

Pedagogy as Praxis: An integrated framework for initial professional education and training in community work and youth work

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Abstract: This paper examines a praxis-focused pedagogical approach to professional formation in community work and youth work developed over four decades at the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University. The approach is rooted in collectivity, participation, and empowerment, and is based on Freirean and feminist analysis of social structures and embedded systemic discriminations including racism. It aims to develop critical praxis in students through an integrated curriculum grounded in theory and practice, a dialectic of classroom and fieldwork learning, interactive assessments, active student participation in their practice learning, mentoring from departmental staff and fieldwork supervisors. Taken together these elements model 'pedagogy as praxis'.

Keywords: community work; youth work; fieldwork practice placements; professional formation; fieldwork education; reflective practice.

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Date of first (online) publication: 15th February 2024

Introduction

Maynooth University's Department of Applied Social Studies is the longest established provider of initial professional education in Community Work and Youth Work in the Republic of Ireland, with programmes offered since the early 1980s. Community Work and Youth Work are value-based professions which share a commitment to participation, empowerment and working for equality, rights and social justice.

Community Work

Community Work is a process of working in, with and alongside communities, guided by the principles of equality, participation, and empowerment, with a collective analysis of social issues, aimed at collective action for progressive social change. It is a developmental activity comprised of both task and a process, working to achieve a more socially just society in which human rights are realised and discrimination is addressed (AIEB, 2016). It is a critical practice for social justice, 'creating the conditions for people to be able to act together... to bring about change' (Ledwith, 2016, p.21). Crickley and McArdle (2009, pp.17-18) argue that it requires social analysis which 'identifies and works towards overall community interests rather than respond only to presented needs' (Crickley and McArdle, 2009, p.18) and is 'not reducible to any one form of activity ...however meaningful'. They call on practitioners to 'surface, analyse and address' issues of concern in and with communities.

Youth Work

Youth work, as an educational and developmental practice, is underpinned by a core set of values and principles including empowerment of young people, equality, inclusion, social justice, and voluntary participation (Tierney, Devlin and Reynolds, 2019). Youth workers are 'primarily educators who engage with young people in diverse settings, using different methods and activities to stimulate informal education and learning' (Wood et al., 2014, p.2). A key defining feature of youth work is young people's voluntary participation, as they choose to engage in the learning relationship with their youth worker. The Youth Work Act 2001 defines it as

a 'planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations'. In the context of growing inequalities, a concern shared with community workers, youth workers need to 'act as advocates for young people' in pursuit of positive social change in favour of the most disadvantaged in society (Treacy 2009, p.195).

The Programmes

The Department of Applied Social Studies Maynooth University currently offers a Bachelor and Master of Social Science in Community Work and Youth Work (BCYW and MCYW). Both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are endorsed as professional qualifications in both youth work, by the North-South Education and Training Standards Committee [NSETS] and in community work, by the All- Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work [AIEB]. Professional endorsement represents a formal recognition by the youth work and community work sectors that Higher Education Institution (HEI) programmes have met professionally specific quality standards in addition to meeting all the standards of academic validation. Some of those specific quality standards relate directly to the process of professional formation and development, both in the classroom (and associated activities) and in the field through field work practice placements. Both the BCYW and MCYW are integrated programmes of education and training, a fact which shapes their aims, structure, approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and overall style of engagement with students and the wider field as well as the outcomes for students, practitioners, and the field of practice. Recruitment to both programmes is a rigorous process with an interview, references, and a written exam. In a diverse and divided society, we are committed to ensuring that diverse, marginalized and minority communities where community workers and youth workers work are also reflected in the next generation of workers in training.

Overlapping professions

While community work and youth work often operate within separate policy and administrative contexts, they also overlap substantially, particularly as regards principles and practice. The fact that they have shared origins in the social change movements of the late 19th century continues to give both a distinctive value-driven edge that is not necessarily characteristic of most contemporary professions. Related to this, they have a close affinity in the professional education and training contexts, especially in Ireland and the United Kingdom. As Keith Popple explains (2015, pp.124-125), it was in the aftermath of the Fairburn-Milson Report (DES, 1969) that existing youth work training courses in England and Wales retitled themselves 'youth and community work'. This development 'set youth work within the context of community development and its contribution towards a more participatory democracy' (Thomas, 1983, p.27). While in today's practice, each requires increasingly complex and differentiated skills, the concern with community as a site of struggle and solidarity remains and is reinforced in both.

The programmes at MU rest, therefore, on the understanding that *youth work* is most effective when it engages actively with the community contexts in which young people live their lives; and *community work* is most effective when it is inclusive of the diverse groups (age-wise and otherwise) that make up communities. Similarly, quality community work generates spaces for the concerns and voices of young people to emerge and to be considered within the collective analysis, actions and outcomes that shape community work practice and processes.

This overlap between youth work and community work applies at several levels, or across a number of dimensions. Both are value-led professions and - more than that - they are driven by many of the same values. As Popple states 'values are the basis for ethically informed action' (Popple, 2015). We take the view that values (and the ethics that arise from them) are the most vital aspect of any profession, and therefore agree with Koehn (1994) that 'a professional is someone who professes', someone who makes a pledge or commitment to a set of values. (Sercombe (2010) makes central use of Koehn's definition in his study of youth work ethics). To be meaningful, the commitment must also be to the ways of knowing, being and doing that flow from or complement those values. That is why it makes sense to think in terms of three separate but overlapping and closely inter-related aspects of community work and youth work as professions: knowledge,

skills, and values [and aspects of the self that are closely associated with values]. These can be represented diagrammatically as follows:

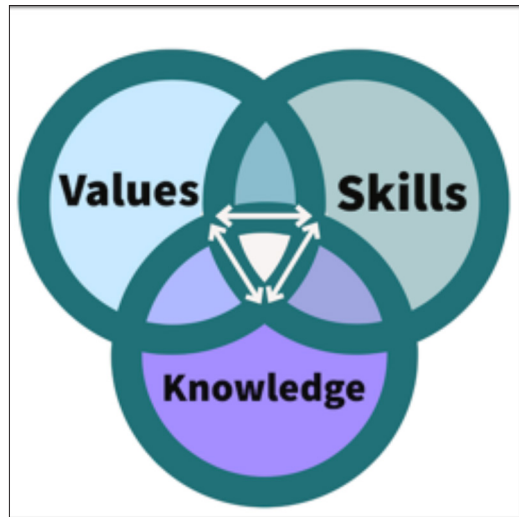


Fig. 1: Professional Formation in Community Work and Youth Work: Knowledge, Skills, and Values

For reasons of conceptualisation and analysis, organisation and logistics the three dimensions can meaningfully be distinguished. However, in practice (and in the *profession*) they are inextricably linked. For example, it is possible to have *knowledge* of the large body of literature on group work theory and the social psychological and other social scientific research on which it draws; to be *skilled* in speaking and/or listening in group situations, in offering encouragement or constructive challenge to others, in working together as a team; and to be *committed* (in value terms and as an important aspect of one's 'self in the world') to empowerment, equality and social justice. But the professional community worker and/or youth worker needs to be able to engage all three dimensions at the same time, in a mutually reinforcing and synergistic manner. Since knowledge and values both feed into community work and youth work theory, and since skills are primarily about practice, this synergy closely corresponds to the *praxis* that is at the heart of Freirean approaches to community development, defined by Ledwith (2016, p. 35) as a 'unity of action and reflection'. We will return to this topic below.

The successful achievement of such synergy or unity is of course a lengthy learning process, taking both effort and time. It does not end with the completion of a programme or award of a qualification. None of us would claim to have no more to learn in this regard; far from it. This raises two other important points about community work and youth work as professions. Becoming part of them (as with any group or organisation) involves a process of *socialisation* that in most cases begins with the initial professional education and training programme (it will often be different for experienced in-service students) and that in all cases will continue in one way or another for as long as people remain involved. And this leads to the second point: professional formation is a journey rather than a destination, and a key task of the educators is therefore to support the learners to develop the predispositions and skills to be able to continue learning long after they have graduated. This is one of the reasons the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015) is useful in describing the experience of joining and journeying through the community work and youth work professions. In keeping with this, it is important that educators themselves remain engaged in community work/ youth work practice, which supports practice-based teaching. In the programmes under discussion, students are encouraged to participate in national student gatherings organised by AIEB; and to engage with and join both Community Work Ireland, the national organisation of Community Workers and the Youth Workers Collective Ireland.

The fact that the complexity of community work and youth work as professions needs to be reflected in the structure and processes of professional formation itself (for reasons of both integrity and efficacy, and because of requirements of professional accrediting bodies) creates its own challenges but also opportunities for community work and youth work educators. This is where our concept of pedagogy as praxis comes in.

Praxis

From the perspective of similarity rather than distinction, both youth work and community work can be considered to be explicitly committed to action that synthesises theory and practice (Smith, 1982; Ledwith, 2007). Such a synthesis eschews the fruitless pursuit of ‘thoughtless action and actionless thought’ (Ledwith, 2007, 2016), and may be conceived of as a

unity of praxis. [Popple \(2015\)](#) describes Freire's 'education for liberation' whereby learners and teachers engage in a process in which abstract and concrete knowledge, together with experience, are integrated into praxis: critical thinking and dialogue (as opposed to discussion) which seek to challenge conventional explanations of everyday life, while at the same time considering the action necessary for the transformation of oppressive conditions. Freire believes praxis should inspire a collective classroom experience, co-creating knowledge through dialogue which is critical and based on lived experience, thus generating a process of praxis, wherein the world is seen anew, and action is taken accordingly ([Mayo, 2020](#)). The commitment to praxis that can be found in a critical pedagogical approach also underpins both disciplines/ professions (community work and youth work) and it is this description of praxis which we endeavour to mirror in our education and training.

In the following section, we will illuminate some of the key aspects of this 'pedagogy as praxis'. We start by describing the epistemological basis for our approach to teaching and learning; we discuss experiential learning both inside the classroom and in fieldwork practice; we argue that the fieldwork practice combined with professional supervision should be guided by an evolving iterative individual *Practice Development Strategy* where the students work with their year coordinators and fieldwork practice supervisors, as well as teachers across the staff team, to develop their professional practice, framed as thinking about and in practice, becoming and being a practitioner and doing or practising practice.

Pedagogy as Praxis

Approach to Teaching and Learning

Our approach to Teaching and Learning is rooted in social analysis, Freirean and Feminist pedagogy, grounded in dialogue and aimed at development of a critical praxis for students which extends beyond the classroom into their professional and personal lives. Like bell [hooks \(1994, 2003\)](#) and others, we see education as the 'practice of freedom' and strive to create inclusive classroom environments which are passionate, political, embodied, and collective. Recognising multiple epistemologies and valuing varied learning styles, our students move fluidly and regularly (often in the same session) between individual and collective activities encouraging

reflection on lived experiences and their interrogation, considering new theoretical perspectives, research, and literature. The pedagogy is grounded in transformative learning as opposed to informative learning, creating the conditions for critical questioning and for transforming frames of reference through critical reflection on assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, acting on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it (Mezirow, 2009).

Critical pedagogy includes the task of 'educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change' (Giroux, 2010, p.717). This cannot be done without contextualising our practice. Decontextualization, Ledwith (2016) argues, 'results in fragmentation of understanding and action' the opposite of praxis. Mayo (2020) argues for the value of 'distance' from a familiar context in order to 'perceive it in a more critical light'. The practice that emerges is nuanced and context specific. As McArdle (2021) highlights: the 'dichotomy of either conflict or consensus approaches' is 'overly simplistic'. Critical community workers and youth workers must be analytical, critically reflective and adept at working meaningfully and strategically in multiple directions with multiple stakeholders. Project visits, readings, written assessments, projects, and classroom discussion provide time and space. This allows learners to think and consider questions and enables students to have critical distance from their own 'world of action' and to engage in reflection geared towards transformative action. Within the programmes an environment is fostered between classroom and fieldwork placement in which such analysis and contextualisation may occur.

Community work and youth work education mirrors this process of embodying, enacting, and realising the core principles of empowerment, collective action, and participation in practice through education and conscientization. The structure, content and teaching methods of the programmes are consistent with their applied nature, always remaining attentive to the importance of academic and professional development. The programmes provide students with the opportunity to work in a professional setting, developing, and demonstrating skills in community work or youth work, integrating the theories and practices learned in the classroom, and adopting a sense of commitment to the professions' core values and practice principles. Abundant use is made of creative and arts-based approaches (drama, music, film-making etc), moving the pedagogy far beyond 'narrower and more instrumentalised conceptions about

what counts as “learning” in [higher education]’ (Howard, 2021, p.10). Throughout the programme, the scaffolding of a conceptual and practice framework is constructed which is intended to sustain students onto their roles within the highly complex environment that is community and youth work. The focus on practice education, also drawn from past and current practice of educators, provides an opportunity for experience and analysis to further inform theory. The following section brings to life the pedagogical approach we describe with focus on the practice development strategy and fieldwork practice.

Fieldwork Practice

‘In common with other social professions, supervised fieldwork practice (sometimes called practicum, field education, or practice placement in other settings) is an integral part of professional programmes of education and training in youth work and community work’ (Tierney, 2011A, p.26). The academic environment is a distinctive one, with many important features for professional development, but many of the practical demands of the work cannot be simulated on a university campus, meaning that fieldwork practice has a special importance which is reflected in both the time and credits attaching to it. Fieldwork involves a ‘period or periods of time-limited experience in a youth work or community work organisation. The idea is that students learn ‘on the job’ under the supervision of a worker chosen by the college or agency’ (Tierney, 2011A, p.26). For full-time students, this involves two fourteen-week full-time fieldwork placements over the course of two-year post-graduate programmes, or three over the three-year undergraduate programmes. Part-time in-service students do the same quantity of supervised fieldwork over three (postgraduate) or four (undergraduate) years, with half of this taking place in an agency external to their usual place of work. Fieldwork is conceptualised as a three-way and in some situations a four-way relationship between the university, student and supervisor/agency and young people/community members and takes place in a variety of community work/ youth work organisations under the supervision of a practitioner. It also involves two ‘three- way’ visits during which the student, the practice supervisor and the university tutor discuss the practice development strategy, its modifications and additions, and how the student is progressing. Successful completion of the entire programme is dependent on successful completion of the fieldwork component. As a

result, preparation for, participation in, and reflection on fieldwork is a significant feature of life for students and staff alike, albeit from different perspectives. Students are encouraged and supported to utilise their own personal and professional ‘toolboxes’ to develop their creative practice within the field (Byrne et al., 2017). Emphasis is placed on how this creative pedagogical practice encompasses inclusivity and collectivity as a form of engagement within the communities we work with.

Fieldwork practice is conceptualised as a learning process, an ‘act of construction, where the learners are constructors who make meaning for themselves in response to learning challenges they face’ (LaBoskey and Rickert, 2002, p.18). Both the reflective practice and academic apprenticeship models are adopted in our approach to fieldwork practice. In this approach, it is essential that ‘expectations of supervisors in relation to their role in both conceptualising and helping students make connections between theory and practice needs to be well articulated’ (Tierney, 2011B, p.26).

The fieldwork handbook states that: ‘the overall purpose of the placement is to assist students - in a context where they are learning through doing - to acquire, and reflect upon, knowledge and skills for community work and youth work practice. Students are expected to make their practice ‘conscious’ rather than merely ‘intuitive.’ Simply put, students are expected to put the theory of campus-based learning into action during fieldwork practice.

Professional formation in community work and youth work demands active student participation in their own learning as they negotiate a personal ‘*Practice Development Strategy*.’ The Practice Development Strategy is a tool that is introduced to students in their first weeks on the programme through a ‘self-assessment’ exercise which invites them to reflect on their previous life, volunteer and work experiences and describe their knowledge, skills and values in community work and youth work. They revisit this exercise every year. It becomes the basis for self-directed learning during fieldwork placement. Students are required to devise specific outcomes for each fieldwork placement that are specific to where they are on their professional formation and development ‘journey.’ They are focused on knowledge, skills, values and personal qualities as they think in and about practice. During fieldwork placement, in three-way visits with tutors, in presentation of fieldwork learning and later in the final oral examinations and values presentations students are required to demonstrate praxis with specific examples and reference to

their own critical reflective practice. They are mentored and supported by departmental staff, their year coordinator and fieldwork placement supervisors in partner organisations to achieve this development in consciousness of their practice and a coherent articulation of this.

Webber (1999, 2000a), LaBoskey and Rickert (2002) and Tierney (2011A and B) highlight the centrality of the field-based supervisor role in helping students learn about practice principles from fieldwork. Students are more likely to be able to be learners about their own practice where supervisors are also engaged as learners about their own practice. This can contribute to a fieldwork placement experience characterised by collegiality, exploration of beliefs and values, and encouragement of risk-taking within a reflective and facilitative environment (LaBoskey and Rickert, 2002). Of course, all fieldwork placements are learning opportunities; with meaningful supervision the learning can be optimised.

Supervised fieldwork practice contains a strong focus on the process of 'reflective practice' (Schon, 1991) with the use of daily journals, regular onsite supervision and two visits from professional practice supervisors. According to Hanson (2012, p.143) reflective practice is 'an active engagement in continual review and repositioning of assumptions, values, and practice in light of evaluation of multiple perspectives, including the wider socio cultural perspectives influencing the context; transforming and transcending self and practice in order to effect change and improvement. Wood et al. (2014) state that 'skilled practitioners need to know who they are in order to be able to practice effectively. They need to be aware of their values, attitudes, and beliefs because there is a correlation between these and how they engage with, experience, understand and interpret the world, including the context and relationships of practice' (2014, p.23). On that basis community workers and youth workers have a continuous and ongoing process that links to reflective practice (Sapin, 2013). As students undertake learning within the reality of organisational life, a 'reflective learner model' (Webber, 1999) is established whereby use of theory and conceptual frameworks acquired through course work are applied, skills are developed and refined, and attitudes and values are explored, challenged, and revised. Substantial supervised fieldwork practice experiences are central in the development of the reflective practitioner (Webber, 2000b). Through this process students are afforded opportunities for analysis and internal exploration in a supportive environment. Unlearning old/ learning new/ adjusting values is a core part of the journey.

Assessment

We employ a diverse range of methods, approaches to assessment and means of eliciting and engaging students in processes of receiving and giving feedback. The assessment procedures for the BCYW (BSocSc Community Work and Youth Work) and MCYW (MSocSc in Community and Youth Work) are designed to reflect the programmes' professional focus and their stated aims and objectives.: The variety of procedures used (written and oral, continuous and 'terminal', academic and practical, formal and informal) is consistent with the variety of attributes (knowledge, skills and personal qualities) which students are expected to acquire and develop. Specifically, the applied nature of the programmes and the practical demands of community work and youth work jobs are given appropriate weighting in assessment: a satisfactory performance in fieldwork practice is a *sine qua non* for success in the programmes overall, regardless of academic merit. Also reflecting the integrated nature of practice, all the BCYW and MCYW modules are compulsory. Each module is assessed separately and must be passed independently, since there is no compensation between modules. As we noted at the outset, values are central to the practice of both community work and youth work. As such, in a pedagogy of praxis, congruency in personal and professional values are also central to the summative assessment. At the end of the initial professional education and training, students undertake an 'exit interview' as an oral examination and a make a 'values presentation', where they share their perspective on their professional journey. Alternative 'exit awards' are in place at both undergraduate and postgraduate level for students who do not successfully complete the fieldwork and practice components of the programme, including these final examinations, but who perform satisfactorily in the academic elements. Such students receive a separate award that does not feature community work or youth work in its title.

Conclusion

Professional formation through a pedagogy of praxis reflects the complexity of community work and youth work in the very structure and processes of the education and training experience. It is a lengthy learning process, demanding extensive effort and time of educators

and learners. It is a dialectic of classroom and fieldwork learning, that generates an innovative synthesis: an intellectually stimulating, engaging environment which fosters active learning for individual students through collective processes. It requires students to take intellectual responsibility by becoming adept at critical self/source reflection, dialectic dialogue and applied ethics (including equality and anti-discrimination). It requires active student participation in their own practice learning, including the crafting of and navigation of a personal 'Practice Development Strategy' that focuses on knowledge, skills, and values; mentoring by departmental staff and professional practice supervisors in partner organisations; and assessments that require an interactive and oral, as well as written demonstration of praxis through critical reflective practice.

As we celebrate 40 years of community work and youth work education and training in Maynooth University, our pedagogy remains firmly grounded in social analysis of societal structures and embedded systemic discriminations including racism and committed to developing a critical praxis in future practitioners. We teach a hopefulness and sense of possibility that aims to counter hegemonic discourses and practices. This pedagogy of praxis offers a variety of educational practices. Praxis demands theory, reflection and action. To achieve this, we remain engaged in community work/ youth work practice in a variety of ways, drawing on practice experience in our teaching. Praxis is not just thinking or reflecting about our action; it is also taking further action as a result of our thinking and this action. As such we engage in individual and collective reflection and evaluation of our practices with each other and with students. Professional development does not end with the completion of a programme or the award of a qualification. It is the ongoing process of building a community of practice that continues to develop and transform.

Acknowledgements

The pedagogy described in this article has been developed by community work and youth work educators in Maynooth University over the past four decades and the authors wish to acknowledge and appreciate the work of these educators across the years.

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