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Published
2006

Journal Title
Practice Reflexions

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Reflections on Practice: Collaborative Writing as a Critically Reflective Activity

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Abstract

This article chronicles the collaborative partnership that was established to submit a book proposal to an Australian publisher, and reflects on the process of writing an introductory text aimed at building a literature bridge between social work and human service practice. The book, entitled ‘The Road to Social Work and Human Service Practice: An Introductory Text’ (Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2005) was published by Thomson Learning. The authors are social work practitioners turned academics, who worked together in an Australian school of social work. The idea for this book was borne from the author’s shared experiences of social work practice and education, and awareness of the increasingly contested space that professional degrees occupy in the field of human services. At a time when common ground is being sought between those working in designated social work positions requiring eligibility for membership of the professional association, and those with a range of other degrees in human services, community practice, counselling and social policy, the development of common purpose, values, frameworks and theory is critical. The writing of texts for social work and human service practice in this contemporary environment is challenging, and this article gives examples of some of those challenges within a context of reflection on social work education and practice. This paper argues that collaborative writing can be a powerful strategy for critical reflection on practice.

Keywords: Critical reflection; reflective practice; collaborative writing; human service education

Introduction: Forming the Collaborative Partnership

Collaborative writing partnerships present many challenges and require some key elements for success. The first of these is an understanding of common purpose, and agreement of the primary aims of the project. In conceiving the idea of co-authoring a book about introductory social work and human service practice, it seemed that this was a natural extension of the endless conversations and dialogues that we had engaged in over more than five years of teaching and researching together. We had already established solid and cooperative ways of working with each other and shared common practice experiences and a view for the future. It was a regular occurrence for one of us to consult the other about dilemmas in teaching, or seek advice about ways to resolve conflicts that often rear their heads in tertiary education. While this initially was a mentoring kind of relationship it soon progressed and developed into a mutual and equal partnership of peer support. We used each other as sounding boards on all kinds of issues and dilemmas. We respected each others’ opinions and guidance and encouraged each others creativity. Often we would spark off each other in creative and innovative ways that enhanced our teaching, writing, research and practice. And somewhere in all of this, friendship also developed.
Recognition emerged over time as our discussions continued, that we were, in fact, using our collegial relationship to foster elements of critically reflective practice within the context of a tertiary education system. Maidment and Egan (2004: 14) describe critical reflection as ‘a deeply personal process that can lead to workers developing greater self-awareness and changing the way they see themselves in relation to practice, broader social issues, questions of ethics, and interpersonal relationships’. Trevithick (2006: 251) notes that reflective practice provides a way of learning lessons from the past, and ‘provides a vital link between theory and practice’. We had both written independently of each other (but with other colleagues) on reflections on other issues such as experiences of collaborative field research (Stehlik & Chenoweth 2005; McAuliffe & Coleman 1999), development of a research method of qualitative interviewing using email (McAuliffe 2003), design challenges of ethics education (McAuliffe & Ferman 2002), and processes of deinstitutionalization (Chenoweth 2000). Our dialogues about social work education, fields and methods of practice, theoretical developments, student-centered learning, professional responsibilities, and articulation of values formed the foundations for beginning to document these reflections in a more systematic and ambitious way.

We had often discussed the need for a text that was pitched at the beginning of the student journey. We recognized this from our experiences of teaching introductory social work courses at the second year level, and designing introductory courses for students coming into social work with a prior degree in another discipline. We were acutely aware of how easy it was to ‘lose’ students in the early stages by submerging them in texts that were too advanced in concepts and language. Also, failure to spend sufficient time in assisting students to reflect on their motivations for interest in human service work could result in problems later. It was our shared belief that students would benefit from a text that they could easily identify and feel comfortable with – one that would not ‘throw them in the deep end’ but would still orient them to the complexities of practice from the outset.

The other consideration was the need for a book to be located within a broader context. This was partly in response to the increasing numbers of international students coming to study in Australia. Students from Asia, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific mostly return to practice in their own countries and in their own cultural and political contexts. We wanted to ensure that the importance of context (as articulated by Healy 2005) in understanding social work and human service practice was highlighted so the text needed to provide the basics which then could be applied in other cultural contexts. As well, we were committed to offering some different perspectives on practice for Australian students who will of course also work within diversity. For example how do students from Aotearoa New Zealand or Singapore or Vietnam perceive or understand professional registration or ethical codes? This aspect was a struggle for us given the limit of words and pages (to keep the text affordable) and the risk that the inclusion of some other cultural identifications would be interpreted as tokenism.

One of the primary challenges that formed part of our motivation for embarking on a book project was our perception of the need for a bridge to be built between social work and human service practitioners. This issue was raised for consideration by O’Connor, Smyth and Warburton (2000: 8) who argued that the restructuring of the
labor market had serious implications for employment in human services. The increasingly ‘permeable professional boundaries’ around the practice of social work, community work and welfare, human services, social policy, program management, and social research (to name some but not all) are also seen in the differing yet similar nature of various degree programs. Students starting out in any of these programs often face similar dilemmas with understanding core values, ethical standards, applications of theory and generation of knowledge, practice frameworks and the nature of the work across organizational contexts. The differences come with the status of the degrees attained, often related to length of study, but sometimes to claims of professional territory that need to be preserved and regulated.

**DM:** Having worked in delegated social work positions for a great deal of my practice life, but also having a practice background in community development and youth work, I was very aware of the divisions that can emerge from perceptions of ‘professional status’. In reality, I was doing the same work, and used the same skills, but the ways others related to me was different when I held the title of a ‘social worker’ and when I had the position of ‘community development officer’. It was important in the writing of this book to focus on the commonalities, with a view to bridging the gap.

**LC:** In more than 30 years of practice I think I was in a delegated social work position for about 10 of these. But as an educator in human services and disability programs and then in social work programs I became aware of a range of views across students, practitioners and employing organizations. Of course this changing permeability of roles in the human service workforce has been well documented in the literature (Healy 2005; McDonald 2006), but for students it can be utterly confusing.

**Constructing the Scaffolding**

Embarking on the book required not only commonality of purpose, but agreement on content and how the material should be presented. We realized that we needed a robust yet flexible framework as a starting point for constructing the book proposal. This was a new endeavor for both of us. While LC had written several monographs for small publishers, and we had both completed doctoral theses and written articles for publication, we had never worked with an international publisher before and had little idea of what to expect. Our first meeting with the publishers left us excited but anxious. The prospect of immovable publishing deadlines that had to be fitted into already overflowing academic schedules was daunting. We knew that a strong framework would help us to structure the text and organize our writing agendas.

Endless conversations ensued about how we might construct the book, and how we could blend social work and human service practice in a relevant and helpful way. We reached consensus on some important points, and at this juncture established:
1. The book would be a **signpost text** – i.e. it would cover the whole terrain but not provide too much detail. Students would be directed to further reading, thinking and action to augment the knowledge base. This meant that references that we were directing students towards had to be the most up to date and most relevant, and activities/exercises needed to be grounded and linked to reflection. The emphasis was on an ‘introductory text’.

2. We needed a metaphor that could be used to guide the student through the text and integrate the new knowledge into practice situations. We had already used the ‘journey metaphor’ in our teaching of introductory courses and agreed that it had provided a workable and logical framework. It also appealed to students who could relate to ideas of maps, landscapes, and hazards. The weekly lecture topics became the initial chapters and provided a way of conceptualizing the journey to facilitate a truly student-centered text whereby students’ own sense of practice and practitioner identity could develop. As Wheatley (2005: ix ) states ‘we make the road by walking’.

3. The book needed to be affordable in cost, accessible in language, and relevant to contemporary practice. It therefore should include a range of case studies and examples. It also needed to have visual appeal in a marketing sense and should include original diagrams, artwork, and the odd Leunig cartoon.

4. The book should be inclusive of professional and other associations that covered not only social work, but community work, counselling, and international perspectives. To this end, it was decided to include information about the various professional bodies for practitioners in Australasia, including the International Federation of Social Workers, the Australian Association of Social Workers, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia, and The Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers.

5. The book should include divergent perspectives on critical issues and debates (for example, the controversial debate about registration of social work), and this should be achieved by incorporating a range of practitioner perspectives throughout each chapter. We agreed to use our own networks to invite practitioners that we knew and respected to write short extracts that we could include in strategic places in the text.

6. The book should be a reflection on our own practice, and should ultimately convey ‘practice wisdoms’ that we had gained from our collective clients and service users, mentors, colleagues, and students over the years. When we thought about it, we had a cumulative 50 odd years of experience between us, covering fields of health, mental health, disability, community development, women’s issues, legal and advocacy practice, youth work, aged care, social policy, working with volunteers, research, training and education. The problem was not so much about what to put in, but what to leave out.
The original book proposal was much longer than the final product, with the publishers seeking critical reviews prior to offering a contract. The review consensus was that this could be a useful addition to the available books in the tertiary sector, and there were positive comments on the journey metaphor and the introductory focus. There were also some constructive comments as to how we could improve the text, and this provided a different vantage point from which to revisit the original proposal.

DM: I was surprised to find such support for the book from a range of academic peers (unknown to us) – it felt as though we were being entrusted with quite an important task, and we were compelled to commit to completing it once the reviews were in and a contract was on the table. I remember thinking that this was our chance to put some things in writing that we had been saying to our own students for years – it seemed a great way to gather thoughts all in one place about the importance of the work that we do and the need for us to have integrity above all else.

LC: There were of course a couple of reviews with legitimate criticisms and one suggesting a particular practice perspective. Reviews are extremely useful – they provide a glimpse into how others see your work. And that offers another opportunity to reflect on your purpose, your framework, your approach. While we didn’t necessarily make all the changes that were suggested, reflection at this juncture affirmed much of what we had decided, helped us to rethink some things and jettison a few too.

**Firming up the Foundations**

Once we had settled on the chapter structure, we found that making decisions about carving up the writing of the text was not difficult. We relied on our knowledge of our own and each other’s particular interests and areas of strength and found a logical path through the allocation task. Fortunately, we had very similar styles of writing and use of grammar, and were able to offer constructive critique on each other’s work at very regular intervals. We both had substantial academic libraries with historical as well as contemporary texts, (and colleagues who had equally literature-laden offices) and this proved very useful when searching for an elusive reference. There were times through the writing stage when we both collected our laptops and headed to a room in the library where we sat among mountains of books and ploughed our way through sections that demanded space and minimal distraction.

DM: It seemed logical that I should write the two chapters on values and ethics as these were the areas of my teaching, and I had always struggled with articulating history, knowledge and theory – I knew that Lesley could do this easily and wouldn’t get herself tied up in semantic knots over the terminology. I was also happy to set my mind to the first chapter but we worked together on thinking through much of the content. The Chapter on the stages of the helping process was a challenge until I found a workable structure, but it appealed to my practical nature so I was able to use a lot of examples and anchor it in reality as much as possible.
LC: I have always been fascinated by history and have collected old books about the origins of human services and social work for years. In preparing for writing I became absorbed in accounts of nineteenth century philanthropy, of early efforts to alleviate the effects of dire poverty and struggles for rights for women. Writing this chapter was an exercise in frugality of words – it constantly needed to be précised. I remember a text on the wonders of eugenics - I couldn’t put it down.

As we reflected back on the writing of the text, it became clear that there were a mixture of challenge points and exciting moments that we could pinpoint easily. We were cognizant of the fact that this was our original text so we were not constrained to simply regurgitating the ideas of others. We did, however, need to acknowledge previous work and find the balance between this and our own ideas. The parts that were most difficult to write were those that required synthesis of previous ideas, or those that needed to move a step further in definition.

DM: I clearly recall the day that I tried to write the paragraph on the purpose of practice. I wanted to revisit previous definitions and see if I could move on a little further. I banished the family, sat on the back deck under a tree with pen and paper, and agonized for a full day. For some reason, I felt a real weight of responsibility. There were certain words that I wanted to capture – words about ‘passion’ and ‘hope’. Trying to get them into a cohesive paragraph alongside concepts of human rights, justice and the nurturance of diversity was really difficult, but I look back now on that small section and feel satisfied that I said what I wanted to say. It will be a long time before I make any changes to the wording of that section.

LC: While Donna may have thought I would not get tied up in semantic knots over knowledge and theory, I was utterly immobilised by this chapter. Having relished the thought of finally “getting something really clear on knowledge and theory” that a beginning student would cruise through, I didn’t! Writing the knowledge chapter was a real struggle. For days I wrestled and sweated, feeling elated as I grasped a lucid sentence from the depths of my brain only to be despairing within hours at how obtuse and awkward it really was. I had watched students struggle with this material, their eyes glaze over, their questioning looks of why-do-we-have-to-know-theory-anyway-can’t- we-just-do-it? So I wanted to create a pathway through which they could engage more readily. I think I got someway there but I’m still not happy and feel I want to rewrite a lot of this chapter for another edition.

As well as the challenges and the parts of the text that required much rewriting, there were the parts that led to a sense of excitement and a feeling of breaking through into new territory. These seemed to mainly take the form of new diagrams and visual representations of concepts.

DM: There were three diagrams that I felt excited about. The first was the ‘hub of social work and human service values’ where I pulled together all the literature and summarized it in a visual way around ethical practice; the second was the ethical decision-making model and diagram (that still needs work in a visual sense); and the third was the family genogram where I was determined to ensure that same-sex families/partnerships were also represented – I had never seen this before on an
example of a genogram – it was important to me to be able to develop something much more inclusive of diverse families.

**LC:** Two diagrams got me going. The first was in capturing human service history and taking Andrew Jones’ ideas of eras and developing them further. The second was the knowledge one where I tried to cover a lot of territory in one diagram. I’m still wrestling with that one. As a visual person, I am a big fan of the map or diagram for students’ learning and I get them to develop their own too in class. Teaching practice can be a swampy, uncertain terrain and certainly not as crisp as diagrams would suggest. But I think you have to unpack all the elements and then lay them out for exploration and scrutiny and then put them all back together again.

**Writing apart and together: Moving towards the summit**

One of the structural advantages that greatly assisted the collaborative writing process was having close physical proximity in our work environment. We shared offices next to each other, and it wasn’t long before we found ourselves literally talking through the walls. We were both very aware of the separate and yet highly collaborative nature of the project. A supportive partnership was crucial, as was a sense of individual and shared ownership of the outcome. We were acutely aware of each other’s work patterns, academic obligations, and family responsibilities.

**DM:** We always knew exactly where each of us needed to be up to with writing on a daily basis. Knowing that Lesley knew what I should have written by the end of a week spurred me on to get it done...I respected our partnership and didn’t want to let her down. It was a huge incentive that resulted in us never breaking a deadline, and often submitting work to astonished publishers before a deadline was due.

**LC:** I have written and still do write with another close colleague of many years. So I had some ideas about what works and what gets tricky. Are we on the same wavelength here? How can we smooth differences of perspective? What do we need to work on together and what can be divvied up and written separately? We did keep each other on task. It was a shared responsibility so despite being exhausted or totally bereft of the next sentence, we kept going. Over the whole time we didn’t have one major disagreement!

Looming publisher deadlines and the start of a new semester meant that we were engaged in both teaching and writing simultaneously. It was common to write through the night, and then take new material to students or colleagues for their impressions and critique. Having student and practitioner input into diagrams, case studies and activities meant that the project became that much closer to what we had anticipated as a student-centred text. It also took us back to our own experiences of social work education and gave cause to reflect back on the literature that we had been exposed to so many years before, and how we could integrate the ‘old’ with the ‘new’. This process was illustrative of the way social workers actively create knowledge and theory in practice (Healy, 2005: 219). We generated ideas and ‘new’ knowledge from our joint writings, tested them out in our field of practice, i.e. education, and then refined them into the writing again.
DM: I had a particular group of students who were just starting out in social work having all completed previous degrees in other disciplines. I had many discussions with them through the writing of some chapters and found their suggestions invaluable. They certainly weren’t afraid to tell me if a case study was too far-fetched, a diagram didn’t make logical sense, or a definition wasn’t clear. They provided an important reality check from the student perspective and I will always be grateful for their willing assistance.

LC: I adopted a similar process with practitioners I knew. New ideas were placed before colleagues in various fields who in turn considered how they might reflect the realities of their own practice. Again suggestions were made, concepts modified, some ideas refined or further developed and then re-integrated into the text.

On reflection, writing the first draft of the book was easy compared to the rigor required in the editing process. We were extremely fortunate that the freelance editor assigned to our project was a person who had a background in human services and community practice. This meant that we shared common language and the attention to detail in many sections was largely due to the editor’s skill in fine-tuning concepts and clarifying terminology.

DM: As I wrote sections of the book, there were many times when I knew that a paragraph was clumsy or a title didn’t really capture a section, or a diagram wasn’t entirely accurate. The editor picked up on virtually every piece that I had my own secret misgivings about, and gave suggestions that added clarity and ultimately made the final product much more readable.

LC: Having an editor with a human service background was a godsend. As well as the meticulous attention to commas, word meanings and repetitive awkward language, she had thoughtful suggestions about concepts, case material and ‘technical’ language. There is though a sense of not being finished with it – no closure yet. I find I am still re-reading sections, wanting to get better examples, cut this out, do that differently etc. That will have to wait for another version I guess.

Conclusion

Several ‘learnings’ emerged for us during this collaborative writing endeavor. The first was that writing became an extension of our own reflections on practice, from our early experiences of social work education through years of casework, groupwork, community work, policy work, activism, administration, research and teaching. Writing became a way of passing on these reflections to future generations of social work and human service workers. The conversation and dialogue became a way of generating new knowledge, refining ideas, clarifying definitions, and encouraging students to develop their own ways to reflect on their practice.

Our second learning was that there is great merit in understanding that the common ground between the many faces of human service work far outweigh the differences. There are common threads that join those who make up the human service industry. These threads rely on commonality of purpose, shared values and commitment to principles of social justice and human rights, and a dedication to quality practice and
ethical responsibility. The growing body of literature that defines the Australasian human services context bears testament to the strength of this shared purpose.

The third and final learning is that collaborative writing, and the development of a supportive and constructive partnership, intensifies and increases the potency of the reflection. We are convinced that critical reflection is a powerful learning strategy, in all of its many forms, and our experience has highlighted some of the essential ingredients that have moved us forward to new and deeper understandings of ourselves, our practice, collegial relationships, organisational contexts and social systems. This example of collaborative writing is only one illustration of reflection on practice, and this ‘reflection on the reflection’ takes us to yet another level of understanding that will move us further again along the road to social work and human service practice.

References


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