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Teaching: learning participation in social work

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Social work is one of the oldest development professions that places importance on people's participation in its practice with individuals, groups, and communities. This is clear from often-cited sayings in social work: 'Give a man a fish, his problem for the day is solved; teach a man to fish, his problem for his life is solved', 'Help people to help themselves'; and 'Working with the people, and not for the people'.

This paper discusses the experience of the Department of Social Work, at Visva-Bharati[1], India in teaching:learning participation in its revised curriculum. The data on students' perceptions was collected through a focus group discussion with 13 students (nine female and four male), studying at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The teachers' perceptions are based on personal interviews conducted with four teachers, and the author's personal experience.

Teaching and learning participation are not seen as two distinct aspects in social work education and hence a

colon (:) is preferred between the two terms. A teacher is a life-long learner. Apart from learning through practice, a teacher learns through the very process of teaching. Teaching:learning social work takes place both in the classroom and in the field (community/agency), and both complement each other. While, in classroom teaching, more attention is given to theoretical inputs, the focus of fieldwork is to learn through practice. As well as theoretical inputs from the literature, the teacher draws on the students' experiences and her/his own experiences from the field. Students learn from this sharing of experience in the classroom and experiment themselves in the field.

Revising the curriculum

Before discussing the role of participatory teaching:learning in the curriculum, I will briefly describe the curriculum development process. Individual teachers worked on the curriculum and syllabus of their respective courses(s) and wrote papers which were then shared and discussed in a series of workshops organised in the department. The methods of teaching each course were decided on the basis of the content, the familiarity of the teacher with particular methods, and the personal competence of the teacher. Two external experts provided insights and facilitated the process of curriculum revision. The participation of a few teachers in

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[1] Visva-Bharati was founded by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). In 1901, Tagore began a system of education at Santiniketan to prepare man for a complete life. But he was also conscious that education alone was not enough. The effects of poverty on the lives of village people called for concerted action through organisation of the people. The Institute of Rural Reconstruction started by Tagore at Sriniketan in 1922, with its systematic approach to community problems, was a pioneering effort in this respect. The two experiments, pedagogic and agricultural, cultural and rural, that he tried to work out at Santiniketan and Sriniketan (collectively known as Visva-Bharati) formed an integrated programme in which culture of the mind and culture of the soil went hand in hand.

the process of curriculum development was poor and they did not contribute to the discussion of other papers. In the entire process of revising the curriculum, the students were not involved. The predominant thinking was, 'We know better what to provide'. However, some teachers mentioned that they used feedback received from the students when revising the curriculum.

Participatory teaching in the classroom

The teaching:learning methods set out in the curriculum for six different courses are shown in Table 1. The courses selected for discussion are the core subjects in social work. They are entitled Social Work Intervention I, II & III (otherwise known as Methods of Working with Individuals, Groups and Community), and they are taught at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Specific emphasis on participation is given in the syllabus only in relation to community organisation and community development. In other contexts, participation is discussed in relation to various methods, theories, and perspectives on working with people.

The curriculum shows that 14 distinct teaching:learning methods should be used in these six courses, although this study showed that only nine were used at the undergraduate level and 12 at the postgraduate level (Table 1). Of these, two – lecture and mini-lectures – are defined in the curriculum as 'non-participatory', as the teacher takes an active role and the students play a passive role. The rest, e.g. group discussions, role play, are classified as 'participatory' in the sense that students take a more active role in these methods. Non-participatory methods are used to present theory to students, whilst the participatory methods focus on developing practical knowledge and skills, and appropriate values and attitudes.

'Non-participatory' methods make up about one-third of total teaching:learning activities (30.4%). The remaining two-thirds (69.6%) of the teaching:learning activities are 'participatory'. This indicates that, in social work education, about one-third weightage is given to theory and two-thirds weightage to the development of appropriate values, attitudes, and practical skills.

All the teachers interviewed mentioned the 'undoubted' need for participatory teaching. One teacher regretted that his classes were not that participatory and attributed this to his own lethargy and lack of enthusiasm. Another colleague ironically retorted, 'What participatory teaching? Only chalk and talk'.

The students categorised methods like role play, asking for students' opinions, giving relevant examples, and asking questions, as participatory teaching. However, they did not

No.	Teaching: learning methods	Undergraduate level	Postgraduate level	Total (%)
	Table 1: Teaching:learning methods used in social work education (figures indicate frequencies)			
1	Lecture	14	13	27 (29.3)
2	Small group discussion	7	6	13 (14.1)
3	Small group exercises	8	5	13 (14.1)
4	Analysis of field records	7	3	10 (10.9)
5	Lecture cum discussion	3	5	8 (8.7)
6	Role play	3	3	6 (6.5)
7	Interaction with field practitioners	2	5	7 (7.6)
8	Simulation	-	2	2 (2.2)
9	PRA exercise	1	-	1 (1.1)
10	Mini lecture	-	1	1 (1.1)
11	Mini lecture cum role play and discussion	-	1	1 (1.1)
12	Experience sharing	1	-	1 (1.1)
13	Micro lab[1]	-	1	1 (1.1)
14	Home task	-	1	1 (1.1)
	Total methods	9	12	

[1] Micro labs create situations and circumstances in which to observe and interpret the behaviour of humans.

categorise other methods mentioned in Table 1 as participatory teaching:learning methods, probably because of the way they are being used. In the students' view, only 25% to 33% of the teachers use participatory teaching methods in their classes.

Constraining and facilitating factors in participatory teaching – teachers' perceptions

Teachers' perceptions of factors constraining and facilitating participatory teaching were also explored (Table 2). Teachers identified various factors relating to teachers themselves, to the students, and to the teaching environment.

Factors relating to teachers and students

Analysis of the contraints faced by teachers suggests that, in some cases, they lack motivation and initiative. If the teacher is skilful enough, the very art of teaching will reduce inhibition, shyness, laziness, and reluctance in the students. However, even if a conducive atmosphere is created, many students do not respond and react positively, and in this situation participatory teaching is very difficult. This leads some teachers to experience 'burnout'. One senior teacher said, 'All these years, I have been sincerely trying to make the students participate more in the classes, but they are not rising to my expectations. Only if I exert myself, can I make

Table 2: Factors contraining or facilitating participatory teaching: teachers' perceptions			
Factors	**Teachers**	**Students**	**The teaching environment**
Constraining factors	• Lethargy • Lack of enthusiasm • Lack of time • Rigidity • Age/generation gap • Outdated teaching methods • Poor self-preparation • Keeping students at a distance • Lack of personal competence • *Dada/didi-chatra* relationship	• Reluctance • Inhibition • Shyness • Non-encouraging • Laziness • Lack of self-preparation • Lack of self-motivation	• Poor infrastructure for teaching • Lack of proper library • Lack of educational aids, e.g. projectors, videos • Traditional seating arrangements (teacher at the front) • Stereotypes concerning 'good' teaching
Facilitating factors	• 'Friendly' student-teacher relationship • Liberal • Firm • Exertion • Practical experience • *Dada/didi-chatra* relationship	• 70% to 80% of students participate • Interested • Self-motivated • Like to participate	• Recognition of participatory teaching

them participate'. Burnout creates lethargy and apathy that in turn makes the teaching process less participatory.

One of the reasons for the lack of active involvement by students is that most students do not invest much in self-learning and rely on the teacher as the sole source of knowledge. This has a direct association with existing pedagogical and evaluation practices where a culture of dependency on the teacher is encouraged.

The teacher-student relationship
The teacher-student relationship in Visva-Bharati was seen by teachers as being both a constraining and facilitating factor. The relationship is often characterised as *dada/didi-chatra* (literally, elder brother/elder sister-student) and *guru-sishya*[2]. The hermitage model of education initiated by Tagore shaped the teacher-student relationship as *guru-sishya*, and the closeness and the residential nature of the university gave shape to the *dada/didi-chatra* model. For instance, the Vice Chancellor and Registrar of Visva-Bharati are often addressed with a *dada* suffixed to their name, except on very formal occasions.

The teachers examined this relationship from the perspective of aspects that facilitate participatory teaching (informality and congeniality) and aspects which, in their view, constrain it (difficulty in setting limits and purposeful use of authority). Students, on the other hand, expressed a strong

preference for preserving the *dada/didi-chatra* model of relationship (see section on students' perceptions). Irrespective of the differences, there was an agreement that the quality of the teacher-student relationship is important in facilitating teaching:learning participation.

The teaching environment
The physical environment is one important aspect of the teaching environment. Teachers identified a number of constraints to participatory teaching arising from the physical environment (see Table 2). Among these were lack of facilities for recording or viewing students' practical skills (e.g. video and observation rooms with one-way glass), which could be used to give feedback to students.

Stereotypical images of what makes a 'good teacher' were also noted as being unhelpful in facilitating participatory teaching. According to the stereotype, the 'good teacher' is one who can deliver talk for hours together. So a teacher who 'plays' with the students is not a 'good teacher'.

Constraining and facilitating factors in participatory teaching: students' perceptions
The perceptions of students of the teaching:learning process were also explored. According to them, the main reasons for low participation are:
• teachers maintain a distance from students;
• teachers are less free with students;
• teachers have problems of expression/articulation;
• the pressures on teachers to complete the syllabus on time; and

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[2] God, parents and *guru* are given great importance in the life of an individual according to Indian tradition. The *guru* is equated to God, as he is the giver of knowledge. When the child is ready for learning he is sent to a *guru*, the supreme authority of knowledge, and the child is accepted as a disciple (*sishya*)

• the inability of the teachers to 'come down' to the level of the students.

One remark from the focus group discussion was, 'Our antennae cannot receive the signals sent by the teacher'. They suggested that teachers could make the class environment more conducive to student participation by drawing the attention of the students, bringing in current issues, and using a 'problem-solving' approach. The 'personality' of the teacher was considered a critical factor, along with gestures, facial expressions, and the use of humour. It is interesting to note that the students attributed low participation in teaching to the capacity and ability of the teacher. However, they did not reflect on their role as active learners in the process.

Students also reflected on the teacher-student relationship. The qualities essential in such a relationship, as mentioned by the students, include 'friendly', 'professional', 'understanding the student's interests' and 'accepting the student'. One student saw teachers as 'very imposing', while he would like to see them as 'more challenging'. Another student mentioned that teachers keep a 'higher position' than the students. She accepts this hierarchy, provided the teacher corrects her mistakes and guides her.

The question of the congruency of the professional and personal self of the teacher was also raised in the focus group discussion. While there was disagreement on the need to maintain congruency between the professional and the personal self, they felt that the teacher should practice what s/he professes, at least in the teaching environment.

Field work

Along with classroom learning, field work is an integral part of the curriculum, and is included in each year of study. The goal of field work is to help students acquire appropriate values, attitudes, and skills in working with people, as well as enabling them to integrate theory with practice. Through this process, the students are helped in developing a holistic understanding of social issues, causative factors, and possible strategies for intervention to improve and/or resolve problems affecting the well-being of people. Students are placed in communities and agencies, and gain experience of working at different levels.

The first step in supervised fieldwork is participatory planning of tasks. The department provides guidelines on the assignments that are expected from a student. Using a log frame, the students prepare a plan of action that gives a detailed account of the objectives, activities, resources, expected outcome, and indicators for evaluation. Each student shares his/her plan in a group conference. This process helps in sharing knowledge, clarifying doubts, and

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improving plans, and provides scope for cooperation and collaboration among students working in the same community. The final plan of action is also used as a monitoring tool during mid-term sharing and final evaluation. Some of the students discuss their plans with community members.

Supervision is a major component of fieldwork. The teachers visit the agencies and the communities where students are placed, observe them at work, and give appropriate feedback. For instance, after a workshop on the benefits of women forming self-help groups, a student and the workshop resource person were discussing a conflict situation that emerged during the discussion. In the course of their discussion, the resource person stated that, 'Muslims always fight'. As a spontaneous response the student affirmed the resource person's opinion. Her teacher brought her unconscious prejudice against the minority Muslim community to her attention in the individual conference. This was a revelation to the student, who afterwards made very conscious efforts to reduce her bias. Similarly, when students organise group sessions, the supervisor observes and gives feedback on their roles, attitudes, and skills in handling a group situation.

Like individual conferences, group conferences enrich the learning of the students. Group conferences are based on the understanding that sharing the field experiences of individual students will help in collective learning and developing collective wisdom about problem assessment, intervention, and outcome evaluation. Group conferences are organised so that each member gets an opportunity to play the role of presenter, recorder, and chairperson. Through these small group exercises students learn and experience democracy, group process, group dynamics, and participation.

The evaluation of the fieldwork programme is conducted in a participatory way. The student and the teacher separately write evaluation reports and these are then shared and discussed. The mid-term sharing is like a monitoring exercise and the teacher gives feedback and directs the future course of action of the student. This participatory evaluation method has proved very effective where it has been done seriously

and systematically. In order to reduce inconsistency among the teachers in awarding marks, a system of joint evaluation by the internal teacher and an external evaluator has been introduced in the new curriculum.

Conclusions

The findings from the study show that lectures are still the predominant teaching method used in the undergraduate and postgraduate courses analysed. Although other methods set out in the curricula are also used, these may not be used in a participatory way even though they are categorised by teachers as participatory methods. From the students' perspective, many of the methods used were not participatory, or at least were not used in a participatory way.

The study also showed that a number of factors constrain participatory teaching. Some of these relate to teachers' own skills and competency. In–service training to develop the skills of teachers is important in overcoming this problem as the current recruitment process is primarily based on academic credentials and the ability and skill to teach is not measured. There needs to be advocacy to include participatory teaching methods in the curriculum of the existing orientation and refresher courses for teachers.

The cultural context is also important to the way in which participatory teaching:learning takes place. These cultural differences are often not taken into account in participatory practices, but culture affects the way in which participation is interpreted and made contextually useful. For example, in this case, the nature of teacher/student relationships and pedagological/evaluation practices in which a culture of dependency on the teacher is encouraged appear to work against the active learning approach needed for participatory teaching:learning. On the other hand, it seems that the hierarchical and unequal power relationship that is inherent in teaching (and was mentioned by many students) can work in teaching:learning participation providing the teacher earns the respect of the students and illustrates the kinds of attitudes and approaches in their teaching which they expect students to use in their social work (ie if they are good 'gurus'). The students repeatedly stressed this point.

The organisational culture is also a constraint on participatory teaching:learning, as participatory methods are not seen as 'real' teaching, and the value of participatory teaching is not recognised. Finally, participatory teaching:learning would be promoted by a more enabling physical learning environment in the classroom.

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