



A Poetic Appreciation of Social Work Field Instruction

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The following is an address that was delivered by Dr. Nai Ming Tsang, a leading Chinese field educator, to a group of approximately 45 social work field instructors at the Department of Applied Social Sciences (APSS) at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. – Editor's note.

We become field instructors for various reasons. We may aspire to such a position because it is a respectable and meaningful vocation in passing on our knowledge and skills to the social workers of the next generation. We may find it fitting to our personal interests and aptitudes. Perhaps a good colleague in the university has invited us to offer some help in supervising social work students. Whatever reasons put us into such a position, we all find that it demands a lot of our physical and emotional resources if we want to do a responsible job. So is it worthwhile after all? Viewing field instruction as a craft, with an emphasis on individualization, personalization, discernment, and collaborative meaning-making, can make field instruction a truly worthwhile endeavor.

The Challenges of Field Instruction

Very often, we think that field instructors are at the giving end of the relationship with students – sharing with them our knowledge, skills and experience. Field instructors have many responsibilities in teaching social work students, including the following:

- Communicate and establish a trustful relationship with a student
- Identify and assess the student's strengths and weaknesses
- Match a student with assignments suitable to his or her present abilities and conducive to bringing about the next stage of development
- Communicate with the responsible staff members in the field agency and school of social work for proper liaison and coordination
- Promote reflective practice in the student
- Conduct constructive evaluation of the student's performance
- Encourage the student's commitment to the social work values underlying practice in order to sustain and develop caring practice in the midst of managerial demands and an emphasis on

technical-rational approaches.

With years of experience, field instructors generate and accumulate pedagogical practice wisdom in performing their roles. However, in a society that construes mastery in terms of a factory where automation standardizes and speeds up the manufacturing process to maximize profit, the student can be seen as the raw material to be transformed into a finished product. Field instructors may have to work with half a dozen or more students each academic year. In the passage of time, they may see field instruction as no more than the execution of a series of tasks starting with orientation, relationship building, assignment matching, skills teaching, promoting reflection, and finally ending up with evaluation and handling termination. Over time, they can come to perform these tasks mechanically; the passion and commitment dissipate.

The field instructor must also be prepared to face multiple demands and tensions. There is the demand by the student to meet his or her learning needs; the demand by the agency for maintaining the quality of services rendered by the social work student; and the demand by the school of social work to meet fieldwork requirements in terms of hours of supervision and quality of instruction as monitored by the field liaison. These multiple conflicting demands pose built-in tensions (Tsang, 2006). There is always the worry about the success or failure of inexperienced and vulnerable social work students working with vulnerable clients. Then there is the tension about approval or rejection of the field instructor by the student. Finally, there is the tension of facing criticism of the student social worker's and the field instructor's performance by the fieldwork agency or the school of social work.

Facing these built-in tensions and multiple demands from various sources, field instructors easily find their vulnerabilities exposed. A field instructor may become over-involved and lose patience with a student who consistently fails to meet standards and respond to instruction and guidance. Another field instructor may become too lenient with a student, leading to a detrimental effect on the quality of service. Transference and counter-transference emerge at times, eroding the quality of supervision, or the field instructor may be distracted with personal matters leading to the neglect of the student's learning needs. However, as field instructors often work without supervision, such issues may be left unarticulated and even suppressed, remaining as potential sources of frustration and burn-out.

A Focus on Excellence: Field Instruction as Craft

Where can the field instructor find the strength and resilience? Wineberg (2008) suggests that teaching, which is a central component of field instruction, be considered a craft as well as a science or art:

Pedagogical craft is more idiosyncratic; its personal and relational dimensions properly take centre stage against a background of various knowledge bases. In this view,

pedagogy demands relational knowledge of young people – not only their attitudes and perspectives of the world, but also their inner lives and uniqueness as persons. (p. 65)

Conceptualizing field instruction as a craft focuses on excellence as an ethical stance: “it matters what kind of people we become through our work, and how our work helps others for the good” (Wineberg, 2008, p. 65). As Skelton (2009) describes teaching excellence:

Teaching excellence is about the enduring human struggle to ‘live out’ educational values in practice. Excellence is about the degree of engagement with this struggle as our values inevitably get denied in concrete material circumstances. We learn about and sometimes modify the educational values that underpin our teaching as we attempt to put them into practice. (p.109)

We know that a craft has to do with something made with refined workmanship, skills and dexterity. It takes time and patience because of a commitment to precision, quality and elegance. There is a passion in craft-making, a desire to produce something in which one would take pride (Gamache, 2002; Sennett, 2008). The idea of field instruction as a craft instills the field instructor with a commitment to facilitate the development of the social work student into a maturing social worker with sensitivity and an understanding of human predicaments, while fully respecting the student’s involvement in the sculpting process (Tsang, 2011, p. 376). The field instructor as a craftsman takes pains to observe two important principles: individualization and personalization.

Individualization

Field instruction as a craft gives individual care and attention to each student. Abunuwara (1999) comments that the “student/Other always surpasses the teacher’s ability to grasp him” (p. 149). Hence, in the process of making an educational assessment, matching appropriate assignments, and using a differential pedagogical approach, the field instructor is to listen to the student carefully and be sensitive to the student’s feedback for adjusting the course of action.

Kierkegaard (1998) says, “In order truly to help someone else, I must understand more than he – but certainly first and foremost understand what he understands” (p. 45). Field instructors should not assume that they know everything about the student. They must pay attention to each individual student’s background, socialization, prior training and working experience as a context for understanding and identifying his or her motivation and aspirations. Then they make an educational assessment in matching the student with the appropriate type of assignment in terms of its complexity and the student’s levels of skill and knowledge. Students are different in their abilities, stages of development, and learning styles. Some may be more rational and analytical; some may want to be more involved in practice and concrete experience. A diffident student may need a high level of support; another with too much confidence may need to develop a critical reflective stance toward

his or her practice. Individualization calls for a pedagogical approach fitting to the student's learning needs.

Individualization calls attention to timing as well (Tsang, 2008). The field instructor considers carefully when is the right time to expose the student to the next level of demand, gradually building up his or her confidence through mastery of knowledge and skills in practice. There is a saying that one must decide when it is the right time to take "one step ahead, one step beside, or one step behind" the student. The field instructor has to decide when to take the lead, for example in giving more specific instruction or in the use of demonstration in role-plays. Then there is a time when the field instructor should refrain from taking the lead but stay at the side of the student by collaborating with and supporting the student's initiative. Finally, there is a time when the field instructor should let the student take the lead, watching carefully in case the student may need some pushing or holding back. All the while, the teacher remains open and eager to improve such understanding.

Personalization

Personalization has to do with attending to the "person" in social work practice, paying due respect to discernment and meaning-making. The field instructor has to discern whether the difficulties of the student in practice are due to a lack of integration of theory and practice, to inadequate mastery of knowledge and skills, or to the student's personal values, socialization and religious beliefs. For example, in working with service users facing unwanted pregnancy, divorce, and various forms of abuse, the student's difficulties may arise from considerations other than knowledge and skills. It may have to do with the student's growing up in a broken or abusive home or with the student's conflict over religious values. Of course, the field instructor is not a counselor. Yet the ability to discern the sources of stress and difficulties is the starting point for overcoming such obstacles. With such discernment, the field instructor builds a trustful relationship with the student. At the same time, field instructors must discern the particular interests and strengths of their students and honor their life experience in areas which may be as disparate as the performing arts, sales, or police work. The integration of students' knowledge, skills, competence, and accumulated experiences is essential to their roles as social workers (Tsang, 2013).

Once the space is created for the teacher to enter the student's world, there is a chance for bringing the student to see other possible worlds (Daniel, 1993, p.137). In addition to understanding service users' meaning-making, social work students learn to apply social work values such as care, compassion, and equality. Students come to see social work practice not just as a kind of social intervention aimed at the amelioration of personal and social problems, but also as a humanistic and existential process restoring dignity, respect, continuity, and integrity to individuals, families, and communities. This perspective on social work can be encouraged by studying episodes from films, novels and stories to promote a hopeful construction of reality. For example, I was moved by the film *Quartet*, where, after years of a broken marriage and relationship, the two retired singers turn to the final page

of their life with a happy ending when they meet again in a retirement home for gifted musicians.

Is It Worthwhile?

In the end, how do we answer the question, "Is it worthwhile to be engaged as a field instructor?" I put it to you that it is worthwhile because I find it to be an activity which is complex, subtle, yet meaningful. It is complex and subtle because it is a caring practice exercised with dexterity and informed by careful observation and discernment. It is worthwhile because we will find each student has a different story. In finding his or her way into the social work profession, the social work student encounters a web of forces at work: psychological forces, family dynamics, and ideological commitments crisscrossing one another. Facilitating the growth and development of each student requires individual care, attention, and skillful pedagogical practice. Field instruction is a craft as well as an art and science. In the process, we learn to accept the imperfection of life. There is no "perfect" student, no "perfect" fieldwork agency, no "perfect" fieldwork liaison person or school of social work, and no "perfect" field instructor either. We realize that learning and development are gradual processes, never achieved within a short period of time or with a great leap forward. In the process of development, we must be prepared and make allowance for stagnation and even regression. Field instruction is about accepting and sustaining the development of students in the midst of the ebb and flow of success and failure. Though field instruction can sometimes be a lonely business, collegial support, peer learning, and consultation from field liaisons and from more experienced field instructors provide the escape route (Tsang, 2000). These colleagues have walked down the road before and found their way out; they share your values and commitment, yet they may challenge you and bring about new perspectives.

In due time, when students finish the social work course and get qualified, they leave us to embark as full-fledged professionals serving individuals, families, and communities. In the years to come, we may meet them again on the streets, in the airport, or on Facebook. They may even say to us something like "Thank you for making me a better social worker," or "I still remember your sustaining and encouraging words and keep the set of recordings with your comments on it." Then we can come to a poetic appreciation of our work all through these years as field instructors.

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