Practice Reflection

The Practitioner Teacher

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ABSTRACT

The degree to which social work educators maintain engagement in practice alongside teaching requires closer examination, given the stronger accountability expectations associated with managerialism in Australian universities. This personal reflection suggests that the ways that social work educators discuss practice examples might be influenced by the proximity of the practice example, and therefore maintaining links with practice may positively contribute to the teaching process. Students learn on multiple levels, and the care and respect implicit in a practice example used in class may provide an important element in the teaching process, particularly in relation to core concepts such as unconditional positive regard. Gestalt therapy provides a lens to help explore this proposition, as Gestalt suggests that the aliveness of the client in the mind of the social work educator may contribute to an experiential change process in the classroom.

Keywords: *Social work education; Experiential learning; Gestalt; Pedagogy*

After spending my working life as a social worker I entered academia seven years ago in a teaching-focussed position. Since then I have taught social work theory courses in the latter part of the Bachelor and Master of Social Work programs; critical reflective practice; interpersonal and group work skills; and social policy. Like many academics who become teachers after many years of professional practice I am curious about the relationship between my practice experience and my role as a teacher. In particular, how is my teaching influenced by my practice experience, and what are the implications of leaving practice behind as I move into academia?

This conversation amongst colleagues about the topic of our past social work practice often moves quickly into the terrain of *forms of knowledge*, in particular practice wisdom versus theory and empirical knowledge (Chu & Tsui, 2008; Drury Hudson, 1997). Such a discussion commonly turns on the risks and benefits of providing students with real world practice wisdom on the one hand; and providing students with the most contemporary knowledge from research on the other. However, my interest is not in comparing these forms of knowledge (both are equally important in my view). Rather, I am conscious that we teach through both the curriculum of a course, and also the way we model professional practice in our actions. My contention is that students learn from us about foundational practice concepts such as congruence and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 2007), not just through theoretical discussions but, importantly, also through teachers modelling these sorts of concepts in the way that we discuss "the service user," and the way that we as teachers relate to our students.

In part because of this untested belief that practice matters to my teaching, I have maintained my own private practice as a counsellor, or more precisely a Gestalt therapist, alongside teaching full time. I do this work because of the (assumed) positive benefit on my teaching, and to build and maintain my skills in this type of work but, more importantly, because it gives me great personal satisfaction. Increasingly I have become curious about the ways that this aspect of my work life shapes or influences my teaching. The context for this question of whether, and how, engaging in practice positively influences teaching is that, increasingly, universities are travelling down the managerialist path of greater accountability regarding how academic staff spend their time (Winter, 2000). In the absence of clear evidence that engaging in clinical practice alongside teaching enhances student satisfaction with the education received from these practitioner teachers, and an understanding of how this enhancement occurs, it will inevitably become harder for social work educators to argue for the space to maintain such practice.

What have I noticed in my teaching?

A key aspect of my teaching pedagogy is to pay attention to the "so what?" question. This is particularly true when teaching undergraduate students, as their exposure to social work practice, and therefore their capacity to make connections between material being discussed in class and the role they are training to undertake in as little as one or two years' time, can be quite limited. One of the benefits of maintaining a clinical practice alongside teaching is that contemporary practice examples are more available to draw on, to help explain the applicability of the material we are discussing in class. But more importantly, I am aware that the *way* that I discuss contemporary practice examples is quite different from the way

that I might discuss an example based on a client who I saw in my professional capacity before I commenced teaching seven or more years ago, as discussions of more recent examples are more alive for me than more distant examples.

In writing this now, my mind goes to a recent client I saw for a number of years in my private practice – a young woman with significant trauma in her past, who came to me for support with anxiety that was impeding her capacity to make headway with her life. The awareness that this young woman brought to therapy was quite powerful and as a result quite touching, as she and I were both very conscious of the ways that her mental health struggles were impacting on her life. I have a daughter of a similar age to this young woman, which added to the extent to which this client impacted me.

While I am mindful of not taking identifying details of clients into my classroom teaching, I recall discussing characteristics of practice with students in a social work theory course at the same time that I was seeing this particular client, and this young woman felt very present for me in those classes. "Feeling present" manifested both emotionally – for example, I was aware of my softness for this particular client – and also cognitively, as I was aware of wanting to properly and respectfully represent aspects of this person in her absence. I recall being conscious that when I discussed the generic "service user" with students, I did so with what seemed like a greater kindness and respect than I might have done in the past. For example, I remember being very mindful of not characterising or defining the client in case examples by their difficulties, and I recall being alert to reminding students of the courage and strength of many clients – evident both through their courage to seek help, but also in their strength to choose each day not to give in or give up. I recall being sensitised to language around how we discussed the service user in order to pay proper respect to this person. And I also recall being drawn to reminding the students that the service user is not "the other" – we may be that person at some point in the future. I recall having a strong sense of the importance of these messages, and the client was forefront in my mind for much of the time – at times it felt like she was there in the classroom.

My belief is that the students heard a message about how I relate to the service user through the very alive recollection of this particular service user as I spoke to them, and my proposition is that this message of compassion and respect was an important accompaniment to the theoretical topics such as strengths-based and task-centred practice methods. None of this happened in an overt or even a conscious way. But I believe that my teaching was impacted by the aliveness of this client in my thoughts, and my sense was that students were receiving guidance about personal and professional values, as well as a richer discussion of social work theory and practice methods. In other words, there was teaching occurring at multiple levels, and through multiple mediums. This seemed to be confirmed in student evaluations of my teaching from that period, that use words and phrases such as, "passionate," "role model," and "walking the talk."

The Gestalt frame – bringing the topic to life in the here and now

Why was this client so alive for me while I was teaching this class? And did this aliveness have an impact on the student learning as I imagined? I think the answer to this first question relates, in part, to personal change that I experienced through my Gestalt training.

To properly answer this second question requires further research, but I think the theory underpinning Gestalt therapy, and the emphasis placed on bringing a topic to life in the here and now, can shed some light on this question.

I recently completed my Masters in Gestalt Therapy, and I primarily work from this perspective in my private counselling. This degree typically takes four years part-time to complete, and most Gestalt training programs require a significant amount of personal and group therapy as part of the training process. I drew significant personal benefit from this requirement to attend therapy, and I am conscious that I gained greater self-awareness through this training and therapy. Many Australian men of my generation (late baby boomers) learned to suppress their feelings, and much of my Gestalt training involved unlearning this message. I think my client was more present for me as I taught the social work theory class in part because I was more conscious of, and available to be affected by, my feelings than I would have been prior to this training and therapy experience.

There are aspects of the Gestalt approach that can shed light on the in-class process described above – both in terms of the impact of this training on my own openness to, and awareness of, my emotions as discussed above, but also in terms of the notion that bringing a topic to life in the here and now can result in a deeper, transformational change as compared with just talking about a topic in a theoretical manner. This bringing together of a theory of therapy and experiential teaching is also beyond the scope of this reflection, so I will just touch on this briefly now to complete this reflection.

Gestalt therapy is a depth form of psychotherapy, and is founded on the core principle referred to as the *paradoxical theory of change*. That principle asserts that, "[c]hange occurs when one becomes what he [sic] is, not when he tries to become what he is not" (Beisser, 1970, p. 77). Putting this principle into practice focuses therapy on the two goals of *awareness* and *acceptance*. The therapy process aims to assist the client to find genuine self-acceptance, and through this process change becomes *less necessary* and *more possible* (hence the paradox). The Gestalt method includes a number of pillars of practice. One pillar is the focus on awareness in the here and now (Melnick & Nevis, 2005). Gestalt therapy eschews the process of talking *about* a topic, instead preferring to bring the topic to life in the here and now – in the therapy room. A number of techniques are used to achieve this goal, and in my view this more active process is a characteristic that differentiates Gestalt therapy from the more widely known Person-centred practice. In simple terms, by bringing a topic to life in the therapy room using experimental techniques (including but not limited to the classic "empty chair" experiment), the client can experience a deeper knowing about themselves, and also can experience a deeper sense of self-acceptance through the acceptance experienced from the therapist.

This process of experiential learning is not new to social work educators (Bogo, 2010). Much of the social work degree is experiential learning through supervised field placements, and many of the campus-based courses seek to incorporate a level of experiential learning. The Gestalt approach gives emphasis to this form of learning; however, it particularly emphasises the relationship between the client and the therapist, as this is where the client can experience

both safety to facilitate and support change, and also different forms of relationship from the one that is familiar in other aspects of their life.

What might this mean for social work educators? My contention, and the subject of my ongoing research, is that students can learn at a deeper level about concepts such as unconditional positive regard through being in relationship with teachers who model this form of relating – both in the way that they engage with the students, and in the way that they describe practice with the hypothetical clients who they bring into the classroom to illustrate teaching points. If this is true, then perhaps there is a case for social work educators to be encouraged to maintain a foot in practice alongside their teaching responsibilities.

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