

Comments on the Course by Second Year Social Workers

In response to a general awareness that certain features of the course have caused difficulties and frustrations, resulting partially from the experimental nature of the course, a meeting was held to discuss these points, and the material presented below was raised at this meeting and in later comments. We have attempted to limit these points and suggestions to questions raised by the majority of the students on the course, and hope that both these, and more individual points, can be raised at a meeting between staff and students.

We should like to relate our remarks to the introduction to the Child Care, Probation and Medical Social Work sections of the course which appears in the prospectus and states that "... the Diploma combines a course in basic social studies with professional education. It provides an integrated training and avoids the dangers of duplication or omission which have arisen from the conventional division into one year of basic social studies, followed by a further year of, often unrelated, applied studies ... Although it is envisaged that students will go into professional social work, this course also provides a good basis for those who are interested in research or teaching in social work at a later stage". We appreciate that certain of these aims have been fulfilled, and have thus limited our comments to those areas where we feel that failures or omissions have occurred. We hope that our criticisms are as constructive as possible, and have included such alternative suggestions to the present arrangements as seemed to gain general support.

It seems that the course has focussed on three aspects of training: 1) Basic education in social studies 2) Professional education, 3) The development of a professional identity. We should thus like to examine the course under these headings.

I. Basic Education in the Social Sciences.

Before examining each subject, we should like to point up the imbalance, in terms of both time and emphasis, which seems to have occurred between social pathology and the other papers taken. We should also like to suggest that in all the academic work basic theories be taught in the initial stages, in order that their application to particular topics be better understood by students who in general have no grounding in the social sciences. In this connection it has been suggested that as much of the basic academics as possible (more than at present) be taught in the first year, with seminars and discussions on current issues in the second year.

(a) Social Psychology

The question of timing seems especially relevant here, there being a general wish for the teaching of personality theories and individual psychology to precede that of social psychology. We suggest that other approaches to Human Growth and Development be added to supplement and perhaps balance the Freudian, and feel the need for a greater emphasis on normality as against pathology.

(b) Social Institutions

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Here seminars discussing the underlying approaches and concepts, before these were applied to specific topics, were felt essential. Students with no previous knowledge of the social sciences can gain little benefit from lectures intended in part for B.Phil., students, and geared to their needs and backgrounds. It would appear from the rubric that the applied Sociology paper might have greater relevance to social work students than social institutions, and we suggest that this paper might be offered. We also feel that the present splitting in the teaching of sociology has been most unfortunate.

(c) Social Administration

We have appreciated here both the historical perspective presented in the tutorials, and the opportunities for discussion of present and future issues raised in the second year seminars, and suggest an extension of the use of the latter both in this and other subjects. The rubric offers the possibility of looking at voluntary as well as statutory agencies, which could perhaps be developed, as could the potential of the subject in the development of social awareness and the need for social action.

(d) Social Pathology

This paper seems to have demanded disproportionate amounts of time and energy, the difficulties of which have not been lessened by confused teaching arrangements. The need to define the overall approach to the topic in the initial stages has been felt extremely strongly here, in order that i. the rationale for the inclusion of particular subjects be understood, and ii. that the emphasis and focus within these topics, specific to the social pathology approach, be clarified. Again, it was felt that tutorials to cover the basic facts should be arranged in advance of seminars with outside speakers, which could then assume ground knowledge and concentrate on current issues and debates.

With reference to the criminological section of the paper, we would question the relative attention given to this by comparisons with other topics. It has been felt that in tutorials and more particularly in seminars, the criminological and statistical approach to topics often of great importance to social workers has precluded sufficient attention being given to the problems for social work practice raised by these issues. The value of seminars shared with, and primarily intended for, lawyers and criminologists, is questioned here, and the suggestion raised that if it is necessary for the requirements of this paper to approach such topics as the CYP Bill 1969 in essentially criminological terms, its implications for social work practice be explicitly discussed in some other context.

With regard to the other topics, we would ask for a refinement of approach in all respects. Booklists for individual topics, which have been both repetitious and inordinately long by comparison with those suggested for single essays under other papers, have generated confusion, apathy and resentment, and the wood has been almost entirely obscured by the trees. No unified concept of social pathology has emerged, merely a series of discrete topics studied apparently for their own intrinsic interest.

(e) Dissertation

Under the present arrangements, goals and means are disproportionate, and the object of the exercise unclear. One month is not sufficient for the gathering of data which allow for valid conclusions in most cases, and time may be lost in overcoming initial methodological problems arising from inadequate preparation or inexperience in research techniques. The time-lag between the field-work and the writing-up creates further difficulties, but most students have enjoyed the possibility of exploring some topic in detail in this way. We feel, therefore, that if the dissertation is to remain in its present form, much more supervision is needed in the initial stages, in order that viable topics be chosen, thoughts channelled, and some of the inevitable anxieties alienated. We suggest, however, that the possibility of group dissertations be offered as an alternative to individual work, as it seems to obviate some of the difficulties mentioned above. Groups of about six students, with a supervisor experienced in research methods, co-operate in the planning, execution and data processing of a project. Each student then selects a separate topic from the material on which to base his dissertation. This arrangement would allow for the collection of larger amounts of data, which could substantiate the drawing of more valid conclusions. It would also have the advantages of providing group support, the sharing of experience and insights, and the collective solution of methodological and other problems.

II. Professional Education

Something of a hiatus seems to have existed here between formal teaching and fieldwork experience. Teaching in the Department has rested on the assumptions (a) that we know what casework is, (b) that we know why we are doing it, (c) that it is justified. We have felt in particular the lack of any teaching in ethics. We also feel that the variability of supervision in placements should be balanced and supplemented by conscious efforts in the Department to provide more teaching, especially in casework methods.

(a) Social Work Tutorials

Since the learning of social work inevitably raises anxieties and stresses for individuals, it seems that these tutorials could more usefully be employed in the discussion of these matters, rather than more general topics (e.g. adoption, fostering), which could more profitably be dealt with in groups, where experience can be shared.

(b) Social Work Classes

The groups in which these classes were based seemed both too large and incohesive to make the classes productive. The group interaction generated by the playgroup groups could perhaps be capitalised upon in social work classes, and we would suggest a series of groups of this size, changing in composition, running throughout the course, working on playgroups, the dissertation, and social work classes, and thus providing a continuing source of support for individuals. With regard to the content of the classes, we feel that the designation of particular topics has precluded the raising of matters relating to the stages of our developing experience. We suggest that either the classes become more flexible, to allow for the inclusion of such topics, or tightened up, so that some more definite attention can be given to methods. The basing of the classes on cases presented by individuals would seem to be of value here, and should these suggestions be implemented, we suggest the institution of T- groups for the raising of more individual matters.

(c) Outside Speakers

We would ask for a progression, rather than recapitulation, of the material presented here; speakers should be aware of the ground previously covered, in order to avoid both omissions and repetitions. We would appreciate a fuller explanation of the intellectual and social development of children to complement the present attention on physical development, and feel that speakers from the Education Department might be of use here. In order to balance the emphasis on the maladjusted, pathological and abnormal, we suggest the inclusion of a child study, in which all aspects of the development of a normal child could be observed and recorded through the course by individual students to act as a point of reference against which degrees of maladjustment etc., can be more realistically assessed.

(d) Settings Classes

Since the amount of time given by supervisors to particular aspects of settings varies, we suggest that settings classes precede, or run concurrently with, the initial stages of the second placement. We would appreciate a more systematic approach to the law relating to particular settings, such as housing, perhaps supplied in hand-outs, and a similar specification of the current security rights and benefits available to clients. Perhaps as a result of relative numbers on the course, much greater attention seems to have been focussed on Child Care than on Probation or Medical Social Work, and we would ask for a greater variety of settings classes for both of the latter. In particular, the M.S.W. students suggest teaching by an experienced M.S.W. on the emotional/social problems associated with physical illness to supplement the present seminars by medical practitioners, which have focussed on relationships between M.S.W. and doctor, rather than M.S.W. and patient. Whilst appreciating the values

of a generic course, the M.S.W. students are concerned that their specific training be comparable with that offered by the Institute of Medical Social Work.

(c) Practical Placements

Individual experience has varied widely here, and we will confine our remarks to more general issues, in the hope that more individual points can be raised at the meeting. A general dissatisfaction with the present split-week arrangements has been expressed, in view of the necessity of dividing attention between academic and fieldwork. We recognize, however, that this system is theoretically preferable to block placements, but would like to point out some of the problems which have arisen. The psychic anxieties inevitable in the learning of social work have not been eased by the additional difficulties of physical tiredness, feelings of frustration that neither the academic nor the practical work can be dealt with adequately, or that attention can be given to one only to the detriment of the other, and confused and rushed planning of teaching in the Department. We would appreciate increased personal support, especially during the second placement, the inclusion of more academic work in the first year, and better organization of such academic work and classes as remain in the second year. The timing of these, in order that subjects are presented in a logical progression in relation both to each other, and to the stage of our experience, seems essential, as does the explanation of their arrangements in a comprehensive and comprehensible form.

(f) Administration

We feel that the administration seminars could most usefully be extended in scope, and given earlier in the course, preferably early in the second placement. Some knowledge of office procedures has also been suggested as a useful preliminary to placements.

III. Professional Identity

Social work requires the development of self-awareness and a sense of professional identity, both of which are likely to involve strains and anxieties. These could be shared and eased by continuing and personal support from tutors. We realize that difficulties have arisen here attributable to external circumstances, but feelings of impersonality and lack of support have been experienced strongly by some students, and others have felt that a recognised means of discussing such problems would be preferable to leaving this to individual initiative. We feel it essential that there be some formal discussion of practical work assessments, in order that we can have some idea of our progress, of points of strength and weakness, and for appropriate job orientations. It has been suggested that, if these could be run well, the use of T-groups throughout the course would be of great value in this and other respects. Relationships between students and staff, and amongst students would be promoted; the question of self-awareness and professional identity could be explored; and concrete experience of groups could supplement theoretical teaching on group processes.

The sense of social awareness, complementing that of personal and professional awareness, has been developed only in a fragmentary way, being largely dependent upon individual experience and interests. We feel that the academic subjects, particularly perhaps in social administration and social pathology, provide admirable jumping-offpoints for this, but ~~and social pathology, provide admirable jumping-offpoints for this; but~~ that it requires a more systematic approach and more specific attention.

Overall we would ask for a greater co-ordination and integration between different aspects of the course at all levels, from the planning of organizational details to the relating of the academic subjects to one another and to social work practice. The necessity to combine many branches of knowledge with practical experience increases the dangers of discontinuity, omission and repetition, and these have not always been overcome. We would ask for progression rather than piecemeal growth in teaching, some

exploration in depth rather than breadth, and a greater overall sense of direction within the course. The attempt to provide training not simply for social work, but also the possibilities of future teaching or research seems to have resulted in the offering of a number of diverse possibilities, raising but not sustaining interest, with little guidance to individual students as to their particular aptitudes. If the course is primarily intended to train social workers, it could usefully be tightened up and rendered more cohesive; if it intends to do more, its scope demands extension and clarification.