

# Bridging the theory-practice gap: Student placement groups co-facilitated by lecturers and practice teachers

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**Abstract:** *This paper recounts details of a project designed to enhance integration of student learning for practice, in particular it focuses on placement groupwork with students, evaluates an innovative approach to the use of placement tutors and suggests that there may be more productive ways of using the traditional time spent on placement liaison and visits.*

*Key words:* groupwork, practice teachers, lecturers, tutors

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## **Introduction**

Doel *et al* in their recent audit of models of practice learning note that groupwork with students ‘is in increasing evidence’ (2004, p.11). They find several approaches in use (2004, p.136), and call for more research into what might be the most effective way to organise group and individual learning on placement (2004, p.11). This paper chiefly concerns the organisation and use of groupwork with students to enhance the integration of theory and practice and we hope that it will be a useful contribution to this discussion.

## **Background**

In October 2003, the University of Edinburgh was commissioned by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) to undertake a project to enhance the integration of learning for practice within the university and workplace. This was part of a nation-wide initiative entitled Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP). Other HEI partners in the LEEP project included the University of Dundee, Glasgow Caledonian University and the Robert Gordon’s University, Aberdeen.

Our project involved a literature review of practice learning and a practice audit. The review and audit confirmed what has been known for a considerable time. The integration of learning and most notably the fusion of theory and practice continue to be hard to achieve, with student experiences of the ‘real world’ of practice often counterpoised to learning within academia. Our project went on to pilot an experiment that set out to bridge this gap. The project involved students on the first of the two long placements around which assessed practice learning is generally organised in Scotland. Firstly, such students were clustered either within a given agency or in a geographical location, secondly, a lecturer/tutor was attached to these groups of students and thirdly, the lecturer/tutor – described as an academic adviser – was sited within the agency or at an agency at the hub of the cluster for a day a week. During this day, the academic advisor was to be available on an informal basis to the students and work alongside the practice teacher in undertaking the standard placement obligations, such as three-way discussions and

reviews of progress. In the course of the pilot, the academic advisors were active in a mixture of ways e.g. contributing to staff's Continuing Professional Development and 'catching' and resolving placement difficulties before they became breakdowns. One activity that all academic advisors were asked to do was to co-facilitate student groups with a practice teacher.

The idea of the co-facilitation was in keeping with the larger rationale of having an academic sited within the agency where a group of students were based, or in the agency-hub at the centre of a geographical cluster of placements. We had speculated that the presence of an academic (called an academic advisor) in the agency under the same roof as students would contribute to literally breaking down the barriers between field and classroom. And the combination of accessibility and informality, and adherence to conventional placement responsibilities did prove to work for a large number of the students involved. However, it was the learning in the student groups, jointly assisted by the academic advisor and practice teacher that concretised and justified the rationale for our experiment and proved to be one of its most successful aspects. A review of the literature indicates that such collaboration between field and classroom at this level is rare but that the conditions for it may now be right.

## **Groupwork with social work students: Advantages and disadvantages**

### **Advantages**

Trevor Lindsay's recent review of the literature on group learning on practice placement sets out the benefits of groupwork in general and groupwork with students in particular (Lindsay, 2004, see also Walter and Young, 1999). Lindsay begins by noting the lack of published work on the subject and goes on to summarise the value of groupwork with social work students. Paraphrasing Taylor (1996), learning in groups:

... recognises and validates the skills, knowledge and ability held by all the students and acknowledges the mutual benefits that arise from the sharing of these. It also provides an environment in which students can learn the

skills of working in interdependent relationships, thereby preparing them for practice in teamwork. (2004, p.2)

Lindsay then draws upon the general literature on group supervision to commend group supervision with social work students on placement where students present their work to each other:

... in addition to learning through listening to someone else in this way (by processing, weighing and reformulating the information), the student him/herself also learns through verbalisation of *his or her* cognitive process. Verbalising one's cognitive processes for the purpose of teaching others helps with one's own understanding, and preparing to teach a peer creates a firmer acquisition of the knowledge than simply learning it for oneself. Not only are information processing skills enhanced in practice learning groups but motivation to use the skills is increased. (2004, p.4)

Lindsay goes on to report on his study into the practice group learning experiences of 102 first and final placement students. He found that 38 of these students had taken part in group supervision. Most of this number were positive about the groups in which they participated with the frequently reported advantages being firstly, support from other students, secondly the chance to share work experiences and get feedback from multiple sources (echoing Tebb *et al*, 1996, and Walter and Young, 1999) and thirdly, the opportunity to relate theory and practice. These advantages vastly outweighed the reported disadvantages. Of the latter the most strongly featured was the difficulties in relating to the individual learning needs of each of the students in any one group (7/38). This was echoed by the small group of practice teachers in the study who reported 'that a system of alternating group supervision with individual supervision allowed them to draw on the benefits of both approaches most effectively' (2004, p.15. See also Walter and Young, 1999, for confirmation of the value of such a combined approach).

Lindsay concludes that 'group supervision when done well contributes significantly to student learning by providing learning opportunities not available in a one-to-one relationship with the practice teacher' (p.15) and calls for social work education programmes to 'explore the possibility of putting systems in place that would make group practice learning available to all students' (*ibid.*).

Confirmation of a re-awakening interest in group practice learning noted in Doel *et al* (2004) can be found elsewhere in a paper on the work of practice teachers associated with the University of Wolverhampton (Atherton and Keating, 2005, see also Atherton, 2006, both published on the website of the Department of Health-sponsored Practice Learning Task Force ([www.practicelearning.org.uk](http://www.practicelearning.org.uk)). Atherton and Keating discuss their experiences and findings from having run their group practice learning model over the course of two academic years involving three cohorts of students that numbered 130 students in all. In their model, off-site practice teachers run the groups with student-led discussions covering practice topics such as ethical dilemmas, assessment and applying theory.

The findings of satisfaction are similar to Lindsay's in that the majority of students enjoyed the support and stimulation of their peers in the groups. Unlike Lindsay, Atherton and Keating include a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the groups from the University's standpoint. The groupwork model used by Wolverhampton University allows a large group of students to have access to a small pool of high quality practice teacher expertise in, for example, linking theory and practice. This is an obvious advantage in settings which, because of resource restraints, have fewer accredited practice teachers but increased social work student numbers.. Whereas before, an accredited practice teacher would be responsible for delivering student supervision, the Wolverhampton arrangements involve a placement supervisor undertaking this role which, in turn, is overseen by a practice teacher who makes contact with a group of placements at key points such as midway and carries out one direct observation. These and other such UK-wide arrangements (previously known, for example, as link or 'long-arm' supervision), are acknowledged as a pragmatic response to the practice teacher shortage.

Interestingly, given the subject of the present paper, another advantage reported by Atherton and Keating is the *abolition* of academic tutor placement contact on the grounds that the new breed of accredited and experienced practice teacher is a good substitute given the practice teachers' objectivity vis-à-vis a given placement and their familiarity with the University programme (although their list of disadvantages notes that in their model 'greater responsibility is placed on the placement supervisor' (2005, p5)).

## **Disadvantages**

The potential disadvantages of groupwork learning are well-rehearsed. Lindsay's literature review summarises these thus:

- Because the group is necessarily being directed towards more general needs and common denominators it may be less focused, structured and relevant than individual supervision.
- A potential for rivalry and competition within the group may inhibit learning and have negative consequences for teamwork.
- Because there is risk of negative feedback from peers, individuals may keep quiet rather than expose themselves to inappropriate criticism.
- On the other hand, because group cohesion can become so well developed, individuals come under irresistible pressures to conform.
- Additionally, the group setting may offer 'hiding places' for individuals where they can avoid responsibility by simply accepting consensus decisions.
- Communication can be difficult as members put individual but differing interpretations on what is said or done.
- Similarly, what may be a solution for one person in the group can be a difficulty for another. (Lindsay, 2004, p.3)

To these disadvantages can be added two which emerged for the students in Atherton and Keating's study. These were firstly, the problem of repetition, i.e. group sessions can repeat academic lectures and seminars and/or cover work that has already taken place with the placement supervisor and secondly, the problem of the disadvantage that can be felt if students were unable to attend a group supervision session - to the extent that if they missed more than one they felt at a considerable disadvantage (2005). However, a central criticism of group supervision or learning is that its very advantage – being able to generalise – is also a disadvantage, as the specific needs of individual students cannot be addressed. Lindsay's response to Kadushin and Harkness's remark that 'group supervision has to be directed towards the general, common needs of all the supervisees and the special, particular needs of none' (2003, p.399) is to suggest as ideal 'a system of alternating group supervision with individual supervision' (2004,

p.15) because the benefits of groupwork do not supplant the values of individual supervision. This is a more positive approach to the question than that of Atherton and Keating who suggest a need to 'revert' to one-to-one supervision arrangements when negative group dynamics exist or develop and 'there may be some groups which cannot continue to function' (2005, p.11).

The answer to the general versus individual needs conundrum then seems to be to meet both (Walter and Young agree with this but add the refinement of having individual supervision taper off 'to every other week as group supervision is introduced and provided on alternate weeks.' (1999, p 87)).

As will be seen, the model that we discuss built in the alternation of group and individual supervision for the duration of the practice learning experience. The resource question here will be sited within a discussion of the wider resource implications of the model as a whole.

The other disadvantages of group learning were mitigated by the fact that the students who participated in our model had had experience of group learning through the Enquiry and Action Learning model of groupwork in which students work on case studies in self-directed groups. The EAL model is prized for its ability to develop the student's abilities to work and learn in groups (Taylor, 1996) and therefore the students that participated in our project did not arrive 'cold' to the idea of participation and learning in groups. We could find little discussion of the timing of when students may best benefit from groupwork learning on placement. In Farrow et al's comparison of one-to-one and group supervision models over a two year period, they discuss the level of student for which a group learning mode would be the most appropriate, but do not adopt a clear preference, noting that 'some participants suggested the group model would work best with students with little fieldwork experience, while others suggested it would work best for students in their final placements' (2000, p.249). We would suggest that the gains of the work discussed in this paper might not have been so great had students not been previously exposed to and learnt from the dynamics of work in their EAL groups.

The works of Atherton and Keating, Lindsay, and others that have been highlighted here are an indication that our project and its findings appear to come during a resurgence of interest and activity in groupwork in respect of how best to enhance the quality of student practice learning.

## **The setting and description of project**

The Project's Base, Family Service Unit Scotland (Now known as Circle, Scotland) is a voluntary organisation which works at the heart of deprived communities, supporting the most marginalised children and families. Six students, of mixed gender and ethnicity, were placed within its well-established student unit where members of the group shared one practice teacher. The students became part of a multidisciplinary team of social workers and project workers with experience and qualifications in community education, nursing, child care, occupational therapy, art therapy, and early years' education. Their workload was varied, reflecting the whole range of services provided by the agency. It included both traditional statutory casework and multi-agency groupwork, providing a breadth of experience to equip them to work in many settings. The students were supported by all within the agency which sees practice teaching as 'everyone's business', and the diversity of learning opportunities available reflected that required for the new degree.

### **What we did**

As noted above, our unique approach to the regular student groups that met during placement was to ensure that these were co-facilitated by the practice teacher and the academic adviser. Groupworkers will be familiar with many of the following aspects of the group process and content. Briefly, students were fully involved in the preparatory process and we broadly identified the group's purpose as follows:

- to develop students' presentation skills
- to share in each other's learning thereby broadening the depth of placement learning
- to share and define particular problems and mistakes in the context of constructive feedback on practice
- to consider all relevant knowledge, including research findings and local knowledge
- to debate ethical issues and take account of the complexity of the social work role
- to assist the integration of theory and practice.



The group contracted to observe some key principles such as:

- Confidentiality (relating to co-facilitators, students and clients)
- That it would be interactive with all participants sharing responsibility for quality of discussion
- That the group would stretch and challenge participants and be the forum for developing critical thinking and practice
- That the group time would be protected, free of interruptions
- Any particular concerns emerging from a student's contribution in the group setting would be taken up with the individual concerned.

The group met fortnightly for 1.5 hours, at the same time and day. It began with a round robin of all group members, including facilitators, using questions from the 'One-Minute Paper':

What has been your most significant learning since we last met?

What has been the most significant gap in your knowledge or skill since we last met?

(see Stead, 2005 for a review of the One Minute Paper and its uses)

There then followed a case presentation by a student, with each taking it in turn. In the very first session, the students were introduced to the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need (DoH, 2000) and to tools for ordering and presenting case material including genograms and ecomaps. These were the frameworks they would then use to gather and present their cases.

So far, so standard. However, as we had hoped, the 'added extra' in this particular piece of groupwork was the combination of an academic and a practice teacher working together as facilitators in the placement setting. This produced a number of interesting developments in students' integration of learning in which it appears that the students got the best of both worlds. Under the question 'What was the best bit of the groupworking', students' comments included:

*It wasn't just the physical proximity of the academic presence, it was also the 'emotional' gains that counted; there is so much uncertainty around when starting*

*your first placement, that having a Uni member so available really helps in bridging the transition.*

Another student remarked that the groupwork discussions ‘had a blend of academic and practice teacher contributions that brought it all together’.

The group discussions were an ideal forum for reminding students about the connections between learning that had been aimed for in academic teaching input and the learning that was taking place on the ground. In fact we were modelling in practice the ideal of field and class being ‘on the same page’.

One student said that:

*I think that group supervision is an excellent idea. I feel that I learn a lot from these sessions. It’s reassuring to know that our learning needs, and how we are meeting these, are in balance with academic work and the practicum. (emphasis in the original)*

Finally, one of the students seemed to put her finger on it when she said that

*We might not need such close support and encouragement in our final placement but if getting theory and practice right means anything, it surely means that both sets of our teachers don’t operate on separate planets.*

Although caution needs to be exercised as to how much this particular model can be related to placement outcomes, it should be noted that all the students involved were successful both in their placement practice and the related academic work that was required from them during and immediately after their placements. The high quality of student practice theorisation was remarked upon by a subsequent Practice Assessment Panel that also noted that none of the students who participated in the project were asked to produce extra work on their final reports. This compared favourably with the student performances in previous (non-project) years.

The facilitators held their own debriefing sessions at the end of each group and these formed the basis for anything that might have needed to be raised in the next session, although there was little that needed

adjustment throughout the course of the group meetings programme. We also held our own evaluation once the series had finished. Our assessment very much echoed both the sentiments of the students in respect of the overall 'rightness' of the model as regards it being a physical embodiment of the unity of college learning and placement practice, but also the learning for ourselves in observing how each other worked.

## Discussion

Doel *et al*'s audit of models of practice learning includes a list of new and different roles and arrangements that are developing since the introduction of the new social award. There are many innovations such as involving service users and carers and the use of staff as 'practice mentors' (2004, p.136), yet notable by their absence are the university lecturers/academic tutors. But what better way to ensure that 'good connections are made between the students' group experiences at college and individual oversight of the student at the practice learning site' (Doel *et al*, 2004, p.125) than a lecturer's co-involvement with the bread and butter of integrating student practice learning? It seems to us that our model's salient advantages and disadvantages can be distilled thus:

### Advantages

- Using a lecturer as co-facilitator in the student group ensures that there is continuity between prior theoretical learning done in class and practice learning being undertaken in the field.
- Theory and practice are brought together in a lively and living manner because comments from both practice teacher and lecturer are complementary.
- The formation of a close and fruitful working relationship between lecturer/tutor and practice teacher takes place as a consequence of joint learning in co-facilitation of groups.

## **Additional wider advantages**

Other advantages deriving from the model of having a lecturer/tutor who is agency-based during the period of students' placement have been discussed elsewhere (Clapton *et al*, 2006 and Clapton *et al*, in press). Briefly, these include:

- Three-way meetings are less stilted than the standard arrival and conduct of the student's tutor in the field (source of much embarrassment and discomfort if the truth be told as the tutor who has perhaps met the student once or twice, asks 'how things are' and is greeted by shoe-shuffling and you-go-first glances between practice teacher and student). In our project these points of contact to endorse learning agreements and mid-way reviews were more relaxed and less time-intensive because the tutor was more informed regarding the student's workload and learning development
- The lecturers/tutors are up-dated as to practice realities and experiences and able to carry this into lectures/course material
- Relationships between students and lecturers/tutors are deepened in a manner not normally possible.

## **Disadvantages**

We will discuss these in greater depth because whilst it seems to us that the advantages of the model may not be disputed (who doesn't want to enhance students' practice learning?), its potential disadvantages could have the effect of dissuading further trials of the model. In our evaluations and in subsequent discussions, two problems have been raised. We will address these in turn, beginning with what we regard as the least problematic – co-facilitation of student groups by practice teacher and lecturer.

## **Co-facilitation**

The model of learning on placement in groups run by the combination of a practice teacher and a lecturer raises the questions of power – the power dynamics that exist between practice teachers and lecturers (who ultimately calls the shots on placement?); student-classroom history, i.e. students' experiences and relationships, both individually and as

a group, with the University and lecturers (what positive and negative 'baggage' might students wish to leave inside the classroom when they start placement and are, generally, dying to come to grips with the real world?); and lecturers' adaptability – as regards to being able to re-enter and re-engage with the real world of real case discussions and dilemmas (as opposed to discussing case studies in the much less-pressurised atmosphere of class).

Lindsay's co-facilitators found no difficulty is developing co-working relationships so long as they 'checked with each other issues such as their preferred style of facilitation, their perception of the aims and objectives of placement and the means of obtaining them and their co-facilitation relationship' (2004, p.14). Significantly, on the question of differences between co-facilitators (although, he confines himself to gender, nationality and religious tradition and is not explicit about power), Lindsay notes that differences 'could have considerable benefit for the students but only if they themselves (the co-facilitators) were clear about how they differed and if they resolved any areas of potential conflict' (*ibid.*). We agree and would add that the model calls for an explicit valuing of each other's contribution to the learning experience. Not being territorial and being seen to defer to the other facilitator over a particular piece of practice advice - or a particular theory - would seem to offer the ideal model for bridging the gap between theory and practice. And if the co-facilitators can get this right then, the group begins and continues under the best possible conditions for students to get the best of both worlds. As far as lecturers' adaptability is concerned, this requires a recognition of the theory-practice gap, a commitment to the values of the model and a degree of humility in participating in a forum in which they may not know all – or any – of the answers. And some groupwork skills. We appreciate that not all lecturers will feel that they can sign up to this. Co-facilitation between lecturer and practice teacher however, is not the main disadvantage that has been articulated during and after the trialling of our model.

## Resources

The central disadvantage of the model described in this paper can be summed up as 'Nice model. Shame about resources' because the model lays itself open to the charge of being resource-heavy to the extent

of nullifying the benefits. 'Joint groupwork out in the field for two hours a week for three months?' has been the incredulous reaction of some academics. The mathematics of this can be calculated. A certain amount of lecturer time spent can be off-set against time saved from the existing practice of placement liaison. For example, take a group of six students hitherto spread across several placements and work out the time spent on placement visits to this group including travel. What if this group of placements were clustered and placement visits replaced with lecturer placement contact of the kind described in this paper? The oversight function of the placement visit and liaison would be met, and if and when difficulties in an individual placement arose, these would be dealt with on an ad hoc basis – as they are at present. Further, it can be argued that lecturer time spent doing groupwork on placement ought to be counted as teaching time. Thus the often 'dead' time spent in carrying out routine placement visits comes alive. It may still be true that the model takes some investment. But what new initiative of potential benefit doesn't?

On a less complex note, one aspect of the approach was neither advantage nor disadvantage, namely the agency-specific nature of the model – that is, students undertook their placements 'under the one roof' and were supervised by the one practice teacher. Learning from different configurations elsewhere in the experimental stages of the model suggests that when students are geographically clustered, they can equally benefit from a series of co-facilitated groups - one agency in the cluster is designated as the 'hub' where groups and surrounding activity (for example, lunch and pre-group informal milling about making tea and so on) can take place; the hub in this scenario is also where the lecturer is based for the day.

Finally we have not discussed the joint (field-academic) assessment possibilities in the above model because these were not pursued in the project. Yet these exist holding out the opportunity to dispense with - or at least streamline – certain University-based bodies and systems which comb over students' performance weeks after the placement is over, such as Practice Assessment Panels.

Here, it ought to be noted that the literature often uses terms such as groupwork, group learning and group supervision interchangeably (e.g. Lindsay, 2004) and whilst not seeking to counterpose group learning and group supervision, we felt that participants needed clarity

in whether their activity, learning and 'performances' within the group would be officially assessed. For the purposes of the Project, we took the executive decision to assure the students who had agreed to participate that their work in the group would not be subject to assessment. Atherton and Keating touch on this when they note that at the onset of their project at the University of Wolverhampton, they had a group supervision model in mind. However, because of the changes in role for the practice teacher and student brought about by the emergence of a greater emphasis on support and more democratic exchanges between group facilitators and students, their model suggests 'group learning as a more applicable title' (2005, p.11). Whichever model were to be adopted we would suggest that for maximum benefit to be achieved, clarity and explicitness of aims from the start is essential.

## **Conclusion**

We have noted a resurgence of interest in student practice learning and the methods that can enhance this, and explored the merits of bringing together field and class during the practicum. On another level there is an awakened interest in confronting the divisions between town and gown:

Developing a learning culture will mean all organisations have to bridge the boundaries between learning and practice.... These new approaches to learning mean organisations which employ staff must behave and think differently. They also challenge some of the traditional boundaries between the higher education and college sector and practice, requiring greater openness and a better understanding of one another's needs. (*Changing Lives Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review*, 2006, p.60)

Perhaps then there is a developing synergy of professional, policy and political interests that could spell good news for everyone involved in developing social work education. We hope that the work that we have discussed here can be part of this process.

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