INTEGRATING LEARNING COMMUNITY PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Pamela Johansen
Philip M. Ouellette

Abstract. *Social work education has a long history of placing emphasis on experiential learning through required field experiences. There is, however, considerable concern regarding the fragmentation in social- work education programs between what is taught in the classroom versus what is taught in internship programs by field instructors. New ways to conceptualize and enhance the coordination gap between academia and field agencies are needed. This article provides an overview of the concept of a learning community, its relevancy to social work education, and provides examples of learning community strategies that have the potential of enhancing better linkages between faculty and field instructors. Specific suggestions for the development of learning communities are included. Learning community principles and its accompanying strategies may be one way to better conceptualize and bridge the coordination gap that is frequently confronted by the conflicting realities of dual training systems in social work education.*

Key *words: Collaboration, University/community partnerships, learning communities, networking strategies field instruction*

As in other human service professions like health care and teaching, social work has a long history of placing educational emphasis on experiential learning through required field experience. This emphasis on dual instruction systems is designed to connect the social work theories presented in university classrooms with the "real life" social work practice in community agencies. Curriculum models require that students complete a series of courses designed to link theory, practice and social work policy. Social work education programs connect with local public and private agencies that provide the field practicum or internships. The extent to which quality social work practice skills are developed is largely dependent on the nature of the partnerships that are established between university faculty and agency-based field instructors.

There is, however, considerable concern regarding the fragmentation in social work education programs between what is taught in the classroom versus what is taught in internship programs by field instructors (Bogo & Globerman, 1999; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Rogers, 1996; Rohrer & Smith, 1992; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Some studies have indicated that students often report field experience as the most meaningful component

Pamela Johansen, Ed.D., LCSW, is an assistant professor, School of Social Work. California State University, Chico, Chico, CA. Philip M. Ouellette, Ph.D., ACSW, is an associate professor, Indiana University School of Social Work, Indianapolis, Indiana.

of their education, but they are at a loss to make connections between theoretical and practical experience (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997; Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Coordination and the establishment of close working relationships between University faculty and agency field instructors are crucial to the successful application of dual instructional systems in social work education (Bennett & Col, 1998; Bogo & Globerman, 1999; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Establishing linkages and collaborative relationships between University faculty and field instructors continues to be a challenge today due to the increased demand to accomplish more with fewer resources. For example, human service organizations must deal with increasing social problems while managed care and welfare reform policies limit financial resources (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Cree & Macaulay, 2000; Jarman-Rohde, et al, 1997; Lacerte, Ray, & Irwin, 1989; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Social work education programs must increasingly meet university standards for research and scholarly activities while at the same time maintaining a high standard for pedagogical activities (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Ruffolo & Miller, 1994; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). The differing work realities of both the academic institution and the human service organizations contribute to increasingly divided perceptions of conflicting priorities and purpose (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Eraut, 1994; Forte & Matthews, 1994; Marsick, Bitterman, & van der Veen, 2000; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to address the need for integration of theory and practice in social work education programs and to explore strategies that would enhance better linkages between faculty and field instructors. The increased demands during times of greater needs and fewer resources is a threat to the shared mission of social work practitioners and educators. Collaboration is necessary not only to create effective training programs for social workers, but to address community issues of poverty, oppression, and human well-being. Strategies based on learning community theories may be one way to enhance academic and social agency partnerships for training social work practitioners. What follows is an overview of the concept of learning communities and its relevancy to social work education. Examples of learning community strategies and a proposed model for the development of better linkages between universities and field agencies is proposed.

THEORETICAL BASIS: LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Learning in the context of "real life" and connecting the world of academia to the world of work are not new ideas. Concerned with a need for educational reform and criticizing traditional education as static and fragmented, John Dewey advocated for the reconnection of classroom learning with "real life" experiences. Dewey emphasized the need to connect "mind to material" and the need for learning to be active and student focused (Thigpen, 1994).

Alexander Meikeljohn is considered the "father of learning community movement" (Beck, 1999, p. 11). Drawing heavily on the theoretical ideas of John Dewey and motivated by concern about fragmentation in American colleges, Meikeljohn organized

the Experiential College in Madison, Wisconsin from 1927-1932. He argued that education had become removed from the larger world of the community, resulting in "intellectual isolation" (p.7).

The ideas proposed at the Experiential College have been applied to many other settings. Although the conceptual framework of a learning community has many forms and definitions, five common themes appear significant for effectiveness. Collaboration, cooperation, interconnectedness, non-hierarchical relationships, and shared responsibility are considered important ingredients for the successful creation of an effective learning community (Collins, 1993; Eraut, 1994; Fox, 1997; Marsick, Bitterman & van der Veen, 2000; Ruffolo & Miller, 1994). A theme throughout the literature on learning communities, regardless of form, is the need for shared objectives and values of all involved participants (Gheradardi, Nicolini & Odella, 1998; Marsick, Bitterman & van der Veen, 2000).

This paradigm requires a major shift in the way we conceptualize academic and agency-based training opportunities in social work education. It has a direct impact on the very nature of the working relationships between participants in the dual system of training. It moves us away from thinking of knowledge acquired in university-based instructional settings as superior to knowledge acquired from direct practice setting (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997; Rogers, 1996; Stein, 2003). A creative and problem-solving thinking process between all training partners allows for a much broader exploration of ideas in multiple contexts. The importance of human relationships is an essential component of an effective learning community.

CHALLENGES FOR THE EFFECTIVE ESTABLISHMENT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

To ensure that linkages between the university and field agencies are maintained, faculty members in some schools of social work are assigned field liaison duties as part of their overall teaching function (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Stein, 2003). These assignments require faculty to periodically visit field agencies and field supervisors and attempt to develop linkages between what is taught in the classroom and what is learned in field placements. Although the field liaison function may be considered an important part of the overall teaching responsibility of a faculty member, the implementation of this role has serious challenges. University systems provide greater rewards for scholarship and research activities as opposed to community service (Gibbs & Locke, 1989; Noble & Severson, 1995). The field liaison role tends to be time consuming, leaving less time for focus on activities traditionally valued in the retention tenure and promotion process (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Noble & Severson, 1995). This may result in a situation where field liaison assignments are delegated to part-time or newer faculty members (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). The low status/high time demands of field director/coordinator and field liaison roles may result in high turnover in these positions.

For faculty members to be acutely aware of agency practices and to actively participate in the assessment and training needs of students placed in agencies, a strong professional inter-organizational relationship must evolve between university faculty

and agency representatives. The extent to which this occurs varies considerably among different faculty members and field instructors. Establishing quality university-agency professional relationships is a serious challenge for many Schools of Social Work (Bogo & Globerman, 1999; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Rogers, 1996; Rohrer & Smith, 1992; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006).

Barriers to building successful community partnerships revolve around the issue of time and distance. Faculty members are consistently challenged by issues of time and distance due to teaching, research, and other scholarly obligations that often take precedence over other tasks (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Noble & Serverson, 1995; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Professionals serving as field instructors in agencies have similar demands. In a world of increasingly serious budgetary and financial restraints, more needs to be done with less. Time constraints make it extremely difficult for faculty and agency representatives to come together on a regular basis for meaningful partnership to evolve (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Rosenblum, 1997; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006).

Distance is another factor that impedes relationship building between the faculty and field instructors. In many cases, students are placed in communities and agencies that are not easily accessible to the University faculty members. Travel time for regular field visits in these cases is not only time consuming but also represents considerable financial costs to the School (Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997).

Students experience similar time and distance restraints. Due to increased costs of education today, many students are compelled to work to supplement their incomes if they are to remain in school. For example, full time students often have family responsibilities. Not only must students fulfill the academic requirements of the program, they must also maintain some form of employment activity to meet financial responsibilities (Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006; Wolfson, Magnuson, & Marsom, 2005).

In addition to the issue of time and distance, there is an assumption of commonality of purpose between university social-work programs and community agencies as well as a belief in interdependence and interconnectedness between the groups. In reality, "universities give lip service to equal partnerships" (Leader, as cited in Forte, & Matthews 1994, p.230). The current system is often characterized by feelings of isolation and competition by all participants (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Forte & Matthews, 1994; Rohrer & Smith, 1992; Ruffolo & Miller, 1994; Skolink & Papell, 1994). Developing effective collaborative communities of learning will not only require a renewed commitment from all involved participants to work toward common objectives and outcomes (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Marsick, Bitterman & van der Veen, 2000; Ruffolo & Miller, 1994), but it will also require that all parties be ready and willing to experiment with new and innovative linkages strategies that go beyond what is traditionally done and yet are coherent with learning community principles.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

There are examples of effective learning communities connecting social work field agencies and university social work programs. The programs share a strong commitment to forming communities of open communication and shared leadership, commitment to mutual goals and objectives and understanding of the need for reciprocity between university social work programs and field agencies.

A number of agency/university partnerships have been established to prepare social workers for practice with specific client populations or public service organizations (Breitenstein & Rycus, 1997; Briar-Lawson, Schmid, & Harris,1997; Reilly & Petersen, 1997; Scharlach & Robinson, 2005; Young,1994) Many partnerships have been organized around Title IV-E training grants to prepare social workers for public child welfare practice. Funding, including student stipends and financial incentives for universities and agencies have helped motivate these collaborative efforts.

Nevada has developed a strong network of university-agency partnerships in child welfare (Reilly & Petersen, 1997). The university is deeply integrated in community social work practice not only through field internships, but in ongoing training for practicing social workers and foster parents. The program is based on a strong commitment to "shared governing structure" (p. 21) in which faculty and community agencies develop training content to meet the needs of child welfare. Community members are actively involved in university committees. Faculty members serve as board members of community social work agencies. Careful ongoing evaluation considers the needs of the university, the agencies, and the students in the context of the greater community. Aware of the special needs of non-traditional students who are less likely to form natural social networks, cooperative groups are formed using a cohort model. Increased use of technology allows commuter students ongoing communication and contact with other students, faculty members and the community. Credibility and understanding are developed by a strong commitment of the university to recruit and hire faculty with direct social work practice experience. The authors note these partnerships were not formed easily. Problems noted include faculty resistance to the amount of time necessary to commit to collaboration, agency distrust of university faculty as "unknowledgeable" and a history of failed relationships between the different parties (p. 23). It was acknowledged that the trust and commitment necessary to form the current learning community had taken many years to develop. It was also noted that having stable faculty and agency supervisors allowed for the informal and formal relationships to develop.

Young (1994) described another example of a statewide system of cooperative partnerships in Pennsylvania, again, utilizing Title IV-E funds. In this model, university faculty members worked in agency settings to provide clinical supervision of student interns and agency child welfare social workers. Practicing social workers in the community were recruited to serve as university adjunct faculty. Focus was on clarifying communication, roles and expectations.

More recently, university/community partnerships have been established to address the need for social work practitioners in gerontology. Scharlach and Robinson (2005) describe a partnership between California university social work programs and agencies serving older adults. Similar to IV-E programs in the focus on competency based learning and the inclusion of student stipends, this program utilized a "training coordinator" position. The training coordinator was an agency employee designated to work directly with field directors, liaisons, and instructors. The authors noted a need for support from higher administration, including agency directors, university directors, and deans for effective collaboration.

In contrast to IV-E and gerontology programs utilizing grants and student stipends, Noble and Severson (1995) describe an innovation university/community partnership developed to address the problems of inmate mental illness and suicide in Louisiana state-run correctional institutions. This program evolved through "chance meeting of a social work dean and community judge" (p. 85). Faculty members were recruited to work directly in correctional institutions in assessment and program evaluation. Although grant monies were not involved and the project focused on traditional teaching, research, and service expectations for the faculty involved, release time was provided by university administration. The authors noted a need for "buy in" from administration in universities and community organizations, as well as a need for the development of trust and mutual respect. The university/community collaboration resulted in ongoing opportunities for student internships, expansion of social work curriculum in response to identified needs, faculty research opportunities, and community benefits. The authors concluded that the direct involvement of social work faculty and interns in the community seemed to contribute to a more positive image of social workers.

Another model of university/community partnership operating without outside funding involved the use of single systems design to integrate field practice, research, program evaluation, and self reflection (Garcia & Floyd, 1999). Designed as a collaborative effort by a field director and research instructor, this program used a self-assessment instrument integrated throughout the curriculum including the field component. Faculty, students, field instructors, and clients were involved in student assessment. This model was unique in its use of existing resources as opposed to reliance on external funding or additional personnel.

These programs illustrate the potential for common objectives, shared leadership, collaboration, reciprocity, conflict management, and ongoing communication reflective of learning community principles. These ideas can be used to evaluate, develop, and enhance mutually beneficial partnerships between University social work programs and community service organizations. The following is a proposed model for the development of learning communities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: A MODEL FOR COLLABORATION

Borrowing the ideas developed by Reamer's "social work ethics audit" (2000), the authors propose that individual social work programs conduct a "learning community

audit" as a starting point. Development of learning communities in social work education will need to begin with open communication between involved parties (Bogo & Globerman, 1999; Bogo & Vayda, 1998). One strategy proposed to open discussion between students, university faculty and field instructors in agencies and to work toward shared objectives is the use of focus groups (Campbell-Evans, & Maloney,1997; Rosenblum, 1997; Scharlach & Robinson, 2005). Such meetings could serve to initiate the process of establishing a vision of shared meaning and consequently lead towards the development of trusting relationships, as well as a belief in inclusion in the decision making process. Focus groups could be structured to evaluate existing collaborations, identifying both strengths and barriers to be addressed. The focus group learning community audit would facilitate reflection and problem-solving. Several questions would be addressed in a focus group learning community audit. (1) What are we trying to accomplish? (2) Who decides what is important? (3) How can we share resources? (4) What's in it for me? (5) What worked, did not work in the past? (6) How do we maintain ongoing partnerships and planning?

Shared objectives/values: What are we trying to accomplish?

The learning community audit would need to openly address objectives and values, without assumption of commonalties. Consistent with learning community ideas, there would be a need for social work faculty and agency practitioners to begin with negotiation of shared goals and objectives. Commitment to a common mission of training competent social work practitioners might allow for exchange of knowledge and feedback across academic and agency organizations (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Ruffolo & Miller, 1994; Skolink & Papell, 1994).

Shared leadership: Who decides what is important?

The learning community audit would evaluate the extent to which social work education programs involve agency practitioners in program evaluation and planning. Considerations could include field instructors' involvement in curriculum planning and revision. Having current social work practitioners actively involved could allow curricula to be developed with sensitivity and relevance to specific needs of service regions. More active involvement with social work program development could allow agency practitioners to become more familiar with social work education and accreditation standards (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Stein, 2003).

Collaboration: How can we share resources?

The learning community audit would explore opportunities for collaboration, providing mutual benefits for agencies, student learning, and faculty research/service expectations. Student research and practice assignments might be coordinated with special needs of community social service agencies (Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997). These might include program evaluations, needs assessments, and community resource directories. Student and

faculty connections might be enhanced by assignment to faculty mentors and emphasis on a cohort model. Students would enter and progress through the curriculum as a group.

Reciprocity/Buy in: What's in it for me?

An important component of the learning community audit is the discussion and evaluation of potential costs and benefits for the involved parties. Busy practitioners may need incentives to commit more time to social work education activities. Incentives and social connections might be provided by university faculty presented in-service trainings, recruitment of field instructors to act as adjunct faculty members, continuing education units, and access to university facilities (Bennett & Col, 1998; Rohrer & Smith, 1992). Incentives for faculty members to work directly with agencies and field instructors might be necessary. Some researchers have suggested the assignment of "field specialists" may be a more effective means to allow university/agency collaboration and development of mutually beneficial relationships (Bennett & Col, 1998). Field specialists are faculty members hired to function primarily as field liaisons, as opposed to the model where the faculty field liaison role is part of regular teaching assignments. Field committees might include full-time faculty members, practitioners, and adjunct faculty, carefully selected to work together as links between university and agency placements. Mindful selection of field practice committees may allow relationship development, shared knowledge, and decision making. Incentives for faculty members might include research opportunities and access to current information about services and current practice issues (Bogo & Globerman, 1999; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Noble & Severson, 1995; Stein, 2003).

Conflict, history: What worked, did not work in the past?

The learning community audit would be an opportunity for participants to reflect on shared history and expectations. Establishing effective learning communities requires a willingness to address conflict. The ability to start by acknowledging what has not worked in the past may be the first step towards establishing cooperative partnerships between multiple systems (Noble & Serverson, 1995; Marsick, Bitterman & van der Veen, 2000; Scharlach & Robinson; 2005). A true commitment to collaborative and cooperative community partnerships may require understanding of the varying cultures of the different participants, including university faculty members, students, and agency representatives. Willingness to educate one another in differences requires a belief in the potential of differences as an asset in learning (Briar-Lawson, Schmid & Harris, 1997; Noble & Severson, 1995; Skolink & Papell, 1994).

Communication: How do we maintain ongoing partnerships and planning?

The learning community audit would be an opportunity to evaluate and plan communication strategies for ongoing networking and information sharing. Individual programs should assess existing systems and processes, as well as consider innovative strategies for enhanced communication. Effective learning communities

require ongoing communication and collaboration beyond the initial focus group/audit plan. With today's computer technology and advanced communication networks, much can be done to further investigate how technology could be used to enhance faculty field liaison functions and ongoing communication between faculty, students, and agency practitioners. The integration of technology in higher education has grown considerably in the last few years, especially in the area of distance education. Experience has shown that the most favorable outcome of integrating technology in higher education has been its positive impact on the issue of time and distance (Ouellette, 1999). Technology-supported educational environments have provided some students with access to educational opportunities that were otherwise not available to them just a few years ago. Not only has technology served to bring education to a whole new stream of adult learners, it has also served to revolutionize how educators and students alike view teaching and learning. In the last decade, the discussion of "what is learned" and "how it is learned" has never been challenged to the extent it has been since the introduction of technology in the field of education (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bednar, Cunninham, Dufy, & Perry, 1991; Cooper & Mueck, 1990; Huff & McNown-Johnson, 1998).

A technology-supported field liaison activity may not change how social work students learn social work practice in the field, but it may change how we teach these skills and how professional relationships can be enhanced between faculty and field instructors. A technology-supported liaison will undoubtedly change the economics and the way faculty liaison functions are delivered to community agencies. The use of technology shows the promise of making it easier and less expensive to produce high quality field learning experiences for social work students, especially for those at a distance (Forte & Matthews, 1994; Jarman-Rohde et al, 1997; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Wolfson, Magnuson, & Marsom, 2005).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Developing collaborative and cooperative learning communities between faculty, field instructors, and students have the potential to enrich social work education programs. Integrating strategies based on learning community principles has the potential to create a learning environment that is in keeping with basic social work values and is aligned with social work practice. Implementing learning community audits using focus groups may serve as an initial starting point to help social work programs assess and plan collaborative partnerships unique to community needs and resources. In addition to the use learning community audits, the continued advances in computer technology and improved communication networks show much promise as a medium that could enhance the way we deliver educational experiences to students and improve the nature of existing university-agency partnerships. For example, integrating today's low cost, internet-based, desk-top video conferencing technology (Wu, Fox, Bulut, Uyar, & Altay, 2004) to carry out field liaison functions would greatly enhance the nature and the quality of the relationships between faculty, field instructors and students as well as deal with the barriers of time and distance. In addition, the use of web-based evaluation tools would provide a means

to acquire immediate and consistent feedback as to student progress while in the field as well acquiring data to be used for a variety of research activities.

Despite the many challenges involved in achieving effective egalitarian working partnerships between universities and agency-based partners, the strategies presented above show much promise in creating an educational environment conducive to the development of a true learning community. Strong collaborative working relationships between students, faculty, and field instructors provide for mutually supportive and beneficial opportunities for all parties involved.

Author's Note

Address correspondence to: Pamela Johansen, Ed.D., LCSW, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work. California State University, Chico, Chico, CA 95929-0550. e-mail: *PJohansen@csuchico.edu.*

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