Enhancing the Quality of Fieldwork Instruction Through Student-Teacher Partnership in Action Research

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A b s t r a c t

Field training is an important component in social work education. Noting however the problematic nature of the mode of teaching and learning in field training, this project is aimed to test a number of action strategies that hold the promise of improving the quality of field training for social work students. Drawing on our teaching experience and empirical studies of the teaching and learning process in social work field training, we have come to identify a number of student concerns and pedagogical issues. To many social work students, field training is potentially a stressful experience. Students may view the supervisory relationship as potentially adversarial, partly due to the supervisor's role of assessor and partly due to their worry over any mismatch between their learning style and the supervisor's teaching style. Such concern is not ill justified. In a previous study, it was found that students were relatively powerless in the supervisory relationship. On the other hand, supervisors were relatively insensitive about accommodating their teaching style to the idiosyncratic needs of their students. Questions as to what students are supposed to learn and how they should learn from field training are both prominent in social work education. The notion of 'integration' has long been emphasised in field training. Furthermore, students are evaluated in terms of how well they can 'integrate' theories with practice. However, it is not entirely clear how 'integration' should be practiced or how social work students can be taught to develop this ability. At the same time, the mode of learning in field training is novel to most students. This mode incorporates learning in both the experiential mode and the cognitive mode. What a student learns depends on how he or she makes sense of the gestalt of experience in the fieldwork placement. The student has to engage himself or herself in self-directed learning whilst at the same time making the best use of supervisory support in the process. This project is an action research that involves collaboration between teachers and students in a process of participatory inquiry. The process went through two cycles of action-reflection whereby student concerns and pedagogical problems were studied and responsive action strategies were devised, tested and improved. The project was conducted by two project teams, one from the Hong Kong Baptist University and the other from the City University of Hong Kong. In this report, the two project teams highlight their findings and discuss the changes they would like to see in the design of field training and in how fieldwork instruction is delivered by practice teachers. The paper concludes with a summary of our research experience and our reflection on the use of action research for improving teaching and learning.

Introduction: Overview of the Joint Project

As an applied profession, field training is an important component in the professional education of social workers. The two project teams — one from the Hong Kong Baptist University and the other from the City University of Hong Kong — working independently of each other, devised a proposal

more than a year ago to conduct an action learning inquiry on practice teaching in social work field training. The two teams identified a shared concern over the problematic nature of the mode of teaching and learning in field training.

To many social work students, field training is a stressful experience. They view the supervisory relationship as potentially adversarial, partly because of their teacher's assessor role and partly because of their worry over any mismatch between their learning style and the teacher's teaching style. In addition, questions arise in what students are supposed to learn and how they are expected to learn. In field training, the notion of 'integration' has long been emphasized and students are evaluated in terms of how well they can 'integrate' theories with practice. However, it is not entirely clear how 'integration' manifests in practice and how students can develop this ability in field training (Pilalis, 1986; Reay, 1986; Saleebey, 1989). At the same time, the mode of learning in field training is by nature more experiential than cognitive. What a student learns depends on how he/she makes sense of the gestalt of experience in the fieldwork placement. The student has to engage in a process of self-directed learning whilst making the best use of the teacher's supervision in the process. This mode of learning is novel to many social work students. As we shall elaborate below, previous investigations carried out by the City University team have shown that such concerns are not ill justified.

The two project teams had somewhat different, yet related, foci of inquiry. The investigation conducted by the Baptist University team was driven by the concern for the difficulties that social work students might encounter in field training. The learning process is affected by an array of factors which broadly fall into two categories: pedagogical and contextual (Bogo and Vayda, 1987; Danbury, 1986; Gayla, 1996). The team was particularly concerned about the problematic nature of the supervisory relationship between teachers and students, in light of the inherent power differential in this relationship and the divergent conceptions regarding the way in which students should learn from field training. On the other hand, the City University team had the expressed aim of developing innovative pedagogical strategies for fieldwork instruction.

We found considerable overlap in the expressed concerns of the two project teams, and decided therefore to bring together the two separate projects into a collaborative one. Both projects followed an action research framework involving the collaboration between teachers and students in a process of participatory inquiry 'by which (they) engage together to explore some significant aspect of their lives, to understand it better and to transform their action so as to meet their purposes more fully' (Reason, 1994:1). The process went through two cycles of action-reflection wherein students' concerns and pedagogical problems were studied and responsive action strategies were devised, tested and improved. Collaboration between the two project teams was fostered by sharing the service of an external consultant (Professor Phyllida Parsloe of the University of Bristol, England) and the joint appointment of a research staff who served both project teams. We also held periodic inter-team meetings and organized joint workshops and seminars to disseminate our findings at several points in the course of the project. An interim report (Kwong and Kwok) was released in mid-course to document project activities by the end of the first action-reflection cycle.

The report presented below highlights the major findings and offers a discussion of the design of field training and how fieldwork instruction is to be delivered to students. There will also be a concluding note on what we learned from this project regarding the viability of participatory inquiry involving the collaboration of teachers and students in action research for the purpose of improving teaching and learning. In this connection, we shall comment on the ideological underpinning of the educational discourse which has propelled current emphasis on quality teaching and in which context the present project is situated. In what follows, we shall offer a separate report for the work of each of the two teams. Both reports have to be selective given the limitation of space. The Baptist University team examines sources of stress experienced by their students in field training. The City University team reports their action experience in trying out three innovative strategies in giving fieldwork instruction.

Report of the Baptist University Team

Data were gathered through an extensive series of focused group interviews (Krueger, 1994) to tap students' experience in field training. These focused group interviews centred on five themes which had been identified in brainstorming sessions among teachers and students at the beginning of the project. They were: (a) adjustment problems and learning difficulties; (b) students' learning style; (c) students' competence as self-directed learners; (d) stressors and sources of anxieties; and (e) work-place issues. As it turned out, the students raised a recurrent theme in the focused group interviews — that field training was a stressful experience and could be debilitating to many students. Most students had, at some points in their fieldwork placement, experienced mental exhaustion, negative affect and somatic symptoms. We identified three major stressors in the students' self-report of what they found stressful in field training.

Stressors Identified by Students in Field Training

Sense of Insecurity

Many students sensed a strong feeling of inadequacy, particularly among the second-year students when they entered their first fieldwork placement. They did not view themselves as mature enough — with the sort of life experiences that their clients would have — to appear as a credible and competent social worker. In this connection, projecting a professional image was uppermost in their mind even though they did not see themselves as living up to that image. Thus, they were particularly sensitive to client responses which they came to perceive as either rejection or resistance. A student described her experience as follows: 'I felt like a young girl in front of my *adult* clients. Since I did not have sufficient life experience, it was difficult for me to read the underlying meaning of what my clients told me. I felt I behaved in a stupid way as I did not know how to respond.' The students came to identify such feelings as a trait-like weakness. As another student put it, 'our coping capacity is not so strong since our generation is brought up in a protective environment'. Seen in this light, their stress was actually self-inflicted. They felt insecure in their professional role as they did not perceive themselves as a knowledgeable professional who could 'read clients' minds'. But then how can they become a knowledgeable professional whilst they are still preparing themselves for beginning practice? They had put themselves in a 'no-win situation'.

Not Knowing How to Learn

The mode of teaching and learning was not only novel to students in their first fieldwork placement but was also ambiguous to them. The received view of practice teaching was 'learning by doing' – students will learn how to practice through the experience of carrying out real-life practice. Yet, how this 'learning by doing' will come about is obscure, other than the assumption that students will learn by subjecting written records of their practice to their teachers' scrutiny and receiving guidance from them. Not withstanding this conventional format of giving fieldwork instruction to students, we are fully aware of the range of divergence in actual practice. It is for this reason that we wish to look for some basis to ground fieldwork instruction such that teachers and students will have a shared understanding of what the teaching-learning process should be in field training. As students' field learning is a private experience, we feel that the principles of self-directed learning may well provide the basis on which to ground fieldwork instruction. As it turned out, our students considered the notion of self-directed learning a problematic one. Coming from a long history of conventional classroom pedagogy — what Freire (1993) referred to as the 'banking concept' of education — making the transition to self-directed learning was not easy for our students. Some students felt insecure in the absence of direct guidance from their teachers. This feeling is understandable since, in the beginning of the placement, most students would still be looking for direction whilst at the same time coping with the novelty of the learning situation. Nor

was it clear to the students what self-directed learning really meant in the context of field training. As we had found out, some students concluded that their teachers had different interpretation of the meaning of self-directed learning. Some were concerned that their teachers might not be assessing them in line with the principles of self-directed learning. For one thing, self-directed learning values students' ownership of their learning and yet such ownership is possible only if students will not be assessed to their disadvantage for the mistakes they may have made in the learning process. Unfortunately, many students did not find the response of their teachers reassuring.

The 'Supervisory Relationship' is Perceived as Adversarial

However, by far the students' gravest concern had to do with the supervisory relationship with their teachers. We recognize now that it may be ill advised to call it a 'supervisory relationship'. Such a label has the effect of amplifying the control that the teacher possesses, hence reinforcing the asymmetry in the power that the teacher wields over the student. Thus, students generally approached this relationship with all sorts of personal misgivings, and 'uncertainty' was the word they often used to describe the relationship with their teacher. Some students felt insecure if their teacher did not make explicit his/her expectations. On the other hand, even if they were clear about their teacher's expectations, they would still experience anxiety because they were not sure if they would be able to meet these expectations. Students' anxiety was actually aggravated by the tendency of many teachers to focus on students' performance — a reflection of the centrality of teachers' assessor role in shaping their way of framing the supervisory relationship. We also found the tendency of teachers to focus exclusively on students as though their part in the teaching-learning process was unproblematic. Finally, we came to the same conclusion reached earlier by our colleagues in the City University team that our assessor role had strained the supervisory relationship by the built-in inequality in power that we had over our students. As a survival strategy, students sized up our expectations and tried to get along with us as best as they could in the supervisory relationship. Maintaining a 'good' relationship became a predominant concern among our students. As the conception one holds about learning may promote or constrain the learning process (Gardiner, 1987), such orientation on the part of our students to a power-dominated relationship is not conducive to learning, and least of all to self-directed learning.

What Can Be Done to Support Social Work Students Prior to and During Field Training?

In a reflective group inquiry session, we asked ourselves what that could be done to provide better learning experiences to our students and to support them in their learner role in field training. We came up with some initial ideas. First, we should help preparing our students for the sort of learning experiences they are going to undertake before the commencement of their fieldwork placement. In other words, a good orientation programme for students is an indispensable part of fieldwork instruction. Furthermore, the orientation programme should also prepare teachers for what their students may bring to the teaching-learning process in field training. Second, as practice teachers, we should articulate our conception of field training in terms of how we teach, what we expect students to learn, and toward what end we teach and students learn. It is through such articulation among ourselves as a community of practice teachers that we may be able to sustain a critical discourse on fieldwork instruction such that, in the long run, we may arrive at a better understanding of the science and the artistry of fieldwork instruction. As we have noted earlier, clearly articulating teachers' conception of field training will help students acquire a better sense of direction in the learning process. Third, we deem it important to re-structure the supervisory relationship in a way that it will not be so power-dominated as it presently is. Having said that, we acknowledge that the power differential between teachers and students is inevitable. What really matters is how to render such power differential less dominant in the student-teacher relationship. In this regard, we may have something to learn from the experience of the colleagues in the City University team. Lastly, self-directed learning will remain a rhetoric unless and until both students

and teachers can reach a shared philosophy of what it means for students to become a self-directed learner in field training. For one thing, the present focus of fieldwork instruction on giving direct guidance and corrective feedback to students' performance in their professional role is clearly self-defeating. On the other hand, both students and teachers are obliged to ensure that the standard of beginning practice is commensurate with service providersí commitment to provide quality service to clients. To that extent, practice teachers must watch over their students' performance. How this paradox can be resolved deserves further deliberation.

We have since taken some steps to develop these ideas into several action strategies and have tested them in the second action-reflection cycle. We are now processing our action experience and shall report what we have learned in other professional forums at a later time. In what follows, the City University team will report their action experience in trying out three innovative strategies in giving fieldwork instruction, all of which have some bearing on the sort of pedagogical issues we have identified above.

Report of the City University Team

The present project represents the team's continuing effort to improve the quality of fieldwork instruction through a programme of action research. We had conducted two related inquiries prior to the present project. In the process, we came to identify many of the pedagogical issues which the colleagues of the Baptist University team have reported above. The first inquiry was carried out in 1993 to study the utility of incorporating student support groups into our field training programme (Wong and Kwong, 1993). We found that these support groups were valued by our students in helping them to cope with the novelty in the beginning phase of their fieldwork placement. However, we had mixed findings regarding the value of these support groups in enhancing field learning through cooperative inquiry and problem-solving. The second inquiry was an intensive, cooperative experiential inquiry of how teachers and students viewed their experience in the teaching and learning process in field training (Kwong and Wong, 1996). We came up with two major areas of concerns.

First, most students approached the 'supervisory relationship' with caution and distrust. They were aware of the power their teachers wielded over them by virtue of their assessor role in judging and grading their performance. Thus, they resorted to the survival strategy of 'getting along' in order to get by. They avoided taking risks as a learner; they turned instead to their teachers for 'recipe knowledge', guidance and approval whilst preoccupying themselves in impression management. Thus, both time and energy were consumed in an extended process of 'sizing up' their teacher before the students could finally feel secure enough to use the supervisory relationship for the purpose of learning from their practical experience in the field. On our part as teachers, we found ourselves being insensitive to students' experience and their perception of the learning situation, and that we were too indulgent with our own conception of field training and how teaching and learning should proceed. Second, we found that the notion of 'integration' — the connection between professional knowledge and intelligent practice — was far too ambiguous for our students to really grasp its meaning. Yet, our students were constantly aware of the fact that they would be evaluated by us precisely on this term. We therefore concluded that the present arrangement of teaching and learning in field training — students reporting their practice in written plans and records and teachers giving guidance and corrective feedback to students in regular supervisory sessions — was inadequate in preparing students to grasp the artistry of practice which the more experienced practitioners learned through reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983).

The Action Learning Project provided us another impetus as well as the resource to pursue a course of action-reflection in experimenting a number of innovative strategies that might address our concerns. The first strategy was known as the 'teaching-learning audit'. This strategy was a

mechanism for promoting mutual feedback within a student-teacher dyad on the 'goodness of fit' between the teacher's teaching style and the student's learning style. The second strategy was a co-practice arrangement by which the student-teacher relationship was transformed into a collegial relationship (though only temporarily). The co-practice arrangement would also support students' field learning through direct observation and reflection. The third strategy was to organize 'campus-based seminars' which provided the forum for students and teachers to collaboratively engage in reflective inquiry on students' practice experience in field training. What follows is a report of what we have learned from our action experience.

Striking a Match Between Teaching and Learning: The 'Teaching-Learning Audit'

A major conclusion we reached in our previous study on the teaching and learning process in field training is as follows:

> (We) could not determine what teaching style was most helpful to students....this is not the issue, nor should we frame the issue in this manner, since teaching and learning are held in a dialectical relationship and....are interdependent.... A teaching style will have its strength as well as its weakness depending on a combination of factors....it will be worthless effort to determine what the best teaching style is....we come to endorse a dynamic view of 'matching' and conclude that it cannot be established beforehand by treating teaching style and learning style as something static. Striking a 'match' has to be an on-going process in fieldwork instruction. However, since the power distribution within the student-teacher relationship is intrinsically asymmetrical, it is inevitably the student who is to accommodate to the teacher's teaching style. The counter-measure we propose...is to institutionalize a mutual feedback mechanism within the student-teacher dyad... (Kwong and Wong, 1996)

This conclusion points to a new awakening that students should be able to share the power in determining how teaching and learning proceed. This calls for teachers and students to engage in communicative action directed to coordinate each other's approach to field training on the basis of what one party learns from the feedback of the other party. However, we do not look for the best match between teaching style and learning style (c.f. Gardiner, 1989). The solution does not lie in finding a match but rather in accepting the process of matching as the end in itself. We have devised an action strategy — known as the 'teaching-learning audit' — to institutionalize joint monitoring of the teaching-learning process in field training by both the teacher and the student such that mutual adjustment can be made on a continuous basis.

The 'audit exercise' takes place at regular intervals during the placement. Each party first completes a feedback form designed for the purpose, exchanges the form with the other party, and reflects on the feedback in the form. The two parties then meet to discuss the feedback one received from the other. The idea behind this arrangement is to legitimise the power of students in regulating the teaching-learning process along with their teacher in a collaborative spirit. The focus is as much on problems and concerns as on the changes that each party is committed to make. We had tried out this action strategy in both the first and the second action-reflection cycles. It was found to be the most popular strategy that the students chose to adopt. The following excerpt is taken from the transcript of a 'teaching-learning audit' session, and it gives a flavour of what the experience would be like to both students and teachers. (For further information on the teaching-learning audit, please contact the authors directly.)

The first audit session was conducted in the fifth week of an 18-week fieldwork placement. As shown in the transcript of this session, it was clear that the teacher was the more active party in controlling the conversational flow. It was also obvious that the power differential in the supervisory relationship was very much in the student's mind. As she confided to the teacher, '....the supervisor is a person who will monitor my work... The supervisor is not a friend. It is a formal relationship'. Thus, it is understandable why the student was cautious in making her views

known to the teacher. Nonetheless, the student could still manage to tell the teacher her wish to have more feedback and not to have live supervision at this point – quite an accomplishment on the student's part. And it would not have been easy for the student to express her wish had the teacher failed to communicate an open attitude and positive feedback to the student. By the time the session concluded, the student had acquired the impression that the teacher was not an authority figure but rather an older peer who had a rich pool of experience to share; that the teacher noted something positive about her as a student and as a social worker; that the teacher accepted her anxiety about live supervision and would wait till she was ready; and the teacher would like her to be more active in controlling what was raised in supervision sessions. On the teacher's part, she had learned that the student would look for more feedback from her; that the student was not yet ready to try out live supervision; and that the student still framed the supervisory relationship in a hierarchical way.

We were generally pleased with the experience we had with our students in these audit sessions. It did not take too much time for both parties to complete the mutual feedback form. Once inside an audit session, both parties could quickly enter into serious discussion on the teaching-learning issues identified in the feedback form. This mechanism signified the interactive and interdependent nature of teaching and learning. Thus, teachers had to examine their own performance other than the performance of their students. To some extent, institutionalizing this mutual feedback mechanism had the effect of redressing the power differential in the supervisory relationship to make it more collaborative in spirit.

Co-practice: Teaching and Learning at the Site of Practice

In the present mode of fieldwork instruction, we rely heavily on written records, particularly verbatim records, for gaining access to our students' practice. Inadvertently, such practice has misguided students' attention to what was said and done rather than what they thought in the 'there-and-then'. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on students' practice — evaluating, guiding, correcting — in supervision sessions has the effect of privileging teachers' comment and feedback as the authorized view. As such, it also gives rise to the impression that there is a correct way of thinking and doing in practice, thus reinforcing among students the misconception that professional practice is characterized by certainty and control. Such an approach to fieldwork instruction has the undesirable effect of amplifying teachers' assessor role and therefore compounds the problem in the supervisory relationship identified above.

The 'apprenticeship model' may be a better alternative to the conventional mode of fieldwork instruction. In this model, the practice teacher actually shows as well as coaches the student how to practise. Thus, instead of relying on students' report of their practice, practice teaching in the 'apprenticeship model' is grounded on what has actually taken place in practice. However, we have reservation about this model as apprenticeship implies a 'follow me' approach to the development of practical competence (Whittington, 1988). Social work is not a technical practice. Students cannot learn by simply observing and copying what the more skilled practitioners do as though there is a direct correspondence between task and performance. Social work is not just a technical-rational activity. It involves both understanding and deliberative action in context, requiring a practitioner to reflect as much as to act (Schön, 1983, 1987). Herein lies the artistry of professional practice which can only be revealed through studying the cognitive processes of experienced practitioners in action. It is for this reason that the notion of 'integration', so dear to field training, has long been plagued by confusion and inexactness.

Students will not be able to learn the artistry of practice if they have no direct access to the cognitive processes of experienced practitioners in practice. There are many ways of providing students such direct access, the simplest of which is to videotape an experienced practitioner in action. This arrangement will give students direct access to the practice of an experienced practitioner if it is supplemented by a reflective discussion on the practitioner's experience,

thought and deliberation in the process. Nonetheless, we are still concerned that students may regard it as expert performance which they should follow, thus reinforcing the misconception that there is a correct way of thinking and acting in practice.

What we advocate instead is the 'co-practice' arrangement (c.f. co-therapy, see Carpenter and Treacher, 1989:196) whereby a student works alongside a teacher as co-workers in a practice session (e.g., a counselling interview, a family visit, a group session) and, even more preferable, throughout the entire helping process. In this arrangement, both parties have direct access to each other's practice. They may engage in reflective discussion on each other's practice experience which is in part shared and in part private. Through such reflective discussion, the student can learn how the teacher frames a situation, uses knowledge, deliberates on the action to take, and becomes self-reflective amidst the moment-to-moment flow of thinking and acting.

Co-practice is understandably an anxiety-inducing experience from the point of view of many students who look upon it as a naked way of exposing their weakness in practice. Furthermore, the very presence of the teacher may actually hamper a student's performance. Thus, when we introduced the co-practice arrangement to our students, we emphasized that it could be a good way to learn only if they felt comfortable to work alongside us as their colleague rather than as their teacher. On our part, we had reservation also. We could not afford the time if many students decided to co-practise with us. It would be difficult for us to accommodate our busy schedule of teaching and research to the demand of the practitioner role.

As it turned out, the co-practice arrangement was only tried by one teacher. A student (Kelly) who was placed in a family service centre brought in the teacher as the co-worker in her first client contact. Prior approval from the agency was sought. The client was informed over the phone that a counsellor-trainer from a university will be present to offer his help. Throughout the 18-week period, the teacher participated in two interviews with the client and one interview with the client's daughter. Another student (Angela) brought in the teacher as a co-leader in a parents' group for six mothers whose teenage daughters were either under the Probation Order or the Care and Protection Order. Again, prior approval from the agency was sought. The idea of bringing in a co-leader was raised in the first group session. Members were informed that the co-leader was the student's social work teacher. He joined the group from the second session onward all the way to the end of the group. How the co-practice arrangement may work for clients and students is a critical issue. The following excerpt from the teacher's reflection journal on the first co-practice session with Kelly shows how he deliberated on this issue:

> I had considered how co-practice was to work out. I was particularly intent to keep myself from taking over the interviewer role. This was the first interview. Both you and I had the least idea of how the client would relate to us. The interview situation would be new to the client. It would be different from what she had experienced in the intake interview. This was also your first client contact in this placement. I had to allow for anxiety on your part, probably more so with me around.

> I thought about a number of approaches... I could be a passive participant most of the time, joining in only when there were points I found important but were overlooked by you. I was not sure whether this was a good arrangement for the client. She would find it difficult to comprehend why I was there if I was relatively passive in the interview. On the other hand, if I played the role of a co-therapist, in that I would join the conversation in the same active way as a therapist would do, then I would have to orchestrate the conversational flow alongside with you in a spontaneous way. That of course would require some knowledge on our part of each other's way of thinking and acting in practice. It would take some time before we could develop that sort of mutual understanding. The last approach I considered would be for me to take on the active therapist role in the interview, and you would be the junior partner in the process...

He was at one and the same time thinking about the client and the student, and about the practitioner role as well as the teacher role. Finally, he settled with the second approach which, at that time, he 'didn't have any specific idea at all how this would work out'. He tried to improvise and learn from the experience.

> ....at some point in the middle of the interview, I improvised a new strategy. When I came across a point needing deliberation, I would raise the point to you and ask for your opinion. Or, if I had some questions in mind, I too would reveal them to you. In these moments, we as co-therapists were consulting with each other whilst the client was observing and listening to us deliberating on her problem. I found it to be a good way of working. It spared me the ambivalence about whether and how I should participate in the process. I would argue that the strength of the co-practice arrangement is precisely this — on-the-spot consultation between the two therapists. I saw an additional advantage of such consultation to the client. She became an observer when we were deliberating on her problem. This may help her distancing herself a bit from the problem and hence would probably render it easier for her to look at the problem in a new light.

Thus, he not only found a way of making the co-practice arrangement work, he also came to appreciate the therapeutic value of this mode of co-practice to the client. Immediately after the interview, the teacher and the student had a short case discussion on how they made sense of what they learned and the impression they formed about the client in the interview. It was as if two social workers talking about a piece of shared practice — exchanging views, impressions and hunches about the client's concern and how to proceed. This method is different from live supervision (Liddle, Davidson and Barrett, 1988) in which the teacher functions as an expert consultant. It is also different from practice teaching in the classroom where theoretical account is usually evoked up-front in a case discussion. As the teacher behaves more like a practitioner in what Donald Schön (1983) refers to as the 'swampy lowland' of the practice world, theories recede to the background. In the case discussion at the end of a co-practice session, even the teacher can only talk about his hunches. He is as uncertain as the student about his understanding of the client and his interpretation of the client's situation. It is also through the case discussion that the student has access to how the teacher, as an experienced practitioner, actually thought during practice.

Apart from such post-practice discussion, teachers may also use reflection journals (see Francis, 1995) to help students reflect on their experience in the co-practice session. Through reading the teacher's reflection journal, a student will have access to the phenomenological world of an experienced practitioner in a counselling interview: the observation he made, how he made sense of what the client disclosed and his thoughts and deliberation in the process. In addition, the student can obtain feedback from the teacher about her performance in the interview. The following excerpt from this teacher's reflection journal reveals the kind of learning that the student may pick up from reading the teacher's account of the co-practice session.

> When I found you pretty formal in your demeanor, I tried to show my natural way of talking to the client..... I saw that the client was trying hard to control herself from crying out — and she wasn't successful. She was talking about her past, a history of suffering and hurt in an abusive relationship.... You did not dwell further on the abusive relationship, nor did I. The client was very distressed when she recalled that bit of her past, and yet she was making an effort to pull herself together. I was thinking: 'Probably she would find it easier to talk about her suffering later on.' I did not wish to reach out further. She might regret making all these disclosures at this point.

> ...the client talked about the event the night before her daughter left home. She reprimanded the daughter again for returning home late in the night.... In a moment of reflection, she blamed herself for nagging her daughter so often that it might be the reason why the latter left home. I underlined this feeling of repentance — which I supposed was founded on the

insight she had about her daughter's experience (an other-oriented perspective) — by offering this reflection to the client: 'You regret that your daughter may be tired of your nagging and that is why she left home.' I was taking a risk when I offered this reflection to the client. Would I add to her self-blame? I did not worry that the client would find me rejecting or criticizing her. It was a caring message even as I highlighted her self-blame. I was therefore particularly attentive to how the client would respond to my comment...

Given the lack of space, we cannot report here this teacher's experience in co-practising with another student (Angela), which was also a very rewarding experience for both the student and teacher. As the latter stated, 'my experience in this parents group has revived in me the faith on social work, that social workers can be helpful to people'. In his view, the co-practice arrangement enables the teaching and learning of social work practice to be carried out at the site of practice in the form of professional exchanges between teachers and students on a collegial basis. He described his experience in the following:

> What I value most about this co-practice arrangement is that we had a shared experience in and of this counselling session. It would not be possible for me to acquire such an intimate knowledge of how you practised even if you had provided me a verbatim record of the interview. It is different from live supervision. The latter will have put me in a 'one-up' position, commenting on your practice as though I am an objective critic. A co-practice arrangement puts me on a more or less equal footing with you — I had to talk about my practice too. More important, my experience as a co-therapist will be different from what it will be as a passive observer. Whilst I was trying to monitor your practice, I was also trying to monitor my practice, and I was at the same time trying to make sense of the client and the interview situation. I could not possibly discuss with you how I understood the client — her problem and her experience as a client in this interview — if I was only there but not taking up the therapist role.

In our opinion, the greatest strength of the co-practice arrangement lies in the opportunity it offers to a student to learn how an experienced practitioner deliberates in practice and what his/her experience is like. We wish to emphasise again that the co-practice arrangement is not the same as the 'apprenticeship model' even though modeling may be operative. (We learned later from Kelly that she did try to model the teacher' practice style.) It is more than learning what an experienced practitioner does, but also how the person made sense of what he/she did in the in the immediacy of the moment. Thus, we are looking into the covert processes of an experienced practitioner in action in a context-relevant manner. How can we render these covert processes accessible to our students? The reflection journal is one strategy. We believe there are other strategies as well.

For all the merits we see in the co-practice arrangement, it is still premature to conclude that it is an effective pedagogical strategy and should be widely adopted in social work field training. First, our experience is very limited since only one teacher had tried out this method. Second, we have yet to learn from students about their experience in working alongside their teacher in a co-practice arrangement. Third, even more important, we need to make sure that such an arrangement really works for the benefit of our clients apart from its pedagogical value. In short, we find the co-practice arrangement a potentially powerful strategy for teaching students the artistry of real-life practice. We need to further experiment it in order to perfect its use for supporting student learning in field training.

Campus-based Seminar: Reflective Inquiry into Practice

The idea of a 'campus-based seminar' evolved from our previous idea of forming support groups for students in field training (Wong and Kwong, 1993). Students returned to campus for regular group meetings with their peers to share their experience in their fieldwork placement. Support groups were meant to serve a number of purposes: (a) to generate peer support; (b) to provide a

medium for students to learn from each other's field-based experiences; and (c) to promote problem-based inquiry in a collaborative learning community. From the outset, we left our students to function autonomously in the absence of teacher guidance. At the end, we learned from the students' feedback that it would be essential for us to provide both structure and guidance to them. In the absence of teacher involvement, many groups suffered from low attendance and the loss of direction. Furthermore, most of the groups could not fulfill the purpose of facilitating field-based learning and problem-based inquiry.

Drawing on our last experience, we modified the idea and replaced support groups with a series of campus-based seminars for students in this project. Our purpose was to provide a forum for students to learn from their field-based experiences through a process of reflective inquiry with their peers. Teachers took an active part in helping students to process their field-based experiences. They took on the dual roles of being a 'friendly critic' as well as a 'resource person' in the group. In the first action-reflection cycle, three parallel series of campus-based seminars were organized for groups of students placed in similar field settings. The project assistant, herself an experienced social worker, served as the moderator in all the seminar sessions. The project leader had also joined some of these seminar sessions. At the end, whilst we succeeded in focusing these seminar sessions on field-based experiences, the quality of reflective inquiry was found to be wanting. Participants did talk about their field-based experiences, but more as a sharing of experience than as an inquiry into practice.

Thus, in the second action-reflection cycle, we tried a different format that resembled more like a professional seminar attended by professional peers. A student would first present her work (in verbal/written report and through video re-play) and an audience of several teachers and students then joined in a free-floating discussion that brought forth a multiplicity of views, clinical orientations and idiosyncratic concerns. Understandably, the teachers were more active in the discussion in the beginning. Soon when it was clear to the students that the teachers could not agree even among themselves, they became more comfortable to air their views. We found that the participatory climate, coupled with the intellectual work and the divergent views raised in the discussion, had created the right kind of condition for reflective inquiry. The following excerpt taken from a teacher's reflective journal after attending one of these seminars attests to the kind of educative experience that both the students and the teachers can derive from these seminar sessions:

> ....all participants, both the students and the teachers, contributed their ideas toward a specific focus and, in return, they also received feedback from other participants.... To the students, it was a good opportunity for them to share their opinions with other people, no matter students or teachers. It widens their perspectives in viewing a particular problem and also contributes to one's self-reflection on the application of skills and the underlying rationale of what one did in a practice session. One advantage of this design of sharing amongst students and teachers is that the students are free to express their views, respond to others including their teachers as well as give and receive feedback in the process. I noticed that the students did not accept feedback from teachers unconditionally. Indeed, they often further pursued their teachers' views. This is a good indication that the students considered themselves an equal participant to their teachers in the seminar. Teachers were their professional peers. They offered their views but did not always agree with each other. It was not like the way teachers supervise their students in field training.

We were satisfied with the quality of interaction in these seminar sessions. For us as social work teachers, it was also the first time that we operated like practising social workers talking about their clients and their work in a field office. Noting that it is through this oral tradition that social workers construct their practical knowledge in their work place, the experience of these seminar sessions will prepare the students for participation in this oral tradition once they enter into their first social work job. What we have yet to gather is the learning experience of the students in these

seminar sessions and what 'professional wisdom' they may gain from listening to the views of their peers and teachers. Will they become more capable of reflecting on their practice, now that they can appreciate the multiplicity of views arising from divergent theoretical perspectives and alternative interpretations? This is the question we would like to explore further in future.

The Research Experience: Participatory Inquiry and the Ownership of Educational Practice

Currently, as the social market ideology permeates the administration of higher education (Elliott, 1993), action research that originates from the ground and which is motivated by individual teachers' value in improving their teaching practice, holds greater promise of enhancing the quality of education than those centrally managed 'quality assurance' mechanisms that turn the teacher-student relationship into one of production-consumption. Education is not about providing and receiving. Rather, it is about the sharing of experience, feeling, mind and intellect.

At the time we conceived the idea of this action-learning project, we had an idealistic view of how teachers and students could work in close partnership to critically inquire into the way teaching and learning should be carried out. Field training itself presupposes a close relationship between a teacher and a student, although it has been generally seen as adversarial by students. In this connection, rendering field training as the object of a cooperative inquiry among teachers and students holds the promise of changing conventional practice and reframing the student-teacher relationship as one of collaboration and shared purpose.

The project afforded us as teachers a rare opportunity of listening to the genuine voice of students about their fears and anxiety in the relationship with us. As teachers, 'we occupy a privileged position over and above our students' (Kwong and Wong, 1996), and this privileged position of the teachers also found its expression in this project. Even though we would like it to be a genuine student-teacher partnership, the students only considered themselves a junior partner at best. They told us their experience, gave their feedback, and participated in the new strategies we wanted to try out, but they did not see themselves sharing the ownership of the project.

In the end, we ask ourselves: Could it be otherwise? Should it be otherwise? These questions point to one fundamental question which has been overlooked in the prevalent discourse on quality teaching and quality assurance in higher education these days, and that is: Are students just consumers of educational goods or are they part-owners of the educational practice? In the social market ideology that permeates the educational discourse in higher education, students are accorded the place of consumers of educational goods. It is the responsibility of teachers to ensure the quality of education that their students receive. Hence, the ownership of this action research project is mostly in our hands.

A dialectical view of teaching and learning suggests a collaborative relationship between teachers and students. Yet, the educational discourse that has given rise to the present emphasis on quality assurance in teaching conceives the relationship of teaching and learning as one of production-consumption. If students are at the receiving end of our teaching, the sort of partnership between teachers and students that we value and have tried to instill in this project can hardly be materialised.