Teaching narrative approaches in community practice

Pat Kelley and Susan Murty

Patricia Kelly is Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa and former Chair of the Family Centred Practice Sequence.
Susan Murty is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa and Chair of Integrated (Community Centred) Practice Sequence.

As noted in the article by Vodde and Gallant in this issue (and in 2002), the distinction between macro and micro social work practice is restrictive and unnecessary. Further, recent trends in practice and theory have reduced or even obviated the need for the distinction. Several social work graduate programmes in the U.S. now have a single advanced generalist concentration, educating students for a wide spectrum of activities. Concern may be expressed, however, that too much breadth diminishes the necessary skills for advanced practice.

This paper discusses how one school of social work has addressed this dilemma through curriculum modification, and a community programme developed by the school will be described. Postmodern theory will be the lens through which these activities will be analysed, since postmodern theory and some of the practice approaches that fall within it offer a basis for the integration of micro and macro practice.

The School has an MSW programme organised under an advanced generalist framework of Family and Community Centered Practice, divided into two concentrations which share underlying assumptions and have planned overlap, but teach specific skills. One concentration, called ‘Family Centered Practice’, focuses more on work with individuals and families, and the other, ‘Integrated Practice’ focuses more on work with organisations and communities. Both teach the connection between the two, however. In the community project described here, students and faculty from both concentrations work together to practise that connection.

Postmodern theory as a basis for teaching practice

While postmodernism is not defined clearly and precisely (Lowe, 1991; Rosen, 1996), it is an intellectual issue of our time, which has crossed disciplines from literary criticism to the sciences. As noted by Rosen (1996), it is a movement against modernism, with its totalising truths, which suppress and silence some voices and privilege others. Instead, with postmodernism, objectivism is denied and theories are seen as metaphors. Language is viewed as controlling and determining meaning, and fixed reality as constructed in the minds of people in interaction with other people and with societal and cultural views. There are many meanings attached to any experience, and many truths. Postmodernists do not deny the truths or realities of personal experience, but believe that by totalising one truth, others are subjugated. As noted by Freedman and Combs (1996) problems are brought about when any one theory or belief is reified or unexamined, and they go on to note that a postmodern view is not against any one family therapy theory, but against the posture of authoritative truth. Within a postmodern view, the social constructionists place more emphasis on the inter-subjective influence of language, family, and culture. Thus, postmodernism can serve as a basis for social work practice in small and large systems.

There are several social work approaches, which can be seen as situated in the postmodern view. For example, the empowerment practice, as noted by Lee (1996, p.219) is an ‘integrative holistic approach to meet the needs of an oppressed group’. She further discusses the need for
empowerment-based social workers to be generalists with both clinical and political knowledge, focusing on the person-environment trans-actions. Hartman (1990), in favouring empowerment practices, isolated the three dimensions of power as personal, interpersonal and political. The ethnic-sensitive approach outlined by Devore and Schlesinger (1999) makes knowledge of culture and race critical to empowerment practice. Saleebey’s strength-based practice (1997) and de Shazer’s solution-focused therapy (1991) fall under the postmodern rubric in many ways, and the linguistic systems approaches of Anderson and Goolishian (1988) certainly do. However, narrative therapy as first defined by White and Epston (1990), seemed the most useful approach for our school, as the basis for the curriculum, especially at the clinical level. Narrative therapy focuses on problems facing clients more than the strengths approaches and is less prescriptive than solution focused, but can be more interventive than the linguistic systems approaches. By honouring the client’s worldview, it is culturally sensitive. It fits social work practice so well that elements of it are incorporated into the community practice courses as well.

The School’s overall theme of family and community centred practice focuses on context and encompasses the following practice principles: collaboration and mutuality between client system and social worker; respect for the clients’ expertise regarding their lives, problem definition, and in decision making; emphasis on and mobilisation of existing strengths; and cultural competence. Narrative therapy was chosen for the family concentration courses as best fitting these criteria. It emphasises strengths, but it also emphasises respectful listening to and understanding of the problem as presented by the client. In fact, the problem story is ‘thickened’ to hear and discuss many aspects of it over time and across dimensions and in cultural context. The problems facing the client are never diminished by just hearing the good news; all sides need to be addressed. While a solution-focused therapist might ask what it would be like if the problem was solved or diminished, the narrative therapist also asks about how the future would be if the problem was still dominant. The presenting problem story is deconstructed, as in literary criticism, by taking it apart and analysing it for meaning. The problem is exter-nalised, that is taken outside of the person, so the social worker and client can join together to find ways to fight it and its effects. In the reconstruction stage, unique experiences are listened for and then highlighted; these are the times when the problem did not dominate the client, or when the client successfully ‘fought’ it. Then, finding ways to try new things, to celebrate new stories and changes, to tell others, and perhaps join with others for larger system change are sought. The reality of the client’s problem story is never challenged, but alternative stories, which are also true, are sought to offer options and new ways to challenge problem situations. The therapeutic relationship is collegial, non-hierarchical, and even playful as songs, letter writing, art work, certificates and ceremonies are used to celebrate new ways and to tell others about it.

While community and political action is addressed at the clinical level, as clients become empowered to act on their own behalf, the same practice principles can also be applied to working with entire communities regarding their perceived problems. In our School’s community practice courses, the capacity-focused approach (Kretzman and McNight, 1993) is studied, and its principles are consistent with narrative work. This approach is asset-based, internally focused, relationship driven, and it relies on the expertise within the community. In a striking similarity to narrative approaches, social workers pay attention to what is already working well as well as what is not; they listen to stories about the community, and they listen for evidence of multiple truths. The community is in charge of its own development.

The community partnership project

In 1996, a group of faculty at a university-based School of Social Work met to discuss their goals to improve the cultural competence of the School and its curriculum. At a time when populations of colour are growing in the state and the nation, they felt that the School needed to improve the curriculum, provide opportunities for faculty development, and increase the number and variety
of opportunities for students to learn about cultures of rural communities and populations of colour. At the same time, a way to apply the post modern principles learned in classes was sought. While all students have practicum placements in agencies or other approved settings, an additional opportunity for some students and faculty from both concentrations to work together to practise narrative and capacity-focused work in a community setting would be new.

To achieve these goals, a town located 15 miles east of the university was selected for the partnership project because of its characteristics. This town, with a population of about 2,500, is a typical Midwestern rural community in many ways, whose population was primarily of German descent for many years. However, recent immigration of two populations of colour made it remarkably diverse for a small town in this state. A small southeast Asian community of refugees had been sponsored by the local Methodist Church. A large Spanish speaking population had moved to this town more recently to work in the turkey processing plant. A majority of these families had immigrated from Mexico, but other countries in Central and South America are also represented. At the time the project was initiated, the Elementary School had 60% Spanish speaking students. At that time, the community was undergoing stress as a result of a corporation buying and then closing the turkey plant. The large Latino population who had moved here to work at this plant was stranded there. The town officials and concerned residents of the town were attempting to raise funds to purchase the plant and operate it as a cooperative. With state and local funds and the support of a turkey farmers’ cooperative, the plant has now been reopened and provides employment. Although the School of Social Work’s students and faculty were not involved in developing the cooperative, this turning point in the life of the community made it a good time to initiate the community partnership programme.

The community partnership theme was chosen because the project aimed at: linking the university and the community working together; linking theory and practice as some classes were taught in the community; linking micro and macro practice with an integrated generalist model appropriate for rural delivery (Ginsberg, 1993); and seeking partnerships across ethnic lines in this richly diverse community. The approaches applied in this partnership are capacity-focused community practice (Hardcastle, Wenocur and Powers, 1997; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Mattessich and Monsey, 1997); narrative approaches (Dulwich Centre, 1999; Freedman and Combs, 1996; Kelley, 1996, 2002; White and Epston, 1990) and rural community practice (Ginsberg, 1993; Koch, 1990; Martinez-Brawley, 1990, 1993; Murty, 1984; Snow, 2001). It also applies principles of culturally competent practice (Cross, 1989; Devore and Schlesinger, 1999; Gutierrez, 1990; McGoldrick, 1998) and empowerment (Gutierrez, Parsons and Cox, 1998; Lee, 1996). This paper focuses on the use of shared narrative at the community level to ‘re-story’ and restore community identity, focusing on assets and capacities, and to work together in building a new community future (Cox and Albert, 2003; Vodde and Gallant, 2002). The approach also helps social work students develop skills in collaborative community building and increase their understanding of intervention at the community level (Singer, King, Green and Barr, 2002).

Early stages of the partnership

The partnership began with a key informant approach initiated by one faculty member, a co-author of this paper (SM). She made contacts with pastors, educators, business owners, and members of community organisations in West Liberty. Natural helpers in the community (Kelley and Kelley, 1985; Martinez-Brawley, 1993) were also interviewed as informants and to provide entry points into the community. Among these were a retired librarian and community volunteer and a retired nurse who volunteers with the elderly. The second stage was to offer a summer seminar in the community in which nine graduate students participated. In addition to learning about rural community social work, the students learned about this particular community from its residents and leaders who were invited to join the class to tell their stories and answer
questions about the community. The students also spent time individually and in groups assessing various aspects of the town, its strengths and its needs. Additional activities included eating at the local Mexican restaurants, purchasing items at the Mexican bakery, and viewing videos about the rural farm crisis and about Cesar Chavez with a local community group at the high school.

Several community businesses and leaders were especially important in the initial stages of the project. A local Mexican restaurant and grocery store provided a place for the faculty member to meet with community members and students for coffee or lunch discussions. Another was a barber shop which proudly displayed a sign ‘se habla espanol’ and was run by an immigrant from Mexico and his wife, a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Central America. The barber shop also had a sign posted for rental of a ‘party room’ which was used by Latino groups for parties, receptions, and special events. The School rented the ‘party room’ for its on-site rural seminar, and the owners became key informants for the project.

From this initial assessment work with the community, it appeared that there were two key themes underlying the stress the community was experiencing. One theme identified was ‘change too fast’. With the rapid infusion of newer immigrants into the community, some residents felt that their town was not their town anymore. ‘Things just aren’t the same’, said some. Change and diversity had arrived suddenly to a town that had long maintained a homogeneous population. The other theme was loss of economic viability, as the closing of the turkey plant happened not long before the school entered into the partnership. This closing exacerbated the problem, suffered in many rural communities, of the economy sinking fast, with local stores closing as town residents began to shop in larger towns nearby. The main street looked different as local businesses stood vacant, and the immigrants who had moved here to work in the turkey processing plant were stranded with no jobs. Together these changes could be classified as a problem of survival and identity loss, which was the identified problem story.

The other side of the story, which is also true, is that this community had demonstrated resilience in coping with its rapid changes, as evidenced by its many community organisations, its successful reconstruction and expansion of its historic Carnegie Library, a newly constructed community centre, and an innovative dual language program-me in the school district. It also achieved a notable success in re-opening the turkey processing plant. Town officials and concerned residents had raised funds and developed it into a cooperative plant.

The partnership at work

Several community projects developed during this time of transition in which faculty and students of the School of Social Work were participants. These community projects can be considered as helping the community to re-create itself with an identity that merged its past traditions with its recent changes and to build on its assets to attract visitors and enhance its small businesses. Some activities involved reclaiming history and affirming the community’s identity in relation to its past. Other activities built on the new residents and their cultural diversity to create a new community identity. In a sense the community was involved in re-telling its story in a way that acknowledged both its challenges and its unique strengths. Some of the community projects involved took on the character of dramatising and telling the new story in a public way that presented the town as an exciting and dynamic community moving toward the future in positive ways which involved collaboration among the established Euro-Americans, and the newer Latino and Southeast Asian residents.

A puppetry centre turned out to be a key organisation in the community. Although the two puppeteers who operate the centre were relative newcomers to the community, their approach encouraged community participation among children and adults, and the puppetry centre attracted both Euro-American and Latino families. The process of creating puppet shows incorporates a narrative approach. The puppetry centre rapidly became a leader in the process of
‘re-storying’ and developing a new identity for the town. A puppet show about the history of the town, a show featuring folk tales from multiple cultures, and a bilingual show created collaboratively with a high school arts class are examples of the innovative community-based programmes created by the puppetry centre. In addition, the puppetry centre participated with the Chamber of Commerce to develop an annual Children’s Festival and worked with a new local arts organisation to obtain state arts funding for community projects. Students from our project were active with the Children’s Festival and the puppetry centre as volunteers and in ongoing practicum and field placements where they were involved with grant writing, fund raising, children’s activities, and various community development projects.

Another aspect of the School’s project also centred on both community involvement and narrative. The School received a grant from the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education for an inter-generational service learning project in this rural community. Students in an introductory gerontology class and a social work course in human behavior were paired with elders in the community (Dorfman, Murty, Ingram and Evans, 2002). Some of the elders were residents at the Retirement Community, a facility which offers independent living, assisted living, and skilled nursing care. Others were elders at the congregate meal site, which meets three times a week for social activities and a noon meal.

Students visited elders at both locations and in addition to visiting and participating in activities together, they gathered oral histories from the elders. The narratives gave the students insight into the lives of these elders during the depression and the Second World War, and helped to convey a sense of respect and dignity to the elders. The local library has requested that the oral histories be included in the library archives. We are in the process of obtaining individual permissions to donate them to the archives, which will provide additional validation and respect for these narratives provided by the elders of the community. A more recent development in the intergenerational service learning project has involved university students with the residents of the Retirement Community and third grade students from the local Middle School. The University students helped the residents write letters to their ‘Pen Pals’ and to respond to the letters they received from the children. A celebration brought the elders and children together, with the children bringing a collection of personal items to show the elders as they told them about their families and lives. The event was an exciting one for all the participants; it was often the first time that these elders have interacted with the predominantly Latino children who are now residents of the town.

A special project involved a graduate student who worked with a local church on a book to celebrate its centennial. After spending time building rapport and trust with the church members, she spent many hours collecting oral histories from older members of the church. The process was highly valued by the student, the church and the elders who participated. The narratives were extensive and were much longer than will be accommodated in the book. The elders clearly found the activity a worthwhile combination of reflection and making meaning of their lives and the life of the church. Their narratives contribute to the larger community-level story of the congregation and the community.

Through the partnership project, we are working together in many ways to identify the needs of the community and to build on its assets. The collaborative process has resulted in agreement on community issues to be addressed. A small local history group has become more active in the last few years to support the restoration of the local historic railroad depot. Thousands of hours of volunteer labour were donated by community residents to restore the building and create brick platforms around the building using original bricks that had been discarded in previous decades. Groups of students participated as volunteers in the project and their efforts were appreciated by the community. The depot is now being used to house a small historic museum and the Chamber of Commerce.

An amazing outpouring of community support emerged when the Governor of the State and his wife, as part of a Global Volunteers Project, came to participate in restoring the local movie theatre. Along with 10 Global Volunteers, approximately 100 local volunteers spent many hours
in January scraping gum, repairing seats and restoring paint. As a result, they re-created the theatre as a locally owned and valued community asset. This event became part of the community’s story of revitalisation, combining community spirit, historic restoration and collaboration among community groups. The puppetry centre, in partnership with the owner of the theatre, obtained arts funding to restore the stage in the theatre so that it can now be used both for live performances and to show films. Puppetry shows are staged there on weekends in matinee performances before the evening movie shows.

At about the same time, the Chamber of Commerce and the City government were developing plans for a street renovation project which included restoring brick streets and revitalising the downtown area. As a result of these efforts, the downtown business district was placed on the National Historic Register and funds were obtained for the project. A new awareness of the value of the history of the community developed. During the summer of 2003, the main street underwent reconstruction. Although the brief period was acknowledged as having negative consequences for local businesses, community leaders also perceived this period of change as an opportunity and began to schedule celebrations of the 100-years-old historic buildings in the downtown area. Children and community groups have been involved in the process. A new community history group has become active to coordinate a variety of events related to the history of the town. The local librarian and the Chamber of Commerce have been central to these efforts.

The First Lady of Iowa has initiated a community programme across the state called Iowa Stories ‘to strengthen communities, families and children through reading, storytelling and libraries’ (Iowa Stories, 2000). This town is one of the communities participating in the second year of this programme. The Governor’s wife attended the opening reception for the new expanded public library and participated in community events the following year at the library, the public school, and the puppetry centre. The programme involves collaboration of community leaders, the public library, the school district, the arts council and the puppetry centre. A group of community leaders participated in a process of planning the Iowa Stories Project; a faculty member of the School of Social Work (SM) was invited to participate and the oral histories collected by students in our project were included in the plan as well as oral histories collected by a video class at the local high school. The state project is intended to enrich the local community efforts to collect, value and recognised the stories of residents and to create a new, stronger sense of identity for the community as a whole.

Throughout this community partnership project, faculty, undergraduate and graduate students from the School of Social Work have served in many ways: in volunteer experiences, course projects, and formal practicum and field placements. For example, students work in shifts at the Children’s Festival helping with craft activities, dressed as giant puppets roaming the streets, and assisting with set-up and tear-down activities at the beginning and end of the day. Students have also helped with the Puppetry Centre’s Parade Project in which community members create puppets and a float for the community parade. Students have helped with after school activities, children’s craft events, as volunteers at puppet shows selling tickets and refreshments and serving as ushers, and have been involved with fund raising and grant writing, programme development, and planning community events. One student had a practicum placement at a job training programme which the puppetry centre developed to provide low income women with job skills. A faculty member serves on the board of the puppetry centre.

Summary and conclusions

This rural town is a strong community with many community groups and many assets. While hearing the problems expressed by community members, our students and faculty have recognized the many assets here and have participated in building on these strengths within the community, and in helping the community in re-storying its identity and in looking at alternative ways of creating its future. This community has responded positively and creatively to the
challenges of rural economic stress and integrating Southeast Asian and Latino populations into a traditional Euro-American Mid-western community. The town has also provided an excellent setting for our students to participate in using narrative approaches to help a community develop a new identity through macro-level community practice.

Our School of Social Work found that a community project where students and faculty from both concentrations (macro and micro) worked together with community members at a time of stress and change was very useful in applying the theories learned in class. While all students have practicum placements in agencies or other approved sites, this community project added another valuable experience for those students who chose it. Here, students worked with faculty members in a shared theoretical practice framework, which was applicable to macro and micro practice, and with community members in collegial relationships based on shared interest and mutual trust. Some students did take one of their two practicum placements here, but most of the students involved with this project came here as volunteers working for the experience, for class learning projects, or for independent study projects. It has been noted (Singer, et. al., 2002) that community action internships can foster generativity and a sense of civic responsibility in students, and our project found that to be true. We also found that the narrative therapy concepts of White and Epston (1990), can indeed be useful in community practice.

References


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