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Integration of Theory and Practice in Professional Training

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I HAVE recently been faced with the problems of changing from the practice of social work to the teaching of theory in the University setting. I think therefore there is some value in pausing at this stage, after a short period only in the University, to formulate some general ideas about this question of integration of theory and practice and to seek to understand some of the difficulties which arise in the process.

In professional training of social workers, no one doubts the importance of the practical experience in social agencies, combined with skilful supervision, for the development of case-work skills. Universities acknowledge their debt to social workers for this. But what of theoretical study as such—study that is not immediately linked to a particular case? How often have we said, or heard it said—(often about professional training courses)—“it’s all too theoretical.” What then is meant by such an observation? It is implied, I think, that “it” (whatever “it” may be) has been in some way divorced from reality in the process of theorising. So that either something has been falsified, or else the theory does not adequately take into account the practical limitations. If the former has happened, then clearly we abandon the theory because it has been constructed on false premises. There is no arguing about that. It is the second possibility with which I am concerned. Theory that does not take into account the practical limitations can be pointless or dangerous. Thus one might (for the sake of an argument!) teach one’s students theoretically that all children under five are better fostered than placed in institutions. But one would fail if one did not help the student to be aware

of the difficulties they are likely to meet in implementing such a plan. Nevertheless, I believe there is great value in showing what is theoretically possible or desirable and helping the student to keep the principle distinct from expediency. It is extremely easy for principles and expediency to become confused the more involved one gets in a situation. The University or a detached organisation has a very valuable part to play in helping a student keep a grasp on principles within the day-to-day limitations. It can help the student to formulate some ideal of what good social work involves and then, one hopes, the student can with a degree of inner security, adapt his ideals to his setting without losing them altogether in the hurly-burly. There is something to be said for division of function; since for a supervisor to keep apart from his agency and not to identify with it would be an undesirable situation. We want people to care about the agency they work for; but in doing this, there must be, humanly, a degree of involvement which may make it difficult to keep principle and expediency apart. The University in offering independent theoretical study enables clarification of concepts in social work; and the student, in crossing from practice to theory and back again, has a chance to test personal observation against accumulated knowledge. How, then, will this help him?

Every professional course in social work has as a basic and vital part of its curriculum the teaching of human growth and development. This should give balance and perspective to the individual experience of the student in practical work. There is a great relief in knowing what may be hoped for or reasonably expected from

certain sorts of people—or the opposite, what may *not* be reasonably expected—on the basis of certain accumulated knowledge. For example, an understanding of certain concepts about immature personalities may help a student or young worker to work more effectively with the so-called “problem family” parent or the deserting mother because, with knowledge, he is less at the mercy of his own feelings. Given time, he may learn the hard way through the experience of disappointment and frustration in trying to help such people beyond the reach of their capabilities: but in the interim, he may bring unhappiness to himself and to his clients by setting goals which are not based on real understanding of the dynamics underlying such people’s behaviour. Theoretical knowledge in this sphere facilitates diagnosis and also, I think, lessens possible feelings of guilt and failure which may be in part due to ignorance of reasonable expectations. Such knowledge gives a framework of security within which a student or worker can operate more effectively. I think this applies also to the study of law and administration. While this can and should be “learnt on the job,” there are inevitably gaps in such a way of learning where day-to-day experience fails to illuminate particular areas. The university has a responsibility to show the student as much of the whole as possible. Law and administration will be to the student rather like a jigsaw: the piecing together is most effectively done with the student by the university. He will learn in his field work that certain pieces are clues to the whole.

Paul Halmos, in his talk at the Keele Conference in 1959, on the teaching of personality development to teachers and social workers, spoke of the aims of professional education and saw them as threefold.

1. “To develop skills in conceptualising experience, analysing the contents of experience and interpreting it in the light of the best explanatory hypotheses available, i.e. to develop understanding.

2. To develop a mastery of problem-solving skills in professional relationships, i.e. skills in helping others.

3. To stimulate the student’s powers of sympathetic identification with several participants in the same situation.

We cannot say of any of these categories—this belongs to the university—this to the field work supervisor. It is not clear cut; if it were, it would result in impoverishment. Perhaps, however, it can be shown that the participants in student training each make a special contribution to these three aims of professional education.

In the first aim, as described by Dr. Halmos, the university plays a particularly important part, as I have implied by my argument for the importance of theoretical study. I see the third aim as belonging especially to the supervisor because the only effective way of developing a student’s powers of sympathetic identification is “on the job”—in terms of actual cases which the student is handling. Only thus will the student face and come to terms with the feelings aroused by conflicting loyalties. His capacity to identify imaginatively with the plight of different people, possibly at variance with each other, will depend on the development of insight into his own feelings. The kind of skilled teaching which this involves seems to be in the main, the responsibility of the supervisor.

What then of the second category—“the mastery of problem-solving skills”? Here possibilities of integration between university and field workers are at their highest and are a delicate matter of timing and co-operation. The development of the so-called “generic courses” marks an effort at integration of various kinds, and this kind of integration is implicit in the “split-week” plan which is common to them all. It provides a framework which makes closer co-operation possible. Whether it works or not depends on other, deeper factors—basically the trust and understanding of those who theorise and those who practise for each other.

So far, I have left out the most important participant in this exercise: it is, of course, ultimately not our task but that of the student, to integrate theory and practice. The student must bring together within himself these two

different kinds of experience which he is getting. He is not bringing together simply theory and practice: these may represent for him thought and feeling. Our two sides of the question—the university and the social agency—may often symbolise for the student the difficulty of bringing together thought and feeling. It is important to recognise this, since it often explains the apparent splitting between the two, when the one side seems to be receiving all the criticism and the other all the enthusiasm. When this is happening, one may need to think of what is happening within the student, of his problems in linking up intellectual knowledge with the caring and feeling side of himself.

This is the core of the matter. To make these links is fundamental to the success of professional training. At the Keele Conference to which I referred earlier, it was pointed out that professional training inevitably and rightly constituted an interference with the personality of the student. At this Conference, Professor Morris said:—

“We are therefore assuming that through means which are apparently largely intellectual, we may bring about changes in feeling and in ideas and in the organisation of feelings around ideas.”

“We therefore claim the right—I would say the duty also to help to make it possible for our students to come to grips with themselves as persons . . . and with the problems of human values . . . more clearly than they might otherwise have done, and in a form in which they can wrestle with issues without undue risk to personal stability and integrity” . . .

In the “mastery of problem solving skills,” it is obvious that a supervisor will continually be helping in the processes Professor Morris refers to. In detailed discussion on cases, this is in fact happening all the time. However, the university also has an important part to play here.

In the teaching of casework in groups which is part of all professional courses, the university has a special contribution. There is here the value of the “guided group” situation. Students gain confidence and security from the sharing

of experience: but it is not enough for them to do this by themselves. It is important for there to be a leader for two reasons; firstly—obviously enough—there needs to be someone who draws out the theoretical implications of what they are saying: secondly—and more relevant here—someone who can recognise the common elements of feeling within the group, help them to face these feelings and share them. Students thus learn not simply intellectually but at a deeper level of shared feeling. The recognition that those who teach the theory know and participate in the “feeling side” of this learning process will, I believe, bring reassurance to the student and help in the process within the student of bringing thought and feeling together. The same should be true of tutorials. This should complement the supervisor’s endeavours.

It may be of interest at this point to try and isolate some of the problems which I have observed during my first year of university teaching in this process of integration I have been discussing.

In their first practical work placement, a number of our students found themselves in a setting where they did not have a clearly defined function. They were therefore brought face to face with consideration as to the meaning and value of casework per se: they were not visiting or being visited with a specific statutory duty: nor were they generally much concerned with material aid. What they were giving of value, what talks between people in a professional situation really implied, was therefore the vital question with which they were immediately faced. It is not enough to see oneself as lending a friendly ear to others’ troubles. “To be a support,” to help her get it off her chest,” were the first explanations of this casework role. Belief in a client’s capacity to change as a result of a caseworker’s intervention involves acceptance of certain hypotheses about human behaviour, based to an extent on psychoanalytic theory. It is not to be expected that all students will accept these theories and there will be always wide differences of opinion—and rightly so—within the student group as indeed there is within the group of practising social workers. What is important, however, is that the practical

setting gives the maximum opportunity for the theoretical considerations underlying casework techniques to be faced by the student. It can be perilously easy to "do the job" day in, day out without ever considering what the relationship between client and worker really implies. I referred earlier on to theoretical ideals and practical limitations. This illustrates the point. How often do we hear—"when you are a child care officer/probation officer" almoner . . . you won't have time for this kind of 'deep casework' which is very often taught." It is vitally important to teach and learn the limitations of the setting. But we surely want our students to study the theoretical basis underlying casework, to be honest with themselves about their aims and methods. This, then, was the first major problem we struck: an inevitable and healthy problem.

The second concerns the professional role. Naturally, the year will be spent seeking to define this and there will be anxiety about it. Yet it seems to me that there are certain cant phrases about, used allegedly in the cause of professional social work. These I have observed repeatedly in the interviewing candidates for the Applied Course, who are at present on Social Studies Diploma Courses. I mean phrases like "not being involved"—"being objective," "being detached." It has been clear in discussion that some resistance to the idea of the professional role is because it is thought to imply lack of warmth. Our younger students seem to think it would be unprofessional to admit how much they care. I wonder if we are to blame in allowing confusion to persist by muddled observations on this subject. It is to be hoped that a student will come to understand the extent of his involvement, not to deny it. What is asked from the student is awareness of his own needs and feelings because this insight enables him to use the feelings constructively for the benefit of his clients. What we do not want is for the student to seek painfully to climb to Olympian heights of detachment. This will only lead to a "false front" of understanding and tolerance, based on denial of their involvement. This false front will be the outcome of just such a split between

intellect and feeling as I referred to earlier. The ridiculous thing is that the good student is perfectly well aware he has deep feelings about his clients but if we are not careful he is ashamed to admit to them. Thus he fails to use the most important tool of understanding, for his "feeling" reactions to people will teach him most, not only about himself but about his client.

I referred earlier to the psycho-analytic theory which explicitly or implicitly underlies much casework teaching. Few of us realise, without pausing to consider, how much of such theory has become part of our thinking as social workers, without our ever having examined the basic hypotheses. Yet examination of such ideas by the student inevitably raises anxieties when, probably for the first time, he follows them through to their (apparently) logical conclusion. The age-old "determinist" problem rears its ugly head; can anyone ever help what they do, and as a social worker, can I assume they could have stopped short at any point? This theoretical issue links closely and painfully with practical casework experience, for example in thinking about the value of "giving advice." This is of course a fundamental question and this is the time to be thinking about it. All students will be affected by it but for some it may be a more highly charged issue and one which rouses intense feelings, associated with his own defences. Supervisors and tutors have a responsibility then to help the student recognise what is bothering him. The student will not be given an answer—which of us knows it?—but the facing of the issue is essential for growth.

Closely related to this is another worrying thought for students. If people are not able to help their badness, can they help their goodness either? So that, for a time, virtue seems meaningless. Those comforting thoughts one had about one's "good points" are suddenly overcast with doubt, and especially one's motivation of becoming a social worker.

Someone has said to me that the professional course is like an injection—"if it takes, you feel it." As Charlotte Towle has pointed out.

anxiety is inevitable for learning; how much more often do we hear the phrase "anxious to learn" than "eager to learn." It is very important for supervisor and tutor alike to tolerate this necessary anxiety. One of the dangers where there is imperfect understanding between tutor and supervisor is the temptation to turn our anxiety about the student into criticism of our "other half." The student's task of integration is made much easier for him if we are basically in

sympathy with each other but this does not mean, of course, a denial of difficulties or differences. It means a general understanding and appreciation of the objects of the training and of the task of integration which it sets. Without this, the potential split between intellect and feeling in the student is, as it were, unconsciously encouraged by us. For this reason, amongst many others, co-operation is imperative if our ideals of professional training are to be achieved.

CORRESPONDENCE

DEAR EDITOR,—The correspondence and comment in recent issues of *Case Conference* has made public some of the exchanges which have been taking place over the last six months about the future role of the Association of Social Workers. The present lack of cohesion between workers in the different specialist groups is, undoubtedly, an obstacle to the development of Social Work as a unified profession. While this Association has always fully recognised the importance of, and the need for, specialist groups, it has felt that loyalty to specialist associations should not be allowed to impede the growth of the profession of Social Work. Equally important, the Association of Social Workers itself should be prepared to make way for any other form of organisation which would better serve this end.

I am inviting the organisations affiliated to this Association to meet in London in June so that these and allied matters may be further discussed.

Association of Social Workers.

E. G. PRATT.
Chairman

CONFERENCES

ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

London Branch

at The Province of Natal, Guildford Place, W.C.1.

Wednesday, June 21st, 7.30—8 p.m.

Speaker: David Jones, O.B.E.

Subject: **The Royal Commission Report on Greater London in Relation to Social Work**

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