



Practicing Social Work through Fiction- Writing and Journalism: Stories from Vietnam

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Abstract

In this article, I will address these theoretical and practical questions by reflecting on my experiences as a social work scholar in Vietnam. Vietnamese society is not yet familiar with social work concepts but is quite receptive to literature and mass media, so I have used creative writing (fiction and journalism) to promote social work values and missions in Vietnam. Specifically, I will discuss how I stumbled into social work, intuitively realized that creative writing is a powerful means to promote social change and social justice in Vietnam; and proactively use creative writing as a forum to practice social work. Placed in a larger context, my story reflects the journeys of many social work scholars and practitioners in Vietnam: they have been “practicing” social work in many ways that are not typical; in fact, only a small part of what they do resembles professional social work practice in Western countries. In telling my story, I will also address some conceptual issues in 21st-century social work including the role of arts, literature, and media in social work, the necessity of social workers to proactively utilize the power of discursive forms in promoting social work values, and developing culturally responsive social work practices in a time of globalization.

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Introduction

The International Federation of Social Workers defines the primary mission of social work as “promote [ing] social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). In most developed countries, social workers use a number of venues including “direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation, administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation” (American National Association of Social Workers, 2008). In less developed countries, however, pursuing social work mission through these venues might prove to be impossible. It would be difficult to promote social change and social justice in a communist society like Vietnam where concepts like “social justice,” “rights,” and “social change,” have politically contested meanings. Especially id that society has only started to develop social work in the last 20 years, is unfamiliar with signature social work activities and lacks the infrastructure for conducting these activities.

In this article, I will address these theoretical and practical questions by reflecting on my experiences as a social work scholar in Vietnam. Vietnamese society is not yet familiar with social work concepts but is quite receptive to literature and mass media, so I have used creative writing (fiction and journalism) to promote social work values and missions in Vietnam. Specifically, I will discuss how I stumbled into social work, intuitively realized that creative writing is a powerful means to promote social change and social justice in Vietnam; and proactively use creative writing as a forum to practice social work. Placed in a larger context, my story reflects the journeys of many social work scholars and practitioners in Vietnam: they have been “practicing” social work in many ways that are not typical; in fact, only a small part of what they do resembles professional social work practice in Western countries. In telling my story, I will also address some conceptual issues in 21st-century social work including the role of arts, literature, and media in social work, the necessity of social workers to proactively utilize the power of discursive forms in promoting social work values, and developing culturally responsive social work practices in a time of globalization.

Vietnam and Social Work in Vietnam

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam established in 1945 after the Vietnamese people overthrew the French-backed royal court and French colonial rule. However, it was not until



the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 that Vietnam finally became a unified country with a centrally planned economy. Due to heavy damages of the wars, in 1975, 60% of the Vietnamese population was poor and social problems such as illiteracy, malnutrition, and infant mortality was widespread (Library of Congress, 2005).

Since 1975, Vietnam has gone through fundamental political, economic, and social changes to cope with widespread poverty and social problems. Most significantly, in 1986, the country abandoned the centrally planned economy to adopt the market economy. As a result of these structural changes, between 1996 and 2005, the annual economic growth rate of Vietnam averaged 7-8%, second in the world to China. The poverty rate of the country decreased from 58% in 1993 to 24% in 2004 and currently stands at around 19% (MOPI, 2006).

Fast economic development in the last few decades, however, also came with obvious consequences: most notably, increasing social inequality, segregation, and injustice. Although the overall poverty rate in the country steadily declined, poverty in rural areas lagged 50% behind that of urban areas (Litchfield & Justino, 2004, p.155). Similarly, the income ratio between the rich and the poor in Vietnam nearly doubled in the 1990s, rising from 4.43 times in 1993 to 6.98 times in 1998, reaching 8.14 times in 2002 (MOPI, 2006, p. 42). In 2008, the Vietnam Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA, 2010), reported that Vietnam had 5.7 million disabled people, three million children living in poverty, and 2.7 million poor families. Combined, about 30% of the 86 million people of Vietnam need some form of services, especially in the areas of education, health care, and economic well-being (MOLISA, 2010).

In Vietnam, Social work only started to develop in the last two decades, even though informal help systems (Buddhist temples for example) had been providing relief for thousands of years. According to a historical account by Madam Nguyen ThiOanh, a key figure in the scene of social work in modern Vietnam, during the pre-French colonial period (before 1982), Vietnamese life was organized in villages, where people were morally expected to help the poor and needy while at the same time working with one another to prevent crime and build the village (Oanh, 2002). During the French colonial time (1862-



1945), the French rulers did not care much about social problems. Catholic missionaries stepped in and offered some social relief through faith-based orphanages and hospices. The French Red Cross also established the Caritas School of Social Work in 1947 in South Vietnam. The school aimed at serving the French, however and ignored the millions of poor and illiterate local Vietnamese.

During the Vietnam War, because the Americans were present in South Vietnam, a few social work and social welfare activities were established by the South Vietnamese regime. Refugee relief and settlement activities were consistently present throughout this period and the Vietnam Army School of Social Work, the Buddhist Youth School of Social Service, and the National School of Social Work were also established to provide two-year training programs for social workers who would primarily serve the Southern government and American soldiers (Oanh, 2002). However, all these schools ceased to exist after the Southern regime was eliminated at the end of the Vietnam War.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, social work in Vietnam has been supervised by the Vietnam Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA). According to a 2008 report by MOLISA, Vietnam currently has approximately 500 service agencies with more than 35,000 staff working in various types of work similar to social work (MOLISA, 2010). However, the majority of this staff has little or no training in social work. With regard to social work education, it was not until 2004 that the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training approved social work as an official program of study at higher education institutions nationwide, making social work a real educational choice for college students (Oanh, 2002; Ngo, 2009). In 2004, the Vietnamese government approved social work as a profession within the registry of governmental occupations, allowing social work graduates to apply for jobs as government staff. Currently, the country has approximately 40 bachelor of social work (BSW) programs and one master of social work (MSW) program, with a few thousand BSW graduates, 40 people with MSW degrees, and a few people with PhD degrees.

One of the most important milestones in the history of Vietnamese social work happened on March 25, 2010, when Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Sinh Hung signed Decree 32 approving the National Social Work Development Program with the budget



of 2437,4 billion *dong* (US\$120 million) for the next 10 years. The Decree showed the Vietnamese government's commitment to developing social work laws, policies, programs, infrastructure, and work force. Two major goals of the Decree in the next ten years are training 60,000 social workers by 2020 and building a nationwide network of "social work centers" (*trung tam cong tac xa hoi*). Following Decree 32, in 2011, the Vietnamese government approved another ten-year program to develop and incorporate social work into medical settings in the country for the first time (Vietnam Ministry of Health, 2011). Also in 2011, the Vietnamese Association of Social Workers was established with approximately 500 members enrolled during the first year.

In all, social work is a new concept to all facets of Vietnamese society. The country is still figuring out fundamental questions and the social work community is still in the process of answering such questions. Although educators, scholars, practitioners, and policy makers in Vietnam agree that they cannot copy Western countries, they have not yet agreed on what should be the unique, culturally sensitive characteristics of *Vietnamese social work*. They are still figuring out how to develop social work in a country where the political system is communist, the economic system is a combination of a market economy with socialist elements, and the socio-cultural system is heavily influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

Practicing Social Work in Vietnam through Creative Means: My Story

Born and raised in North Vietnam after the Vietnam War, I was interested in a career that would help people, build communities, and improve society in general. However, terms and concepts like "social work" did not exist in Vietnam then. The closest resemblance to that idea would be self-organized communal activities that I observed in my neighborhood, all of which were done by families living in the neighborhood in accordance with communist standards. Back then, every rural village or urban residential block in Vietnam was considered a collective unit where activities had to be coordinated and shared based on the communist principle of collectivism. As a child, every Saturday evening, my friends and I would circle around the meetings of our parents, who met at someone's house to decide what to do about the neighborhood's latest issues (Mr. Tran beat his wife again, the common water tank is getting too dirty, the potholes in the road need to be fixed, or Mr. Le just died). People discussed these issues and shared the work. Some elderly woman would have a "friendly



talk” with Mr. Tran, the men would fix the potholes, every family except the very poor would raise money for the funeral of Mr. Le, and the youths would be in charge of cleaning the water tank.

I now realize, the solutions to our neighborhood problems often derived from communist political doctrines and moral judgment based on cultural norms and expectations. For example, it was often agreed that Mr. Tran should not beat his wife because in a socialist country like Vietnam, men and women are equal; however, it was also a cultural belief that the husband is the head of the household and entitled to decide what needs to be done to maintain order in the house, including “training the wife” through physical actions. There were no standards or consistency about how the neighborhood treated different families and different issues; decisions were based on the emotional and moral appeals around each specific case. There was no conceptualization of “helping” as a profession; it was considered something people just did—out of kindness, tradition, and necessity.

In the mid-1990s, when I was taking the mandatory national entrance exam in college, no BSW program existed and “social work” remained an alien concept in society even though the United Nations and various international non-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had been in Vietnam since the late 1980s with various programs. Within such a context, I had few options for my desired career. Seeing that the country was fast integrating into the world economy and that globalization was an important agent of change in Vietnam, I decided to major in foreign trade economics, hoping vaguely and rather naively that learning to understand how the economy functions in a global world would provide me with the tools to pursue my career goals.

During my time in college in Hanoi, I started volunteering for international NGOs, and was exposed to concepts like community development, social policy, social administration, or public policy as areas of expertise that one could pursue as a career. I was also introduced to concepts like empowerment, gender inequality, community participation, micro-finance, and sustainable development, all of which suggested a new depth to the helping career that I had hoped to become a part of. However, “social work” was still not mentioned even in the circle of NGOs, possibly because when translated into Vietnamese,



this term had a political connotation associated with social movements, protests, and revolution, all of which evoked ideas of war and social unrest from which the country was still recovering.

In addition to volunteering for NGOs, I started writing for newspapers in Vietnam. I was seeing too many problems in society and did not like how they were being thought about, talked about, and resolved. My dislike was strongly influenced by the many Russian, French, and British novels that were translated into Vietnamese. From French romantic novels like Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* to Russian realist works such as Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* or the British moral novels of Charles Dickens, I learned about different ways human beings relate to each other – as drama, fantasy, and cultural norms. I would much later understand these relationships through the social work lenses of equality, justice, social class, power, and human dignity and relations.

I started writing simple op-ed articles describing social issues such as corporal punishment of children, wife beating, or the hard life of farmers. Though my observations and stories were simplified and one-dimensional back then, writing them and having them published instilled in me a clear thought: writing is a powerful means to help people understand social problems and advocate for social change toward justice and equality.

After graduating from college, I applied for graduate study in the United States and started my doctoral education at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, not knowing that I was entering a social work program. I had decided to go to Chicago because I was attracted by the term "social service administration," which I had envisioned as leading to a career with NGOs. Needless to say, I was very confused during my first semester in Chicago when I kept hearing my classmates and professors use the term "social work" in class. I graduated from Chicago with an MSW and PhD, becoming one of the first people in Vietnam to have a doctoral degree in social work. I had indeed stumbled into social work.

Once I realized what social work meant in the US and Western society, I also realized that it would be difficult for me to apply an American model of social work in Vietnam since



Vietnam's political, social, and cultural context is very different from America's. Currently, an essential part of practicing social work in Vietnam simply involves raising basic awareness about social problems. It also involves introducing the Vietnamese public to the very basic concepts of social work: what social work is and what social work can do for people. Realizing this, I again turned to literature and journalism; only, this time, I was more proactive and intentional.

To understand why literature and journalism are powerful means of promoting social work mission and values in Vietnam, one must remember that Vietnamese society has had a long tradition of using these discursive forms in the classroom and public education. This tradition is rooted in the teachings of Confucianism and Buddhism, both of which emphasize the mastery of prose and poetry as indicators of superior intellectual power. Confucianism in particular dictated a social structure in which the highest social status was bestowed onto the intellectual class consisting of people who passed tiered national exams that tested them on *The Four Books* (*The Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Confucian Analects*, and *The Works of Mencius*) and the *Five Classics* (*Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *Classic of Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*). People who wanted to serve the king or thrive in the higher class in society would have to cram for these exams from young ages.

Throughout the history of Vietnam, then, the social marker of an individual's intellectual ability, emotional maturity, and social manners, thus his social status, authority, marital worth, and legacy, relied very much on his creative abilities, which manifested through his ability to compose poetry and essays. Literary power was held so sacred that it became a major means for the royal court and higher classes to indoctrinate the rest of the society in important matters. Lower classes (most of whom were illiterate farmers) also developed their own poems, and other folk literary forms to educate each other on farming techniques, social etiquettes, moral lessons, and historical stories.

During the wars against the French and Americans, arts and literature were once again used as a powerful means to mobilize people into war and keep the nation's spirit up. The pervasive use of literature as a means of education and propaganda was a trademark of the



Vietnamese communist government and that legacy still lives on. With new insights into Vietnamese conditions and empowered by an education in social work, I have shifted from a *reactive* to a more *proactive use* of literature and journalism to practice social work. My activities have included writing fiction, translating books, writing articles for newspapers and magazines, and incorporating literature into social work research and education.

Fiction and Non-fiction Writing

The exposure to social work has introduced me to new ways of framing, analyzing, and explaining problems that I once perceived as “natural.” One clear example is the issue of domestic violence and abuse. Though I had witnessed wife battering frequently growing up and resented it, I was not sure there would be a *structural* way to address this problem. However, my education in social work introduced me not only to the concept of gender empowerment, but also to different theoretical frameworks to explain the gender structure, such as the social construction of gender, sociology of gender, social construction of sexuality, and feminism. These insights shifted my fiction writing from simply describing these problems with a sympathetic voice to deconstructing where and how the problems were formed, by whom, and how they could be changed.

I also shifted from writing fiction to non-fiction, believing that the real stories of real people are more powerful and necessary to raise awareness of Vietnamese audiences about social problems. In 2012, I started publishing a series of three books titled *Unhappiness Is an Asset* on the topic of women’s struggles through divorce. The divorce rate in Vietnam is currently less than 5% and many women are afraid of leaving their unhappy marriages because of social stigma and fear of the unknown. In this book, I detailed the psychological journey of a woman through divorce; then, using a strength-based approach and the concept of resilience, I pointed out that women can empower themselves during and after divorce. The book is a strong advocate for the pursuit of a life in which women are recognized as equal to men. I also plan to write another science-made-easy book on divorce, relationships, abuse, and mental health for women.

Translation Project

Parallel with writing my own work, I have organized translation groups to bring English-language works to Vietnam. Starting in 2005 and more so since 2011, I collaborated



with a major Vietnamese publishing house and Fields Medalist Ngo BaoChauto create a book project called “An Open Door.” Within this project, we recommended books in three categories—fiction, science, and children’s books—to the publishing house to translate into Vietnamese. The project aims to “open doors” to new ways of thinking and we target young people whose embrace of social equality and justice will be crucial for the future of Vietnam.

Most of the books in our project push the audience’s thoughts on social issues and justice, questioning stereotypes and prejudices. For example, Michael Sandel’s *Justice* provides arguments and practical examples of distinguishing between moral judgment and justice, which we hope helps Vietnamese readers become more familiar with using logical reasoning and rationality in making decisions rather than relying on moral indoctrination and cultural norms. All books included in this project share an underlying theme that resonates with social work values: to honor human value and dignity, to appreciate human diversity, and to show the many faces and devastations of injustice or prejudice, thus encouraging kindness, compassion, and resilience. We envision eventually turning it into a social project, in which anybody can recommend books and be part of the process. The project will strengthen social capital and social solidarity in Vietnam, especially among young people.

Using Art in Social Work Education

I also regularly use literature in my teaching and research and find it to be a great way to engage students in Vietnam as well as in America. Students in both countries are very enthusiastic and receptive when the instructor includes a poem, story, movie clip, or novel into the lecture as class exercises. For example, when I taught Social Work and Social Policy for Children with nearly 100 participants in Vietnam, I often turned the 10-minute breaks in variety shows where class participants would take turns reading poetry or singing. Not only did these activities help facilitate the lecture, but they helped create a deep bond between the instructor and class participants that still remains today. Similarly, in teaching Human Behavior and the Social Environment in the US, I used short stories, novel excerpts, or movies whenever possible to illustrate how cultural scripts work to marginalize, silence, direct, empower, and dis-empower people. These literary and artistic tools prove to be very effective in the classroom in helping students understand social problems, social inequality, justice, and diversity issues, all of which are at the heart of social work.



Implications for 21st-Century Social Work

Currently in Vietnam, about 40 BSW programs are educating a few hundred social workers each year. These new social work graduates, teachers, and policy-makers are doing everything they can to promote “social work” as a profession in Vietnamese society. They often need to play multiple roles: journalist, activist, PR experts, community organizer, therapist, counselor, and writer. However, since a basic understanding of social work has not been established in the country’s general public, social work scholars and practitioners should proactively use mass media, arts, and literature as a means to educate society about the mission, values, and issues in social work. They can do so through a wide array of activities:

- Writing for newspapers and magazines on issues related to social work, especially topical issues that are being debated in society such as gay marriage, universal health insurance, education reform, the rights of disabled people, gun control, child abuse, and domestic violence.
- Writing books, monographs, pocket dictionaries to make social science issues accessible to the public, particularly on issues that can have a direct impact on people’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviours such as coping with cancer, going through divorce, living with disabilities, facing anxiety disorder, patterns of domestic violence, female psychology, effective parenting, caring for an older parent, or discrimination in health care. Easy examples for this category are *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* by John Gray, a relationship counsellor; *The Verbally Abuse Relationship: How To Recognize It and How To Respond* by Patricia Evans, a communication specialist; or *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman, an anthropologist.
- Creating fine arts such as poetry, novels, short stories, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, plays, music, paintings, and anything else that makes use of materials in social work and promote social work values and mission (justice, diversity, human dignity, human relationship, etc.).
- Using photography, installation art, performance art, and other creative forms to promote community well-being.
- Using literature and fine arts in classroom activities to help students appreciate and use them more proactively in their practice. Turner (2012) found that using literature assignments could encourage professional growth and empathy among social work students by giving students a chance to reflect whether they share something in common



with the characters or whether they would like to help the character in real life. In general, fiction and/or biography are powerful in deepening social work students' empathy, ethnic consciousness, cultural competence, critical thinking of social issues, organizational strategies, and other attributes (Shapiro, Duke, Boker & Ahearn, 2005; Cnaan, 1989; Pardeck, 2005; Holloway, 2009). Gold (2012) found poetry to be very effective in social work education because it helps students make sense of relationships, develop a sense of self, and generalize about human nature. Similarly, Kinsella (2006) found poetry to be effective in foregrounding previously silenced experiences while Furman (2005) found poetry to be effective in sensitizing social workers to the experiences of their clients, teaching empathy, and evoking self-reflection.

- Using literature and the arts in therapy and counselling in order to provide clients with a safe vehicle to talk about their experiences and emotions that are difficult to express (Androutsopoulou, 2001). In psychotherapy, poetry is useful in helping therapists to become more sensitive to gender issues (Furman & Dill, 2012).
- Using the Internet and social media to publish and promote social work through starting one's own blog or website, setting up Internet communities for social work, contributing to websites about social work, uploading lectures and imitation therapy sessions online, etc.
- Participating in large-scale social activities that can raise public awareness about the profession of social work and social work issues.

Using mass media, fine arts, and literature to “practice” social work is important for many reasons. First, it helps social work become accessible to a large audience, thus benefiting more people in society. This feature is especially important in societies, such as Vietnam, China, and other Asian countries, that still stigmatize seeking help from Western-style professionals. A woman in these countries might feel reluctant to go to a social worker to talk about her husband's violence toward her but she might be more willing to read about it in private from a self-help book, the Internet, or a novel that addresses the issue.

Second, since human beings are naturally receptive to creative story-telling, using literature and the arts to promote social work values will create a lasting and comprehensive impression. From the beginning of human society, works like Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* did



not just entertain with adventurous tales but also served to guide the audience on practical moral conducts, social etiquettes, roles, and expectations. Most countries have classic literary works that served as foundations of their culture, such as *Ramayana* in India; Arthurian legends and Shakespeare's works in England; *Journey to the West*, *The Three Countries*; or *Hong Lou Meng* in China. Charles Dickens' works taught readers about social injustice as much as Jane Austen taught readers about manners, pride and prejudices, and gender structure. In America, works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and more recently *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Grapes of Wrath*, and *Martin Eden* influenced thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors toward a wide array of social issues. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Jack London's *Martin Eden* are stories that help expose the abuse of children and the discrimination against black men and disabled people that social workers come in contact with on a daily basis. If social workers can tap into their creativity to transform their clients' cases into creative stories, they can make the public more aware of the depths of the problems facing people.

Thirdly, creative writing will enhance the experiences of social work scholars and teachers, making them more engaged in larger social dialogues, which will enhance their work ethic. Extensive research has found that creativity is an important part of wellbeing and health (Hafford-Letchfield, Leonard, & Couchman, 2012). Social work scholars and practitioners often work in stressful environments, with difficult and emotionally draining situations; thus, they are likely to get burned out. If they can use literature and the arts as a creative outlet to the emotional challenges at work, they can enrich their highly stressful lives.

Finally, social work scholars and practitioners need to adapt to a world that is becoming increasingly connected virtually through social media. The Internet and mobile technologies make information and discourse more influential than ever before. Scholars have argued that human civilization is moving into a new form of society: a society of information, in which the creative class will be the most influential class (Florida, 2002). Bell and Desai (2012) coined the term "social justice art," which they define as art that promotes social justice, with tackling dominant discourses and institutional structures as a key component.



I propose that social work scholars and practitioners of the 21st century need to engage in a new line of practice that I label “social work of discourse.” I define it as the way social workers deconstruct discursive forms in social work and in general society to eliminate injustice and discrimination embedded in language. This form of practice is theoretically based on Marxist conflict theory and Foucault’s theory of power, discourse, and knowledge, both of which argue that all discursive forms—mass media, fiction, arts, governmental forms, healthcare setting communication, or any form of communication—reflect power structures and are too often unfavorable to vulnerable groups. For example, communication at addiction treatment facilities embed the power structure between clients and therapists; and both can manipulate the therapeutic communication scripts in order to achieve their hidden agendas without actually making progress in treatment (Carr, 2006). In a country like Vietnam, the relationship between the clients and service providers can be deeply structured, in which the providers play the role of granting favors to the clients. This tendency is due to the fact that in Vietnam and similar countries, social services are provided by a communist government, which is traditionally bureaucratic and centralized in decision making. Social workers can aim at tackling this unbalanced power structure and at the very least, social work scholars and practitioners should be more involved in promoting the right image and the role of their profession in the general society. Gibelman (2004) found that the media have been portraying social work in an unfavorable and distorted light and encouraged us to “put our networking skills to use in regard to media contacts.”

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I have reflected on my personal experience of practicing social work in Vietnam through creative writing. In a country like Vietnam, where history and culture create a ready receptiveness to literature, arts, and the mass media, social work scholars and practitioners will benefit a great deal if they can tap into these areas in their research, teaching, and promotion of the profession. Such an approach is also useful for countries where social work is in its infancy and where the mass media play an important role in social control. It is also beneficial for developed countries where the Internet, social media, and advanced telecommunication are making virtual community more real than physical community and discourse more influential to human thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors than anything else. In that light, 21st-century social work will need to adapt itself to these new



developments of the world; I propose that 21st-century social work scholars and practitioners engage more proactively in creative social work and social work of discourse.

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