

TEACHING RADICAL SOCIAL WORK SKILLS: A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL POLICY, SOCIAL WORK AND COMMUNITY WORK

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Abstract. *The worlds of social work practice, community work and social policy analysis converge in the academic study of radical social work. As such, voices from each of these disciplines should be incorporated, jointly, in social work education about radical practice. This article explores the nature of radical social work, its importance in social work education and the partnership approach taken by one University to teaching social workers in training about radical social work practice. Over a two-year programme, students are equipped with sectoral and policy analysis skills, followed by skills for active engagement with the social justice and social change mission of social work.*

Key words: *Radical Social Work, partnership, social policy, community work, teaching.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The worlds of social work practice, community work, social policy analysis and other social science disciplines such as sociology or human geography converge in the academic study of radical social work. This aspect of social work practice can be understood as an over-arching approach that moves from the individual to the societal, focusing on ideas, concepts and practices that place an emphasis on the socio-economic-political context. Radical social work places an imperative on practitioners to critique and engage with the policy arena, entering the liminal space between social work practice, community work practice and social policy analysis. This article documents the partnership approach taken by one university to populating this space. The approach explicitly engages voices from three disciplines – social work practitioners, community work practitioners and social

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policy analysts – within the liminal space, in a collaborative approach to teaching radical social work.

2. WHAT IS RADICAL SOCIAL WORK

Radical social work is concerned with the wider, structural issues in society – discrimination, inequality and poverty, for example – and argues that certain state instruments such as policies function as instruments of oppression that benefit the privileged groups (Mullally 2007). Building on sociological theory, a radical approach to social work therefore posits that neoliberalism and global capitalism strongly deepen inequality (Fraser et al. 2017). Many aspects of the way society is ordered reflect the interests of the powerful. The control of media, politics and education, and how social issues are conceived, influence everyday life and relationships. Radical social work sees fighting for social justice as an ethical imperative of social work. Manning (2003) advises that the ethical is also political and that social workers

“...should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (Manning 2003).

While it is not easy to identify a single definition of radical social work (Reisch and Andrews 2001), most share the following themes: a structural analysis of personal problems; an analysis of the social control functions of social work and welfare; and an ongoing social critique, analysis of oppressive functions within and across society.

In focusing on injustice and inequality, radical social work prompts practitioners to examine not only what can be done at the macro level to address these imbalances, but also to seek to elucidate the root causes and establish a structural analysis of personal problems. This drive to discover and address the root causes of injustice and disadvantage are at the core of radical social work (de Maria 1992). In positing an analysis of the social control functions of social work and welfare, radical social work differs from other forms of “good” social work in that it first requires discovery of the “root causes” of inequalities. This must be followed by engaging in social action towards progressive social change, operationalising an ongoing social critique, an analysis of oppressive functions within and across society. Social work which is understood from a radical perspective acknowledges the political aspect of social work and is unapologetic about this. For some, social work should be viewed as a neutral profession (Pawar 2019; Whiting 2008), for others, particularly those in the radical tradition, social work is necessarily political (Ioakimidis 2016).

Radical social work largely focuses on the macro as opposed to micro – the community as opposed to the individual – but acknowledges the dialectic relationship between the two. For example, Bertha Capen Reynolds, a USA based radical social worker in the mid-1900s, did not differentiate between individual casework and community organising because in her view difficulties faced by people and communities were ‘beyond the scope of any one method’ (Joseph 1986, 122, in Belkin-Martinez and Fleck Henderson 2014, 18). A community-lens is therefore imperative for radical social work.

One of the challenges of the radical approach is translating it into everyday practice. Social work exists in an on-going tension whereby practitioners are demanded by the state to carry out an ‘agent of control’ function, but simultaneously, through their education

and training, are compelled to strive for social justice. By helping people, and the communities they work with, to see and understand how their problems were being created by a system that favours the rich and powerful, social workers sympathetic to the radical tradition are able to raise political awareness, which in itself helps to empower people and communities towards conscientization (Freire 1993). Rossiter (2001) encapsulates some of these concerns in her discussion critiquing whether social workers can actually assist victims of the (neoliberal) system, when social work is part of the very structure that defines that victimhood.

Is radical policy work for social workers an optional approach or one which every social worker should engage in?

“Too often the claim is made that critical and radical social work is a luxury that is afforded to academics ... but has no practice relevance ... This was always a lazy claim ... there are [and always have been] practitioners looking for [and using] critical and radical ... practice” (Ferguson & Lavalette 2013).

The ‘Global Definition of Social Work’ adopted by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) codifies the radical nature of the profession. For example, in its commitment to the development of ‘critical consciousness’, the creation of ‘action strategies to support emancipatory practice’ and the commitment to ‘solidarity’, working with those experiencing disadvantage to alleviate poverty and oppression. Indeed, for the IFSW the commitment of social work to radical practice is constructed as a core mandate and from this perspective, social work has a duty to promote social change, social development, and the empowerment and liberation of people. The commitment of the IFSW to radical perspectives therefore underlines the centrality of this approach to social work practice.

3. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TEACH RADICAL SOCIAL WORK?

It is important to teach radical social work in practitioner programmes because social work students entering practice need to work from a sound knowledge and social science theory base in order to be confident and develop as ethically sound practitioners. While most students in Ireland will come to social work training with the sociological underpinnings of radical social work, if students are not exposed to radical social work theory in college, then they will not necessarily become aware of it or incorporate it into their practice in the field. If students are drawn to radical or critical social work theory, either while on placement or through the taught part of their programmes, it is important that they are offered tangible ways of “doing” and “being” radical social workers in practice.

For a sizeable number of students entering social work programmes, the broader, collective aspects of social work serve as motivation for study. Some of these students may agree that social workers should act as ‘change agents’ for communities and society as well as individuals and families (IFSW 2012). This motivation is evident in a recent Irish study *The Push and Pull Factors of a Career in Social Work: What Drives Recruitment and Retention in Social Work* (Flanagan et al. 2021) where 91% and 86% of respondents in the study articulated that their personal commitment to social justice and social change respectively were motivating factors for studying social work (Flanagan et al. 2021, 177).

Through critical reflection of radical theories and analysing placement experience, social work educators can support students to not “...fall into the trap of hyper-individualising social

problems” (Fraser et al. 2017). Educating people based on values aligned with the principles and definition of social work is another important element of incorporating radical social work tradition in social work education.

“Critical, radical and structural social workers appreciate that unemployment, poverty and homelessness are debilitating social problems in many people’s lives (Lavalette, 2011; Mullaly, 2007; Morley et al., 2014)” in (Fraser et al 2017).

As such, social work educators should seek to impart knowledge that allows students to understand that a core aspect of social work is to work to change the political system to meet the needs of the people and not to change people to fit in with the political system.

Social work educators teaching radical approaches to social work should also ensure to instill hope in social work students that change comes from (re)claiming the radical social work identity (Fook 2002). Incorporating radical approaches in social work curricula highlights the notion that collaboration between social workers and service users is imperative (Beresford 2011). In encouraging discussion and analysis, social work educators can support students to heighten their awareness of structural and societal injustices and in doing so, increase the potential for action (Howe 2009). Not including radical social work theory in the education of social workers risks producing a social work workforce which accepts the entrenchment of the neoliberal status quo, of individualising public issues; a workforce that is unable to strive to create real systemic change and yields to the embedding of structural inequalities in society. This risks a

“Professional social work (which) is taught as if it exists within a political vacuum, largely devoid of class analysis and is incapable of addressing issues of poverty and oppression...In this context, it is easy to ignore the need for social change” (Russell 2017).

As noted earlier, the challenge is to support students to apply radical approaches to everyday practice. Community Work may offer a way forward in the application of theory to practice. Indeed, there are interesting connections between radical social work perspectives and community work approaches. It is also interesting to note the similarities in the language of the IFSW definition and the Community Work Ireland (2016) definition of Community Work as

“A developmental activity comprised of both a task and a process. The task is social change to achieve equality, social justice and human rights, and the process is the application of principles of participation, empowerment and collective decision making in a structured and co-ordinated way” (AIEB 2016, 5).

For the social work educator, community work, traditionally one of three methods of social work (along with social casework and social group work) offers approaches for integrating radical theory into action. The contribution of the Brazilian Educationalist and Community worker Paulo Freire and his ideas on ‘praxis’ and ‘problem-posing education’ (Freire 1972) represent key points of influence in classroom teaching of radical social work.

4. SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

In addressing the teaching of radical social work in the practitioner curriculum, it is important to consider the evolution of social work education in the Republic of Ireland. The establishment of social work education in this country can be traced back to 1912,

when a training course entitled *Civic and Social Work* first started in Alexandra College in Dublin. Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin followed in 1934 and 1936, respectively, with diplomas in Social Studies. In 1973 a form of social work education, more similar to contemporary practitioner education, was adopted and social work programmes were approved by the UK Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) despite the state being an independent republic. A quarter of a century later the National Social Work Qualifications Board was established, followed by the current statutory regulator CORU in 2005. CORU oversees not only the professional conduct of social workers in the Republic of Ireland, but also accredits and monitors social work teaching programmes. All social work teaching programmes must undergo a comprehensive review by CORU every five years and be approved in order to retain their accreditation and continue providing the programme.

Currently, six universities offer social work education in the Republic of Ireland; Maynooth University (MU), University College Dublin (UCD), University College Cork (UCC), University of Galway (UCG), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Atlantic Technological University (ATU), Sligo. A further two schools provide social work education in Northern Ireland, one in Queens University Belfast and one in the University of Ulster. However, while there is extensive cross-border collaboration with schools in the Republic of Ireland, these two schools are in a different political jurisdiction, the United Kingdom, and do not fall under the remit of CORU.

As with social work education across the world, most of the education is offered at the post-graduate level. All of the universities in the Republic of Ireland have two-year post-graduate Masters programmes, with TCD offering an undergraduate programme and UCC offering an undergraduate programme for mature students. All of the programmes are structured with approximately half of the teaching being classroom based in the university and the other half being practice based learning in social work agencies. On average, approximately 250 students graduate each year in the Republic of Ireland.

The Maynooth University professional social work programme, which was setup in 2019, is a two-year postgraduate, Master's degree. Forty students are taken into the programme each year and these students spend approximately ten months in the classroom, interspersed with two 14-week blocks of practice placement. Applicants to the programme are required to have a social science background and many successful students already have a degree in social science which incorporates social policy alongside a second subject such as sociology.

5. A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL POLICY, SOCIAL WORK AND COMMUNITY WORK

In devising the social work programme in Maynooth University, significant Freirean influences were brought to bear on the overall curriculum. For Freire, central to the definition of praxis (doing action) is a contentious cycle of reflection on how theory influences action and vice versa, defined as '*reflection and action on the world in order to transform it*' (Freire 1972: 52). This influence prompted the use of problem-posing methods that encourage students to critically reflect on the opportunities and challenges inherent in the task of applying, for example, radical ideas to practice. Freire's theory of 'codification' (1972) was identified as a practical way of engaging students, and indeed

educators, in problem-posing education. Simply, a ‘code’ is a representation of an actual situation that students have strong feelings about and can be exemplified as a picture, story, video, or poster. The purpose of the ‘code’ is for students to generate something that can be analysed at the levels of description, impact, root causes, and possibilities for change through action planning. In terms of an example, the ‘Ethics Work’ Framework of Banks (2016) supports the application of radical perspectives on ethics to practice (e.g. emancipatory values including social justice, and collective responsibility). The ‘Ethics Work’ framework contains various elements that start with situating or framing an ethical issue. Students are encouraged to consider how when taking up the social work role they can balance the rational and relational nature of practice. Students are also encouraged to frame practice as political, for example, when working with case studies they are invited to explore how a focus on human rights and social justice would change the more therapeutic elements of the case. The aim is not to repudiate therapeutic approaches, such as strengths-based models rather the purpose is for students to understand that personal issues often reflect political causes. To bring change both the personal and the political require intervention.

The teaching of social policy in social work training has traditionally been undertaken by colleagues from the related, and often co-departmental discipline of social policy. However, many social work students come to social work with an undergraduate degree in social policy or a social policy component in social care training. As such, students on postgraduate social work programmes, by and large already have a grounding in social policy. Therefore, the role of social policy within professional training can often be one of refamiliarization with the concepts, theories and practices of policy making and application of that theory to social work policy practice. Similarly, most social work students in Ireland come to social work with an undergraduate degree in sociology from which they can build their existing knowledge of the socio-economic-political context of social work. In recent months, a sociology component was introduced to the social work programme in this university; however, it is not yet explicitly linked to the teaching of radical social work.

In line with the programme ethos, a Freirean influenced problem-posing approach was sought to teaching social policy for social work which would integrate the practitioner voices from the policy arena. The first author of this paper, a social policy academic, tasked with social policy education on the professional social work programme, studied the information behaviour of social workers for her doctoral research and was acutely aware of the value of a social work voice in teaching social policy (Flanagan 2020). The second author, a social work practitioner, has engaged in policy work throughout her career and actively engages in promotion of policy practice to practitioners through her work with professional associations and unions. The third author, and Director of the social work programme, came to social work with a long background in community work and youth work. The interface of a policy academic with a research interest in social work practice, a social work practitioner with active participation in policy work, and a programme director with a background in community work became the genesis of a two-voice teaching strategy which maximises the individual disciplinary expertise, cross-disciplinary collaboration and Freirean problem-posing, modelling to students the relationship between these closely related disciplines.

5.1. Year 1, Sectoral Analysis and Policy Analysis

It has been pointed out that ‘social work, radical or otherwise, is fundamentally linked to the time and to the place in which it occurs’ (Vance 2017, 1). Furthermore, radical social work

brings the collectivist tradition and community development approaches to bear on social work practices (Ferguson and Woodward 2009, 132). However, inherent in radical social work, there are also risks to professional reputations when undertaking radical social work in isolation (Ferguson and Woodward 2009, 132), underlining the importance of strategic alliances to mitigate the potential risks (Ferguson and Woodward 2009: 132). In this context, an outward-looking approach, into the community in which practitioners work, is crucial. This philosophy of an outward-looking profession underpins the first strand of radical social work skills development at Maynooth University – that of sectoral analysis.

The social policy component of the Year 1 programme runs weekly for twelve weeks and involves didactic inputs which reintroduce students to social policy, outline the policy-making process and explore the various voices in policy making in Ireland. Alongside this teaching input, students work on a *Collaborative Sectoral Analysis Portfolio*. Each student is assigned a stakeholder organisation who have a voice in policy making. This can include relevant government departments, statutory agencies, non-government agencies, advocacy groups or professional organisations such as the *Irish Association of Social Workers*. Students research the organisation and write a short blog to share their findings with the class. Blogs are posted on the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) and are visible to all class members. In this way the acquired knowledge is shared among the class. In a second blog, students research and post about how their assigned organisation takes a voice in policy making. Some organisations or government departments will be in the formal role of policy maker, while others will contribute through government advisory roles, responding to calls for submissions on legislative development, and/or advocacy campaigns of various breadth and magnitudes. The main statutory agencies in Ireland which are of most relevance to social work include Tusla: Child and Family Agency and The Probation Service. In these agencies, policies become *de facto* national policies. The student blogs, which are short and succinct, support skills in sectoral analysis and identification of organisations that may be potential strategic partners in radical social work practice.

The second part of the module focuses on policy analysis with lectures on national-level policies of relevance to forthcoming social work placements. This can include, for example, the national child protection policy, or the joint working protocol between police and child protection workers, or an adult safeguarding policy. Building on research which shows that social workers like to acquire knowledge and information from fellow social workers (Flanagan 2020), each student is assigned a policy closely related to the organisation they researched. The students are instructed to prepare a five-minute video 'teaching' their peers about the policy, with the instructional guidelines that the videos are a peer-to-peer teaching and learning exercise. In other words, the content and presentation should be what they themselves would like to hear about a policy. The videos are limited to no more than 5-7 minutes and serve as an introduction and overview to a policy. The aim of the videos is to construct a collaborative portfolio of policy knowledge which students can access while on placement: a portfolio prepared by and for social work students. Despite the technical as well as academic challenge associated with developing these videos, students have produced a range of short, informative and educational materials which are housed and accessible to the class on the University's VLE.

5.2. Year 2, Skills for Active Engagement

While Year 1 skills development focuses on sectoral analysis and policy analysis, Year 2 addresses issues of active engagement in radical social policy with Freirean problem-posing exercises. This 12-hour module is delivered in a two-voice presentation with a social policy academic and a practitioner introducing the concepts of radical social work, justifications for policy work education, and then walking students through structures and strategies for influencing policy making and the problems or risks associated with them.

Students are introduced to the social justice and social change mission which inspires many practitioners to join the profession and motivates them to remain in practice. This component of the module draws heavily on data from a piece of participative research undertaken by the first cohort of social work students in Maynooth University (Flanagan et al. 2021). As mentioned earlier, the findings of the study on recruitment and retention in Irish social work point clearly to the primacy of the social justice and social change mission among Irish social workers. For many, the proximity of the research to the current students chimes with their own motivations for choosing to study social work.

This input on the social justice and social change mission of social work is tempered somewhat by an input on the risks associated with engaging in radical social work in isolation. The risks are presented in an ecological framework (Bonfenbrenner 1979) which maps risks at the individual level, the organisational level, the professional level, the national and societal levels.

Moving on from the ecology of risk, the module addresses the structures within which social work practitioners can safely engage in radical social work practice. Strategic alliances at local, national and international levels are again placed in an ecology of alliances, introducing students to the organisations through which they can collectively influence policy. Having undertaken a sectoral analysis in Year 1, students are well equipped to brainstorm potential strategic partners at a number of levels in the ecology.

A model for taking a voice in policy making, drawing on social policy studies, is complemented by a social work practitioner input on each phase in the process. The *Model For Active Engagement In Policy Making* (Flanagan & Cuskelly, in preparation) looks at five phases of active engagement in influencing policy work.

- (1) developing a policy agenda
- (2) developing a strategy for action
- (3) presenting a policy position
- (4) Persistence in pursuit of policy change
- (5) Monitoring of policy evolution and implementation.

In each phase of the model, students are introduced to the steps, practices and procedures that they can employ to effectively and safely contribute to policy making. Again, employing the Freirean problem-posing approach each step is critiqued and discussed by the practitioner lecturer in order to embed the steps in social work practice.

Having taken a largely Irish-centric approach throughout the module, the assignment for the module is a structured, whole-class 'round-the-world' discussion about radical social work practices. The assignment uses Gall and Weiss-Gall's (2014) edited volume, *Social Workers Affecting Social Policy: An International Perspective* to navigate international and country-specific policy work practices. The book includes chapters on social workers policy work in Australia, England, Israel, Italy, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the USA. Small groups of students are assigned a chapter from the book and, having read the chapter

outside class, are invited to discuss the chapter in their small groups identifying key practices which they would like to bring back to the whole-class discussion. Students are afforded relative freedom in what they choose to bring to the discussion, some choosing to focus on practices which we could adopt in Ireland, others choosing practices which we should avoid in Irish social work, and others again highlighting the barriers and risks experienced by fellow social workers in other jurisdictions.

Students are each invited to prepare 3-minute discussion points on a policy work aspect that they would like to share with the class. Students post a blog indicating their chosen theme for discussion and a structure for the discussion is mapped, either thematically or geographically. The map, overlaying a geographical map, is displayed on a screen so students know when to make their contribution. Each student presents their theme of interest and can link, compare and contrast to Ireland or other nations' practices in the presentations of their peers.

CONCLUSION

Maynooth University's ethos and history has evolved from, firstly, a community and youth work origin, to include social policy and most recently social work. The structure of the University is such that sociology and human geography are part of separate departments, although most social work students will have studied at least one or the other at the undergraduate level. Acknowledging and building on the social science underpinnings of undergraduate study, the applied social science disciplinary influences of community work, youth work, social policy and social work, which form the pillars of the Department were judiciously and purposively woven into the fabric of social work education within the University, embedding a Freirean problem-posing philosophy in policy work for radical social work. Radical social work places an imperative on practitioners to draw on their broad social science background to critique and engage with the socio-economic-political policy arena, entering the liminal space between the wider social sciences. This module is firmly situated in an applied framework where students bring their existing social sciences knowledge to bear on policy practice, using their knowledge of root causes and structural analysis of personal problems to critique and plan for effective policy practice. The key to the impact of this approach are the voices of practitioners and analysts in partnership, modelling the importance of strategic partnerships in radical social work practice.

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NASTAVA RADIKALNOG SOCIJALNOG RADA: PARTNERSTVO IZMEĐU SOCIJALNE POLITIKE, SOCIJALNOG RADA I RADA U ZAJEDNICI

Praksa socijalnog rada, rada u zajednici i analiza socijalne politike konvergiraju u akademskom proučavanju radikalnog socijalnog rada. Samim tim, informacije iz svake od ovih disciplina trebalo bi da budu uključene, istovremeno, u nastavu radikalnog socijalnog rada. Ovaj rad istražuje prirodu radikalnog socijalnog rada, njegovu važnost u nastavi, i partnerski pristup koji je jedan univerzitet odabrao u podučavanju socijalnih radnika u okviru prakse iz oblasti radikalnog socijalnog rada. Tokom dvogodišnjeg programa studenti stiču veštine sektorske i političke analize, uz veštine za aktivno angažovanje u ostvarivanju ciljeva socijalnog rada i socijalne pravde.

Ključne reči: *radikalni socijalni rad, saradnja, socijalna politika, rad u zajednici, nastava.*