

## **Walk the Talk: the journey towards deconstructing the education environment as a model for anti-oppressive social and community welfare practice**

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### **Abstract**

*As an experienced social welfare practitioner, two years spent living and working as a volunteer in Botswana forced me to reflect critically on my practice, but it was not until I returned that I recognised the pervasive power of our culture to oppress, most visibly, Indigenous Australians. That realisation has led me to focus on issues of power, racism and oppression in my social and community welfare teaching and I am endeavouring to develop a model of teaching that not only raises these issues and strategies to address them for practice but provides an educational environment that enables students to experience such a model. This paper examines the process of integrating my personal experience with my professional teaching and welfare practice and offers some ideas about how social and community welfare students might learn to be genuinely inclusive professional workers through their educational experience.*

**Keywords:** *social and community welfare; social work; education; anti-oppressive practice.*

### **Introduction**

In 1986, under the auspices of AVA (now Australian Volunteers International), I left North-East Victoria for Botswana, southern Africa, to spend two years living in the rural village of Kanye and working as an Extension Officer for an appropriate technology centre. The anticipated ‘adventure of a lifetime’ proved challenging and, as an Anglo-Australian woman, I learned as much about my own culture as I did about life in Botswana. Over the last fifteen years I have been grappling with the impact of this experience on my social welfare practice and on the way I engage our social and community welfare students around issues of discrimination and oppression.

As I write, I am aware of my continuing struggle with the many ways my culture induces (even seduces) me to support discriminatory belief systems. At the same time, along with my colleagues, I am responsible for preparing students to use an anti-oppressive approach in their future practice. This paper explores some of my experiences and offers some thoughts about an educational process to help prepare students for the challenges of anti-oppressive practice in an increasingly materialist and individualised society. Most importantly, I invite you to join this conversation and share your experiences and ideas about this important issue.

## Reflections on life in Botswana

Prior to leaving for Botswana I had worked in the social and community welfare field for some ten years. I was committed to non-discriminatory practice which I understood to mean providing everyone with the same level of respect and care regardless of their circumstances or background. I believed I was a good practitioner and did not see myself as ethnocentric, let alone racist. The extent of my self-deception was revealed during my time in Botswana. Daily, in the way I lived and worked, I saw my culture reflected in the bemused or uncomprehending eyes of people of a very different culture.

I was astonished to learn how so many of the things I said and did, how I felt and responded to people and events, reflected my own cultural values and beliefs and were unfathomable to others. I had previously travelled overseas but I realised that as a traveller I had essentially been a cultural 'tourist' and had simply moved on to another country or retreated to the familiarity and comfort of a Western hotel if I found others' values or beliefs too confronting. I had also worked with Indigenous families and people from different cultural backgrounds and I have memories of retreating behind the safety of my Anglo-Australian culture and my professional role, "This is the way **we** do things", when challenged. I realised that I judged other people's cultures entirely through the lens of my own. My culture was taken for granted, assumed to be 'right'. It remained almost totally unexamined. My commitment to two years in Botswana meant living with the frequent discomfort of cultural dissonance. Increasingly, I realised that my previous social welfare practice had been ethnocentric and, at times, overtly racist. A couple of examples may help you understand how my struggle to come to grips with cultural clashes in Botswana enabled me to see my social welfare practice in Australia in a very different light. They will also explain my search for ways to enable social and community welfare students to become more aware of the power of cultural mores on their social welfare practice.

## The rules of supplication and gratitude

Negotiating cultural differences occurred on a daily basis in Botswana. I became aware of how strongly I held my cultural values and beliefs and I was unnerved by the power of my emotional response to having them challenged. Women and children regularly came to my home seeking basic items such as matches, bread, sugar, candles, kerosene or soap. Opening my door to a called greeting, 'Koko', my visitor would then say 'I want soap.' This was not accompanied by 'please', nor followed by 'thank you' and my initial astonishment was quickly followed by indignation and at times, outrage. My Botswana<sup>1</sup> colleagues told me that their language, Setswana, only has the words 'tswee, tswee' for begging and 'ke e tumetse thata', in appreciation of a gift, adding that, in their culture, basic goods were shared. Undaunted, I insisted that my culture, too, needed to be respected and I told the children to 'ask nicely' by adding 'please' and 'thank you'. They obeyed, but I was still not satisfied. Why did their

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<sup>1</sup> Botswana, pronounced something like Butswana, are the people of Botswana.

requests continue to sound like demands? I realised it was because there was no upward inflexion at the end of the sentence, indicating a question in our culture. I also realised that despite being a guest in their country I was applying the rules of my culture and responding punitively when these rules were not met. I felt 'put upon' and resentful and would often mutter 'ungrateful', 'greedy', 'spongers' as they left. No matter how hard I tried my feelings would constantly threaten to override my rational thoughts.

How could I have been so unaware of the pervasive power of these cultural rules when I lived and worked in Australia? How many times have I 'assessed' who was 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of my assistance or my resources on the basis of how well people obeyed the rules of supplication and gratitude? How often have I rejected the requests of people because I perceived them to be demanding, rude, greedy, sly, scheming and ungrateful? I do remember times when I felt I was being 'had', or 'taken for a ride' and in spite of my understanding of the structural causes of disadvantage, I used my professional power to refuse their requests. I remember calling this my 'intuition' or 'practice wisdom', but I now see my actions as discriminatory and, in relation to Indigenous people or refugees and migrants, racist.

### **The seductiveness of professional status**

In Botswana part of my role as an Extension officer was to encourage local villagers to embrace the appropriate technologies developed at R.I.I.C. (Rural Industries Innovation Centre). I became aware that the predominantly British, American and European engineers had developed appropriate technological, rather than cultural, solutions for pumping water from 100m under the Kalahari Desert. One was a wind pump. Batswana men were very reluctant to climb the 12 metre towers either to service the machines or to furl the spinning blades in a storm. In response to my queries they asked me to look around. I could see nothing over 3 metres high and what vegetation existed was covered with vicious 10 cm long thorns. They had never been so high off the ground. Additionally, in a storm, the fast rotating pumping shaft would grab the men's shirt-tails ripping them from their backs or pulling them off the tower. The engineers responded to my attempts to explain these difficulties by emphasising their technical expertise and professionalism, clearly valuing their knowledge over that of the villagers.

For similar reasons the Batswana also showed reluctance to embrace other technologies being developed and I began to hear some expatriates expressing increasingly racist beliefs. At a meeting with my Batswana Extension Officer colleagues, I suggested that we ask the engineers to meet with the villagers to hear their concerns. This was enthusiastically supported. At the meeting, however, the villagers applauded the engineers for their expertise and nothing was said about the (in)appropriateness of the technologies. At that moment I realised that we had all been seduced by a reverence for Western professional knowledge and status. The engineers valued their professional expertise more highly than the knowledge of the people they had come to assist; my colleagues valued my professional expertise and ideas over their own local knowledge by agreeing to a meeting that they knew would not resolve the issues; and the villagers applauded the skills and knowledge of the engineers rather than expressing their own needs and concerns. Nothing changed. The

technologies, funded by aid projects, were built and distributed, but were mostly unused or poorly maintained. The engineers felt unappreciated by the 'lazy', 'ungrateful' Batswana. I, too, was complicit. I had been happy to accept, unquestioningly, the 'expert' status accorded me by my Batswana colleagues.

I have since wondered how often I am seduced by my culture's reverence for professional qualifications and the expertise that is assumed to accompany them. Do I use my qualifications to claim greater status for my expertise over the knowledge of service users or students? How do I respond to perceived challenges to my 'expertise'? As my professional identity is integral to my sense of self do I perceive such challenges as personal and draw on my 'professional' status to support me? Do I ignore, dismiss or denigrate knowledge that does not accord with my professional knowledge? How do I respond to service users' religious or spiritual knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, cultural and ethnic knowledge? I am now much more consciously alert to the abuse of professional power but how often am I unaware of my seduction by the dominant culture from which I benefit as a member?

Through my experiences in Botswana I learned that powerful emotions are generated when cultural values and mores are challenged. I also learned that those of us who benefit from the status quo will, often unwittingly, use our status to reinforce our cultural 'rules' to the detriment of those we consider 'different'. On returning to Australia I realised how little we understand about the role we each play in maintaining our cultural oppression of 'others'.

### **Australia's cultural malaise**

Arriving back in Australia I discovered I had an 'outsiders' view of my own culture. I 'saw', with shocking clarity, that racism towards Indigenous people and their culture was omnipresent. I felt the oppressive weight of negativity and oft-times contempt with which they were regarded by so many non-Indigenous Australians. I had heard comparable attitudes from white South Africans and Zimbabweans I had met in Africa, and the faces of the Aboriginal youth similarly expressed the despair and anger I had seen in black South Africans and Zimbabweans who had suffered under British colonisation.

Soon after my return I began a job in Child Protection and met an Aboriginal woman who said to me "You sound Australian but you're not from here, are you? You're different." I explained that I had just returned from living overseas and she nodded, but said no more. I was puzzled until I realised that I had related to her if she was a Motswana<sup>2</sup> or any other woman. How do I explain this? Firstly, I don't think I saw this Aboriginal woman as someone who was 'different'. In Botswana skin colour or 'blackness' had become 'normal' to me. Almost everyone I saw was 'black'. The degree of someone's 'blackness' was the mark of 'difference' as evidenced by my Batswana colleagues' frustration at my initial inability to recognise individual Batswana. In desperation they might say, "You know so and so, the black one!"

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<sup>2</sup> Motswana refers to one person from Botswana ie. singular. Batswana refers to people ie. plural.

Secondly, I had no cultural 'past' with the Batswana, while my past relationships with Aborigines were imbued with the beliefs and attitudes that were all around me. Perhaps this Aboriginal elder could see that I was free of their influence, at least for a time. She later asked me "Why did you go overseas to help the Africans? Why didn't you stay here and help us?" I had said nothing. The only answer I could have given reflected the racist attitudes of which I had suddenly become so much more aware.

I had tried to explain to colleagues in the public welfare and justice systems what I 'saw' around me, but I found it almost impossible to penetrate the cultural malaise with which our culture is afflicted. I found few non-Aboriginal people able to hear anything positive about Aboriginal people. I tried to do my Child Protection job differently. I resisted removing Aboriginal children from their families, arguing their evident abuse in the context of the past and future long term damage of removal. The evidence of immediate abuse, however, was more compelling. Aboriginal family and community support systems, both formal and informal, were stretched beyond breaking point. I continued to remove Aboriginal children from their families. I began to lose my capacity to 'see' Indigenous people 'differently', struggling to see their strengths and potential, not only their failures. The dominant cultural view was engulfing me like a creeping, high country 'white-out'. Trying to challenge our pervasive culture of negativity towards Indigenous people was exhausting. I left direct practice. I don't know how Indigenous Australians and their culture survive, carrying the burden of our cultural condemnation, every day of their lives. And yet, as an Aboriginal elder responded when asked his people's greatest achievement, '(w)e have survived.' (Burney 2006:13).

Now, some 12 years later, I wonder whether the attitudes and beliefs of non-Indigenous Australians have changed towards Indigenous Australians. Linda Burney, delivering the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Vincent Lingiara Memorial Lecture in May, 2006, said '(t)his country is sitting on a time bomb. If you can't hear the ticking, you are not paying attention.' She related the statistics about Aboriginal disease, death, unemployment, imprisonment that we know well, adding '(b)ut I suspect that most Australians accept them as being almost inevitable. A certain kind of industrial deafness has developed. The human element in this is not recognised. The meaning of these figures is not heard - not felt.' She added, '(h)istory tells so many horror stories of what can happen if humanity is denied' (Burney 2006:8-9).

It is imperative that we recognise our cultural values and beliefs that oppress Indigenous people and address our own role in their continuance. As social and community welfare workers we must heed Galloway (2005:273) who cautions 'against assuming that the welfare sector is any more willing than other sectors of Australian society to move beyond symbolic acts of reconciliation (such as walking across the Sydney Harbour Bridge; Gratton 2000), to engage the gamut of issues that comprised the original reconciliation agenda.'

Those of us involved in the education and training of social and community welfare workers must find ways to render 'visible' the unseen values and beliefs of our culture that impact so devastatingly on those we 'see' as different. We can then choose to challenge oppression rather than contribute, often unknowingly, to its continuance. Lena Dominelli asserts that while realising the aims of anti-oppressive practice is

‘fraught with difficulties, their continued endorsement is crucial to social well-being at both individual and collective levels’ and thus ‘has to remain on the social work agenda for the foreseeable future’ (Dominelli, 2002:181). The rest of this paper will draw on literature that has led me to think about a way of engaging students with the lived experience of oppression by deconstructing our participation in our ‘knowledge’ culture, a system in which we are both oppressors and oppressed. This approach is seen as a starting point, as it is important for anyone who wants to become an ‘ally’ of oppressed groups to reflect on his/her own experience of being a member of oppressed and oppressor groups (Bishop, 2000).

### **Modelling anti-oppressive practice for students**

Theoretical and practice approaches to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social welfare work have been developed by a number of authors (see, for example Dominelli 2002; Mullaly 2002; Thompson 2001). There is an understanding that oppression operates across and between three levels; personal, cultural and structural or institutional and that social welfare workers need to acknowledge and challenge these in their daily practice (Mullaly 2002:50; Maidment & Egan, 2004: 5). More elusive, however, is advice about educational approaches to assist students to develop an anti-oppressive practice approach. The texts referred to above examine the nature of oppression and outline the social welfare worker’s role, but answers to the question of ‘how’ an educator assists students to develop their own understanding of and approach to challenging oppression is the focus of my enquiry. Research clearly identifies the need to address this question, stating that there is a distinct gap between anti-oppressive and anti-racist theory or rhetoric and real life practice as reflected in student placement and field supervision reports (Butler, Elliott & Stopard 2003; Maidment & Cooper 2002; Collins, Guttridge, James, Lynn & Williams 2000) and the personal attitudes and beliefs of students and practitioners (Heenan 2005; Galloway 2005).

In one approach, frameworks have been developed that comprise measurable goals or standards by which students can demonstrate their anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive competency (Roer-Strier 2005; Butler et al 2003). Wilson & Beresford (2000:560) have warned that such approaches run the risk of students ‘feeling that they have ‘done’ anti-oppressive practice and are competent therefore in its usage at all times.’

An anti-oppressive approach to working with Indigenous Australians, according to Michelle Blanchard (2005) and Stephanie Gilbert (2006) both Indigenous Australian academics, requires workers to demonstrate an understanding and respect for Indigenous people. Gilbert says ‘(i)f this requires workers to revisit their beliefs, values and understandings of Australian history, then they must take this on as their challenge.’ (Gilbert 2006:72). My efforts to encourage students to undertake this challenge has been fraught. As McMahon (2005:79) explains, this approach may either alienate workers ‘by presenting harsh facts they find difficult to deal with personally or are unable to respond to adequately’ or be seen as belonging in the past and thus unrelated to current situations.

Most of the practitioners and authors referred to above emphasise the importance of practitioners developing self-awareness through a process of continual, critical self-reflection for an anti-oppressive approach to working with difference. Fook's (1996:4) approach uses a series of reflective questions to examine practice experiences by exploring thoughts, feelings, actions and the assumptions and biases they reveal. If this process of self reflection includes a focus on the context in which we work it can help us become more reflexive in our practice. Fook explains that reflexivity 'refers to a *stance* of being able to locate oneself in the picture' recognising how we influence the situations and contexts in which we work (Fook 2002:43,130).

Analysis of case studies offers an important way of developing self-awareness and practising self-reflection. Case scenarios familiarise students with the situations they may face in practice, however, my experience is that for many students, especially those with little knowledge or experience of practice, they present situations that are remote, involving 'others' who live 'out there' and reflexivity is difficult to develop. I have at times explored other ways of helping students to gain an understanding of the lived experience of oppression through films such as *Babakiueria* (1986), which, by reversing the roles, portrays the Indigenous colonisation of modern day Australia with irony infused with humour; and with cartoons, poems, biographies and physical activities, for example fish bowl role plays and sculptures exploring oppressive relationships. All these techniques attempted to engage students at an affective as well as cognitive level, however, whilst student feedback attested to their partial effectiveness, I had still not been able to bring the experience 'in here' for students, akin to the way my experience in Botswana impacted so powerfully on me at a personal level. Tesoriero (2006:139) recognises the importance of lived experience as a way of providing students with opportunities to learn to engage competently with difference and "contributing to upholding respect for human rights in times when world leaders promote difference as something to be feared and hated'. He takes social work students from the University of South Australia to a partner agency in southern India for their final placement to provide them 'with the opportunity to develop intercultural skills and intercultural sensitivity' (Tesoriero 2006:126). Along with other tools he uses Fook's (1996) process of reflective questioning to assist students to explore the meaning of their experiences and 'as a bridge to increase the sophistication of their intercultural sensitivity' (Tesoriero 2006:131). The excerpts he provides from students' journals mirror some of my own experiences and insights in Botswana. Given, however, few students are able to take three months out from their commitments to experience another culture we must find other ways to assist them to recognise the cultural discourses that define and discriminate against 'difference' in our daily lives.

Social work educators, Taylor and White (2006) also use drama, literature and poetry to provide students with different representations of life and they use reflexive processes to help students recognise the complexities of practice. They urge that rather than seeking certainty through theories, models and frameworks, students need to be continually self questioning and to stay with the anxieties, confusions and ambiguities of practice, in order to developing a practice approach of 'respectful uncertainty'. Miehl and Moffatt likewise encourage educators to assist students to stay with their feelings of anxiety explaining that '[r]ather than looking for ways to calm anxiety, social workers might understand uncertainty and social tensions as

necessary for the development of an identity that is sensitive to the experience of the other' (2000:343). They suggest that by staying with the anxiety and other feelings generated through interacting with those who are 'different' we recognise our interconnectedness and are no longer able to see 'the struggles of another person or a group of persons from a safe distance' (2000:340). Most importantly for my enquiry, the authors see the classroom as a site of learning. They assert that role plays are no longer useful because they remove students from reality, while the classroom setting itself offers experiences of 'the many tensions that occur through attempting to speak across difference' (Miehls and Moffatt 2000:346).

Clifford and Burke (2005) urge educators to focus on the classroom adding that we should explicitly highlight the role we play in the learning process. They assert that '[s]tudents should learn not only from the theory of anti-oppressive ethics and decision-making, but also from the model of practice provided by teachers who struggle to live by the values that they recommend to others' (Clifford and Burke 2005:687). Graham (2004:214) responds to the incongruity that often exists in social work education between 'what' and 'how' we teach, by challenging 'the teacher [to become] a facilitator of a constructivist process rather than an expert who disseminates information to individuals.' She continues, '[t]he constructivist orientation, with its rejection of 'objective facts' and its emphasis on social constructions of reality, offers a lens through which diverse perspectives may be seen and experienced' (Graham 2004:16). Conflicting views are held in creative tension and privileged views are not valued over marginal ones. She urges teachers to create an environment of open enquiry by approaching topics with 'a genuine uncertainty' and participating in deconstructing their own meaning making processes, thereby becoming 'vulnerable' thus creating a 'dialogue with students based on mutuality' (Graham 2003:220). These authors have contributed a number of ideas to my thoughts about how to create a learning environment that furthers students' understanding and engagement with issues of difference and oppression. These are: our understanding of difference is enhanced by encouraging a position of 'uncertainty' rather than certainty; with uncertainty comes anxiety and other emotions that are important to encourage rather than eliminate; the importance of fostering and developing students' reflexivity; and the possibility that these could be learned through classroom experiences. Anne Bishop's writing further encouraged me to explore the possibilities of using the classroom as a learning model. Bishop (2002:112) asserts that

'...part of the process of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed...When oppression is not part of your own experience, you can only understand it through hearing others' experience, along with process of analysis and drawing parallels.'

I have been searching for a link between these approaches to education and social and community welfare practice to ensure that my educational approach would have relevance in the 'real world' of practice. Christine Morley (2004) provided that assurance. She writes about her work with practitioners to deconstruct the entrenched power dynamics and structural barriers in their workplace, enabling them to make choices that changed their oppressive experiences and relationships. Using critical self reflection, the practitioners deconstructed the discourses that maintained their 'identities' as powerless workers becoming '...aware of our potential to unwittingly



comply with discourses that actively disadvantage us and our emancipatory values and analyses' (Morley 2004:303).

Morley (2004) challenges us to rethink our approach to education and practice in terms of how we engage with the dominant discourses that impact directly on us. I was encouraged to critically reflect on my earlier attempts to 'walk the talk' by modelling future anti-oppressive practice through my teaching. I realised that whilst I engaged the students in deconstructing oppression in our culture, I had failed to deconstruct the dominant education discourse that had had such a strong impact on the classroom experience. I abandoned my 'model'. I had engaged students in a learning 'partnership' to model anti-oppressive 'partnerships' in practice. They contributed to creating their own learning contracts, I emphasised the value of their knowledge and skills, tried to relinquish the role of 'expert' and involved students in peer assessment. The experience was fraught for us all. Standing at the front of a tiered lecture theatre, behind a bank of technical wizardry, there was no question about who is perceived as the 'expert'. I continually struggled against being seduced by the 'expert' role, reinforced by the expectations of students and rewarded by a culture which accords me 'lecturer' status. Students also struggled. They expected me to be the 'expert', indebting themselves financially to gain knowledge, skills and a professional qualification certifying their own expertise. Whilst some students embraced the opportunities offered by learning 'partnerships', others actively resisted, declaring that it was my role to teach them what they would need to know to become professional social and community welfare workers. Many students struggled to value what they and their peers brought to the learning environment and were thus reluctant to engage with peer evaluation processes. They understood their role as recipients, rather than partners in their learning and many sought to reinstate our culturally ascribed relationship. I now realise that I failed to recognise in these tensions and shared discomfort, frustration and resentment, any reflections of my own experiences to cultural challenges in Botswana and on my return to Australia. Instead of seizing the opportunity to actively engage with students in the process of cultural change, through articulating and deconstructing the ways our culturally ascribed roles as students and teacher draw us into oppressive relationships with each other, I retreated from the 'anxieties' created by this 'different' relationship to the safety of my culturally ascribed role as the 'expert' lecturer. We all agreed it was easier this way, but at what cost and to whom?

Given our cultural understanding of how knowledge is gained and whose knowledge is valued, it is not surprising that the roles of learner and teacher can be seen to be replicated in the roles of service user and professional social and community welfare worker. Graduate social and community welfare workers are expected by our society to be 'professionals', 'experts' in their field and so service users expect the worker to fulfil that role providing the expertise they seek. We, however, seek to educate students to practise anti-oppressively, to change this relationship, to form more equal 'partnerships' with service users (Maidment and Egan 2004; Trevithick 2000). We ask students to challenge the interpersonal, cultural and structural power relations that govern their relationships with agencies and service users. The classroom experiences outlined above, however, show the potential for this process to generate tensions, strong emotional responses and active resistance from all involved. My experiences of trying to address concerns about the (in)appropriate technologies in Botswana

similarly reflect the complex and powerful influence of cultural mores, albeit influenced by Western culture. It seems clear that unless we are able to deconstruct the oppression in its complexity in our own experiences, our attempts to educate and practise anti-oppressively will result in reinforcing rather than changing oppressive relationships.

At this point in my thinking I believe a more reflexive approach will enable us to utilise classroom experiences to deconstruct the dominant cultural discourses of education and expertise as a model for understanding the complexity of oppression and anti-oppressive social and community welfare practice. By articulating my own struggles to resist the role of the 'expert' and displaying my vulnerability and uncertainty about knowledge and knowing, I hope graduates will be able to live 'the examined life' and practise 'the examined practice' (Taylor and White 2006); be more open to questioning their own unexamined cultural 'certainties'; and will choose to live with the tensions and anxiety created by challenging cultural mores rather than retreat to the safety of culturally ascribed roles which preserve cultural and structural oppression.

## **Summary and conclusion**

My experiences as a social and community welfare worker in Botswana enabled me to see my culture through others' eyes and to recognise its powerful influence on the way I think, feel and act towards others. I learned that, despite personal integrity and professional education, my practice was ethnocentric and discriminatory in ways of which I was previously unaware. On my return to Australia I was able to see that racism towards Indigenous people and their culture is omnipresent in our Anglo-Australian culture and that we have a crushingly negative and pessimistic view of Indigenous people. For many social and community welfare students, oppression is experienced 'out there' in other places, in the lives of 'other' people. I saw a pressing need to provide students with opportunities to 'see' and 'feel' the pervasive influence of culture on our lives and to understand how we benefit from and contribute to the continuance of oppression so that as individuals and practitioners they can make choices that challenge rather than, unknowingly, reinforce it. By creating learning 'partnerships', which challenge the culturally accepted roles of student as 'learner' and teacher as 'expert', we reveal the 'unseen' elements of this relationship.

Deconstructing the tensions that emerge illuminates how we contribute to and are oppressed by the traditional student-teacher/ learner-expert relationship. Students are then able to see how their personal experiences are reflected at cultural and structural levels revealing tensions between their employment as recognised professionals and their anti-oppressive approach to working in partnership with service users. It is hoped that students' personal engagement with the nature and structure of oppression creates opportunities for them to challenge and change culturally produced and structurally maintained power relations beginning at an interpersonal level. I invite you to join this conversation about culture, oppression and the education of social and community welfare workers. The *Practice Reflexions* discussion list provides us with such an opportunity, and I would welcome your comments, reflections and contributions.

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