

Educating for Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

This article considers some of the factors involved in the modification of social work education and practice to suit the setting of a society in transition. The author describes a research project undertaken with students at the Hong Kong School of Social Work, with the purpose of designing a relevant skills training course suited to their actual work needs and requirements. The result indicates that student social workers are likely to opt for an eclectic model, constructed principally from Western theory, but drawing from the concrete reality of their own situations. The demands of time and pragmatic considerations, as well as conservative attitudes, are likely to mean that uniquely 'indigenous' models are not developed. However the outcome most probably will be a workable amalgam of learned theory adjusted to suit practical realities encountered in the field.

Introduction

When I lecture Chinese students in Hong Kong I am often struck by the thought that the political, social and economic certainty of the students in front of me extends no further than a decade. The year 1997 is when the lease of most of Hong Kong's territory expires and, by virtue of the Sino-British agreement, Hong Kong returns to Chinese suzerainty. The exact shape of the future is a matter of conjecture, but let us focus on the students' ambiguity. What do they think of the social work theory and practice they are learning when they reflect that most of their professional lives could be spent under a wholly different set of assumptions, rules and expectations? In the teacher's mind there is also a question-mark: how relevant is the instruction he is passing on?

While the Hong Kong situation may be dramatic, it is not unique. The Third World in particular has experienced and will continue to experience a wide range of political, economic and social changes such as national

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independence, economic instability, revolution, the modification of social institutions due to modernisation, new modes of social behaviour and life styles. social work practice is automatically affected by changes in community attitude, client expectations, welfare administration and government policy. Social work education in many parts of the world takes place within the context of a transitional society - a society passing from one spot to another - and social work educators must wonder how they can root social work in such uncertain soil. A problem exists: past models drawn from the industrialised West or even more recent Third World experience in social work practice and education can hardly serve the present, much less the future. What is to be done?

Part of the solution must lie in training people to invent, borrow or modify 'appropriate social technologies' as happened in agriculture or medicine. Normally the phrase 'transfer of technology' is used with reference to the physical sciences, and often the technique to be adapted has some connection with a piece of hardware, a machine. But not always. Business management, government budgeting, social welfare and public health services also involve a transfer of technology that means more than the wholesale borrowing of ideas without adaptation to local circumstances. For social work personnel the adaptation of social technologies is best done in the training phase since it is quite unlikely that social workers who are untrained in change will appreciably alter social institutions or know how to deal with a transitional society.

This paper describes a research project in social work education among Chinese university students in Hong Kong who face vast cultural changes and must reckon with political and economic uncertainty as well. The initial portion of this research was presented as a paper, "The Transfer of Technology: Western Models of Social Change applied in a Chinese Environment" at the First Sino-American Conference on Social Welfare, Taipei, in 1980. The present paper, however, goes beyond the empirical findings of the research to explore more general problems associated with training social workers for revolutionary changes in society. I will leave out here a discussion of the research methodology and detailed findings.

One of the difficulties facing a teacher of social science is the gap between theory and its application to practice. The difficulties are increased where cultural, social or environmental factors are themselves obstacles to the utilisation of research. It may be, for instance, that a variety of rice, responsible for a Green Revolution in one part of the world, does not thrive in the soil or climate of another region. New agricultural machinery suitable for large open areas is unlikely to fit the needs of, or be affordable by, the small farmer. Research on fertilisers runs the same risk of failure when effective application is the most important criterion of success. The question is sometimes referred to as a transfer of technology problem, and one suggested

solution is to find 'an appropriate technology' to meet indigenous requirements. Each invention must be modified through further inventiveness before it will satisfy people everywhere.

In social work education, when theories are literally translated and no transformation of ideas takes place, there is a tendency for students to learn them for academic purposes only, without applying the idea in practice or even examining whether the concept could be utilised in the field. In teaching an applied social science such as social work, instructors find that students generally learn a vast amount of Western social science theory but frequently misunderstand its meaning, consider it remote from their life experience and fail to apply it in their practice. Research findings on human behaviour are not so much questioned as ignored when the circumstances of the research bear no relation to the life style of the students. Thus the transfer of technology does not occur.

Motivating the present research was the observed difficulty undergraduate social work students have in digesting social science theories and research which originate from the West. Failing to comprehend adequately the implications of theories, they have a tendency not to utilise fully concepts and principles learned in class. Case records as well as the observation of field instructors add support to this contention. I would assume that this state of affairs holds true not only for Chinese university students in Hong Kong but for other non English-speaking students in Asia, and that the problem also confronts Asian-born educators.

Theoretically, there are a number of strategies which might be used to meet the deficiency, if such it is. One utopian tactic might be to rely less on Western social science and develop instead indigenous models. But that is easier suggested than done. There are some objections to setting aside a body of knowledge in order to invent a new system. It would be a huge task (though perhaps a fruitful one) and it would certainly demand the inventiveness of a genius. At any rate, the creation of indigenous social service theory is quite outside the capability of most Westerners - quite definitely this one - so that this option was not seriously considered in the research project.

Another approach which I had the opportunity to pursue on another occasion, when co-authoring a book with a Chinese colleague, was to attempt to re-write Western concepts - in that case social work administrative theory - in a Chinese way (Gones and Libik-chi, 1979). The task is more than literal translation since it allows the co-author to fashion the material in his or her own manner, adding local illustrative material. There is some danger, however, that the changes are more stylistic than real which I fear happens too often.

The third approach is to attempt a transfer and modification of technology by intervening in the learning phase so that the training itself becomes the

context and means of transferral. This course of action was the one chosen in the present research. The students were a class of third year social work undergraduates in a small group teaching course, Skills Development Workshop, which was intended to foster skill development in social work - whether casework, group work or community organisation. Using the Skills Development Workshop, the demonstration project aimed at having the students gain a thorough understanding of a limited body of theory by integrating it into their conceptual framework, so that they could use the theory to acquire the skills necessary for planned change. The demonstration project described below was action research in teaching, and it had all the strengths and weaknesses associated with this type of research.

The project

Very simply, the methodology of the research was as follows: a facilitating team of instructors coached students in a limited body of theory - the dynamics of planned change according to the Lippitt school (Lippitt et al, 1978). The students numbered 50, divided into 9 groups. The tutoring was done through small group teaching with almost no written material. The students studied the model of planned change presented to them, reformulating and modifying the ideas as they wished; faithfulness to the original theory was not a priority. In the second stage the students gathered together as a single class to negotiate a single unified theory of planned change, ie their interpretation of the original theory, adding, subtracting or totally altering the ideas according to their opinion of what was appropriate. When they arrived at consensus among themselves (which took some time), a team of rapporteurs recorded their ideas. To prevent plagiarism of the original source, the rapporteurs had no access to either the group instructors or to any written material. The rapporteurs wrote up the theory presented in a systematic fashion and submitted this to the class for double-checking and editing. The next part of the experiment consisted of the students designing a skills training course, using the theoretical concepts as they understood them as well as additional training material which the instructors made available. The entire class then agreed upon the general format for a training workshop, duly recorded by the rapporteurs. The students, again breaking up into small groups, underwent their own workshops, and evaluated their learning.

As for data collection and methods of analysis, the chief methods used were participant observation of the students' behaviour and content analysis of the rapporteurs' and the students' reports. The strong points and limitations of participant observation are well known, but the reasons for choosing this approach need not detain us here. Observations were documented through process recording and, in the final report, through summarising the process. The method of process recording is familiar to social workers who also

recognise its short-comings. Because the principal investigator and instructors were all social workers, there was no doubt some professional bias in the choice of method but there were clear advantages in choosing the method for its own sake as well as for the ease with which the researchers could use it.

The findings

The results of the experiment were mixed. After a slow beginning and a certain resistance to the learning method, the students modified the original theory presented to them. They drew up their own theoretical model with somewhat different assumptions and alternative strategies for change. The planned change model of the Lippitt school was not rejected so much as altered but altered quite substantially. However, in altering the planned change theory the students did not launch any 'indigenous' Chinese model but fell back instead on other bits and pieces of previously learned theory (notably Compton and Galaway's (1979) conceptual framework). The result was an eclectic model of planned change, constructed from mainly Western theories though based in part on what the students felt was appropriate in a Hong Kong setting.

The outcome is not surprising. To expect any group of undergraduates to come up with a brand new theoretical invention would be asking too much, and a 'Chinese theory' of planned change was never the expected result. There are no doubt also cultural factors which favour a conservative, traditional approach to learning and make Hong Kong students, at any rate, more inclined to pick among Western social science concepts rather than try to construct their own planned change model from experience.

Students go to university to acquire knowledge. So long as the students see this acquisition process as a simple transfer of information from the teacher to the taught they may tend to regard group criticism of a reputable conceptual system as a waste of time, if nothing worse. And it has to be remembered that in developing countries students have good reason for not wanting to waste time.

Finally there is a language problem. The fact that most Asian students have to make at least some use of textbooks in a second language and attend classes where at least some of the terms used are in a second language means they have a double task in seeking mastery of their subject. Second-language materials that were designed to be self-exploratory have to be explained by the teacher. Time needed simply to understand the materials inevitably cuts into time that could be used for reflecting on them. It may be felt that there is no time left for any teaching method that does not go straight to the point.

While readily admitting that no completely indigenous theory and practice of planned change emerged, the positive outcome included a conscious

transfer of social technology which was, within the limits of the experiment, fairly well achieved. The students undertook a modification of technology to suit their own purpose and this was the aim of the project all along. This brings us to consider the ways in which Chinese culture assists students in their search for knowledge. Apart from the value attached to learning in Chinese society, there is a pragmatic factor which cannot be ignored. The students were not unduly worried about where the planned change theory came from so long as it was useful, as long, that is, as they judged it capable of being put to work. With that goal in mind, they altered the unified theory presented to them and came up with an eclectic model of their own drawn from various sources.

In the workshops where the skills needed for social change were emphasised the students demonstrated independence and initiative. The students met in a general session to negotiate and decide upon a overall framework for the individual group workshops, curriculum outline, methods of learning, etc, but failed to agree, so the individual groups went their own way with self-designed training courses. Most groups revealed the students' ability to use and manipulate concepts and acquire skills.

Conclusion

Underlying this experiment is the notion that the transfer of technology in the classroom is not unlike what happens in the field. The Third World has to absorb a vast amount of information if it is to cope with the progress of technically advanced Western countries or if it is to modernise in its own fashion. The social services are, or at any rate should be, part of this revolutionary progress. While it might seem ideal for each country to invent its own social structures, infrastructures, organisations and cultural systems on its own, there is no time to re-invent the wheel nor much inclination to do so on the part of the developing world. Therefore borrowing must and should take place within the context of national cultures. And there's the rub. A particular social welfare system, for instance, should not be introduced lock, stock and barrel on alien soil simply because it works in Western industrialised countries. A technology must be appropriate if it is to be useful. The transfer of social technology should involve an assessment of the model's effectiveness in the local situation. It is the contention here that this assessment as well as the adjustment of ideas should occur in the initial training period when the technology is first introduced. Thus the training itself becomes the means through which the technology is transferred and made appropriate.

In no sense did this classroom research project prove the theoretical assumptions underlying the transfer of social technology. what is demonstrated is one approach to making theory relevant in a transitional

society. The possible implications in the field and training institutions are obvious. Too many social work textbooks in the Third World are translations or near-translations of Western social work theory. Research into the transfer of social technology is crucial if social change is the goal or likely consequence of local, regional or national policy. This is a task for social work education.

References

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