

# **Critical Reflection in Community Work Education: A Social Work Curriculum Addressing Social Deprivation and Poverty**

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## **A b s t r a c t**

This research dealt with the pedagogical problem of enhancing critical reflection in community work education using the action research approach. It focused on the community work skills laboratory offered to second year Bachelor of Social Work students in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration. The six-month-long laboratory consisted of a series of eight seminars on issues related to community work and a community project in an assigned agency and client group. The class of 70 students was divided into nine laboratory groups, each working with a different agency and client group. The action research design for this project was based on the Kember and Kelly (1994) and Zuber-Skerritt (1992) models, and centred on the action-observation-reflection-change cycle. A series of quantitative and qualitative data collection and assessment methods were employed, including classroom and field observations, focus group interviews with questionnaires, and the Competence and Aptitude Assessment in Community Work Scale which was developed for the purpose of this project. From the data collected, it was obvious that there had been considerable effort on the part of the students in critically reflecting their own attitudes and biases and their levels of adequacy of knowledge and practice competence. The project identified contextual as well as personal factors that affected teachers' effectiveness in bringing about critical reflection in students.

## **Introduction**

Community work is the profession bestowed with missions of tackling social problems, and eliminating societal deprivation, discrimination and exploitation. It is concerned with bringing about changes in the wider socio-political arena. It relates to changes in social policies and practices, structural institutional changes, as well as changes in the values and attitudes of the wider public. The ability to feel the pain of the people who are suffering, the possession of knowledge required to design appropriate interventions and the skills in bringing about change are all essential qualities of an effective community worker. This action research study examined a community work curriculum that addresses social deprivation and poverty, namely, the Community Development Skills Laboratory (hereafter called the Skills Lab). The first part of this paper summarises and discusses the essential components of effective community work education that form the framework of the Skills Lab. The second part deals with the experiences of students and instructors who were involved in this study. Finally, implications for community work education are suggested.

## **Effective Community Work Education: The Case of the Community Development Skills Laboratory**

Community work education is concerned with inculcating appropriate values, imparting knowledge and developing the practice competence of students. It calls for concerted efforts in attending to three areas simultaneously: knowledge, skills and values. With respect to the knowledge domain, Derricourt (1977) suggested that community work education should consist of theoretical and substantive knowledge which include the understanding of social structure and social organisations, how organisations work, people in their environment, behaviour in groups and the power structure. Similarly, local scholars, such as Fung, Wu and Chui (1994) call to attention the significance of theories of practice and practice theories, which pertain to, respectively, theories of social analysis and macro-practices such as community care, service extension, community organisation and grassroots leadership development. In the domain of practical skills, there are a multitude of relevant skills required of a community worker. The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (1981) in the U. K. laid down an elaborated list of requisite skills for community workers, which include interpersonal, groupwork, inter-organisational, political, teamwork, education and training, fact finding and social study, communication, organisation, finance and budgeting, recording and self-organisation skills. The last domain, values, includes respect for human dignity and worth, justice and freedom, institutional orientation, equality and equity, democracy, people's participation, mutual help and social responsibility (Wu and Lam, 1994). Though there is a conceptual division between the three domains of values, knowledge and skills, they are indeed closely intertwined and there exists a dialectical relationship amongst the three in the process of their development. The challenge confronting community work educators is therefore to devise viable teaching packages that are most conducive to the development of the three domains in an integrated and effective manner. Community work education is indeed a very extensive programme imposing heavy demands on both the teacher and learner.

### **The Significance of Field Experience and Critical Reflection in Students' Learning**

Various scholars in the field of community work education call to attention the significance of providing field experience and enhancing critical/reflective thinking among students. As the roots of community problems mostly lie in the societal arena, which cannot be simulated in a classroom setting, a training package to provide real exposure to students, so they might appreciate and experience such problems in society is called for. Latting (1990) proposed that the cognitive processes of assimilating relevant knowledge and concepts require not merely rote learning or memorising. Learning is better achieved by means of more striking experiences which form part of the learner's cognitive processes and which imprint more deep-rooted memories of abstract concepts as well as concrete information. Similarly, Derricourt (1977) proposed his 'direct experience' model which emphasised 'a kind of involvement ... (of the students, in which) their direct experience at work or in life provides the material, the bases from which skills and knowledge for community work may be developed' (p. 136). Drolen (1991) demonstrated the effectiveness of utilising the experiential approach in a practice component in enhancing undergraduates' understanding of community organisation practice. Segal (1989) also outlined a model for teaching community organisation through students' self-initiated community studies and development of advocacy strategies and programme planning. These various models point to the same direction: that of devising effective means and mechanisms for effective teaching and learning of social work values, knowledge and skills. However, effective and sustainable learning can only be achieved by the learner's own assimilation of what s/he encounters thereby deriving his/her own framework for subsequent integration of new material. For this reason, the crucial role of critical thinking/reflection comes to the fore.

Seelig (1993) criticised the prevalent neglect of nurturing students' 'thinking', as well as instilling knowledge and skills, in conventional social work education programmes. He propounded that 'It is necessary that social work educators maintain an emphasis on developing critical thinking as a separate skill component not only to ensure that students will be able to apply the method, but to also ensure that they will be able to survive within a field that constantly requires integration, introspection and adaptation.' (p. 31) Goldstein (1993) also pointed out an emergent trend in the argument for reflective learning which highlights a more balanced partnership between direct field experience and classroom learning as 'the real-life emergencies and paradoxes that characterise the field practicum recommend it as the vital centre for the development of reflective thinking.' (p. 179) In other words, reflective thinking stimulated by direct experience can facilitate effective learning. Furthermore, the integration between field and classroom, based on the experiential nature of learning, offers a solution to the barriers of learning. Vayda and Bogo (1991) proposed an Integration of Theory and Practice Loop (LTP) to enhance social work educators in their teaching. The model highlights the continued processes of 'retrieval-reflection-linkage-professional response'. Information about a specific practice situation is recalled and assessed with relative objectivity and sensitivity. It is then linked with the students' and educators' cognitive associations, and finally, a plan that will inform the next encounter between the students and educators is selected. Critical Reflection is essentially a mental process that incorporates cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains. The genesis of developing critical reflection begins with direct field experience which induces the development of cognitive schema, and eventually this helps to equip the learner in picking up the relevant skills for his/her practice. The frameworks of Wellington and Wellington (1960) and Brookfield (1987) on developing critical thinking suggest that the first crucial step is the inducement of anxiety or a trigger event in starting off the process. Seelig (1991) also pointed out the viability of using integrated application of critical incidents to develop critical thinkers in social work. The structuring of critical incidents, such that they have substantial bombardment or impact on the learner, is requisite in the initial stage. Immediately following such a 'shock', the learner is guided in a rational cognitive process of appraising or identifying the problem at hand. Next comes the search for information essential for understanding the problem. The learner then proceeds to formulate his/her own hypotheses or perspectives in conceptualising the given situation or problem. After all these steps, s/he would arrive at an integrated re-appraisal of the issue. Thus, the aim of the learner's own reflection — revision of previously held preconceptions, biases, misunderstandings — would be achieved.

### **The Design of the Community Development Skills Laboratory**

The Community Development Skills Laboratory offered by the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong was reorganised in 1992, taking the components of community work education discussed above into consideration. This two-semester Skills Lab is essentially an experiential training course for second year social work students. It is intended that through the crucial processes of critical reflection, students' acquisition of the three major domains of values-knowledge-skills in relation to community work practice can be enhanced. Students attending the Skills Lab are divided into small groups. Arrangements are made for them to go directly to a social service agency to work with front-line social workers as well as the clients served by the agency. The direct encounter with 'real-life' situations allows students better exposure to social problems and to develop sensitivity. This may stimulate students to critically reflect upon their own preconceptions about social problems and clients. Various policy issues and related clienteles are selected for students to examine the underlying problems of possible social injustice, administrative malfunctioning, and/or other gross inappropriateness leading to clients' suffering. Students are required to gather relevant information from documentary reports, interview relevant personnel and pay visits to the clients with the goal of identifying the core problem and conducting contextual analysis. Regular seminar sessions with intensive discussion guided by instructors are arranged to allow students to examine the validity and empirical basis of divergent premises and stances of the various actors involved in policy

issues. Effort is made persistently in helping students to differentiate the subjective judgements of the various actors from objective facts existing in the environment. Students are also encouraged to explore the situation and derive alternative views and perceptions of the multifaceted problems at hand, their genesis, magnitude and possible ways of solution. Throughout the process, students as well as the instructors are alerted to the need to maintain reflective scepticism. Critical incidents are used to elicit 'trigger events' or induce students' 'anxiety' for critical thinking .

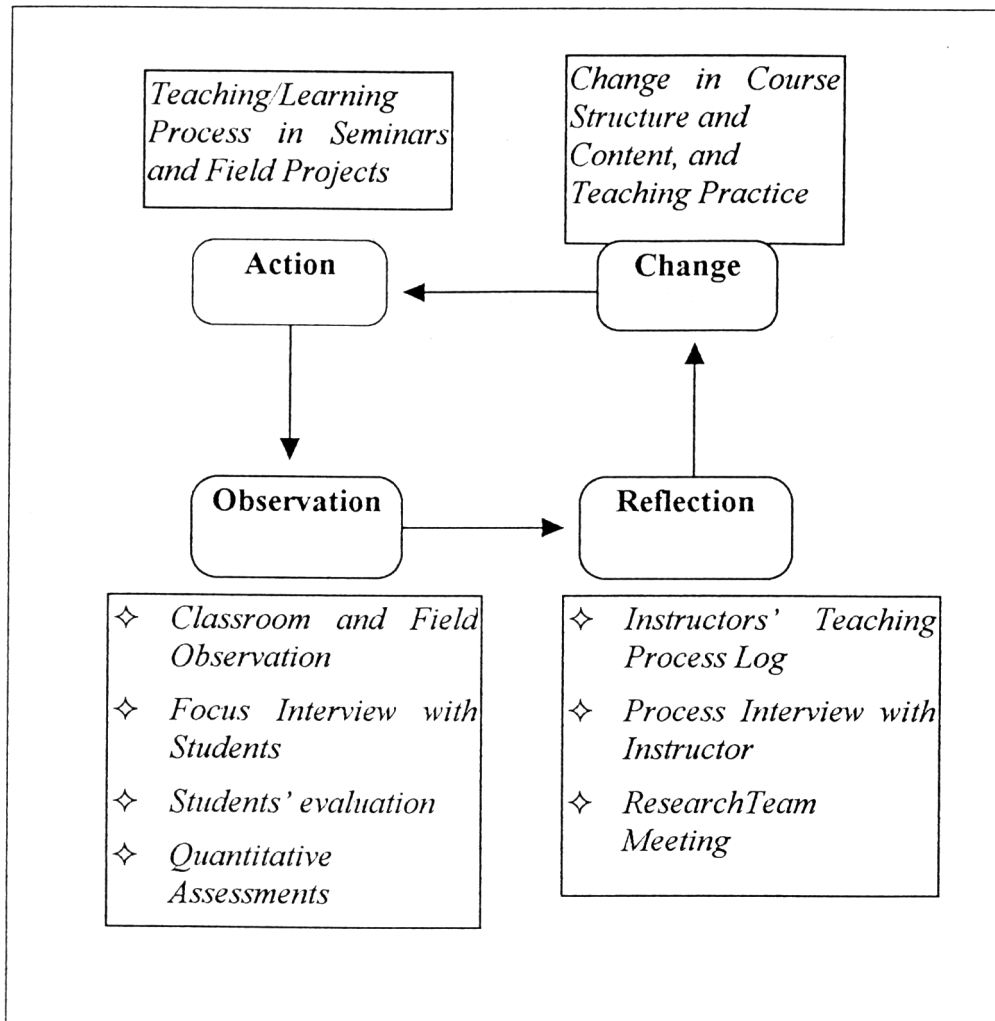
Apart from the students, the instructors leading the Lab projects are equally expected to maintain critical reflection in their teaching. They have to critically evaluate the content as well as the format of their teaching through the research process. Prior to this novel attempt in real-life Lab Projects, the laboratory training had been conducted in a simulated mode in which students took part in in-house training activities such as role-play, using audio-visual aids and demonstration. Having built upon such experience, the instructors ventured to launch more real-life modes of instruction.

All in all, the objectives of the present study are two-fold: (1) To examine critical reflection of students involved in the Skills Lab in relation to the three domains of values, knowledge and skills in community work; (2) To provide an opportunity for the instructors to reflect on the teaching/learning process of the Skills Lab, thus leading to suggestions on devising effective teaching modes. The crucial element of critical self-reflection on the part of both the students and teachers is regarded as the linking thread throughout the process.

## Methodology

This study involved an entire class of 70 second year social work students taking the Skills Lab and three instructors. The students were divided into nine groups of seven to eight members each. Three lab groups with a total of 23 students were chosen for observation and in-depth interviews. The study employed the approach of action research as its main methodology. Action research is a collaborative critical enquiry by academics themselves into their own teaching practice, into problems of student learning and into curriculum design (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). The approach sees knowledge as action which can be implemented in a social context (Argyris, Putman and Smith, 1987). The goal of this study is to involve teachers, students and agency social workers in developing insights, recommendations for improvements and innovations in teaching and learning. The instructors who have shouldered the bulk of the mental tasks of course design, action implementation and its corresponding reflection, are indeed co-researchers in the entire research project. Based on the models of Kember and Kelly (1994), as well as Zuber-Skerrit (1992), the research design was in the form of an action-observation-reflection-change-cycle in which the action of teaching/learning was observed and reflected upon by the students and instructors, leading to changes in the educational practice. The principle of triangulation was followed in the study, which means that multiple data collection methods and the perspectives of various actors were incorporated. The study utilised an assortment of qualitative and quantitative methods, which include: (a) Non-participant observation on classroom and field activities; (b) focus interviews with students; (c) students' year-end reports including their reflection on the learning process; (d) interviews with individual instructors on their reflections on the teaching process; and (e) quantitative assessments on student competence and aptitude in community work. Extensive observation field notes, verbatim interview transcripts and memoing were prepared throughout the project. It is through capturing the experiences in the Skills Lab and noting reflections on the learning/teaching process that changes in the Skills Lab curriculum and instruction are suggested.

Figure 1: Action-Observation-Reflection-Change Cycle



## Findings

As the present study employs two strategies of data collection, there are two separate but inter-related sets of data, namely, quantitative and qualitative ones, to illustrate the accomplishments of the Skills Lab projects.

### Student Competence and Aptitude in Community Work

The Competence and Aptitude Assessment in Community Work Scale was developed for the purpose of this research project to measure students' self perception of their ability and potential in community work. The six subscales — knowledge, social awareness, leadership, communication, values and self-concept — cover the behavioural, cognitive and value domains of community work.

Paired t-tests performed on the data show that there were significant differences between the pre-lab and post-lab assessment for all six subscales (see Table 1). This indicates that the class as a whole had acquired or learned the skills, knowledge and values related to community work. In other words, after taking the Skills Lab, students perceived themselves as having increased

knowledge, social awareness, communication skills, leaderships skills, self-concept and social work values.

Table 1: Paired t-test performed on the Competence and Aptitude in Community Work subscales (N=63)<sup>1</sup>

Time	Mean Score on the Subscale <sup>2</sup>					
	Knowledge	Social Awareness	Communication Skills	Leadership Skills	Values	Self-concept
Pre-Lab	3.69	4.13	5.27	4.88	6.38	5.67
Post-lab	4.35	4.72	6.19	5.50	7.16	5.97
t value	4.12**	3.32**	5.46**	4.14**	4.69**	2.14*

\*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05

It is noteworthy to point out that, the mean score on values is the highest among all subscales for both pre- (6.38) and post-lab (7.16) assessment. In other words, students perceived themselves as possessing the values underlying the practice of community work. Such a perception might be the reason behind their choosing social work as a major. In the subsequent section on the students' self-revelation, it can be detected that there were substantial changes in the students' value positions in various aspects. On the other hand, the lowest score goes to the subscale of knowledge for both pre- (3.69) and post-lab (4.35) assessment. It indicates that students felt relatively inadequate with respect to knowledge at the beginning of the academic year. Nonetheless, after the Skills Lab, the score on knowledge increases significantly (p<0.01), which indicates that the students were convinced they had gained a better understanding of the community work field. With respect to the skills domain, since the students had been provided with various opportunities to experience leading groups, organising programmes and even staging social actions, they had ample chance to equip themselves with the relevant skills. This explains their improved scoring on the communication and leadership skills components.

### Student Reflection

In addition to the above quantitative data indicating the students' changes effected from the Skills Lab Projects, the focus group interviews and the year-end reports served as the means to examine students' reflection on their learning as well as experiences in the Skills Lab. The self-reflection revolved around several themes: enhanced understanding of the nature and function of community work; re-examination of their conceptions about self and clients; increased commitment to community work; and enhanced skill competence.

#### ***Enhanced Understanding of the Nature and Function of Community Work***

In the first instance, it is noticed that the students gained a better understanding or appreciation of the nature and function of community work service. This serves as the basis for their concomitant changes in value positions with respect to social change and their own sense of commitment to the

<sup>1</sup> Only 63 students provided identifications in both pre- and post-lab assessments to allow for score comparisons.

<sup>2</sup> Response scale: 1 indicates a low score while 10 indicates a high score.

social work profession. Students talked about grasping the concepts of community work and getting acquainted with social policies and issues related to their client groups. They began to recognise their limitation or inadequacy in basic knowledge of relevant policy and concepts that were essential for enhancing their understanding and appreciation of clients' problems. Such experience oriented the students to adopt a more critical stance towards analysing social policies in terms of philosophy and standards of adequacy and fairness. One student said, 'I became a bit more critical. I was able to pick out a policy shortcoming and criticise on it. But not thorough nor in depth.' Likewise, another student said,

I learned what social welfare and social welfare policies were about. The project helped me to see why social policies are needed, why there need to be changes in existing policies. There are many shortcomings in existing policies that need to be improved.

One student who worked with a group of renal patients in advocating for their employment opportunities commented,

I learned more about the disease. I gained a deeper understanding of patients with chronic illness and their needs. There were things that I could never think of on my own. I learned a bit about strategies as well in the steps towards social change. I learned about practical issues such as working with the media and practical issues in implementation of a project.

I realise that the field of CD is very broad and what I know is only a tiny bit of it, despite that, I find myself gaining a great deal from the project....I just feel that I am very small and the field is too big.

To some students, the experience in the Skills Lab projects brought to light the requirements of community workers who could effectively carry out the goals of community development.

Community work ... requires a very clear mind and comprehensive knowledge about the situation of members of the community, their needs, different strategies of bringing clients into the community and educating them so that they can organise their efforts for social and policy change.

I feel that community work requires a lot of effort, commitment and the social worker should be assertive. It does require a lot of time and effort because it is not an easy job to change people's attitudes and values and motivate them to participate.

Learning in the cognitive domain led to a better understanding of the nature of community work which was an unknown terrain for most students before the Skills Lab. Students began to appreciate that fighting for human rights was not restricted to material or tangible items (e.g., raising the amount of Comprehensive Social Security Allowance [CSSA]), but also the right to know, the right to be respected and the right to engage and participate in social activities. They also began to appreciate that community development was not restricted to social action which is merely one of the many means to achieve policy and/or social change. Some of them alleged to have changed their attitude towards community work — from negative (radical, action/task-oriented) to neutral or even positive (accepting it as worthwhile for bringing about change).

After this year, I have begun to capture the concepts and rationale of community work. It emphasises the participation of the target group. Also I know that community work is not only meant to be social action, but also social planning and community education.

There are two things that impress me most in my study of community work. First, I have found for myself the rationale in doing community work. ... This concept came to my mind when we were discussing the problem of 'private personal failure against collective public responsibility' in the first seminar. It is believed that everyone is born equal and free.

However, there are many things in the world that were not secure such as health and that made the less fortunate live in inconvenience and uncertainty. ... In other words, where there is inequality, there is the need for community work.

### ***Re-Examination of Preconceptions About Self and Clients***

Throughout the Skills Lab, the field instructors tried to challenge the value position of the students hoping that they could reflect on their own values and response patterns. In the values domain, some students were cognisant of the challenges brought about by involvement in community work projects to their value systems. These might amount to a transcendence or transformation of their preconceived values or beliefs. For instance, students remarked the following:

Through this project, I really think that community development is very challenging work. It is training our thinking. In the process, our values on specific issues are challenged and sometimes our value system is also reorganised. It also helps in the consolidation of our belief system.... Awareness of the problems, needs, resources, social issues, characteristics and changing dynamics in the locality help us to come up with some appropriate strategies for the target group. On the whole, I think community work trains peoples' sensitivity, flexibility and wisdom.

In facing criticisms, I thought about — I reflected on myself and began to wonder why I have been so conforming even after I entered university. Why do I worry about making a wrong move? Is it because I want to protect myself? If I start my career, will I withdraw my position upon hearing criticisms? Will I stand firm with what I think is correct? Or will I withdraw because of criticisms? This is what I thought about.

I did not have much experiences about the lives of the lower social class and I did not see how it affected me. Perhaps as discussed in the seminar, I am a beneficiary of the existing system. I dared not incur any changes such that I may lose all that I have now. I dared not make a move.

The experience in the Skills Lab offered students an opportunity to understand and be empathetic with the client. For instance, students began to challenge their own preconception about the elderly being obstinate, inactive, and fatalistic. They began, based upon their real exposure to and experience in interacting with the elderly, to explore the roots of such stereotypes and the social implications; such as general neglect of the rights of the elderly and designation of a receiver role for the elderly in the entire welfare system, without paying due consideration for their development. These incidents of an experiential nature aptly support Goldstein's proposition that the most effective learning is gained in the immediate, vital experience — where meaning is directly located. It highlights the significance of 'to become what one knows' and to be able to participate in the social world of our clients, which requires the learner to develop the ability to use critical reasoning or reflective thinking (Goldstein, 1993). The students' journey, commencing from interacting with the clients followed by exploration and reflection, aptly illustrates the processes of exploration and generation of alternative perspectives in the appreciation of the problem. Eventually, students consolidated their views and judgement upon the clients' situation and the related social policies or problems, which pertains to the stage of integration or appraisal proposed by Brookfield (1987) and the Wellingtons (1960) respectively. This also supports Latting's (1990) proposition of identifying and working on students' biases, which helps prevent social work students from rote incorporation of professional values, or sheer suppression or denial of their having professionally unacceptable biases.

I had to persuade myself that all the clients deserved my efforts. From the experiences of the home visits, I even found that some families had better household appliances than I have. This surprised me and I had to rethink my concept of poverty. However, when I visited more families and had more understanding of them, I found that I had overlooked many



things, e.g., their feelings, stresses and the real picture — they are deprived of many other things which I would regard as basic needs.

Previously, if I saw a CSSA recipient who wore beautiful clothes, I would wonder if he/she was cheating. However, after the contact with clients, I changed my mind. I think that I need to think and investigate more and understand their situations.

I was impressed by one patient's speech.... She made me feel that it is worthy to work with renal patients. They treasure their jobs and they live positively despite their illness. She also implied the unfair situation in her work, which encourages me to advocate changes in the existing system.

As students gained a better understanding of their clients' life situations, they began to see the service recipients as real people and realised that they should not be merely task-oriented — e.g., inviting the clients to come to the programmes, but should show real concern and care for the clients. Several students showed concern over the clients' well-being after their withdrawal from the project — which was an indication of a genuine care and concern for their clients. Some students began to see the connection between the unfortunate personal problems of their clients and loopholes in the social system. Such insight was very important for community workers whose focus is at the macroscopic, societal level.

### ***Increased Commitment to Community Work***

Through carrying out community work projects, students were able to experience first hand the potential impact of intervention on clients. Some students came to the same realisation and recognised the role community work plays in improving people's life situations. Community work was subsequently perceived as worthwhile and beneficial by some students. Other students were also inspired by clients' positive responses to the programmes and the impact of their projects on clients. Such experiences brought satisfaction to students and made some of them committed to the missions of community work.

Whilst attending the inauguration ceremony of a self-help group I witnessed the tremendous power of self-help .... This was the first time I saw so many patients gathered together and working enthusiastically. The atmosphere made me feel that all the people in the hall were waiting for the birth of a baby and it would bring hope and joy to them. In fact, this also implies that a two-way communication is very important in community work. It is because what we are doing is not for ourselves but for a group of people. So through communication, we would be able to know what our clients really need while at the same time we can gain support from them.

It cannot be denied that the achievement in community work can have great benefits to more people in the community. ... the increasing awareness of people on this issue makes me feel happy and satisfied with our performance in the project.

Community work is worthwhile as I think it could really improve people's living standards by involving clients and developing the clients' potentials for their own positive change in life.

Also in this project, I have seen changes in some of the patients. At the beginning, some of them felt afraid to speak up in public. After the forum and the rehearsal, they become more confident. Improvement of patients' performance brought forth the greatest satisfaction in the project. Moreover, I am glad to know that the awareness and concern of the public and government sectors on this issue have increased after putting in all this effort.

Quite a number of students explicitly stated that their interest in community work had increased after attending the Skills Lab and conducting a project in the community. They were motivated to work with the grassroots, especially the deprived.

I am still trying to figure out whether I will become a community development worker. I used to think that it was quite meaningless to conduct home visits or activities for the elderly.

I find myself having an increased interest towards community development. If you asked me in the beginning of the school year, I would say for sure that I disliked community development the most among the three skills labs.

After starting this project, my interest and concern for deprived groups or people who are suffering has increased.

CD to me is something that begins with working at the grassroots. I really want to begin with working at the grassroots. Hence I 'treasure' contacts with the grassroots.

### ***Enhanced Skills Competence***

Finally, in the domain of skills acquisition, the Skills Lab Project achieved its objectives of providing opportunities for students to practice their skills in community work through conducting home visits, community survey and community education activities. The acquisition of interpersonal and communication skills was particularly prominent as students had the opportunity to meet real clients. This was especially useful for those students who had limited life experiences. Many students had seldom initiated conversation with strangers. The experience of the skills lab was an eye-opener for them, while it also built up their confidence in becoming a competent social worker.

I have learned a great deal. I could't have imagined beforehand that I would be able to conduct home visits and to engage people in a conversation. It provides novel experiences for me.

I learned about ice-breaking with strangers. I overcame myself as a barrier and learned to talk to strangers, engage them, and develop their trust in me.

I learned a great deal from the programme .... From the experiences of entering into a household, I learned interpersonal skills. I used to feel unhappy when people turned me down, say, in a flag sale. I felt embarrassed. After this skills lab, I feel less scared of people and of rejection.

I think community work can train a student to be more confident and courageous, as we need to talk to strangers and make contact with the authorities.

Other skills acquired included negotiation skills, which were essential community work practice. One student had the experience of attending a meeting with government officials with a patients' group as a student representative. She remarked,

I was the student representative of the official meeting. It was a real challenge for me. It enabled me to know how to present in formal meetings, especially during negotiation. I learned how to use tone, pace and wording to express myself and be assertive.

## **Instructors' Reflection: Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Developing Critical Reflection**

Besides the students, the teaching staff were also the subject of investigation in the present study. The research also aims at helping the social work teachers to reflect upon their teaching competence and the way of instruction. Throughout the Skills Lab, the instructors shared their experiences and views with colleagues and conducted peer review and systematic evaluation of the course, with a view to continued improvement of the Lab design. Simply put, the research team has identified some 'external' as well as 'internal' factors pertaining to the effective inducement of critical reflection by means of such an experiential approach.

### ***Saliency of Social Issues***

In the widest contextual sense, the societal environment proves to be the overall encompassing system that provides the arena in which students learn and develop their minds. As community work tackles macroscopic issues of societal magnitude such as social deprivation, poverty and discrimination, the nature and magnitude of such problems and their respective manifestations are the very empirical substance that students can draw upon for analysis and appreciation. In our laboratory projects, our students worked on such issues as the rights of chronic patients, welfare recipients and low-income residents in private tenements. The visibility and immediacy of these issues in Hong Kong society were crucial factors leading to the students' recognition of such problems. This particular cohort of students was brought up in a relatively affluent Hong Kong society, which provided no immediate and stark incidents of social deprivation, thus students had a high threshold of sensitivity towards human suffering. As an illustration, students alleged that they were not touched by some moving scenes observed during the projects. In a particular incident, the students seemed to have no special feeling when they saw an elderly public assistance recipient playing happily with his son amongst a group of low-income mothers and their children. This seems to reflect that students were relatively void of the ability to tune in with a humanistic orientation to observe clients' lives and experiences. In another case, the students worked for the housing rights of old people in an old urban area. The stark deprivation of the elderly tenants, being crowded in the shabby cocklofts and bedspaces in old, poorly furnished buildings, provided vivid stimuli for students to commit themselves in striving for the improvement of conditions for such a deprived clientele.

The availability of a social agenda of policy issues during the period in which lab projects were run was also critical in making the projects a success. For instance, in one of our project groups which worked on the issue of CSSA, social concern on the level of assistance had been dwindling. As the tangible issue of assistance level tends to provide the greatest impetus for mobilisation and clients' participation, it thus deprived the clients as well as the students of a strong urge to arouse public sentiment for further increasing the level of assistance. The lack of favorable contextual conditions also deprived the students of the opportunity to develop critical reflection on the social policy issues concerned.

### ***Workload Incurred by a Compact Curriculum***

There are a host of 'internal' factors pertaining to the curriculum design as well as the subtle processes of structuring the learning experience for students. In the first instance, the Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong adopts a generalist approach in its bachelor degree programme. Hence the social work curriculum is characterised by a rather compact structure, especially in the second year of study, which the present group of students were undertaking. The tight schedule and packed curriculum meant the students were under a rather heavy workload. Students alleged that they had not been given ample time to digest what they had learned on the course. The persistent burden of assignments dampened their motivation to grasp the learning opportunities offered by the laboratory projects. The various tasks

necessitated by the lab group projects, like paying home visits, organising groups and programmes for the clients and visiting key informants, were taken as extra workload, instead of valuable components of outside-classroom learning. This defeated the purpose of the lab project in inducing students' experiential learning, not to mention critical reflection.

### ***Students' Disposition and Background***

Another set of 'internal' factors centres around the roles of the various actors involved in the Skills Lab projects. The students, being the objects of this learning process, logically come first as the major concern. Observation of the lab groups provided evidence to support Barrow and Milburn's (1986) proposition of emphasising the learner's inclination towards developing critical thinking. Students with different aptitudes in their concern over macroscopic versus microscopic aspects of social work tended to have divergent levels of performance in the Skills Lab. Those who were more predisposed to microscopic or clinical practice were found to be less interested and motivated to work on policy issues and tasks in the Skills Lab. On the other hand, those who had shown interest in macro-practice were more inquisitive throughout the lab project and were likely to raise critical questions. Students' personal background could also have some influence upon their learning and appreciation of critical reflection. It was observed in this study that those who were relatively more protected in their upbringing were less inclined to make critical assessments of social problems. Those who had undergone some kind of family hardships were apparently more attuned to clients' situations. Last, it was observed that as the students were quite homogeneous in their experience and thinking, they could not generate sufficient stimulation among themselves to provoke their thinking. This would deprive the students of the chance to be exposed to alternative views, which in turn would restrain the incidence of critical reflection.

### ***Instructors' Teaching Style and Interaction with Students***

Another major actor in the learning process of the Skills Lab is the field instructor. It was observed that there were a multitude of features pertaining to the instructors that were of relevant concern to the study. In the first instance, the instructors' own commitment and involvement in the issue as well as the community work agency concerned were of vital significance. A close working relationship between the instructor and the agency and his/her familiarity with the policy issues were important assets in enabling the students to have access to relevant information and personnel in conducting their lab projects. Apart from this, the instructor's own style of teaching and his/her demonstration of professional commitment to social causes were also significant in providing a role-model for students. Students in this project were generally appreciative of the instructors' supportive and approachable style. However some students were felt that the teacher did not give them sufficient pressure to fulfil their course requirements. It is worthwhile to further study the type of styles and qualities of a field instructor that could be more effective in the skills laboratory teaching, as well as the matching between the students' learning pattern and the instructor's teaching style. Finally, the extent to which the instructor has deliberately arranged relevant structured experiences was of paramount importance in providing the necessary critical incidents for triggering students' critical reflection.

Furthermore, the 'chemical reaction' between the students and the instructors is also of crucial significance. In the first instance, the effectiveness of the instructors in conveying messages to the students is a focal point. During the seminars, the instructors tried to help the students to reflect on their values by challenging their positions. While some appreciated the instructors' effort and found discussion stimulating, others felt that the instructors just dragged on with the discussion without a clear plan to lead them. When the topic of discussion was far from the students' own concerns and experience, it did not trigger a good response. In fact, the instructor concerned deliberately treated critical self-reflection as a hidden agenda, which was meant to provide more room for the students to broaden their thinking. However, the students apparently did not appreciate this point. Subsequently, the instructor explicitly revealed his intention to trigger critical

self-reflection in the seminars and attempted to introduce a student-led activity for promoting critical self-reflection. Still, the students remained passive and they took the activity as yet another piece of assignment.

### ***The Effectiveness of 'Critical Incidents'***

With reference to Seelig's (1991) proposition of utilising critical incidents in triggering the learner's reflection, the field instructors made deliberate effort to identify and structure relevant critical events. Experience in the Lab projects reveals that there can be four critical elements affecting the effectiveness of such 'trigger events' in inducing critical reflection: (1) the instructor's own sensitivity towards critical incidents happening around the students; (2) whether the immediate setting in which the event occurs is appropriate for reflection; (3) students' roles at that very moment when the event occurs; (4) students' sensitivity in responding to the event. To illustrate, a group of students were asked to stage a mock complaint to the Legislative Council Secretariat. This triggered the students' anxiety, making them put in extra effort to prepare for the task. In this case, the instructor concerned happened to have a friend working in the Secretariat, which therefore provided easy access to such a complaints channel. The Secretariat was a relevant, formal channel handling the issue on which the concerned project group had been working (CSSA level). The extraordinary experience of facing an official authority figure in filing a complaint made the students heighten their sensitivity in say, reflecting on their own understanding of the issue; their presentation skills; effort exerted during the meeting and thus the result achieved. This proved to be a good 'trigger event' in facilitating students' reflection.

### ***Collaboration with Agencies and Front-Line Workers***

Apart from the students and the instructors, the agency worker(s) with whom the laboratory projects collaborated were also crucial actors involved in the whole learning process. They provided positive (as well as negative) role-models through which students could gain a sense of the professional commitment and practical competence of front-line practitioners. It was observed from the three lab groups that students did appreciate the positive modelling effects of the various social workers in the collaborating agencies, in working with their respective clientele and issues at hand. The good working relationship between the instructors and the agencies reveals the merit of having a viable linkage between the training institutes and the service agencies.

### ***The Clients' Real-Life Exposition Enhances Students' Learning***

Finally, but not of least importance, the various types of clients whom the students encountered in the laboratory projects were also crucial actors in the entire process of learning and development of critical reflection. They provided, in the first instance, real cases for students to feel the actual sufferings and hardships of deprived people. The courage and determination of these clients in their effort to endure their suffering, to counteract the systemic injustice prevalent in society and to gather together in mutual concern were all viable incidents and real-life demonstrations which helped students grasp the values of human dignity, social justice and social concern. These also provided direct encounters for students to reveal their own preconceptions and stereotyped images of the various types of clients.

## **Implications for Effective Community Work Training/Education**

The use of an action research approach in this study showed that the design of the skills laboratory was basically effective in imparting the three domains of values, knowledge and skills of community work to the students. Given its action-oriented nature, as contrasted to the monologues provided in traditional classrooms, the laboratory design provided natural situations for students to assimilate real-life issues in their affective, cognitive as well as behavioral domains.

With a specific focus on critical reflection, it can be postulated that, based upon the students' self-reflection and the instructors' on-going observation and assessment, there has been remarkable change in the students' capacity to engage in critical self-reflection. It is believed that students benefit enormously from this conceptual ability such that they may sustain independent learning in the future. The direct experience of encountering real people, real issues and social problems, in the flesh, provides the most vivid material for students to think about, reflect on and then integrate into their mental horizon. This capacity of critical self-reflection can help a learner to derive his/her own schema of processing incoming information, and then coming up with his/her own framework for organisation and assimilation. This essentially serves the missions of education in general, and social work and community work education in particular, which deals with such social issues as social injustice, poverty, social deprivation and the like.

Based upon the positive experience of our skills laboratory design and the accomplishments of the trial, there are several practical implications for the effective teaching of community work that arise. The first lesson learned is that community work training programmes should go for more direct real-life exposure through experiential action learning. This helps students to have vivid material for their learning and assimilation. The second issue relates to the structure and design of the lab projects. Taking full cognisance of the students' divergent inclinations and levels of competence, and the need to cater for individual coaching, it is advisable to stay with small groups. Closely related to this, is the group versus individual focus of the instructor. It is obvious that if an instructor could provide more one-to-one guidance and coaching to each individual student, the students could benefit more. The wide range of students' motivation and quality in terms of cognitive ability and sense of self-direction, rendered some discrepancies in students' performance in the group. This resulted in frustrations amongst fellow group members, as well as the instructors themselves. Third, the heavy workload engendered by a three-year bachelors' programme constrained the students to focusing on either casework, groupwork or community work. There has been comment on the part of the instructors as to whether there is too much, in terms of content, for students to cope with. However, in view of ever-increasing demands from the field, and increasingly complex social situations and problems, it seems desirable that instructors provide as much material as possible to the students, so that they can face future challenges. The results of this project highlight that awareness of the actual process of guiding student's learning is equally, if not more, important than the substantive content of teaching.

On the part of the field instructors, it is imperative that they be equipped with a rich repertoire for the design of structured experiences to induce or enhance students' critical reflection. This is fundamentally based upon the instructors' own background and experience of front-line practice. The instructors' maintenance of viable linkage and good working relationships with the service agencies, even whilst working within the training institutes, should further promote such partnership. Furthermore, notwithstanding the large number of students and the relatively big size of a project group, the instructors should cater for the varied characteristics and learning style or strategies of different types of students. The dual roles of a teacher assessing students' performance, and that of an enabler helping the students to learn, should be reconciled tactfully. It boils down to making sure that instructors are given practical guidelines which enable them to be both supportive in general, but still demanding in ensuring students to take up the responsibility of learning on their own.

With regard to students' readiness to undertake social work training in general and community work training in particular, it is observed that the baseline is relatively low, in terms of their limited previous exposure to society and their insensitivity to social issues. Furthermore, the decline of intellectual ability of university students in general has become an alarming issue. Some might attribute this phenomenon to the water-down effect of universal education. Students are found to be incompetent in performing social and policy analysis, which is essential for problem identification and analysis of the clients' presenting problems. Moreover, students are apparently

rather dependent upon the teacher, and are therefore passive learner in the educational process. All in all, instructors find it increasingly difficult to get the teaching material through to students effectively. This issue is linked to the question of how the students could be better equipped or prepared during their secondary education, to adopt an independent learning strategy at the tertiary level. The present project reveals the merit of real-life experience in enhancing students' learning. The results of our study suggest that curriculum planners should strive for more vivid course designs which facilitate the development of students' sensitivity and assimilation of their daily life experiences. In turn they will be more able to integrate 'life knowledge' and academic studies. Furthermore, society at large should provide more opportunities for the students to have direct contact and exposure with real social situations, instead of ploughing through books and notes in preparing for public examinations.

Last but not least, the real gist of action learning is continuation and self-perpetuation in progressing towards further improvement. As revealed in the present research into community work training through the medium of the skills laboratory, it is clear that such a process does not end with the conclusion of the projects nor the closing of the academic year. Action learning sustains its momentum in both the instructors, who are challenged to produce more vivid and effective ways of teaching community work; and in the students, who increase their capacity in self-reflection which is essential for independent learning.