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Overcoming Isolation: Making the Case for the Development of Blended Service Learning and Social Work Interprofessional Field Education Experiences to Improve University-Community Engagement

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Abstract

We argue in this paper that if social workers are to engage in more equal and just ways of working with people and communities then there is a need to reconceptualise the field education experience. While the teaching in the classroom of particular theories such as social justice and anti-oppressive practice can influence how students come to view the world it is not likely to impact upon their eventual practice unless it is reinforced in their field placements. Traditional settings reinforcing traditional interactions between students and consumers are not the means by which changes will occur. The blending together of the three learning modes of service learning, field placement and interprofessional education offer a chance to reinforce classroom teachings in a new way during the practicum experience.

Keywords: field education, service learning, interprofessional education

Introduction

There is increasing evidence of the benefits of service learning in post-secondary education (see: Philips, 2007; Pribbenow, 2005; Rooks & Winkler, 2012). There is also a growing body of literature regarding the importance of interprofessional education in the training of health and human service workers (see: Barr et. al. 2005; Charles, Bainbridge & Gilbert, 2010; Pockett, 2010). However, little has been written about the potential benefits of incorporating the principles of service learning and interprofessional education into the social work field education experience (Charles, Birring & Lake, 2010; Charles & Dharamsi, 2010). Field education is critically important in the training of social work students (see: Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Poulin, Kaufman & Silver, 2006; Pelech, Barlow, Badry & Elliot, 2009). Blending service learning and interprofessional practice experiences into field education offers students early opportunities to build their practice on the principles of mutuality, reciprocity and collaboration that are increasingly recognised

as critical to effective health and social care (Alexander, 2005; Alexander & Charles, 2009; Oliver, 2013).

Field education is considered to be a core component of social work education (Edmond, Rochman, Megiven, Howard & Williams, 2006; Pelech, Barlow, Badry & Elliot, 2009). Canadian social work undergraduate and graduate students spend a minimum of 700 and 450 hours respectively in the field during their degrees (CASWE-ACFTS Standards, 2012). In most programmes this comprises almost 40% of their total educational experience. Field placements are where students are given the opportunity to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom (Barlow, 2007; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Poulin, Kaufman & Silver, 2006; Pelech, Barlow, Badry & Elliot, 2009; Edmond, Rochman, Megiven, Howard & Williams, 2006; Phillips, 2007; Schiff & Katz, 2007). They are the forum in which students are often best able to appreciate and begin to understand the complexities of practice and the needs of clients and communities (Barlow, 2007). It can be said the field is where students begin the transition from trainee to professional.

This makes it surprising that more attention has not been paid to how the field placement might be reconceptualised to meet some key criticisms of social work education. One of these is that schools of social work are disconnected from the communities they were established to serve (Charles & Dharamsi, 2010; Fogel & Cook, 2006; Stoesz, Karger & Carrilio, 2012). Field education is often the only avenue of mandated partnership between social work education programmes and the community, and the relationship between the two can be strained (Charles & Dharamsi, 2010). The requirement in the educational standards for field practice experiences (CASWE-ACFTS Standards, 2012) means that education programmes have to maintain an ongoing relationship if not with their overall community than at least with the specific practice sites that offer placements for their students. However, while many social work educators like to pride ourselves upon our relationships with the community, we are often collectively seen as being as isolated from our practice peers (Clapton et. al., 2006; Charles & Dharamsi, 2010; Fogel & Cook, 2006; Shardlow, Scholar, Munro & McLaughlin, Stoesz, Karger & Carrilio, 2012).

This parallels the disconnection that some in our profession feel exists between social work and the people we serve (Alexander & Charles, 2009; Fogel & Cook, 2006). There has long been debate on the price social work has paid in order to become a profession (Alexander, 2005; Alexander & Charles, 2009). The very nature of professional training, whether in social work or other disciplines, can be said to create barriers between ourselves and others (Alexander, 2007; Alexander &

Charles, 2009; Charles, Bainbridge & Gilbert, 2010). Indeed, the process of becoming a professional with our ongoing emphasis on objectivity and emotional distance means that our relationships with the people we serve can be distant or, at their worst, lacking in compassion. (Alexander, 2005, 2007).   This negatively influences our ability to connect with the communities that we are trying to serve. There is an inherent illogic in trying to connect with others by being distant and emotionally removed from the relationship. This process of professional distance completely ignores the reciprocal nature of human relationships (Alexander, 2005; Alexander & Charles, 2009; Valsiner, 2000).

Finally, social work as a profession is also struggling to find its place with other health and human services professions (Charles & Dharamsi, 2010). Numerous social work tragedies show the price to be paid for poor communication and a lack of voice with our interprofessional partners (for example see BCRCY, 2012). Social work students could benefit from opportunities to develop the boundary-spanning skills that are increasingly recognised as crucial to effective interprofessional practice (Oliver, 2013). We believe that incorporating service learning and interprofessional education principles into field placements may provide such opportunities and help alleviate concerns about social work's disconnection from community and consumers.   In this paper we summarise key concepts associated with service learning and interprofessional education and make the case for blended learning experiences. We describe two such learning experiences offered by Canadian universities and suggest they may provide models for a new way of educating students that might enhance university-community relationships and better equip social work students for practice.

Service Learning

Service learning was developed as a means of promoting university-community engagement (Checkoway, 1998; Kenny, Simon, Kiley-Brabeck & Lerner, 2004; Ngai, 2006; Wilhite & Silver, 2005). It is meant to be a reciprocal partnership between the university, students and the community that is beneficial to each of the partners (Bushouse, 2005, Philips, 2007; Pribbenow, 2005; Rooks & Winkler, 2012). Service learning experiences ideally balance the needs of the community, the students and the university (Holland, 2000; Philips, 2007).   No one partner should derive more benefit than the others.

The community partner gains access to student labour and university resources (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connnors, 1998) while at the same time benefiting from the social change that

occurs as a result of the project (Holland, 2000; Philips, 2007). Service learning is also a form of capacity building for the communities. The process of engaging in specific projects provides for the skills training of community members in advocacy and leadership. In this way the benefits to the community continue even after a specific project is completed.

Students gain from participating in service learning opportunities. The experience gets them out of the classroom and into the community, giving them a chance to experience learning through action and to develop their sense of civic responsibility (Waterman, 1997). Engaging in service learning projects has been shown to increase student satisfaction with their overall postsecondary experiences in addition to helping them increase cultural understanding and critical learning and problem solving skills (Boredelon & Philips, 2007; Cone & Harris, 1996; Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Ngai, 2006; Rooks & Wimkler, 2012). Service learning opportunities also provide students with the opportunity to better understand the connection between people and their social environments to a depth not likely to occur through classroom learning alone (Roos, Teamane, Davis, Prinsloo, Kritzinger, Naude & Wessels, 2005).

Service learning provides universities and individual faculty members with the opportunity to develop long lasting relationships of a reciprocal nature with their immediate and broader communities (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Holland, 2000; Pribbenow, 2005). The projects developed and implemented in a service learning partnership should bring solution-focused expertise to local needs and as such increase the immediate relevance of the university to the community (Kenny, Simon, Kiley-Bradeck & Lerner, 2004). The partnership thus has the potential to enhance the reputation of the university in the eyes of the community. Individual faculty members also report that being involved in service learning projects help them to make stronger relationships with their students and to find greater meaning in their teaching through the opportunity of connecting the theory they teach in the classroom to real life situations in the community (Driscoll, 2000; Pribbenow, 2005).

Despite the stated benefits of service learning to each of the partners (Boredelon & Philips, 2007; Cone & Harris, 1996; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Driscoll, 2000; Holland, 2000; Kenny et al, 2004; Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Pribbenow, 2005; Roos et al, 2005; Waterman, 1997) there remains some criticism of the process. The most serious is that while service is of benefit to each of the partners, the experience may reinforce stereotypes that students hold of community members (Moley & Miron, 2004). Students can see service learning as acts of charity rather than true partnership and thus the traditional power imbalance between universities and the communities can be maintained (Morton, 1995). However the

principles of service learning should orientate both faculty and students away from an expert and charity framework of working with the community to a framework of equality and joint expertise. Consumers and communities are not simply the recipients of services but active participants in the planning, design and delivery of the programme. As such the relationship is not one-way.

Interprofessional Education

The barriers that exist between social work and our clients (Alexander, 2005, Alexander & Charles, 2009) and universities and our communities (Checkoway, 1998; Kenny et al, 2004; Ngai, 2006) also exist between the various health and human professions (Charles, Bainbridge, Copeman-Stewart, Tiffin & Kassam, 2005; Charles, Bainbridge, Copeman-Stewart, Kassam & Tiffin, 2008). In the health and human services these barriers and the corresponding lack of collaboration can cause service users serious, even fatal, harm (Kohn, Corrigan & Donaldson, 2000, Romanov, 2000).

The barriers to interprofessional working are often the result of power differences between the professions (Geva, Barsky & Westernoff, 2000). These are commonly exposed and reinforced through attempts by each of the professions to protect its turf, claims to 'expert' knowledge and professional freedom (Loxley, 1997; Miller, Freeman & Ross, 2001). Role insecurity (Hornby & Atkins, 2000), closed role boundaries (Miller, Freeman & Ross, 2001) and value and priority differences (Loxley, 1997; Miller, Freeman & Ross, 2001) further inhibit interprofessional communication and collaboration. These issues, either standing alone or combined, can create rigid barriers that set the professions apart from each other and from the people we serve. These barriers exist within the post-secondary education system as well as in the practice community (Paul & Peterson, 2001).

Interprofessional education aims to equip students with the attitudes and skills to overcome some of these barriers. Students learn in interprofessional teams in which they are supported to examine the difficulties of interprofessional practice, to debrief problematic communication and to explore the contributions of their own and partner professions to the common enterprise of meeting consumer needs (Barr et al, 2005). This type of interaction has been shown to increase students' knowledge of other professions and to broaden their appreciation of the contributions of others (Charles et al, 2005, 2008).

Interprofessional placements support students to move away from a top down profession-driven perspective to one in which there is an

acknowledgement of the expertise not only of other professions but also of the consumers. The development of skills for engaging in reciprocal interactions with other professionals is also helpful in relationship building with consumers. The voice of consumers in identifying and dealing with their needs becomes more important in this framework. Meeting consumer needs commonly provides the unifying goal on interprofessional teams. The process of working together in collaborative ways requires students to acknowledge the mutuality of the relationships. A key tenet of interprofessional education is that recognizing the skills and strengths of others results in not only a more equitable system but also a stronger and more efficient one (Barr et al, 2005).

Interprofessional Education, Service Learning and Field Education

Social work field education in most instances is uniprofessional (Charles & Dharamsi, 2010). That is, social work students tend to do their field training with other social work students while under the supervision of a social worker. Their interactions with members of other professions are often limited. Even when they occur these interactions are often viewed through lenses which create interprofessional distance rather than collaboration. The issues of territoriality, ownership of expertise, value differences and power imbalances that are often seen in the practice world can easily become the framework for practice acquired by students during their field placement. The students come from the uniprofessional world of their classrooms to the uniprofessional world of their field placements. This almost guarantees that they will acquire the traditional limited collaboration practices that cause so many difficulties for consumers.

Field education is also almost exclusively unidirectional (Phillips, 2007). The students as experts-in-training provide services to consumers in the top down manner often seen in most traditional health and human service programmes. There is no expectation of any kind of mutual or reciprocal relationship between the student and the consumer. Indeed, paradoxically while the focus is superficially upon the needs of the consumer, in reality the relationship is more about meeting the learning needs of the student (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). There is little equality in the traditional social worker/consumer relationship and possibly even less in the student/consumer one given the focus upon the needs of the person in training.

We would suggest that if social work is to become more fully engaged with individuals and communities within a social justice or anti-oppressive framework then we have to begin to redefine our relationships with consumers, the broader community and our professional partners.

Consumers have to be seen more as partners in the process and less as recipients of service. Consumer voice needs to be heard in a way that recognizes the mutuality of human relationships. (Charles, Bainbridge & Gilbert, 2010; Charles, Dharamsi & Alexander, 2012). We need to bring the same spirit of partnership, reciprocity and mutuality to our work with the various health and human service professions. The incorporation of service learning principles into interprofessional field education experiences would be an important first step in this process. Service learning and interprofessional education both attempt to change the relationship between those with and without power and to redefine the types of interactions that occur between the various players in the relationship. Introducing into the field placement experience their emphasis on partnerships, reciprocity and mutuality offers students an important early learning in the complexity and potential of interacting with consumers and colleagues in a different way (Alexander & Charles, 2009; Mertz, Fortune and Zendell, 2007; Pierpoint, Pozzuto& Powell, 2001; Scheyett & McCarthy, 2006).

Combined Service Learning and Interprofessional Field Education Experiences

Students in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary and at the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver have had the opportunity to participate in two quite unique learning experiences during their undergraduate field placements. Both of the learning opportunities incorporated service learning principles as well as interprofessional learning opportunities. Both challenge the traditional boundaries that exist between social work and the other professions and as well as between professionals and consumers.

Downtown Community Initiative (DCI)
The Downtown Community Initiative (DCI) was a partnership between the University of Calgary and a large emergency shelter and transitional housing programme known as the Centre run by the Salvation Army and located in the East Village of Calgary, Alberta and. The DCI hosted students for 13 consecutive semesters from Spring 2005 to Winter 2009. Instructors and researchers from the Faculties of Nursing and Social Work supervised undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students, who were involved in interprofessional service learning projects, health and social support service delivery to residents of the Centre (and working with Centre staff), co-learning activities with residents or former residents, and community-based and action research projects. The goal of

the project was to facilitate co-learning and service learning between the inner-city population, agency staff, students and faculty for the purpose of improving the health and well being of all involved to improve the knowledge of community health issues (Rutherford, Walsh & Rook, 2011). In addition to meeting education and research goals, the project provided service to the community through direct service to residents and collaboration with the Centre.

One activity within the overall project was a university course developed as a co-learning opportunity for students, community members and Centre staff. The course was informed by principles of social justice and a commitment to anti-oppressive practice (Walsh, Rutherford & Sears, 2010) and was hosted at the Centre. The course involved experiential learning, reflective practice, classroom-based and on-line learning.

A number of research projects were undertaken over the course of the project (Rutherford, Walsh, & Rook, 2011; Walsh, Rutherford & Kuzmak, 2009; Walsh, Rutherford, Sarafincian & Sellmer, 2010). Community-based and action research projects involved students, Centre staff, faculty and community members. A doctoral research project on co-learning was undertaken and completed within the scope of the project (Rutherford, 2011).

In addition to research projects, undergraduate and graduate students engaged in interprofessional service learning projects. As an orientation to the project and Centre, instructors connected volunteer community members (people who were formerly homeless) with students in order to act as key informants about homelessness, street life, addiction, mental illness, experiences of services, and the neighbourhood. Community members gave an early-semester neighbourhood tour to the new students, informed instructors and students about relevant neighbourhood and political issues, acted as consultants, and provided a 'bridge' between the DCI academic team and the broader community. Nursing and social work students partnered in small teams to identify and complete projects in service to the Centre and residents.

One outcome of the project was the development of an ad hoc committee to host a demonstration to raise awareness of the problem of homelessness for women. One resident (an Aboriginal woman who was staying in the emergency shelter) engaged two social work students, and challenged staff and faculty to "do something" about the large number of homeless women in the city. This collaboration resulted in a large rally outside Calgary city hall.

Over the course of four years, the DCI project was highly successful. The orientation to service learning, co-learning, action

research and community-based research challenged instructors and students to develop new perspectives and methods to collaborate and work with community members (Alexander, Walsh, Rutherford & McDougall, in press). Staff members also reported seeing their clients (residents) in new ways, through the eyes of students and faculty. Some of the benefits and challenges faced by community members working with faculty and students are also documented (Rutherford, 2011; Walsh et al, 2010). Several faculty members have since focused their program of research on topics related to their experiences at the DCI, particularly the experiences of Aboriginal women (Walsh, MacDonald, Rutherford, Moore & Krieg, 2011).

Interprofessional Rural Program of British Columbia (IRPBC)
The Interprofessional Rural Program of British Columbia (IRPBC) ran from 2003-2011. It was established as a means to promote the development of interprofessional practice skills of health and human service students. A key goal of the initiative was for students to become more fully engaged in the communities they served than they would in more traditional field placements (Charles, Bainbridge, Copeman-Stewart, Tiffin & Kassam, 2005; Charles, G., Bainbridge, L., Copeman-Stewart, K., & Kassam, R., 2008; Charles, Bainbridge & Gilbert, 2010). IRPBC was a partnership between the University of British Columbia, the British Columbia Academic Health Council, eight other post-secondary institutions, five health districts each of whom served rural communities and the provincial government. The rural and small urban communities served by the initiative were key partners in the program.

There were a number of specific desired outcomes for the programme. While the primary goal of the program was to train future practitioners to work together collaboratively while learning about, from, and with other professions, the ultimate goal was to improve the quality of healthcare for all citizens while promoting patient voice within the delivery systems. An equally important goal was to expose the participating students to life and practice in rural communities with the hope that they will decide to return to work in the communities upon graduation. As with other jurisdictions in Canada, British Columbia has ongoing difficulty attracting health care workers to rural communities with a resulting decrease in optimal health care for people in those areas (Charles, Bainbridge, Copeman-Stewart, Tiffin & Kassam, 2005; Minore & Boone, 2002; Pong & Russell, 2003).

Students from social work, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech language pathology, pharmaceutical sciences, audiology, midwifery, laboratory technology, and counselling psychology

took part during the eight years the programme was in existence. Groups of four to seven members from different professions were placed together in communities where they were given the opportunity to learn the benefits and challenges of interprofessional practice. Although they were placed in interprofessional teams they were also expected to meet their discipline specific practice education learning objectives. The composition of the teams varied depending upon the availability of students from different disciplines and the type of student requested by the particular communities. Most teams included a social work and nursing student. While the students from social work and nursing were in placement for approximately 12 weeks those from the other professions tended to have shorter field experiences. In most cases the overlap in the community for the full team was usually only for six weeks.

While in their field placements students were expected to develop an understanding of the other professions and the interplay of the community and the health care system. The type of interprofessional experiences varied from community to community and year to year but often included such activities as job shadowing other members of their team. The teams also meet formally and informally to discuss common cases in order to learn the perspective of the other professions. In addition, the teams had to identify, develop and implement a community project. The purpose of this assignment was to engage the team in a service learning experience with the community. As part of this process each team had to negotiate with members of the community the type of project which would be implemented. The type of projects varied widely according to the needs identified by each of the communities.

While it is difficult to identify if IRPBC has had a long term influence on improving health outcomes in the participating communities, the programme did meet many of the shorter term goals (Charles et. al., 2005, 2008). The social work students who participated in the programme appear to have made significant gains in both the interprofessional learning and their discipline specific goals. Among the positive outcomes noted for the social work students were an increase in their leadership and group facilitation skills as well as a greater confidence in being able to confront address issues related to marginalization and racism (Charles, Birring & Lake, 2010).

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that if social workers are to engage in more equal and just ways of working with people and communities, we as educators must begin to reconceptualise the field education experience.

While the teaching in the classroom of particular theories such as social justice and anti-oppressive practice can influence how students come to view the world it is not likely to impact upon their eventual practice unless it is reinforced in their field placements. Traditional settings reinforcing traditional interactions between students and consumers are not the means by which changes will occur.

The three learning modes of service learning, field placement and interprofessional education share common goals of promoting critical thinking and problem solving skills, a greater appreciation of cultural diversity and a broader understanding of people and their social environments. There are those who say that service learning and social work field education are distinct experiences that cannot co-exist (Lemieux & Allen, 2007), and that incorporating interprofessional education into uni-professional training threatens professional integrity (Charles & Dharamsi, 2010). However learning projects like the Downtown Community Initiative and the Interprofessional Rural Placement Programme of British Columbia demonstrate the potential for developing integrated service learning and interprofessional education opportunities that meet social work field education requirements. Both projects involved challenging the traditional top-down relationships between universities and their communities. Both provided opportunities for faculty members and students to interact in new ways with consumers and members of other professions and agencies. In each case this had concrete benefits for all involved.

Blending the core principles of service learning and interprofessional practice into field education requires a change of attitude and a willingness to be creative with our community partners. We are convinced that this type of placement experience can help students learn how to develop partnerships based upon mutuality and move away from the top down style of interacting with consumers that we have used for so long. Teaching students how to engage in respectful and reciprocal relationships will best occur in settings that go beyond the way we usually do business. Service learning and interprofessional education are both motivated by a desire to change the way that people interact with each other and they have an important role to play in social work field education.

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