# Teaching community development to social work students: a critical reflection

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**Abstract**  Community development is generally considered to be a core component of social work practice and knowledge. Yet much professional social work education and discourse seems to relegate community development to the margins. This paper critically analyses the development of a community development subject within one particular Australian social work course. Particular attention is drawn to subject objectives, content, reading material, teaching methods and assessment. Some suggestions are made for new educational initiatives that could potentially enhance the contribution that community development skills and processes make to social work practice efficacy and wisdom.

## Introduction

In November 2006, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers co-hosted a national conference in Perth titled 'United we stand: Building knowledge and strengthening practice in our communities'. Community development is also a required subject in all 25 Australian Schools of Social Work, and two out of the three key community development textbooks in Australia are authored by social workers (Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon, 2003; Ife and Tesoriero, 2006).

Traditionally, many Australian community development workers have been social work graduates, and much community development education has occurred within social work or social welfare courses (Mowbray, 1985, p. 303; Thorpe and Petruchenia, 1992). To be sure, a significant new Australian social and community services industry including community development has emerged, which exists independently of the organized social work profession (Kenny, 1999, pp. 12–14). However, on the surface at

least, it would appear that there is a close and complementary relationship between social work and community development practice.

In practice, however, the relationship is far more complex. Firstly, there remains some unresolved tension in the relationship between the two disciplines. As noted by Dominelli (1990, p. 1), some authors argue that community development is a distinct discipline with its own traditions and political philosophy, whereas others describe community development as one method of social work intervention. This controversy has contributed to some conflict between the two disciplines. In particular, a number of community development educators and practitioners are explicitly hostile to social work and concerned to distance community development from what they see as an allegedly conservative profession (Mowbray and Meekosha, 1990, p. 343; Waddington, 1994, p. 6; Kenny, 1999, pp. 37–38, 80, 85–87).

Much of this criticism arguably reflects a false construction of community development as inherently radical and social work as inherently conservative. In reality, both have conservative and radical components. To be sure, professional social work has been dominated historically by individualistic and psychoanalytic perspectives. However, in recent decades, mainstream social work has incorporated structural and systemic perspectives. Most Australian social workers now practice within what may be called a 'persons in their social environment' framework which holistically examines the relationship between individuals and broader social and community structures and networks (O'Connor, Wilson and Setterlund, 1998, pp. 6–10; Goldsworthy, 2002, p. 330).

Similarly, the critique ignores the presence of considerable mainstream or conservative practice within community development itself. For example, many contemporary programmes such as neighbourhood renewal are based on working within our existing socio-political system rather than developing strategies to explicitly challenge social structures (Mendes, 2004; Mowbray, 2004). Although there are some significant value-based differences between community development and social work, they also have much in common.

In contrast, a number of authors argue for closer integration of the two disciplines based on the assumption that social workers are committed to promoting social justice: that is, to linking personal pain with broader social and political structures and interventions.

According to this perspective, both professions could benefit from sharing their knowledge and skills to facilitate personal and community empowerment. This could be particularly useful in rural areas where individual services are often difficult to access due to cost and distance. For example, community development workers may find that the application

of the micro-skills valued in social work will assist them to recognize and respect individual differences and needs within collective processes. Similarly, social workers may decide that community-based interventions based on exploring the strengths of communities and individuals are often more effective than individual casework interventions in addressing social needs (Earle and Fopp, 1999, pp. 493–494; Clarke, 2000, p. 1; Figueira-McDonough, 2001, pp. 137–138; Rubin and Rubin, 2001, p. 72; Goldsworthy, 2002; Whelan *et al.*, 2002; Bun Ku, Chung Yeung and Sung-Chan, 2005; Bunn, 2005; Carlon, 2005; Carroll, 2005; Coulton, 2005; Tajnsek, 2005).

Secondly, there are also divisions within the two disciplines over how they construct the other. Some social workers – probably a minority – see community development as a key practice skill that should be utilized in most social work interventions. Others – probably the majority – view community development as a specialist skill only to be utilized by those working specifically as community development workers. The latter position tends to lead to the marginalization of community development within social work practice and education. For example, it appears that community development subjects are increasingly taught by inexperienced sessional rather than core academic staff, and that only a small minority of social workers work in community practice (Lee *et al.*, 1996; Dixon and Hoatson, 1999; Allen-Kelly, McArthur and Roughley, 2001; Ife, 2001, p. 39; Maritz and Coughlan, 2004).

And equally, community development workers seem to hold a variety of positions on the issues of professionalism and volunteerism which in turn influence their approach to social work. Many reject social work's reliance on professional discourse incorporating specialist knowledge and skills in favour of a more democratic relationship with communities (Kenny, 1996, p. 108; Kenny, 1999, pp. 21, 144–145; Clarke, 2000, p. 11).

Social work is defined here as professional intervention to address situations of personal distress and crisis by shaping and changing the social environment in which people live. Community development is defined here as the employment of community structures to address social needs and empower groups of people.

## The structure of the community development subject

This article describes and analyses the development of the community development subject within one particular Australian-based social work course over a ten-year period. This course involves two years of study for a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) following the completion of two earlier years of university education. The social work degree is also offered to Distance Education students in either a two-year full-time, or four-year

part-time framework, and since 2004 to BSW students based in Singapore. Some students also undertake a combined four-year Bachelor of Arts/ BSW degree, or combined Bachelor of Health Sciences/BSW degree.

Community development subject is a compulsory final year subject involving twelve weeks of two hour lectures for on-campus students. Distance education students receive a workbook containing all the material used in the lectures, and also attend a compulsory workshop in February. The Singapore-based students also receive the workbook and participate in weekly tutorials plus a compulsory workshop in February. There is, however, little if any community development content in the accompanying direct practice subjects such as working with individuals, working with families and groups, cross-cultural social work, fieldwork skills and practicum, etc. Overall, the community development subject appears to occupy a small, if not marginal, place within the curriculum.

This marginalization arguably duplicates the equally marginal position of community development in the AASW's *Practice Standards for Social Workers* document, whereby community development warrants only a two word mention in a thirty-one-page publication (AASW, 2003, p. 5). Both the professional social work association and the university appear to place community development outside the mainstream of social work practice. Social work seems to be defined narrowly as direct practice with individuals or groups, and community development is constructed as a specialist activity that is assumed to be of interest to only a small minority of students and graduates.

I was appointed to coordinate the community development subject at Monash University in 1998. Prior to that date, I had only minimal teaching experience. This had included a few guest lectures from 1992 to 1994 in a Social Policy subject at another Victorian university, two years of co-coordinating fieldwork (1995–1996) and the teaching of an eight-week final-year elective called 'The Politics of Welfare' in 1996.

In addition, most of my practice experience had been limited to individual-based casework in areas such as child protection, income security and crisis counselling. However, I had worked as a Social Policy Officer at the AASW for one year. This experience had confirmed my belief that social policy and community development interventions were an integral part of social work practice, and that individual or group work needed to be complemented by collective activism to be effective.

## Development of course content

The initial development of the course content can best be described as a process of 'learning by trial and error' (Pawar, 2004, p. 13). I was appointed

to the position in late January 1998 and given only a short period of time to develop content for both on-campus and distance education students. The retiring lecturer kindly provided some assistance including a copy of previous course outlines, and some teaching material. However, I found that much of the content and style of this material did not fit with my plans for the subject.

My aim was to develop a course that would provide students with the skills required to work in specific community development settings, or at the very least to employ community development strategies within other social work practice contexts. I assumed that students who were able to employ both personal micro- and CD macro-skills in their work would be able to intervene more effectively with individuals, groups and communities. However, given my lack of teaching experience and minimal knowledge of teaching methods and strategies, it was always likely that this process would take time.

Over time, this process was assisted by formal teaching and subject evaluations from both students and academic colleagues. Student feedback was attained via the Centre for Higher Education Quality, and a number of constructive revisions were suggested pertaining particularly to a greater diversity of teaching methods. These are discussed further under the heading teaching methods. In addition, a senior lecturer in the Department reviewed the distance education workbook in preparation for an AASW accreditation review and suggested the inclusion of some additional content.

I have outlined the objectives and content of the community development subject in Tables 1 and 2.

The course commences with a basic definition of the different meanings of community as in geographical, functional or communities of interest. We then examine a range of definitions of community development including some case examples of practice from local authors such as Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon (2003) and Kenny (2006). We also discuss the ambivalent professional relationship between social work and community development and explore the changing historical role of community

**Table 1** Objectives

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| To understand the concepts of community and community development |
| To develop an understanding of community development as a core social work practice method |
| To explore different models of community development including community development, community organization, social action and social planning |
| To consider the value and ideological bases of community development |
| To enable students to develop and implement appropriate ethical behaviours and standards in their community development |
| To examine the range of roles and strategies in community development |
| To explore a variety of community development skills |

**Table 2** Content

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| Week 1 | Social workers and community-based practice |
| Week 2 | Roles and skills of community development |
| Week 3 | Theoretical/ideological base of community development |
| Week 4 | Principles of community development |
| Week 5 | Models of community development practice |
| Week 6 | Guest speaker on social action |
| Week 7 | Guest speaker on social planning |
| Week 8 | Guest speaker on local community development |
| Week 9 | Social development |
| Week 10 | Ethical issues/dilemmas |
| Week 11 | Bargaining tactics and strategies |
| Week 12 | Evaluation in community development |

development in Australia and elsewhere including the tensions between state-funded CD approaches and community generated liberationist approaches (Popple, 2007, p. 149).

Week 2 outlines the key features of the Australian community services industry. We then introduce students to the key roles and skills of community development practice as constructed by local authors such as McArdle (1999), Kenny (2006) and Ife and Tesoriero (2006) and analyse their implementation in particular projects. Students are invited to complete two exercises: one involves analysing community development interventions with four particular groups: homeless people, Aboriginal communities, non-English-speaking communities and rural communities, and the other involves constructing a community profile.

Week 3 analyses the theoretical and ideological bases for community development. We note the considerable ideological confusion within community development and the competing conservative and radical views of community. Attention is drawn to nine different ideologies (functionalism, liberalism/pluralism, social democracy, Marxism/structural theory, feminism, postmodernism, communitarianism, environmentalism and neo-liberalism) and their particular approach to practice. We also consider the application of various constructions of the concept of 'power' in community development.

Week 4 examines the key principles of community development practice ranging from empowerment to participation to inclusiveness and the extent to which they are reflected in existing Australian welfare structures. Week 5 discusses the strengths and limitations of the key models of community development such as Dominelli (1990), Checkoway (1995) and Rothman (2001). Students are provided with case studies of the locality development, social planning and social action approaches described in the Rothman model.

Weeks 6–8 involve guest speakers. We generally try to invite one speaker who is involved in a local community project, one speaker who is involved in a larger state government or regional social planning project and one speaker who is involved in a controversial social action campaign.

Week 9 explores the key features and principles of the social development model. Students are provided with case studies from the global community including a number adapted from the recent International Association for Community Development report (2007). An exercise is offered inviting students to consider the different approaches of traditional casework versus social development to common social problems such as juvenile crime, substance abuse and rural disadvantage.

Week 10 utilizes the writings of Brager (1968), Alinsky (1989), Reisch and Lowe (2000), Banks (2003) and Ife and Tesoriero (2006) to consider some of the key ethical issues and dilemmas that typically confront community development practitioners. These include conflicts with the community, conflicts with employers or funding bodies, issues of information and communication, laws and regulations, the use of children in campaigns, tensions around involving welfare service users in campaigns including questions of confidentiality, contested values and multiple accountabilities.

Week 11 introduces students to the bargaining and negotiation skills and processes utilized in community development. Utilizing writers such as Alinsky (1989) and Nash (2001), attention is drawn to the relationship between particular goals, intervention modes and tactics and a range of potential campaign strategies.

Week 12 analyses the role of evaluation in community development. Students are introduced to the formative and summative approaches to evaluation, the reasons for evaluating community development pro-grammes, common steps in evaluation and the debate around open or inquiry evaluation versus audit review evaluation. A case study of evalu-ation is provided from the earlier work of Wills (1985) on the Fitzroy Advisory Service.

Each week of the off-campus workbook also includes a specific section for Singapore students. For example, we provide an overview of the specific role and history of community development in Singapore. We also discuss the functionalist ideology that seems to dominate practice in Singapore, the application of community development principles in Singapore and the applicability of the Rothman and other models to Singapore. We also pro-vided culturally relevant case studies addressing issues such as the difficul-ties faced by elderly citizens in attaining employment due to discrimination by employers; the inability of 'unwed' mothers to buy their own homes due to existing legislation, and the refusal of the military to accept gay men as combat soldiers.

## Teaching methods

I began teaching this course using primarily didactic lectures accompanied by material on an overhead plus a few guest lectures. Critical feedback from both students and academic colleagues suggested that this did not work particularly well in terms of engaging the audience in an interactive way.

For example, independent student evaluations organized by the university consistently called for a greater diversity of teaching methods including visual presentations. In addition, they asked that a copy of the overheads be provided to them in a handout so that they could concentrate on what I was saying rather than on copying down the overheads.

Over time, I have moved to a combination of didactic lectures, regular exercises, guest lectures, student presentations and videos. A typical two-hour period would include a forty-five-minute lecture, a fifteen-minute coffee break and approximately one-hour for student small group exercises.

For example, the Week 1 lecture includes two exercises. One is a simple icebreaker (Murphy, 1998, p. 31) whereby students are asked in small groups to identify communities that they are involved with, and to consider how a community differs from a society or a business association. The second exercise encourages students to think about the specific contribution that community development skills can make to social work practice efficacy and wisdom.

Further exercises involve students being asked to consider how community development principles could prevent a worker or agency from imposing an ideology or value system on a community in regard to issues such as homelessness, domestic violence, racism and disabilities and also applying Rothman's three approaches to a number of case scenarios.

Guest lecturers also seem to be welcomed by students particularly when they provide a passionate and informed presentation of their topic. For example, a number of speakers have addressed local community projects around issues such as refugees and multiculturalism. We have also had a number of speakers involved in large-scale state or government social planning projects pertaining to illicit drugs, street sex work, poverty and youth suicide. Recently we had a speaker from the Department of Victorian Communities, which funds community projects across the state. In addition, there has been a number of speakers from social action campaigns pertaining to child care, the environment and feminist issues. They have included representatives of the Werribee Residents against Toxic Dumps campaign (Van Moorst, 2000), and the Diversity in Safe Communities campaign to protect single mothers from harassment by the ultra-conservative men's rights group, the Blackshirts (Mendes, 2004, pp. 136–137).

Videos focusing on particular community projects and campaigns also appear to be popular with students and are useful for triggering discussion (Murphy, 1998, p. 44). A video called 'Community Action and the Environment' provides a particularly good overview of the Werribee anti-toxic dump campaign and the various community development skills, principles, tactics and strategies and ethical dilemmas involved. Another video 'The Battle for Byron' explores the various value and ideological conflicts within the beach resort community of Byron Bay.

## Reading material

Australia is fortunate to have three good local community development textbooks, which complement each other. Sue Kenny's work has gone through three editions (1994, 1999, 2006) and provides a good coverage of community development context, skills, theory, ideology and evaluation. Ife's work, which has also included three editions (1995, 2002, 2006), is strong on community development roles and skills, principles, processes and ethical dilemmas. And the edited work by Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon (2003) provides lots of good case studies of community development practice.

We also recommend a number of other local and international texts by Popple (1995), McArdle (1999), Nash (2001), Rothman et al., (2001), Twelvetrees (2002) and Rubin and Rubin (2008), which add further knowledge and insight. In addition to recommended texts, students are also offered substantial reading material for each week of the course. For example, Taylor (2003) is particularly strong on community development ideology, and Wadsworth (1997) is good on evaluation.

Two weaknesses were quickly apparent in the available literature. One was the lack of local case studies exploring ideological conflicts within communities over social problems such as illicit drugs, street sex work and family violence. Another deficit was the lack of informative material exploring the specific relationship between social work and community development practice in Australia. Over time, I have attempted to address both these gaps in my own research and publication activities to provide students with relevant resource material (Mendes, 2002; 2004; 2006; 2008).

## Course assessment

My first priority in this subject was to encourage students to become familiar with community development skills and strategies and their relevance to everyday social work practice. Hence students were asked to

**Table 3** Daily job activities of a development worker

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The task is to interview a local community development worker. Ask them about their job: what do they do; how do they do it; why do they use these strategies; who funds their job and what is the official stated purpose or objective of the funding; any political or organizational factors, which hinder their effectiveness; what is their training or professional qualification; how do they define community development; what is the difference between what they do and what social workers do?

In essence, you will be asking them to explain and rationalize how they meet the stated duties of their job description, and to identify the particular CD skills they use in their agency or work setting. The length should be 1000 words maximum, and it is worth 20% of your total mark

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**Table 4** Relationship between social work and community development values and principles

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### Option One

You are required to analyse a current or recently completed social action campaign. 'Recent' implies that information is accessible that people such as organizers and other people involved with the campaign can be interviewed, and the campaign is not so long ago that they will have forgotten key details. Must not be longer than two years ago

The campaign should be in a human service-related field. Campaigns involving environmental issues qualify

In analysing the campaign, please address the following questions:
1) Describe the process of the campaign from beginning to end (or its current point if it is still occurring) and the resources available and/or resources needed;
2) Describe and analyse the tactics and strategies being used;
3) The community work ideology/ies employed in the campaign and any associated community conflicts;
4) On the basis of the above, present and justify your views on how successful the campaign is or has been, both in the way it has been handled and with regard to its achievement/s.

### Option Two

Analyse a current or recently completed locality/community development, social planning or social/community action campaign or project. Critically analyse this campaign or project with reference to the following precepts:
1) The goals of the activity, the nature of the communities/community groups involved (i.e. local group or community of interest) and the community work skills and processes used to implement the campaign/project;
2) The community work principles employed in the campaign/project or those not employed;
3) Outline any ethical issues you perceive in the campaign/project and present your views on how appropriately they were handled;
4) Evaluate the success of the campaign/project and refer if necessary to skills, principles and ideologies not employed, which may have contributed to a more successful outcome

### Option Three

A) Utilizing an interview with at least one community worker (can be either social work or non-social work trained), discuss the arguments for and against a closer integration of community work and social work practice. Include in your answer some comparison of the respective values and principles of the two disciplines
B) Using three case scenarios from your own practice experience (not from the workbook or any other published source), describe the application of a community work approach in your case interventions, analyse the community work skills and roles involved and discuss why a community-based intervention is likely to prove more effective than a traditional casework intervention

The essay should be 3500 words, and it is worth 80% of your mark

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**Table 5** Singapore Assignment One

Interview a local community development worker. That is, a worker or manager who works with groups of people rather than individuals and liaises with the broader community. For example, you could speak with a Community Development Council officer, or someone who works for a Family Service Centre, or one of the many programmes funded by the National Council of Social Service Community Chest. There are also the Community Centre Management Committees, the Residents Committees and the Town Councils

Ask them about their job:
1) What are the characteristics of the community or communities (either functional or geographic) at which their activities are directed?
2) What are their agency's objectives in asking them to pursue these objectives?
3) What tasks do they carry out in the pursuit of the above activities?
4) What knowledge and skill do they need to carry out these tasks?
5) Who funds their job and what is the official stated purpose of the funding?
6) What is their training or professional qualification?
7) How would they assess the impact of their work on the community?
8) Are there any factors – organizational or political or funding – which hinder their effectiveness? What could be done about this?

interview a community development worker and explore their daily job activities (Table 3). The second priority was to encourage students to critically examine how the theoretical concepts in the literature around strategies, ideologies, principles and ethical dilemmas were incorporated in

**Table 6** Singapore Assignment Two

**Option One**
Analyse a current or recently completed local or national community project. You will find many examples of such projects on the CDC, NCSS and MCYS websites and probably elsewhere including in the media. Critically analyse this project with reference to the following precepts:
1) The community work skills and processes used to implement the project;
2) The community work strategies employed in the project;
3) The community work objectives and principles employed in the campaign;
4) Evaluate the success of the campaign and refer if necessary to skills, strategies and principles not employed which may have contributed to a more successful outcome

**Option Two**
A number of prominent Singaporean social workers such as S. Vasoo and Tan Ngoh Tiong have urged greater involvement by social workers in community development activities. Utilizing an interview with at least one community worker (can be either social work or non-social work trained), discuss the following:
1) The key similarities and differences between community work and social work in Singapore with references to the values and principles of the two;
2) Select three case scenarios from your own practice experience or imagination. For example, they could involve various groups facing disadvantage or discrimination due to reasons of ethnicity, religion, gender, age, disability, low income, drug use etc.

Describe the application of a community work approach in your case interventions with members of this group, analyse the community work skills and roles involved and discuss why a community-based intervention is likely to prove more effective than a traditional casework intervention.

actual community development projects and campaigns. An alternative was to reflect further on the specific relationship between social work and community development values and principles (Table 4). In addition, Singapore students are provided with slightly different essay questions, which reflect their particular practice context (Tables 5 and 6).

It is debatable whether the existing assessment framework fulfils the objective of developing practice-based as well as theoretical community development knowledge. A more ambitious project would involve organizing the students to develop and undertake their own community projects as suggested by Allen-Kelly, McArthur and Roughley (2001). For example, this might involve assisting a group of young people leaving state out of home care to develop a peer support network, or helping an indigenous community to introduce a child care collective. This 'hands on' approach would be more likely to promote an effective learning of community development skills. However, such active learning methods may also be very time- and resource-consuming for both staff and students.

## Conclusion

This paper has documented and analysed the development of a community development subject within a particular Australian social work course. Some attention has been placed on the extent to which the course successfully incorporated practice-based as well as theoretical content.

The subject content including exercises and assessment has arguably introduced students to the potential effectiveness of utilizing community development skills and processes. In particular, students have noted that practice outcomes are enhanced by utilizing broader community networks and supports to address situations of distress or disability, and via empowering vulnerable people by linking their personal experiences with opportunities to participate in collective activities for social change. These types of interventions challenge the tendency of much social work practice to focus on paternalistic individualistic-based interventions, rather than more structural or collective approaches.

Nevertheless, there still appears to be inadequate exposure to community development as an everyday social work practice. Two particular initiatives are suggested. First, there needs to be greater integration between community development and the social work theory and practice subjects. At the very least, the interpersonal skills subject should include examples of community development interventions in small group skill sessions so that students learn to base their interventions on both the individual and social context (Heenan, 2004, p. 805).

In addition, there needs to be a greater opportunity for students to implement their community development skills in the real world. This could potentially occur either via greater access to field practicums in community development agencies or alternatively through the type of active learning assessment methods described in this paper. Introduction of these initiatives would hopefully provide a greater number of social work graduates with both the motivation and the capacity to seek employment in specifically community-based positions.

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