Abstract

This paper describes how eight social work graduates from St. Thomas University, accompanied by an instructor, met together for two years to support each other in the transition from student to qualified social worker. During their first few months all graduates found differences between the world of social work as described in the classroom and the challenges of paid employment. The way that group processes assisted in bridging the gap between university and social work is explored. The author suggests implications for facilitating the transition from undergraduate student to the workplace that may be relevant for social work and also for other professions and disciplines.

Introduction: The Transition from University to Employment

After they are awarded their baccalaureate degrees, most of our graduates seek employment. During their years at university, students need to develop knowledge and skills to help them succeed in the workplace. It is particularly important that universities address the transition from professional education to professional practice. This paper provides a collective narrative about issues encountered by eight social workers during their first two years of practice after graduating from St. Thomas University with BSW degrees in 2002. These issues include the challenge of finding suitable employment, developing productive working relationships with clients and colleagues and managing workplace stress. I suggest implications of their experiences that are especially relevant for social work education, but may also be applicable to other professional programming and also other undergraduate education.

As more Canadians attend university there is an increasing necessity to devise strategies for bridging the gap between undergraduate education and employment rather than the public school system and university. More school leavers across Canada are choosing to attend university before entering the workforce. In 2002-2003, 19.7% of 18-21 year old Canadians were participating in university programmes. This represents a 3.2% increase since 1990-1991. An even higher proportion of school leavers pursue university education in Atlantic region. In New Brunswick, for example, 30.2% of Canadian 18-21 year olds were attending university in 2002-2003 and the proportion of this age group attending university had increased by 7.4% since 1990-1991 (Millennium Scholarships, Focus on New Brunswick, n.d.). Enrolment projections for Atlantic Universities suggest that student numbers will continue to grow. Even though a slow rate of population growth is predicted in the region, it is estimated that there will be an enrolment of an additional 8,200 students in the region by 2010 bringing total numbers to 70,000 (Atlantic Provinces Economic Council & Association of Atlantic Universities, 2000, p. 8).
Our universities adopt several different mechanisms for bridging the gap between university and work, including cooperative education, service learning and internship programmes. Cooper (n.d.) suggests 101 ideas for combining service and learning in 15 different disciplines including humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, as well as applied and professional programmes. Nevertheless, Pocklington and Tupper (2002) argue that contemporary Canadian universities are “no place to learn.” In their controversial book they assert that Canadian universities employ faculty who focus on their research rather than teaching (p. 37). These research-oriented faculty develop expertise in a very narrow sub-fields of their disciplines and lose the breadth of disciplinary knowledge needed to teach undergraduates. Undergraduate education, particularly in lower level courses, becomes unpopular and much of the work is consigned to inexperienced teaching assistants. Pocklington and Tupper point out that “many students lack interest in theoretical analysis and speculation . . . they have no need of professors with doctoral degrees from prestigious universities. They would be better served if their teachers were men and women who were successful practitioners of their occupations” (p. 176). These authors then suggest that “criticism of professional faculties for alleged failure to attend to the vocational interests of their students is rare” (p. 177). They propose that “academic” faculties should emulate some of the methods used in professional and co-operative programmes.

Professional programmes have responsibilities for educating and for training their students. Students need an understanding of the theoretical bases of their professions and they also need skills for practice. There is often a tension between the need to educate and the need to train. Academics may tend to emphasize the educational function of university social work programmes while employers may be more aware of the need for trained graduates with skills for the workplace. Internship arrangements are usually included in professional curricula, accredited Canadian social work programmes at the baccalaureate level must include at least 700 supervised practice hours in the curriculum (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004, p. 10, SB 6.5). These practice hours are intended to give practical training as well as provide an opportunity for students to link theory and practice.

Educators in professional programmes often recognize that supervised practice experiences are insufficient for bridging the gap between academic study and practice (for example Clews and Magneson, 1996). During my twelve year career as a social work educator, I have developed a number of mechanisms for enabling students to relate their university studies to the communities adjacent to the university. Activities have included inviting community practitioners to join classes as guest speakers, team-teaching with community practitioners, arranging for students at the end of a course to act as guests in a radio phone-in programme and answer questions posed by members of the public, designing a course where students conducted research for a community agency, and using data from my own community research studies in the social work curriculum (for examples see Clews 2000; Clews, In Press). In this paper I will describe one such attempt to ease the transition from university to the workplace.

In 2002, students in a final year undergraduate social work class were assigned a project that I hoped would form a bridge between their professional education and their early experiences as qualified social workers. I asked these students to produce a “Credo” in which they outlined their beliefs and values about their chosen profession and a “contract with themselves” to pursue
ethical practice as they had defined it. They were also asked to devise a method for monitoring
their work during their first six months of practice. Eight of the students who were remaining in
New Brunswick decided to meet together to support each other through their first few months at
work and they invited me to join them (Clews et al., 2003). We met together for two years and
tape-recorded our meetings. In this paper I explore three of the major themes that were discussed
during our meetings: finding the first job, handling co-working relationships and organizational
challenges, and managing workplace stress (challenges faced by graduates from all academic
programmes). The “collective narrative” in the following section of this paper, links quotations
from the recordings of the eight graduates to describe their experiences of transition from
university to the workplace. Included here are reflections by the graduates on these early-career
experiences and my observations on the implications for curriculum content and teaching and
learning methods in undergraduate social work and professional programmes as well as for other
undergraduate university courses.

A Collective Narrative About the First Two Years of Social Work Practice in New
Brunswick

The First Job

One of the group of graduates returned to the position she held before beginning the social work
programme and another took employment in the agency where she had her internship experience.
The remaining six group members found the selection of their first job to be challenging. One
said, “The transition from university to professional practice is about finding that job. Is it the
right field of work?” During the social work programme students were encouraged to engage in
reflective activities to gain greater self-awareness. When they reflected on their suitability for
potential jobs, they sometimes found a disjunction between their self-assessments and their
perceptions of jobs that were available. One group member concluded that “... my strengths, my
talents and my interests ... sometimes they are not compatible with the position.” Another
graduate summed up her feelings about the transition from university to professional practice as
follows: “After spending so much time in academia, often with like-minded people and obtaining
the marks to back us up, it is a humbling experience for some new graduates to learn that you
cannot judge how much you have learned until you start looking in earnest for a position.”

Reflecting on the job-search by all group members, one participant concluded, “It is not easy to
find a job. It involves search and competition. For members of our group the selection of a job
was usually an active process, sometimes a painful one, sometimes evolving more slowly than we
hoped for.” Their dilemma was whether to take a job that was less than perfect, or hold out until
the right job came along. One group member explained this dilemma: “I don’t know what to do
and that’s my big dilemma. Whether I should go for what I know I can handle or wait around or
should I just jump and take whatever comes first because I do want to work.”

Although graduates found the self-reflection skills they had developed at university were
valuable because “it helps you unravel who you are,” this was not always enough. Some found
that they needed practical job-search skills. One graduate asked: “How do I network? How do I
find jobs that are out there? Am I ready to start work?” Another group member who had a more
general feeling of being unready for the workplace commented, “I realized how little equipped,
how poorly equipped I am, and that was bothersome and challenging.”
Co-Working Relationships and Organizational Challenges

Often social work students are fearful that they may not have the necessary skills for working with clients. Instead, the greatest challenge tended to come from co-working relationships. New graduates find they receive much less support from workplace supervisors and co-workers than they received from their internship supervisors. One group member reported, “In my first days nobody had much time for me. Everyone was so busy and I felt lost. I did not feel accepted or that I belonged . . . The feeling of loneliness got better over time as I found my little spot and could finally see the value of my work. But certainly it did not happen on its own and it felt like a slow painful process.” One of the graduates summed up the experiences of all of her colleagues as follows: “. . . the field instructor is just another stressed face in an office of stressed faces. The welcome mat has been removed and replaced by an empty office or cubicle assigned to a worker . . . Orientation is offered as soon as scheduling allows.”

As they settled in their workplaces the graduates faced other challenges. One group member discovered that “misunderstanding of personal feelings, situations and professional issues among co-workers is a real problem.” Office gossip and ineffective channels of communication were troubling to a casual worker who commented, “There are a lot of rumours that go round the office . . . and I do not always know what is going on . . . I hear it from other people.”

In contrast to these negative experiences, some new workers found enormous support from co-workers. A graduate stated, “In our office we really sustain each other. When we have spare time we offer it to a co-worker who is swamped.” Another graduate was pleased that, “No decision I make is solely my own. My coworkers have a wealth of knowledge. They put things in perspective for me . . . There are so many things as a new worker I need feedback on, to see if my perspective is correct and sometimes I just need a sounding board. I am glad to be . . . in a safe environment where I can talk.” Some office environments were better than others, but all new employees needed to find supports within the workplace and learn to accept that “we do not relate equally well to all our co-workers.”

Relationships between supervisors and the graduates differed. One new worker said: “I was lucky, my supervisor almost mothered me in a no-nonsense way . . . The loyalty in that department to the supervisor is unbelievable. We’d take a bullet for her.” Graduates who worked in rural offices found that “supervisors in satellite offices were frequently absent and required to travel to Fredericton to attend ‘manager meetings’ at Head Office.”

Several of the graduates commented that they entered social work to work with clients but their organizations seemed more interested in financial matters. One disillusioned graduate who expected to spend her time in “teaching/helping [her] clients to meet their needs,” concluded that “government is not the place where you can be practicing . . . social work . . . you’re going to get frustrated. It is amazing that accountability has been reduced to dollars and cents.” Similarly, another group member stated that: “accountability is about being able to demonstrate and keep track of the money and filling out lots of paperwork. The money is where social work stops.” Pressure of workloads resulted in insufficient time to conduct work with any degree of thoroughness: “. . . interaction with clients is determined by . . . policies and procedures . . . you are trying to ferret out as many facts as possible in the shortest amount of time, leaving little time to build relationships.”
Managing Workplace Stress

New social workers experience several layers of challenge. They must seek and find employment. Then they must find support mechanisms within the workplace and develop strategies for dealing with difficult relationships with co-workers. They need to learn how to practice in organizations that are sometimes unsupportive. Added to this are the challenges of helping clients to resolve complex difficulties. Often social workers have inadequate time to complete full assessments of the needs of their clients. Stress builds and burnout is an occupational risk. One graduate concluded that “burnout has become a norm in the helping profession due to the consistent and highly involved demands placed on the individual both within the job and on a personal level.”

Typically the graduates threw themselves into their work with great enthusiasm. One new worker stated that “for the first eight months of my career as a social worker, self care was something I thought about but did nothing about.” Large workloads, and a commitment to assist clients in whatever way they could, led new social workers to put in long hours at work. “After driving long distances to and from work, I would spend many evenings calling foster homes or clients that I could not contact or respond to during the day, as I felt obligated to contact them immediately. I did not realize how much time I was taking away from my self and my family.”

Many of the graduates practiced in small communities. For these graduates it was particularly difficult to maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives: “Particularly when we live in the community we meet [clients] in many different situations and often get to know them well. It is hard to say ‘no’ and we push ourselves beyond what is reasonable.”

The newly qualified workers worked harder and harder before realizing that they could not continue to work at such a pace. They remembered their struggles to finance their university education and expected that they would be able to cope. “It’s been scary for me because I’ve always been what you call a work-aholic. I’ve always worked and worked hard. And often had two or three jobs at a time.” The pressure of social work was such that they abandoned coffee and lunch breaks and then one group member realized, “I was beginning to think that I didn’t have time to go home . . . so I learned to walk away. It will be there tomorrow, there is no such thing as catching up. This is challenging for me because I like to get things completed and that’s just not possible.” Painfully the graduates learned that “overall we are the only ones who are responsible for taking care of ourselves, nobody else is going to do it.”

Implications for Undergraduate Education

The BSW programme at St. Thomas University has developed many strategies to ease the transition between university and the social work agencies where their graduates will be employed. Nevertheless, the eight graduates who supported each other during their first two years of practice experienced considerable difficulty in their selection of the first job, finding their places in social work agencies, and handling the stress that accompanies the social work role. Of course students need to develop conceptual skills and knowledge about their disciplines, but the graduates also need to enter workplaces outside of academia. Only a small minority will go on to become academics. What can educators in social work, other professional programmes, and all undergraduate disciplines do to better prepare their students for the workplace?
Universities could devise methods that enable a graduating cohort to maintain contact for mutual support during their challenging time of transition from university to paid employment. Group members in this project valued the support provided by peers during a time that they were making major changes in their lives. They found that discussing their struggles clarified their thoughts about how to resolve them. Discussions often suggested a new way to tackle workplace challenges. Group members received validation from their peers and described meetings as their “comfort-zone.” The fact that group meetings took place at the university was important because it felt like “coming home” to a place where difficulties could be resolved and successes shared.

It is clear that students in the group I have worked with would have benefited from devoting more attention to issues relating to seeking and selecting their first jobs after qualifying. Graduates needed more preparation in job-search strategies. They also needed to develop criteria that would help them to decide whether to accept a job offer. Group discussions also revealed that many graduates had low confidence about their readiness to enter the workforce.

Further studies with graduates in social work and from other programmes are needed to determine whether a difficult entry to the workforce is the experience of the particular group I worked with, or if the selection of a job is a cause of concern for many recent graduates, in professional programmes such as social work and elsewhere. If, as I suspect, many recent graduates find job selection to be a challenge, one option would be to include a greater emphasis on this issue in the curriculum. Classroom discussions could utilize the experiences of class members and recent graduates. Guest speakers who have expertise in these areas could be invited to class to share their knowledge and answer questions. Capstone courses could include or extend their attention to job-seeking and job-selection. Alternatively or additionally, workshops could be offered to students from several disciplines, either through student service departments or through academic departments and faculties. Each of these methods could also be used to encourage students to gain confidence in their ability and readiness to enter the permanent workforce.

Employees are unlikely to work on their own. They need to form productive relationships with co-workers, supervisors, and managers. The graduates in the study experienced challenge in this regard. Teaching and learning strategies similar to those proposed for entering the workforce could be applied to co-working issues. Classroom relationships can be generalized to the workplace. I have found that many students consider groupwork assignments to be challenging. Exploring these challenges and seeking solutions to them could provide valuable skills for developing productive co-working relationships. I think that we have an obligation as educators to be as clear as we can with our students about issues they are likely to encounter in the workplace, and help them to develop the skills needed to deal with these issues. For the social work graduates, an important concern was their need to work in agencies which seemed more concerned about money than people. Social work educators need to decide whether they should devote attention to financial management, and/or assisting students to find ways of maintaining integrity when the value base of an employer appears to differ from their own values. The concerns of graduates in other professions and disciplines may be different. We should explore workplace concerns and challenges with recent graduates and find ways for current students to address these issues during their time at university.
A recurrent theme during our group meetings was strategies for handling stress. Social work and other human service work is very stressful. Stress management is frequently explored in the social work programme from which the group members graduated, but they still experienced a high degree of stress in their first two years after qualifying. These graduates would have benefited from even more attention being devoted to developing their skills in recognizing an increase in personal stress levels, and mechanisms for handling this stress. More research is needed to ascertain whether stress-management is an issue for other new social work graduates, and graduates from other first degree programmes. If this is the case, more attention should be devoted to this matter within the curriculum of particular programmes, within faculties, and by our student services departments.

Bridges (1980) suggests that work transitions are among the most important transitions that we face during our lives. The transition from university to employment must surely be one of the most important work transitions. Eight graduates from a social work programme explored their transition from university to the workplace. They identified several challenges and supported each other as they attempted to resolve the challenges. In this paper I have suggested that we should anticipate with our students the workplaces they will enter on graduation. The experiences of recent graduates in professional programmes can also help us to design and refine our curriculum so that it is relevant for the workplace of today. Workplace experiences of all recent graduates provide valuable information about current workplace challenges and methods for overcoming them. Final year integration and Capstone courses are useful ways of consolidating learning throughout an entire undergraduate career. These courses can also assist the transition from university to the workplace. We should expand and extend internship arrangements and encourage students to explore fully their experiences in the internship – not only their professional roles but also issues of job-selection, co-working relationships and workplace stress. In addition, we might consider offering our graduates an integration course which they can take after they graduate. Such a course would enable graduates to work with their university professors to make the transition from university to the jobs they are actually in rather than the jobs they anticipate. Such a course would benefit university teachers by offering valuable insights into the current challenges faced by new social workers.

Note: All the quotations are attributed to females to avoid comments by the male group member being identified.

References


