

# Teaching letters

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**Summary:** This article presents a hypothetical series of letters from an anonymous social work student at Flinders University describing their learning. The student is writing to Charles–Louis de Sécondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu, in keeping with the Baron's famous, anonymously published *Lettres persanes* (*Persian Letters*). The student's letters highlight the progress of education in general and social work education in particular from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the present time. They illustrate the author's approach to teaching and learning, and some of her strategies for effectively teaching social planning and social work ethics.

Montesquieu wrote his *Lettres persanes* in 1721 as a vehicle for commenting on life and culture in contemporary France. This paper presents a series of hypothetical letters to Montesquieu from a social work student at Flinders University describing her learning. These letters were presented at the Australian Universities Teaching Committee National Teaching Forum in 2002 to convey the educator's approach to teaching. While the letters conclude with a peroration in which the educator outlines the conceptual framework underlying her teaching, the article concludes with a reply from 'Montesquieu' on the letters and the student's response.

**Keywords:** teaching, learning, social work, field education, ethics

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## Introduction

Teaching is a practice influenced by educational theory, professional requirements, the teacher's discipline interests and personal preferences. I work in a school of social administration and social work. Our graduates receive a double degree for social planning and social work, and find employment in social work, social policy, and community and social planning. My professional career involves both social planning and direct social work practice, therefore I teach across both degrees. I am currently teaching social planning and social work ethics.

I was asked to present some aspects of my teaching to a National Teaching Forum hosted by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee in 2002. When considering this task I endeavoured to put myself in the place of a student commenting on my classes. I tried to put a mirror up to myself to see how I appeared to my students, and how they would explain and understand what I was trying to achieve through my approach to teaching. The more I tried, the more difficult it became. Then my mind went back to my student experiences of Sociology One in 1966. The answer was clear: Montesquieu's letters!

In 1721, almost 300 years ago, Montesquieu published his *Persian Letters*, purportedly written by two Persian visitors to France. These letters, used by Montesquieu to comment on contemporary France, and lying firmly within the traditions of literature, social comment and satire, are often cited as germinal in the development of social science. What might a student write about my teaching and Flinders University if writing home to their long-gone, great to the nth degree grandfather Charles-Louis Sécondat, Baron Montesquieu, lawyer, writer and member of the Bordeaux Parliament?

## Letters

### Letter 1. The first day

Dear Monte,

I have just arrived at Flinders University in Adelaide where, as you know, I am studying in the social work program. This is run by a School called 'Social Administration and Social Work', terms that may not be familiar to you because this profession of 'social work' is very recent. The School was originally just called 'Social Administration', with 'Social Work' added in the last ten years. Social administration is a British concept, transported to Australia and incorporated into the title of this program because the founding professor's British education was inspired by the academic traditions of people such as Titmuss. After learning about the colonisation of ideas and traditions, older students are pressing for changes to the School name, despite the fact that social work is itself a concept foreign to Australia.

Flinders University is nothing like the University of Paris, which you described some 280 years ago as being the eldest daughter of the Kings of France and dreary at times because she is more than 900 years old.

This University is young, less than 40 years old, and there is no King or Queen – or so most of my fellow students tell me. Our lecturer was overheard saying that the previous Vice-Chancellor thought he was a King with four fiefdoms when he reflected on the power of the faculties.

Things are not quite as you remember – the teacher is a woman, as are most of my fellow students.

On my first day I attended a class for first year students called *Introduction to Social Planning*. I was shocked to discover that our classes were not even held at the University. They were held at the Adelaide Central Mission, where the students worked with practitioners who planned and provided services for underprivileged people in the inner city.

Everybody, students and non-students alike, discussed controversies and practical issues that occupy planners' minds and their daily work. These discussions went far beyond my ideas of social work as being associated with minute details of social difficulties, and of university life being one of empty formalities leavened by occasional drops of wisdom.

You will recall that in your own works you wrote of a controversy

concerning some scholars' views on the letter Q, which the university wanted pronounced as a K. This dispute became so violent that the Parliament stepped in and made a solemn decree granting every subject of the King of France permission to pronounce the letter as he [sic] saw fit.

A controversy of similar proportions arose recently in the local city of Adelaide and provided the basis of our first class. This controversy concerned how best to cater for dogs and people in the inner city area. Adelaide is a very well planned city, with its inner areas surrounded by parklands. The local residents walk their dogs in these parklands. Many of the dogs run free and are poorly controlled. Unsurprisingly and unfortunately, some less disciplined dogs recently attacked a local doctor whose wife was a member of Adelaide's parliament. The City of Adelaide's response was presented as an exercise for student discussion and comment. It provided an excellent example of how planning should not be done.

It was apparent that the City of Adelaide had done nothing about this emerging problem until after the dog attack and had continued that course of inaction until the local television stations asked what they were going to do. The councilors then made numerous rushed decisions, eventually deciding that they should ban dogs from the parklands altogether. When this approach failed, the city planners were called upon to consult with the local community and a compromise was reached. We students were asked how we would have proceeded with this planning problem.

A similar incident happened here at University. The geese living on the University Lake recently attacked a disabled student and found themselves beheaded for dinner! We students were not asked how we would have proceeded with planning to overcome the problem of geese freely wandering the University campus. There was a great deal of protest about killing the geese, but the University authorities adopted a 'selective deafness' option. They rationalised the killing by effectively taking the stance 'no British geese for this Aussie lake'!

## Letter 2. Still planning

Me again Monte,

You will be interested to know that not everything has changed since your time – ordinary citizens still have to fight to be heard.

My *Introduction to Social Planning* continues apace. All our classes have taken similar but different approaches. In my most recent class, we participated in a simulation exercise. The class was divided into three groups – planners, welfare professionals and ordinary citizens.

Our task was to discuss a draft crime prevention plan, which had been recently released by a local parliament after extensive research by their planners. We were given a copy of this draft plan and asked to play roles appropriate to the group to which we had been assigned.

The groups were asked to play out a formal consultation process on the plan. The ordinary citizens were to have one final say before the plan was implemented. During this simulation, the planners group controlled the whole meeting and did not allow any of the citizens to speak at all, whilst the welfare professionals spent their time discussing in needless depth the most trivial aspects. I learnt much about how difficult it is for ordinary citizens to participate in community consultations, and how easy it is for experts to dominate and confound these processes.

## Letter 3. I am let loose

This you will not believe!

I am still doing this social work program and still not doing my course at the University! As part of this social work program, we are required to go out of the University and ‘work’ in social welfare ‘agencies’. They call this the ‘practicum’ – a most different educational arrangement.

Before commencing this practicum, we are ‘prepared’ for this work. Part of our preparation means that we become ‘work literate’ and understand such things as occupational health and safety, learning to learn, preparing for uncertainty and learning to work with others. Our teacher emphasises the importance of motivation when on placement, saying that disinterest in the clients or yawning will not be tolerated by our social work practice teacher.

The class lecturer helps us to develop skills in communicating with people. This means that, amongst other things, we are assisted to work with

people by discussing taboo topics with them such as incontinence, sexuality and their finances. Social workers must talk to people about some very private issues. Knowing how you used innuendo to describe similar topics, I will desist from further discussion of such issues to avoid offence.

I was placed in an agency that provides counseling, health and legal assistance services for women and children who have been subject to domestic violence. You would be singularly impressed at how legal concepts have become an integral part of educational activities but I am not sure how you would respond to women having equal rights with men.

Although this is meant to be the practical aspect of the course, we are still expected to write journals, letters and various logs in which we reflect on our experience.

#### **Letter 4. Advancing**

I hope my last letter didn't shock you.

I am now doing a topic called *Advanced Social Work Practice*. I must confess to some initial confusion about the genesis of this title, given the age of my fellow students. These are generally older, predominantly women, but there are also some men.

The lecturer focuses on getting us to think and talk about 'ethics'. I was increasingly conscious of your own writings, which provided what is now known as a 'sociological analysis', commenting on the life and society of people. The lecturer has names for the different sorts of thinking that she wants us to do – interpreting, translating, applying and analysing.

The class commenced with an interesting conundrum. Let me describe it.

*Imagine that you are a social worker providing counseling and residential services for homeless youth. Many of the youth are solvent abusers and sniff paint outside the welfare agency door and sometimes in the waiting room. Should you supervise sniffing to ensure that adolescents are safe, or should you ask them to leave to protect the reputation of the agency?*

It was impossible to escape being drawn into the issue. No sooner had the dilemma been described than our teacher drew a line across the classroom. She said that one end represented supervising the solvent sniffers and the

other end represented asking them to leave the agency premises.

We were asked to place ourselves in a position on this line that reflected our stance on the issue and were then asked to justify that position. We were then presented with more information on the problem and asked to reconsider our stances, then asked to justify our position once more to see whether or not it had changed. Try this for yourself. It is not as easy as it seems. There is always another twist.

The students argued a great deal in this topic and our arguments were about moral questions. The arguments considered such pragmatic concerns as law and professional standards. We used the work of the great philosophers. Seemingly there are more of these now than when you wrote your letters.

### **Letter 5. Lying, dogs and Presidential peccadilloes**

In our class yesterday we considered whether social workers should lie and ended up asking whether Presidents should lie. We began with a simple question: 'Is telling the truth an important principle that should be followed no matter what the outcome, or are there occasions when lying is acceptable?' We ended up discussing whether it was more acceptable for a social worker or a President to lie.

Lying or telling the truth seemed to be a particular concern to one student, who, in the middle of our discussion, told us a story about her practicum. She had been caring for an old woman who had been admitted to hospital with a stroke. The woman was not able to return home because of her incapacity and was admitted to a nursing home. The student's dilemma concerned the woman's dog, which was temporarily housed in an animal refuge. The refuge had sent an ultimatum: 'Find a home for the dog or it will be put down'. What should the student tell the client? Should she lie and say that a home had been found for the dog? Or tell the truth and upset the client? There was a great dispute about what should be done. The discussion ended up in a vigorous debate on President Clinton's ethical standards and his sexual behaviour. (Bill Clinton was President [leader] of the United States of America and was accused of having an illicit liaison with one of his female staff members. I do not think there were such things as presidents in your day).

I was struck again by how much has changed without making any difference.

### **Letter 6. The end of it all**

In your time the law treated suicide with the utmost ferocity. You wrote that those who failed in a suicide attempt were put to death a second time. I had thought that such laws were unjust. Should a person who is overcome with pain, anguish, poverty or humiliation be prevented from exercising the only remedy for their situation that is within their power?

The issue is not resolved in the 21st century. Students in my class explored the rights that individuals have to take their own life, or ask a doctor or nurse to assist with suicide. As part of developing awareness of the complexity of ethical issues, we students were asked to put ourselves in the shoes of others who want to take their own life and those who are close to them.

Our mentor used the case of Dr Kevorkian, an American pathologist (that is, he was from the United States of America, the country I mentioned in my previous letter) who has assisted many people to suicide. The last person he assisted was Thomas York, a man who had Lou Gehrig's disease. Kevorkian not only assisted him to die but also 'videotaped' his death and provided Columbia Broadcasting Service with this tape. The tape was subsequently shown on 'prime time television'. We were asked to imagine the differing moral positions of people closely involved with this assisted suicide. At the end of this exercise we were asked to vote on whether this was euthanasia, assisted suicide or something else. Finally we were asked to summarise the literature that outlined the views of this range of people. The diversity of moral positions exposed us all to the complexity of a situation in which there was no clear right or wrong.

### **Letter 7. Online at last**

Dear Monte,  
If only you could imagine.

I have already told you about this strange situation where large proportions of my class are taught outside the University at which I am studying. The situation became even more interesting when I found that it was possible to complete some topics 'online', where a small group of students had to collaborate and develop their responses to values dilemmas. We were able to communicate and interact with other



students, some of whom I had never met, using 'WebCT'. Despite my never meeting some of these students face-to-face, we were able to engage in regular fruitful discussions on complex issues. It is surprising how easy it is to get to know your fellow students and work collaboratively with them online. We were able to present work for comment and discussion by our peers and our lecturer. These processes formed the basis of our assessment. This form of assessment is infinitely preferable to mass examinations done in isolation from other students.

Well, that's about all. I know you would be interested in the online topics and WebCT material, but it will take too long to explain them here – what a pity I can't email them to you!

## **Peroration**

You have read the student's thoughts on the teaching methods I use as coordinator of the field education (practicum) program, helping students learn both online and face-to-face in the topics *Introduction to Social Planning* and *Social Work Ethics*. Now it is my turn to outline my approach to teaching and learning, which is based on an understanding of the learner and how they approach learning.

I believe that learning takes place through various forms of social participation – peer-to-peer, individual to culture, group projects, joint problem solving, and interactions between students and agency supervisors. Students use this social interaction to construct their interpretations of theory and practice. For example, I have initiated collaborative online learning in clinical supervision and used case studies from agencies to engage students in peer-to-peer learning. This social participation enables students to learn in the work placement and to come to understand the community of practitioners.

I believe that learning is a 'cognitive' process that involves thinking, perceiving, interpreting and constructing knowledge, so that assisting students to learn *how to learn* and using cognitive strategies are critical parts of my teaching. For example, in teaching social work recording, I focus on particular cognitive skills, i.e. discriminating between facts, interpretations, judgements and recommendations. I also assist students to apply cognitive skills (translating, interpreting, analysing) to social work assessment to deepen their understanding.

I see feedback from teachers, peers and self as playing an important role in learning. Timely feedback in formative and summative assessment for class work, seminars and practicum activities enhances learning. In our practicum program, students are assessed at the middle of the placement by the University and field educator, and given written feedback about their progress. If their work does not reach the required standards they are provided with strategies to improve their practice, and given additional academic and practical support.

Self-monitoring, demonstration, active supervision and reflective analysis of practice enable students to learn professional practice. In the practicum and in professional practice, I use a range of strategies to monitor behaviour and reflect on practice. These include process recordings, values clarification exercises, portfolios and reflective writing about the process of learning.

I do not see learning as a static process. Rather, it is an 'active' process that takes place in a specific context (university and professional) so that transitions to university from school and from university to the world of work are important considerations in assisting students to learn effectively. I try to make transitions easier for first year students by introducing myself and tutors on WebCT before the first semester begins and inviting students to tell me about themselves. I attempt to create a community of learning in which each student's experiences are valued, as learning requires vigorous student participation in workshops, lectures, class discussions, group activities and professional activities. Students enthusiastically tell and retell their stories about practice situations to explore attitudes and values, and I involve students in active learning by asking them to make decisions on moral issues.

Learning in social work also involves change, especially personal development, self-awareness and dealing with taboo topics. Teaching involves broadening students' experiences and preparing them to work in taboo areas such as dealing with life and death issues, and talking about very personal issues by presenting them with disparate perspectives and opportunities for dialogue about different value systems. The 'demands of the moment' outside the classroom, especially in field programs or in social relationships, mean that many learning situations (hot learning) arise serendipitously. In our seminars, we ask students to describe their hot learning – issues that arise unexpectedly in their practicum and provide the platform for learning.

Finally, I believe student learning is enhanced when students make connections between subject areas (social work and politics, sociology,

philosophy) and through integration of theory and practice. In our program, we run weekly seminars as part of field education to link classroom theory with the students' practice experience in agencies. Connections between subject areas are part of work-based learning activities that involve agencies and other professions working together.

This integrated learning process is affected more than we often acknowledge by time and place – evolving theories and practices that suit the current political and social climate, and the geographical and/or ideological place in which the student is learning (not discounting the geographical, political, social, ideological and cultural places in which the student has developed as a person). While Montesquieu's letters may seem perplexing to a Flinders University social work student in 2003, Montesquieu may well be perplexed by the student's letters if he were here to read them!

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## **A response**

The following reply was received from the Baron through the intermediary of Steve Ambler.

Paris, 9th February 2006

Thank you for all of your recent correspondence. I apologise for not answering earlier, I have been very busy with parliamentary matters and of course my writing. I have also taken up a new post as Editor of a *'Petite Journal'*

Your thoughts, musings and reflections are most suitable for publication in our journal, however I do have one or two suggestions to make prior to them being published.

What a strange and wonderful world you inhabit in the 21st century! This 'Social Work' that you are learning is indeed new to me, but, it does have some parallels and resonates with some of the activities that our more rebellious and radical priests currently engage in,

(Good luck to them I say). Our ancient Templar, Masonic and Guild fraternities appear to be moving into this domain also.

I digress though, back to your letters; Who is this 'Titmuss' you write of? I am sure he is well known among the English-speaking nations, perhaps a footnote or reference would be in order to inform our international readership.

Your Teacher has also written to me with some interesting and thoughtful reflections. I understand some of the concepts and paradigms, but perhaps some explanation of these is needed. For instance, how do you undertake a 'value clarification exercise'? Some of our readership come from far-flung places (even as far away as Persia!) and may not be familiar with these occidental ideas. They may wish to explore them more deeper to develop their 'praxis' and would welcome some references. Schön (1983), Kolb (1984) and Winter, et al (1999) are, I understand, writers considered authoritative on the subject in your time.

Overall, yourself and your teacher have made a considerable impact with your writings. I have shown them to other learned colleagues and I quote from one of them:

.... This is absolutely fascinating, as a lecturer in social work myself, also responsible for teaching about values and ethics in social work, I was struck by your creative and energising approach. I could feel the controversy in the classroom as I read your account .... Thank you for the contribution to my learning, I hope our readers similarly enjoy ....

I concur with the above view of the work undertaken by learner and teacher in the Antipodes, congratulations.

Yours most sincerely,

Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu  
(Alias Steve Ambler, Editor (Papers))

PS What is this WebCT? Is it something to do with spiders or even a magic potion?

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## **Reply to Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (Alias Steve Ambler)**

Adelaide, 21st February 2006

Dear Monte,

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect a reply to my letters. Thank you for your very constructive 'feedback'. I'm not sure if this word existed in your time but you'll remember in my third letter I spoke of taking part in the 'practicum'. Well, feedback (constructive comments/critique) from my teacher and my agency supervisor about my assignments and my attempts to practice social work is a really good way of helping me learn to become a professional social worker and expand the way I think about what I'm doing. By sending me your feedback you have stepped into the shoes of a 21st century social work teacher and supervisor.

Who is Titmuss and what is WebCT? Some would say Richard Titmuss was the father of the British Welfare State. He was Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics from 1950-1973, and was instrumental in establishing social policy and administration as scientific disciplines not only in England but also internationally.

It's a bit more difficult to explain WebCT. Although it has nothing to do with spiders or magic potions, it is a form of magic, as most people haven't a clue how it works – they just use it. My teacher would call this 'tacit' knowledge. Basically, WebCT is a computer program, run through the internet ('the web' - a giant web of computers all linked up around the world). It enables teachers to create and organize information such as lecture notes and tutorial exercises for students to access from computers anywhere in the world, even Persia. There is also a page where students can discuss issues with each other and their teacher.

To clarify your query re 'a values clarification exercise', this is a strategy to help students understand the process of 'valuing' that influences the way they think, make decisions and behave. This process is not restricted to any specific set of values. Students are asked to think about: beliefs and behaviours they 'prize' and would 'stand up for' publicly; alternative beliefs and behaviours; the pros and cons of each set of beliefs and behaviours; discrepancies between their actions and stated beliefs; and how these discrepancies can be addressed (Simon, Howe & Kirschenbaum, 1972).

In regard to your comment seeking references related to your readership's praxis, I have listed several sources of information about

how to teach students (and yourself) to become reflective professional practitioners. I hope they find these publications helpful.

*Postscript*

May we (teacher and student collaboratively) offer you some feedback re your use of the term 'Antipodes'? We Australians now find this a bit offensive, as we believe we are 'up there' with, or even better than the rest of the world in many things, including education. If you send a reply, could you please refer to 'Australia', not the 'Antipodes'?

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