On becoming a just practitioner:
Experimenting with the final paper of an undergraduate programme as a rite of passage

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> You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything, live the questions now. (Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, From Letter Four, July 16, 1903.)

Purpose and intent

The purpose of designing the paper 'Just Practice' was to invite and inspire the graduating class of the Bachelor of Social Practice programme to incorporate social justice concerns into their practice as they begin to enter their work places. It was expected that students would define their 'social justice' intentions, purposes, aims and contexts for their practices in light of the retrospective accounts of those who had gone before them and had been acknowledged for their own 'just practice'. This was made possible by providing opportunities to bring the graduating class into close acquaintanceship with the 'lore' of just practitioners.

By the final year of the programme, students have been exposed to a number of theories, worldviews, approaches and perspectives. We wanted them to expand on these various ways of practising and to develop a well integrated approach encompassing who they are, what they do and how they want to contribute towards a just society. We invited our students to go beyond the circumscribed bounds of radical texts by drawing close to the histories of the just practices of their seniors. We hoped that might leave them with some stories and memories of their tellers that would imbue their everyday professional lives with 'just practice'.

We accepted the notion of practice not only as a 'series of planned interventions' but also as 'a human action and a process wherein we are both shaped by the prevailing social order and are active participants in the creation of that order' (Finn and Jacobson, 2003). Our intention was to provide a liminal space for reflection where students would be able to explore their personal understanding of justice and the possible ways of realising that through their future professional practice as counsellors, social workers or community developers. In addition, we wished to collaborate with students by 'walking the talk' of 'just practice' throughout the course.

We also wanted to make the course as 'alive' as possible. To this end, we decided to invite social practitioners in the widest possible sense – not only counsellors, community developers and social workers, but also practitioners coming from a wide range of backgrounds and various professions – to share their experiences of practising justly in unjust contexts, to speak to their passions, and about their challenges, trials and tribulations. This invitation

also conveniently allowed us to formally recognise the contributions of their efforts, which are rarely acknowledged and sometimes disdained.

The context

The origins of the degree programme rested in a conviction that the term *social practice* was both novel and helpful. This term made it possible to implicate all three fields of practice, namely social work, counselling and community development and blur the disciplinary boundaries that separated them. In planning the programme, there was an avowed intention to subordinate these professional endeavours to a larger purpose and that purpose was defined as *social practice*, implicating key themes of social context and social justice. However, each professional discipline was bound to distinguish itself sufficiently so that students could fulfil any requirements for professional memberships, e.g. Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) or sufficient community development practice to enable students to seek employment in positions designated by that term of employment. Accordingly, at the beginning of Year 2, students must indicate which major they wish to undertake. The counselling major included three field-specific papers, while the social work and community development majors require two papers designed for them alone.

As students pursue their chosen field of practice, the class starts to fragment along disciplinary lines, at times leading to boundary skirmishing as the commonalities of social practice start fading from the minds of the students. The shape of the counselling third year is somewhat different from that of the other strands and it seems that the fact of being thrown in the deep end on their placements fostered a level of intimacy more intense than in the other two strands. We noticed a tendency for counselling students to detach themselves somewhat from the programme's ideal of producing a social practitioner.

In addition, we were aware that in creating an embryonic professional identity, student practitioners tend to focus more on the differences than the similarities among the different majors. We still hoped that the counselling students would revive their appreciation of the wider social contexts and that social work and community development students would more readily ground social structures in personal agency. We believed that we could achieve that by promoting a lively exchange of ideas amongst the students as well as inviting distinguished practitioners from a wide range of social practice settings to share their experiences of social justice.

Concerns and thinking behind the emergence of a new paper

We intended to find a vehicle that would both bring and bind together the specific knowledge the students had gained in their separate fields of practice. The question we faced was *'How can we reconvene the three fields of practice in the third year of the degree programme and under what banner?'* In discussion, it was easy for us to conclude that social justice was a theme that could serve us well here, for the reason that it was social justice that convened the staff as well, despite their respective trainings and professional commitments. Social justice had long been a core value of the School of Community Studies. The question we were left with was *'What would be the means by which we could join up the three fields of practice to this purpose?'* We envisioned the theme of social justice braiding the three strands of practice into a rope that would secure each strand equally well and be far stronger and more durable than any of the strands on their own.

Another consideration was that in the past there had been no climax to the completion of the programme. While we provided students with 'breathing space' to complete final assignments, it was very difficult for students to sustain interest in the penultimate papers, possibly due to their heavy workloads. Many third year classes were poorly attended, and those who did attend seemed fatigued and just going through the motions. The mood of the classes was desultory, much like dinner guests on the fifth course pleading for no more dessert.

We had to figure out how to excite our students at this significant time in their undergraduate education in a way that renewed their vitality and enthusiasm for that which lay ahead - the assumption of their professional identities and the commencement of their professional careers. We designed the Just Practice paper to reach out to the students in ways that intellectual debate *about* justice could not. Our intention was to depart from textbook generalisations by creating a context in which students could reflect on and 'breath life into' any number of theoretical notions. We invited students to meet, talk with, and be touched and inspired by devoted practitioners and to reconsider accordingly their current understandings of social justice as a 'practice'. We thought it important for them to know, feel, think and do social justice when they graduated. We believed that if we were to 'walk our talk', then it was incumbent on us, as teachers, to make this paper 'just' to its core, which required us to address these concerns in a deliberate and thoughtful manner. We chose the 'rite of passage' as a metaphor to guide and innovate our pedagogy, as it was rich in suggestion for our intentions and purposes.

The rite of passage

Essentially, van Gennep as quoted in Epston and White (1995), asserted that the rite of passage is a universal phenomenon for facilitating transitions in social life, from one status or identity to another. He proposed a processual model of this rite, consisting of the stages of *separation, liminality,* and *reincorporation.* In traditional cultures, the initiation of each of these stages is marked by ceremony. For example, at the separation stage, people are detached from familiar roles, statuses and locations, and they enter an unfamiliar social world in which most of the taken-for-granted ways of going about life are suspended. The *liminal space,* which constitutes the second stage of a rite of passage, is betwixt and between known worlds and is characterised by experiences of disorganisation and confusion, by a spirit of exploration, and by a heightened sense of possibility. The third stage, *reincorporation,* brings closure to the ritual passage and assists people in relocating themselves in the social order of the familiar world, but at a different position. The new position is characteristically accompanied by new roles, responsibilities and freedoms. Traditionally, the arrival at this point is augmented by claims and declarations that the person has successfully negotiated a transition, and this is legitimated by acknowledgement within the person's own community.

Accordingly, the just practice paper was not conceived of as the 'final paper' marking the 'end of the road' for the degree studies but rather as a liminal space... 'a twixt and between' undergraduate professional training and professional practice. Even though we were unable to move to a unique geographical space, the students themselves transformed the mundanities of their familiar classroom into a 'ritual space' in ways that never ceased to amaze us.

Selection of those to be presented with the award of 'Just Practitioner'

We decided to invite guest speakers who were noted by their colleagues or communities for their commitment to social justice. They were provided with guiding questions to orient

their presentation to the class and told that students would be given an opportunity to talk with them to further explore their concerns around personal ethics and social justice.

We were aware that so many social justice practitioners are unacknowledged in the professions as well as in their work places. Mavericks are not always welcome. Also, many of these practitioners were not people who made their professional way through the more obvious forums of acknowledgement, e.g. conference presentations, journal article writing, or committee work. From our experience, the 'heart and soul' of just practice is practice itself and for this reason 'just practitioners' often do not have the time, energy or writing skills for documenting their experiences, practices and learnings. We also recognised that often the controversial or confidential nature of their work prevents publication of any kind. A number of these extraordinary practitioners had demonstrated courage, exposing themselves to criticism from their profession, at times suffering for that. It interested us to establish an alternative forum of acknowledgement and an opportunity for students to be infused by the stories and lore of such people about why and how they have lived their work lives as 'Just Practitioners'. Given that this rite of passage was to be enacted on campus and under the aegis of a tertiary educational institution, we still wondered if we could pull it off.

At first, we tried to match speakers to particular constituencies among the students. We had representatives from different ethnicities, fields of practice, genders, religious and sexual orientations. We also looked beyond the traditional boundaries of social work/counselling/community development, to include social practitioners working in other fields, some of whom were unconventional or radical – a Green Party MP who was a community activist, a progressive Christian clergyperson advocating for gay rights, a community psychiatrist advocating for deinstitutionalisation, a gay disability activist performing as a stand up 'sit down' comedian.

We were seeking those who might be considered to have stood outside conventional practice and who might be better known as political activists, whatever their professional training. We did however have a preference for those who started such activist careers as social workers, counsellors or community developers. What was foremost in our minds was finding exemplars serving social justice concerns in their work lives.

The process of inviting just practitioners

We pursued a deliberate process of inviting just practitioners 'to engage with our students'. We asked staff, colleagues and students to nominate candidates with a short description of why they considered the practitioner was eligible for nomination. The candidate would then be called and informed of what was required. If the offer of the award was accepted, this letter would follow.

> Dear x:
> Following the conversation we had recently over the phone, my colleagues and I are writing to invite you to accept our acknowledgement of you as a 'distinguished social practitioner'.
>
> We consider that your practice over the years has shown a commitment to social justice and that your passion and ingenuity have produced what we are referring to as 'Just Practice'. We mean by that a social practice that is engendered by social justice concerns.
> We would like to celebrate the award of this distinction in a rather uncommon manner. We are inviting you to speak to our graduating class, whose programme (Bachelor of Social Practice) culminates in a semester-long paper entitled 'Just Practice'. During this paper we expect our students to articulate and confirm their own passions and commitments to social justice con-

cerns and look into their futures as practitioners. This is easier said than done – there is often far more talk than walk.

Concurrently with our students forming their own commitments, we invite you to share with them retrospective accounts of the history of your own 'just practice'. While they look forward, we would ask you to look back over your career.

The following questions might serve you in such an endeavour:

- Looking back over your career and your life, are there any stories that now come to mind that help you understand and now tell you the reasons for your 'just practice'?
- What made you concern yourself about 'just practice' as an essential part of your practice?
- How did you sustain your passion in the face of your trials and tribulations?
- What were your highlights? Your lowlights?
- Who or what kept you true to your calling?
- What advice would you have wished someone had given you when you were just starting out in your career, fired by your concerns for justice?
- What practice wisdoms, even in hindsight, would you wish to bequeath to those who are just about to begin their careers?

We would like to invite you to spend a morning with the class on _____ and address the questions above. We hope they will have assisted you with your preparations. These 'orienting' questions will be reasonable facsimiles of the questions the graduating students will be entertaining in their own discussions

The format for the day would be:

9.00 – 10.15 Your address
10.15 – 11.00 Students formulate questions
11.00 – 12.00 Questions, reflection and dialogue with students
12.00 – 1 pm Lunch
1.00 – 3.00 Reflection and discussion time for students only

There is an honorarium of $xxx to cover your expenses and at the conclusion of your presentation you will be formally recognised as a Just Practitioner.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss this further before accepting its conditions, please contact the paper co-ordinator. Phone xxx, e-mail xxx.

Yours sincerely,
Course co-ordinator

The storying of just practice

The presentations by ' just practitioners' were as far from rarefied academic lectures as you could get. They commonly consisted of stories and reminiscences linked one to the other, painful accounts of their trials and tribulations, and deeply considered 'wisdoms' often gained the 'hard way'. The atmosphere was ceremonial and always had a sense of the unexpected and the excitement of the unknown. Each welcoming committee created a different sacred space in the broadest possible sense. The day was opened by a karakia (prayer) or a quote relevant for a specific speaker and a sacred space was created anew on every occasion. The ceremony was reinvented for each speaker by their welcoming committee.

What was quite extraordinary was the degree of intimacy that quickly developed between the speakers, previously unknown to students, and the class itself. What seemed to touch everyone, speakers included, was a palpable sense of mentoring the 'next generation', not by way of the bravura of traditional 'graduation speech-making' but rather a deep retrospective on their own politically active work-lives. Many presenters have expressed delight that they were given cause to reflect on their work lives in a manner that they had not done before.

In spite of the physical environs of a classroom in a tertiary educational institution, a ritual space was created where everyone stood together with the speakers looking backwards over

their careers and the students looking forwards to theirs. It was as if each time a torch of social justice was passed to new initiates, and the initiates were participants who resonated with at least some of the stories told in the class. These resonances were not passing only from experienced practitioners to students, but they were obviously mutual and it would be unjust to say that students were the only ones learning. Discovering a just practitioner in a colleague student who has opposing beliefs to your own was probably one of the most powerful learnings for quite a few students.

The morning ends with the awarding of the designation 'Just Practitioner' together with a 'thank you card' signed by students with some personal comments from each of them.

To prepare the students, they were informed that academic grades were not the primary focus of the paper and that while there were two assignments, there was an expectation that they would be more concerned about creating a socially just practice for themselves. They were also told that this was not 'what you know' but 'what you intend to be about' – forming commitments to work towards a just world and 'dwelling in possibility' (Dickinson, 1862).

Reviews over the years

We envisaged this paper as being dynamic. This required our commitment to learn from the process of offering it and to modify it accordingly.

After the first year, we became aware of the significance of students' reflecting on the speakers' presentations. Many buttons were pushed; many hearts were touched. Those students with fundamentalist beliefs, either religious or political, were often challenged the most by the paper. We came to realise that considerable time was required to allow for these reflections to be voiced and processed. For many students, these reflective processes were transformative.

They allowed for open discussion and for mutual appreciation by students of others from various backgrounds who held very different and at times opposing beliefs. In other classroom contexts, we would expect far more contestation. The spell of this rite of passage seemed to allow for more inquiry, more uncertainty, 'to live the questions now'.

We scheduled full days for student reflection on top of the reflection time that followed each just practitioner address. During the reflection days students were guided by orienting questions such as:

1. How did what x (a guest speaker) had to tell us resonate with your values and beliefs about just practice?
2. What was most challenging in x's talk for you? And why?
3. Were your buttons pushed or your heart touched in any way? If so how?
4. How was this presentation relevant to your future practice?
5. Did you have any learnings that took you by surprise? If so, what were they?

The purpose of guided reflection was for students to share their responses to guest speakers and also to examine their own ideas of just practice. In addition students worked in their groups, beginning the process of sorting out which particular presentations would have bearing upon their future practice.

In the first year we had encouraged 'just practitioners' to invite their family, friends and colleagues to their award ceremony to share in their honours. We suggested the students do the same when they were doing their presentations on their future just practice before the class. Although very potent for the students concerned, this became practically impossible with the increasing number of students in the class.

We also invited students to negotiate with us how assignments were to be assessed because we believed that that initiative represented a just teaching practice. After these negotiations, most students took more responsibility, giving their best effort in accomplishing all that was required and more.

We noticed, however, that some students preferred to group themselves with likeminded people, almost to the point of excluding others whose beliefs or fields of interest were different from their own. Such groupings had the effect of silencing an honest, fair and challenging exchange of various views and favouring of a preference for feeling comfortable. To encourage greater inclusiveness we decided to impose a group structure to promote the idea of learning from one another's differences. There were to be four in each group and we insisted that there was at least one future social worker, counsellor and community developer in each group and preferably people of different culture, age, gender, sexual orientation and political preference.

Some students initially resisted the introduction of imposed study groups. Two students said they could not work with people in their group because their worldviews were so different, but we persisted. On final analysis the 'rebels or fighters for social justice' gratefully admitted that working with people they would never choose to work with was a major learning experience. The outcomes were extremely positive. The imposed structure paradoxically nourished useful dialogue and greater inclusiveness and allowed students to voice their views more clearly in order to present them to their peers with quite different views. The very people who initially opposed such an imposition expressed the greatest levels of satisfaction to staff.

Whereas during the first year of offering the paper students did individual presentations of their intentions to practise justly, we decided to change the assignment to a group presentation the second time around. For the group presentation, students were asked to create a fictional social practice agency where both the policy and practice was guided by their social justice concerns. This assignment required each group to reach a consensus on what would constitute a virtual socially just agency where they all could work in concert. Our aim in requiring this task was to encourage students to collaborate with others, be aware of their own positions and professional disciplines and at the same time learn from talking with other practitioners of fields of practice with their distinctive perspectives. In addition, students were also required to write up their own personal commitments to social justice.

In the second year of the paper, students were given responsibility for the hospitality associated with the award ceremony, including decorating the space as well as welcoming, introducing and providing refreshments for the speaker. The 'study groups' doubled as welcoming committees, responsible for hosting the day. These activities strongly contributed to the students developing a sense of ownership over the paper and taking charge of their learning. Convening the meeting, establishing its mood, providing food, and so on, allowed students to be far more intimate with the visiting 'just practitioners' than we would have otherwise expected.

Reflections

We were delighted with both the planned and unplanned outcomes of the just practice paper. From the beginning we were aware that we were doing something new, useful and relevant, but we never expected such high quality student work, demonstrated in the depth of discussions and the level of participation. Despite overdue assignments hanging over many of the students' heads like the sword of Damocles, attendance was the highest of any

paper in the programme. Students would phone in with apologies, when circumstances prevented their attendance. Another encouraging aspect was the consistently high level of student evaluations of the paper. As the course co-ordinator changed from year to year, we attributed the success to the process itself rather than to the charisma of any individual staff member.

Students

I had no idea what to expect, so there was a sense of excitement in the beginning because of not knowing what was to come. I was not disappointed and the excitement and anticipation were sustained week after week by the speakers' presentations.

I felt allowed to take what I wanted from each speaker and able to leave the rest. This created a kind of cellular memory of things I want to remember. In this way, 'Just Practice' was different from other papers where 'learning outcomes' often dictated what was to be 'learned'. In this paper, I held on to what was special to me and that was the high point for me. This created for me a sense of ownership... a sense I was in control of what I learnt from this paper. It was deep, cellular learning, the stuff I think of every day and probably always will.

What was of particular value was the idea of that I could make a difference; that as a social worker I am in the business of inspiring people to bring about positive changes in their lives. This remains with me as a filter through which I now view my work with clients.

At a personal level June Kirk-Smith[1] and Ian Lawton[2] moved me to take a more tolerant and balanced view of Christianity. This was totally unanticipated. I acknowledged for the first time that some people in the church have played a significant role in the deconstruction of hierarchies of power which it had been instrumental in creating.

Of all speakers, June Kirk-Smith made a particular impression on me because of her humility. She never used the pronoun 'I'. She shared with us that she starts each day with a prayer for compassion and wisdom in her work. For her, it seemed like the antidote for burnout.

We survived as a project group, in spite of being so diverse and having different levels of commitment. This enhanced my self-awareness and my understanding of cultural differences regarding hierarchies of importance. I think being put into such project groups is a fascinating bit of social engineering, and certainly for me, it produced unexpected experiences and alliances.

I really enjoyed the de-emphasis on 'academic production', which created for me a sense of freedom, creativity, passion and enjoyment around producing the assignment.

The rituals of beginnings and endings of every class and the beautiful decorations were inspiring. It appealed to my professional love for ritual and ceremony.

The speakers were an amazing collection of people. I cannot say that I enjoyed one more than another – each had a pearl to offer, a treasure that I held on to and recall from time to time.

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1 June Kirk-Smith is a Religious of the Sacred Heart, a retired school principal, who has been involved in international work for her order. For the last 12 years she has been a community activist in New Zealand.

2 Ian Lawton is a young Anglican priest who made a commitment to social justice as an advocate for those who are on the edge both in the church and in society.

For me 'Just Practice' was a well-earned gift, the reward of three years of personal growth and effort. It seemed like the first steps along the way towards facing practice realities (Wendy Moore, 2002).

Just Practice was different from any other Bachelor of Social Practice courses. It represented a break from formal academic activities. It embraced a sense of fun, a sense of ceremony in preparing for and welcoming our 'guests', and a sense of equality in that this was not a lecture but rather a gifting from 'one who has gone before'.

When Kiwi Tamasese[3] suggested that we would be the ones creating future 'theories', this allowed me to see beyond the completion of my degree and look to the possibilities that lay ahead. This statement was very influential and contributed to my confidence in becoming the principal researcher of a project undertaken after my finishing my degree. I presented this at the International Narrative Conference in England in July 2003.

Warren Lindberg[4] spoke of 'handing on the mantle' to the class. Considering this, I was imbued with a confidence not to shy away from the kind of responsibility that such knowledge affords. Christine Herzog[5] said that 'you can step out of the box without anything too bad happening' and knowing this gave me the courage to practise it. I liked what Ian Lawton said about being a human being first and I think that when my personal and professional 'selves' are aligned in ethics then I am at my most 'fully human'.

All of the above were unexpected 'treasures' from the course that have contributed to both my personal and professional life. I believe these speakers 'pushed' me beyond the expectations I would ever have had for myself. Opening such a window of possibility seemed effortless.

This course gave me some ideas of exactly what Just Practice might be about. To be honest, I had never really thought about this before. One always has one's head so stuffed with the academic material during a degree that it was hard to think about how to put this into practice. In this regard, Just Practice was the perfect bridge between completing the degree and establishing my/ourselves in our work.

I think the relaxed nature of the course and the mutual respect that I felt, which was created and held in the room between practitioner and future practitioners, enabled our own ideas of what Just Practice might mean to us to personally to come through. There was something incredibly powerful in listening to the stories of people's lives rather than studying this in academic ways.

There was a good balance between doing a group presentation and a personal piece of writing for assessment. It was good to bounce ideas off each other in the group and come to a consensus as to how we would bring these ideas together to form a cohesive whole.

In the writing and the reflection that this involved, I felt I reviewed my whole life through the lens of Just Practice. Significant events in my life that had previously been 'unfathomable' could now be seen in a different context with new and valued meaning. This was definitely

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3 Kiwi Tamasese is a member of the staff of the Anglican Family Centre in Lower Hutt, New Zealand. She has been part of a team who have developed Just Practice therapy. The team have promoted this work extensively both nationally and internationally.

4 Warren Lindberg has a background in teaching and community development. He was for many years director of the New Zealand Aids Foundation and is now a Human Rights Commissioner.

5 Christine Herzog has a background in community activism, community and social work education and in providing education around anti-racism and the Treaty of Waitangi.

one of the most profound pieces of writing I did during my degree. The powerful stories that I heard gave me a wide range of perspectives on Just Practice. I determined that my 'just practice' would emerge from who I am and choose to be, the values and beliefs I hold at that moment in time and the contexts in which I find myself and how I want to respond to them (Hazel Thompson, 2002).

Speakers also indicated that their involvement in the paper was an experience that both moved and challenged them. One commented that the preparation challenged him to review aspects of his professional life. Another sent us the following note:

I simply must send you my heartfelt thanks for allowing me to speak to your students. I felt a deep sense of privilege to do so. The experience for me has been a memorable one. I would be grateful if you could tell the students how impressed I was with them – their attentiveness, their depth, their acceptance of me. I can't tell you what a pleasure it was to read their comments. That is a lovely practice – it certainly meant a lot to me. So often one goes away after giving a talk full of doubt with no idea how it was received. I felt there was a great spirit in the whole department and that for me means good leadership.
Loving greeting, Pauline O'Regan[6]

Co-ordinators

It was a joyful experience because it joined teaching and learning. Every guest speaker brought something new. Facilitating this paper was for me a privilege and an experience of collegiality with students and guest speakers. It provided a space for discussion and debate of ideas – at times very controversial. We were inspired by exceptional practitioners and our discussions became equally inspiring. This spiritedness is not usually possible because many of the earlier papers I facilitated were content oriented and content driven. In this paper the context was equally important. The atmosphere was democratising (Ksenija Napan).

It was the best paper yet. It stretched me beyond where I thought I would go. The attendance was the highest compared to any other paper I've co-ordinated. Students would fail to attend only for dire emergencies and they would notify us in advance. Several acknowledged that they couldn't take any more, which was intended as praise, not criticism. The atmosphere was extremely lively and excitement permeated the paper. Students took over elaborate decoration sensitive to the speaker – murals which were culturally responsive, symbols, floral arrangements, taped music ...all appropriate to each speaker (Gavin Rennie).

This was the most challenging paper I've ever co-ordinated, but I enjoyed it immensely. It was all about 'walking the talk' and every social justice issue that we addressed was practised in the classroom. Decisions were made collaboratively and the atmosphere was different than in any other class. Somehow we all became connected with the common thread of social justice and a whole range of possible views on it. Dialogues, or 'multilogues' in the classroom were deep and meaningful and extremely relevant to social practice (Ksenija Napan).

Students quickly found that this wasn't like any other paper. Assignments were handed in on time and despite the fact this was the final paper in their programme they were of exceptional quality. According to all those involved in marking, many of the students surpassed themselves. The students loved the speakers and the speakers loved the students. The speakers found the students welcoming and hospitable, especially their attempts at symbolising what the speakers represented in terms of their practice. They also mentioned their appreciation for those questions that were really important to them e.g. asking a radical community psychiatrist who had

[6] Pauline O'Regan is a Sister of Mercy, a retired school principal who moved into community development 20 years ago and has written extensively in that area.

closed down an infamous psychiatric hospital if he had lost many friends? The nature of the students' questions were surprisingly brave as they exposed their own trepidations and fears. (Gavin Rennie and Ksenija Napan).

Bringing just practice into being

The 'spirit of social justice' was brought into being in an almost palpable form. Far from textbook definitions, it arose instead out of the stories of those practitioners who had come to 'mentor' their juniors. It was almost as if the seniors were conjuring up that 'spirit' so they might pass it on to the initiates who were about to take it up. Social justice was no longer a concept but a kind of lore, which the graduating class avowed an intention to pursue during their working lives. Most speakers told stories more than anything else, many of which were particularly vivid and memorable, touching and laugh provoking, of great deeds alongside risible errors of judgment. Interestingly, many speakers reiterated the point that their 'real' learning began after their formal professional training.

Conclusion

We defined 'just practice' as practice that is engendered by social justice concerns. By committing to this definition, we hoped that students in the just practice paper would develop the capacity to see realities from a wide range of viewpoints and to become attentive to client's stories and their ways of experiencing and resisting the injustices in their lives. By listening to and referencing the guest speakers' exemplary LORE, students said they were inspired to enter and lead their professional lives for the sake of 'social justice' as they had come to realise it. These newfound or deepened commitments strongly align with the definition of social work formulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2002, which encompasses themes of social change and social justice:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environment. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (www.ifsw.org).

Another unplanned but very relevant outcome was that this paper and the ritual associated with it ushered the students into a collegial relationship with their teachers and the speakers as members of the same community, a community of practitioners concerned for social justice.

This collaborative process guided students to make specific commitments for their careers. Voicing these commitments before the assembled class seemed to have a powerful effect and in some instances impelled students to act upon their commitments.

We kept a close tally on what might be referred to as lines of enquiry over the years. The most recurring lines of enquiry were:

1. How do people with strong commitments to social justice survive in the institutions where they either work or to which they owe an allegiance (e.g. mental health service, statutory child protection service, religious order, church, etc.)?
2. What is the price of standing up for a just cause or concern? and
3. Is it possible to take a stand and not lose a job?

Students were fascinated with the speakers' responses to their highlights and 'lowlights' and to the 'advice they wish they had received as beginners'.

Students focused on various aspects of their future 'just practice' in their individual assignments culminating in the development of a virtual 'just agency', which they presented to the class as a whole. In a range of scenarios they conveyed the mission and the practices of their virtual agencies. One group exemplified their just practice by interviewing a candidate for a vacancy in their agency. Another group ironised practices to which they were opposed. A third used a scenario of a staff meeting to illustrate how their values inhered in their practices.

Providing a space for student imagination to envisage a just workplace enabled us all to reflect on our contributions to creating a just society. Principles and ideas considered in the paper came to life in student presentations and it raised everyone's hopes that if not tomorrow, maybe the day after tomorrow, these virtual agencies would materialise and recruit them and their like – social practitioners committed to social justice.

References

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