a way that is sensitive to contextual changes? It is only in real-life practice that they can appreciate the 'context-dependent' nature of practice. There is no one right way of doing things. It depends on how we 'read' the situation, and that in turn depends upon the 'interpretive frame' we adopt to make sense of it. When students ask us 'how-to-do' questions, we are inclined to ask them "What do you see?" How can we help them in such situations without demoralising them? I think this is the artistry of fieldwork instruction. I was fortunate that Ivy had the courage to bring this issue up. What if she had 'put the lid on' and tried to get along in order to get by?

So, rather than drawing lessons from this episode of teaching experience, I set about re-interpreting it and giving it new meaning. At first, because of Ivy's emotional reaction towards my 'inconsistent opinion', I sensed a problem. By the time I had re-visited the event when writing my reflection journal, I changed my mindset. I began to recognise how difficult it can be for students to grapple with the guidance they get from their teachers in supervisory conferences. It is neither the students' difficulty nor the teacher's fault. Rather, it is due to the way social work is being taught. I began to understand the 'inconsistency' as a curriculum issue, and one that is of fundamental importance to social work education. After the reflective discussion with my learning partner on this episode, I developed a new impression of Ivy as a learner. I appreciated her strength in taking the risk of exposing herself. This is a very good illustration of the value of reflection to practitioners - the key to new ways of looking at one's experience and finding new meanings as a result.

## Wai-man Re-thinking his Ideology about Fieldwork Instruction

Unlike Carol who sought to construct a 'grand narrative' for fieldwork instruction, I took a different route in this action learning project to discover how best we should go about teaching practice in the site of practice - not by following a fixed framework of what/how to do, but by appreciating the nature of what good social work practice is. It sounds hegemonic to claim that we have the authority to judge and determine what best practice is. It appears to be arrogant to claim that our practice is the best practice. There can be many versions of best practice, depending upon the authority that we adopt to justify our claim. If we turned to the set of implicit or explicit criteria in which to ground our rational authority, we would find ourselves ultimately reaching an educational discourse that gives value and meaning to what we do. But there can be many competing discourses. How do we decide then? How do we know which one is good?

In my story of teaching Ivy, her frustration reminds me of the difficulty a student experiences in trying to do things right. She had no way of discerning what was right if the guidance  she received from an external authority provided no sure guide. If our students want to be right most of the time, the safest way is to do what is told, and, better still, to ask 'Show me how?' Indeed, many teachers do teach in this manner. They take over their students' thoughts and actions. The students become agents to execute what their teachers have instructed (and sometimes rehearsed) them to do. I do not think this is good practice. Social work is not a technical practice of executing some routines in a manual-driven manner. One then ends up with one important conclusion: What is considered good (or the best) practice in practice teaching depends upon our conception of the nature of social work practice.

If social work is not a technical practice (and I am very sure about this), the issue of whether one is right will be a far more complicated one because there is no objective standard (or objective criteria) for making such a judgment. Yet the judgment will be made, and has to be made, by practice teachers since their students will be concerned about how good they are as beginning practitioners. In fact, this issue is not only relevant to practice teachers, but also relevant to practitioners. How do they determine how best to help their clients? If the capacity to deliberate on the 'goodness' of what one does in practice characterises social work practice, then good practice in fieldwork instruction should also be judged in this light. When practice teachers regard themselves to be the external authority, they will take over, and take away, their students' opportunities to learn how to deliberate on the 'goodness' of their action. Hence, I question the received view that practice teachers should operate as an external authority in guiding and evaluating their students' practice in field training. In my view, the essence of fieldwork instruction is not about teaching our students the version of practice that we deem right. Rather, the essence is about enabling our students to appreciate their way(s) of practice, examine what practice entails, and develop a critical awareness of the need and the discipline to reflect on their practice experience, and learn from it.

## Wai-man's Reflection on His Action-learning Experience

It was through the series of reflective conversations that Tak-yan and I, collaborating as learning partners, succeeded in 'problematising' the 'received way' of teaching students in field training (and in classroom-based practice courses). As we talked about events in my teaching experience in Ivy's placement, we began to make explicit our ideological and pedagogical standpoints underpinning the way we approached fieldwork instruction. I began to uncover my 'practical knowledge' in teaching students field-based learning that was embedded in the way

we thought and acted in supervisory conferences. To this end, I found it fruitful to examine our teaching practice in reflective conversations with a professional peer. Both of us had gained substantial insights in the process. Now that the project is completed, I feel I would be wiser in the way I teach students in field training in future.

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