

# Continuing Education: A Place Where Micro and Macro Social Work Practice Reside

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**Abstract:** Leading the Continuing Education (CE) Department situated within a method-based public social work school required that I align the values, vision, and mission of the school and the department. The school's mission speaks to the notion of providing social work education of the highest quality at the lowest possible cost while preparing its graduates to become social workers committed to lifelong learning. In this narrative, I reflect on the offerings of workshops that created spaces for micro and macro practitioners using program funds to offset the cost for participants and infused continuing education contact hours in faculty-championed end-of-year workshops which included field instructors. I also explore the benefits of using different organization lenses to assess, develop, and expand the CE program.

**Keywords:** continuing education, life-long learning, micro, macro, social work practice

Continuing education (CE) is the centerpiece by which social workers renew their licenses to practice. Kurzman (2016) shared that with the passage of mandatory CE requirements in all 50 states, social workers now face the need to renew their licenses. Halton et al. (2014) define CE "as an ongoing process of education and development that continues throughout one's professional career" (p. 1). Similarly, the National Association of Social Workers (2011) shared as one of its preambles that social workers must commit to lifelong learning, as working with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations requires continued competent professionals. Likewise, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) stated in its *Educational Policy Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) that social workers must demonstrate competency in their practice.

One of the ways for social workers to meet the demands and live up to the expectation of lifelong learning and attain professional competency is to partake in courses and workshops offered by CE providers. Because there is no uniformity amongst the states regarding CE requirements for social workers to renew their licenses, there is an avalanche of providers offering courses to social workers in each state. With no clear guidelines of course provisions, every institution offers workshops they believe will enhance social workers' skills, knowledge, and aptitude. Academic institutions are part of the foray of CE providers yet also have no clear formula and, as such, leave the directors to figure it out. In this narrative, I reflect on my role becoming the CE director in a method-based social work academic institution. I use an organization theory lens to assess programmatic needs while offering workshops to enable micro and macro practitioners' opportunities to enrich discussions and skill-building.

## On Becoming a CE Director

I must admit that I at first knew very little about the CE program, the role, and responsibilities of a director of CE in an academic institution. However, I had done staff training and program development and had extensive social work experience both as a direct practice and macro

practitioner. As a matter of fact, after working as the director of social services in community-based organizations and wanting to continue to develop and hone my administrative skills, I took a post-masters advance certificate course in administration. Although it was not called CE then, it was my first post-MSW educational experience which provided me the skills necessary for my professional growth.

More recently, I enrolled in and graduated from the doctoral program at St. John Fisher College in Education and Leadership in New York. The program was rigorous as I attended classes every other weekend and simultaneously concentrated on the dissertation process. In so doing, I felt that I was continuing to live up to the profession's preamble of lifelong learning. The knowledge and skills honed during this process created space to understand leadership styles, organization culture, challenges to program design, program evaluation, and the importance of working collaboratively.

Becoming the director of CE in this school, I wanted to lead an active, responsive, and sustainable program with both micro and macro programming. The challenge of operating a CE program situated in the school of social work seemed difficult, as I had questions that needed answers: What is the vision and mission of the program? How do I develop a program situated within an academic environment where the increase in clinical students reflects the domination of micro practice in the field? How do I infuse my vision to integrate CE workshops where micro and macro social workers can hone and develop skills relevant to practice? How do I ensure that the appropriate documentation is collected consistently in an environment where silo thinking is prevalent? Given that there are numerous CE providers in the New York area, what is this program's niche? These and other questions kept me searching for answers. The one decision I made that emerged from the questions was that the workshops offered must provide a space where social workers would find a deeper understanding of the relationship between micro and macro practice.

The courses offered to micro and macro practitioners provided opportunities to discuss issues affecting individuals but also to understand the broader implications of how the environment affects people. Mosley (2017) supports this notion when she posits that "students must understand how micro and macro practice work together and how each area is needed to achieve real and lasting change" (p. 10). Based on this view, I created a niche for CE to include an integrated approach to programming where social workers (micro and macro practitioners) would have spaces to continue to learn from each other and connect systems to serve individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. I offered macro and micro workshops and used Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frames to assess and fix problems encountered within the program.

### **Situating Macro and Micro Offerings**

It is my experience that most program directors recognize the importance of meeting programmatic goals and objectives to renew contracts and secure funding given that research shows that CE programs are the most underfunded (Cochran & Landuyt, 2011). As such, directors' knowledge and ability to meet program goals and outcomes is critical. It becomes their responsibility to assess their programs, identify gaps, and circumvent barriers to program

outcomes. Overcoming obstacles for program success calls for the leaders' understanding of organizational nuances, resource allocations, the competition to service, and the life within one's organization. Bolman and Deal's (2003) four lenses—*structural, human resource, political, and symbolic*—assisted me in assessing my program to examine how I was doing in situating workshops using the micro-macro philosophy.

The *structural frame* (Bolman & Deal, 2003), with its metaphor of a factory, views organizations as rational systems where goals, specialized roles, and formal relationships exist. I realized that I needed to develop a strong relationship with the instructors, the dean, and the funders to redesign a fledging program where social workers; physical, occupational, and speech and language therapists; and educators all needed to attend because of the interdisciplinary approach to early intervention service delivery. The program was not meeting its goal and objectives, and I needed to make drastic changes. Because we had a grant, there was money to absorb the cost of running the program—but changing the structure, I knew, would not have been smooth sailing. The feedback from the instructors included statements like, “Anything free is not necessarily good,” “No one will attend because it is free,” and “You will never get permission to offer the workshop for free.” I knew that without the involvement of these instructors, I would not have a program to implement any change. The instructors were the ones who designed and implemented the curriculum and were the experts in the program area—they needed to be a part of the process. While they were not optimistic, they agreed to move forward if I obtained permission. I received approval from the dean and the funders because of the impact of my understanding of the structural framework suggested by Bolman and Deal (2003) on my case for change.

Once I obtained permission, I combed through the email list and created a listserv. I sent out hundreds of emails to social workers, speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, educators, and other allied professionals informing them of the workshops. With a colleague's support, we created the brochure, provided information on the five workshops, included the biography of the instructors, inserted the number of CE contact hours per workshop, highlighted the days and hours (evening and weekends), and noted that there was no cost. Through emails and meetings, I kept the instructors, funders, and dean abreast of the progress with registration. The response was remarkable, as every workshop increased in enrollment and attendance.

After the workshops, the evaluations from the participants (including social workers, speech and language and physical therapists, educators, administrators, and policymakers) stated that they enjoyed the workshops. The feedback included statements like the following: “I received an e-blast from Patricia Gray...I appreciated [that] this course is FREE. Most importantly, it is training necessary for growth in my career...I'm an HCSSW alum, a supervisor, and I need CEU's...It allowed me to take a different approach to how I coach my parents/teachers to support the child.”

Although I could only provide the allied CE professionals a certificate of completion, the positive feedback from the CE workshops demonstrated that with planning, ingenuity, inclusion, and support, the tide was turned and resulted in positive outcomes for micro and macro practitioners to learn together.

While the above showed how I utilized the structural frame to secure changes, the need to work with faculty who offered end-of-year programming to field instructors was also critical. As a one-person department, human resources are scarce. To expand my reach, developing relationships with faculty became critically important to the success of the program offerings. The workshops offered by faculty provided new and seasoned field instructors the opportunity to learn and hone their skills with support through the field education department. Working with professors to establish programming, though, takes a lot of time and requires organization, thoughtfulness, flexibility, and patience. Recalling the *human resource frame* (Bolman & Deal, 2003), with its metaphor of organizations as family, which captures the relationships between individuals and the organization, kept me focused and grounded in the knowledge that relationships are about trust, support, mutual respect, teamwork, collaboration, and communication (Covey & Merrill, 2006). Keeping the lines of communication open saved the day many times.

In one instance, I recalled that two weeks before a scheduled training, the registration was zero. The professor and I met and began discussing the lack of registration for the workshop. We talked about whether the date we launched the advertisement had been suboptimal, whether the cost was too high, and whether the email notification had possibly missed its audience. Initially, I could feel the hair on my neck standing up as the line of questions felt more like blaming than figuring out what caused or affected the registration numbers. However, as the conversation went on and I began to think about the need for success, I listened and offered solutions. The flow and tone of the conversation changed. We reviewed what was different in the first year, and we realized that we had not charged the previous year. We discussed the possibility of changing the advertisement to say *free of cost*. The professor expressed concerns about the actions now needed to change the promotional events already sent. I reassured her that it was doable and went to work. I quickly made the changes, sent out the information via Constant Contact, and had the website updated. Within the first day, we had twenty registrants. By the day of the actual workshop, we had over 125 participants registered. We had 100 participants in attendance.

The workshops supported the vision of having both micro and macro social workers discussing issues and concerns relevant to supervision, individuals, populations, and the need for ongoing advocacy work. The field instructors were social workers providing supervision to our students but held various positions within their respective agencies—“clinical social worker,” “supervisor,” “team leader,” and “director” were all titles I heard from students.

The professors whom I provided support to expressed gratitude and praise for a job well done. They thanked me for a seamless workshop and shared that they could not have done it without me and my organizational skills. As the director, recognizing the importance of building relationships with faculty to effectuate change for individuals, organizations, and communities utilizing the CE program supports the vision and mission of the program—a concept where micro and macro professionals must live harmoniously and passionately.

The passion I feel for holding both together makes the profession different from other allied professional groups. Situating the workshops using the macro-micro lens assists me in reminding social workers why we chose the profession. Bolman and Deal (2003) discuss the *symbolic frame* or theater metaphor that captures the life of the organization. The presence of this CE

program featured programming set to restore, replenish, and sustain. If social work professionals are to remain current because of changes to the environment, fill many nonprofit social service administration jobs, and prepare for leadership positions in organizations, then they must have access to workshops that bridge the micro-macro divide (Rothman, 2012; Goldkind & Pardasani, 2013; Fogel & Ersing, 2016; Mosley, 2017).

Micro and macro practice work are critical to the profession of social work. The Hartford Center of Excellence in Diverse Aging hosts its annual conference at the end of each academic year, demonstrating how micro and macro practitioners flourish together and capture the life of organizations because of their thinking. The conference brings together community-based organizations, administrators, social workers, providers, advocates, and consumers to discuss topics affecting the elderly population, share programming, and discuss best practices when engaging and working with the elderly community. Participating in the committee meant that I could also use the CE listserv to invite participants to the upcoming conferences.

While communicating with Ms. T, a retired social worker seeking continuing education to remain active, I mentioned the upcoming conference to her. Her immediate question was whether she could attend and bring her friends. I told her yes, and Ms. T registered and brought 10 of her social worker friends, all retirees living in the same community, and all also micro and macro practitioners. Ms. T and her friends demonstrate real commitment to the profession and to lifelong learning, as they are retirees but still want to learn, engage, and share their knowledge. Evaluation documents stated things like “I enjoyed the conference, was happy for the opportunity and wanted ongoing access to workshops offered by the school,” and others expressed that they “especially liked hearing about the new assisted living program in Brooklyn,” or “enjoyed seeing the movements used to engaged seniors.” Attendees also noted the lack of knowledge they had about grants before the workshop and the refreshingly strong activism for seniors recently in social work.

While building relationships with faculty was essential to the life of the CE program and to situating the micro and macro workshops within it, the community also needed my attention. This area created and still creates the most pressure for me; within the New York City area there are numerous CE providers, both private and within academic institutions, and as New York is very diverse and social media continues to shrink our world, faculty and staff receive postings about other institutions’ CE offerings regularly—and soon compare them. Bolman and Deal’s (2003) *political frame*, with its metaphor of a jungle, represents the arena where competition, power, and scarce resources reside. As the program director, I needed to understand the competing forces, the power dynamics of the competitors, and, most of all, my program’s lack of resources.

The CE program does not have the personnel nor the financial resources to be a powerhouse in all three aspects of the political frame—to ward off the competition, to wield the power of being the biggest and best, nor to charge at the higher end for CE hours. I recognized early on that I needed to build support to navigate and learn about how other programs met their goals and objectives. I thought about how to create additional support and resources to learn and explore how other providers function and to collaborate rather than compete, since we emphasize different focuses and workshops based on what other programs are offering.

My belief system feeds on a community-based, collaborative approach in doing business. As such, I reached out to a colleague and began the discussion, and soon we learned that we had similar issues and wanted the opportunity to learn, share, and grow. These conversations gave birth to the New York City Continuing Education Consortium (NYCCEC).

The NYCCEC had several CE directors and program personnel attempting to find our niche in an overcrowded environment. Out of a willingness to learn and support each other, we began discussing issues and concerns about CE in New York State (NYS). We were concerned about the numerous CE providers, the quality of providers, and having a space to review and understand the regulations around CE. Kleiner and Krueger (2013) wrote that, in total, about 25 percent of today's US workforce is in an occupation licensed at the state level, up from less than 5 percent in the early 1950s. This share is higher when local and federal licenses are included.

The NYCCEC was helpful as, out of our meetings, new CE directors found a place where they could learn about CE rules and regulations. For example, one new assistant director who attended our meetings was applying for her agency to become a CE provider. The group coached her through the process, answered her questions, and guided her to the right persons at New York State Education Department (NYSED). Additionally, we focused on administrative tasks such as workshop goals and objectives. We shared ideas on what works and the pitfalls to avoid within CE. In one conversation about pitfalls, the discussion about the CE documentation took precedence. The conversation began when I asked each person to share the required documentation needed from participants to support their CE hours—while I answered “a pre- and post-test, then an evaluation,” another member shared that their pre-test and evaluation are done online, and another wasn't privy to such information because their program documentation was handled by an internal entity online.

What I learned from this exchange was that how you submit your application to NYSED governs the documents you must collect from your program users.

As it relates to formulating the NYCCEC, it was a blessing as I found support but also, and more importantly, developed relationships with other CE providers doing similar work. I also recognized that with the approximately 58,578 social workers in NYS and the NYC area, there are more than enough opportunities to serve social workers, especially if the program incorporates micro and macro practice.

Creating and providing spaces for micro and macro workshops for social workers in CE aligns with my idea of social work practice. I feel alive as I engage in discussions with potential instructors about their workshop ideas and make sure that social workers will hone and develop their skills while meeting the demands for licensure renewal. I wanted to create a space where social workers would come and learn about new intervention strategies but simultaneously link it to the structural reform work we must engage with to meet the demands of providing services.

### **Conclusion**

As I write this reflection manuscript, I realize that I internalized and demonstrated my commitment to lifelong learning as a social worker working as an administrator. Still and more

importantly, though, the question is whether this manuscript provides readers with tools to re-think their programs, create spaces for broader thinking, and/or generate discussions about how to address issues affecting CE programs. I believe it does—and here are some implications for future use:

1. CE provides an opportunity for helping professionals from various disciplines/fields to come together in an interdisciplinary learning environment, whereas we are often educated in silos in professional programs.
2. Social work can join with other disciplines that have a macro focus. For example, public health is an excellent example of a field that is heavily macro-focused. We can create workshops to build an interdisciplinary approach to service delivery like what occurred in the Early Intervention program design.
3. Directing a CE program allows one to view academic programs from four metaphorical frames, which is an excellent way to examine the culture of academe and learn what will and will not work in terms of engaging faculty in CE work.
4. Opportunities to collaborate across schools and disciplines (universities and colleges) are encouraged in CE, and there are lessons learned here about how to form and develop those collaborations.
5. The ability to obtain funding offers new opportunities for curricular development and outreach.
6. Ways to span the divide between macro and micro work are wide open in CE, and creativity can make a difference for helping professionals in the community.

Despite the challenges, my worldview about social work provided the impetus in taking on the responsibility of becoming the CE director as it suited my vision and offered unlimited opportunities to build a program. I hoped to model exemplary leadership skills in developing the CE program by following Kouzes and Posner's (2012) modeling. To me, their models served as a reminder to all CE directors within and outside academic institutions that you must believe in the values you express, but those values must not be merely your principles, they must also represent what the organization stands for (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

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