

Social work placements: A student perspective

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Summary: This article is a reflective account of my student experiences of practice teaching whilst on placements during the Social Work Degree. I consider what and how my Practice Teachers and on-site supervisors have been able to teach me about Social Work and Social Work skills and what I have learnt about myself as a person and future practitioner. I look at what, I believe makes a good Practice teacher and how different styles of teaching have enhanced my learning. I reflect on the benefits, under the new degree, of increased days on placement and how this has helped me in applying theory, methods and models which are not always easy in the classroom.

At the time of completing this article I am three quarters of the way through my last placement of 100 days. I am undertaking my Social Work degree at the University of Northampton, which has a full time degree course of three years and a part time route taking four years. I am due to graduate with a B.A Honours degree in Social Work in July 2007.

Keywords: practice learning placements; practice teacher; on- site supervisor; social work degree; social work student

1. Social work student

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Social work placements: A student's perspective

I am a student in my third year of the BA (Hons) in Social Work studying at the University of Northampton in England and have recently started my final one hundred-day placement. I have been seconded (funded) to complete the degree on a full-time basis from a local authority where I have worked for the last eleven years in the Fostering and Adoption Service. Previous to this I worked for two years in the voluntary sector for a large children's charity in a Bail Support Project. My first placement of forty-days was in a voluntary Drugs Agency and my second sixty-day placement was in a Community Mental Health Team for older people within the statutory sector. My final and current placement is in a statutory childcare team. All three placements have been within a city that is both culturally diverse and has areas that are high on the indices of deprivation (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004).

The new Social Work degree was introduced in 2003 in response to the Department of Health's requirements for Social work training. It builds on the previous non-graduate training of the Diploma in Social Work, and places practice learning on an equal level with academic classroom teaching. Under the new degree, students must undertake 200 days of practice learning in a minimum of two contrasting settings, one of which must be within the statutory Social Work sector. The University of Northampton has chosen to deliver the 200 days of practice learning by opting for three placements of 40, 60 and then 100 days respectively in years one, two and three of the degree. Other universities have chosen to continue to offer the two placements, albeit longer, which is historically what was on offer with the Social work Diploma.

Currently students are allocated a qualified practice teacher who is responsible for teaching, assessing and supervising them. If the placement agency cannot provide a qualified practice teacher an 'Off-site Practice Teacher' (OSPT) is allocated who works in partnership with an 'On-Site Supervisor' (OSS). Usually the assessment and teaching functions are undertaken by the OSPT and the OSS provides management supervision.

In this paper I will give an account of my experiences of Social work placements and practice teaching. I wanted to write about my experiences as a student on placement, largely because I have been given so much by my practice teachers and on site supervisor that I felt it was my way of giving something back to social work education. My experience of the new degree and social work learning in the field has been a positive one; and I would

like to acknowledge this. Finally, in the good tradition of social work, I enjoy reflecting on my experiences and learning and in writing this article, hope that others may identify with some of my reflections.

If I were running a marathon I would just about be coming up to the 18-mile stage. The end is within reach, but I still have some pain barriers to break through! The goal of obtaining a BA (Hons) in Social Work, and the General Social Care Council's (GSCC) registration, for me personally, has sometimes felt as if I were not only completing a marathon, but one with lots of hurdles along the way thrown in for good measure! Registration was established under the Care Standards Act 2000, and came into force for social workers in April 2005, its role being to regulate the social care workforce, promote high standards and professional credibility (GSCC 2004). Qualified social workers, Social Work students, soon to be followed by other social care workers, have to apply to the GSCC for professional registration before being able to practise in such positions. The aim of the register is to make sure all students, Social Workers and Social Care workers are suitable for work in Social Care and are deemed safe to practice (GSCC 2002). The GSCC can also deregister workers and hear cases of potential misconduct and then impose conditions on registration if deemed necessary.

The process of becoming a social worker should, like a marathon, push students to their limits, and stamina rather than speed is one social work skill that is not mentioned in the textbooks or taught in the classroom. However, in my opinion, stamina does need to be acquired if robust and resilient social workers are going to be crossing the finishing line. By resilient, I mean tough, durable and having the ability to bounce back, although according to Newman (2002) Resilience refers to

a quality that helps individuals or communities resist and recover from adversities.

Social workers need to be able to bounce back as well as having the ability to recover when under pressure. My own experience of becoming more resilient and acquiring stamina has largely been as a result of my social work placements. I have been lucky, as I have had placements that were all my first choices and which provided me with a wealth of learning and a good balance of support versus challenge. I have also chosen placements that have made me step outside of my 'comfort zone' and thus confront fears about different service user groups and anxieties about my own skills

and abilities. I have had a mix of placements with on and off-site practice teachers and I can argue for the benefits of both approaches and I have also benefited from different types of supervision and different supervisory styles. Some practice teachers have shared my reflective analytical style whilst others have been more directive and nurturing. The benefit of having a Practice Teacher with a style that is different from my own has helped me to think in different ways about service users and the services they receive, in my opinion this has to be a good thing.

So what do I think makes a really good placement? Firstly, it is essential to have, a practice teacher, on-site supervisor and team that makes me think 'outside of the box', and who are prepared to challenge and be challenged. Secondly, a practice teacher that gives praise when it is deserved is crucial, as I have discovered that even those students with some social work experience under their belts can doubt themselves. Also important is a team that is committed to helping students learn and whose members are committed to keeping supervision appointments wherever possible. Finally, a practice teacher who appreciates that students are 'students' and that they are there to learn rather than be treated as additional social workers with a full case load. All of the above will help to ensure a positive experience.

In my experience a trusting relationship with my practice teachers and on-site supervisor meant that I had a greater ability and confidence to demonstrate my skills and knowledge. I also felt able to raise issues that I had strong feelings and beliefs about without being worried that my intentions would be misunderstood. I recall a particularly good debate I had with my on-site supervisor about assisted suicide, and by the end of this debate I had a clear understanding of how personal and social work values could clash and why I needed to acknowledge my own feelings on the subject. Having a supportive practice teacher engendered the capacity to receive critical feedback without feeling that I had done something wrong.

Experiential learning has given me the opportunity to acquire practice skills and then apply knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. I can clearly relate Kolb's experiential learning cycle (cited in Infed, 2005) to my own learning journey. For example, during my first placement in a voluntary agency supporting drug users, the opportunity to observe and work in the needle exchange scheme enabled me to reflect on the outcomes for service users, which in turn helped me to understand theories and concepts of harm minimisation. This led me to suggest other ways of minimising harm from drug use, which I believe resulted in a more client-centred approach to my practice. An example would be that I gained knowledge about the harmful

effects of sharing needles and of injecting when there are alternatives, which are safer. I was able to give advice to both regular injecting users and those service users who were contemplating injecting. Prior to this placement, I had not really given much thought to harm minimisation approaches to Social work, and I had thought more in terms of trying to help service users just stop all risky behaviours. Since this placement, my thoughts on harm minimisation have shifted almost 100%, to the point that I now think that Britain would do well to follow in the footsteps of some of our European counterparts and introduce consumption rooms where drugs can be taken in a safer controlled environment. Furthermore, I can use my understanding of harm minimisation in other areas of Social Work, such as working with young people who are sexually active.

All of my placements so far have enabled me to do things that I know will become difficult once I qualify. For example, I think that having the time to reflect in practice as well as after the event will be difficult due to time constraints and the pressures of having a larger caseload. Being reflective has been easier for me as a student due to a smaller caseload. I have been able to reflect about service users, service provision, oppressive practice, methods, models and theory (to which I will return later) and have had time to reflect on how I learn. Furthermore my three placements have given me the opportunity to dip my toes into different areas of Social work that I may never get the chance to investigate again. I have also discovered things about myself that I did not realise or fully understand, and there have been some shocks along the way. For example, I have come to understand that I am a competitive person, in that I want to achieve the best grades, get the best possible placement reports and the best feedback from service users. I have learnt that this has the potential to be a destructive trait and that I need to learn resilience as well as competitiveness.

I have enjoyed having practice teachers who are creative in their approaches to helping me learn, not something in my experience for which social work is renowned. In my second placement it was possible for my practice teacher to organise a group supervision session with some other students. This enabled me to touch base with other students; something I particularly enjoyed as having others in the same position to discuss placement issues with was very supportive. Group supervision sessions enabled me to think about case studies and bounce ideas off others in a safe arena. We spent time looking at methods, models and theory and in discussing portfolios, cross-referencing evidence and looking at anti-discriminatory practice. Group supervision is an approach to learning that

I would advocate for others and a concept that I would be keen to bring with me into practice. MacCafferty (2005) provides a more formal model of group supervision for student social workers that could be adapted for existing social work teams.

The dreaded methods, models and theory, which was accurately described as being like 'a plate of spaghetti' during the fifth International Conference in Practice Teaching in Health and Social Work that I attended after my second placement, is actually not that scary to approach if you have a good teacher. The advice that I have been given on my placements by many people including practice teachers, on-site supervisors and experienced social workers has made the spaghetti less of a tangle, and more of a lasagne, a way of looking at social work practice as being multi-layered. Layers or levels feature heavily in social work theory, practice and knowledge. During supervision on placement I can recall many instances where diagrams, triangles, circles, pie charts, cake layers and even houses have been used to help me understand concepts, theory or structures. An example could be Thompson's PCS analysis (Thompson 2006), which uses a Venn diagram to show how inequalities and discrimination are interlinked and interact with each other at three levels; the personal, the cultural and the structural. In my experience, the use of pictorial aides has been an important part of my learning to help me break down concepts into understandable bite-sized chunks. Now when I think about my practice in relation to power and oppression I can visualize Thompson's interacting rings, and this helps me to reflect on the different levels of discrimination which in turn helps me to put my own values and practice under the microscope.

Social work placements make up half of the time spent studying for the degree, and many of my student peers have said that their experiences on placement have been not only the times for steepest learning but also the most rewarding and enjoyable. Not all students are this lucky, however, and some of the stories that I have heard would be enough to put anyone off being a social worker! Yet placements have the potential for being powerful reminders of why many embark on the social work degree. When I began my marathon I was pretty sure that I wanted to qualify and practice in the field in which I have been working for a number of years, but now I am not so sure. Having had the opportunity to dip my toes into other areas, I will wait until my final placement is complete before I choose. What I am sure of is that a supportive practice teacher and on-site supervisor have the potential to steer students in a different direction. I would say to all students

to try something different for a placement and even to be prepared to try something that you think you might not like.

Most of the time I have enjoyed this marathon that I am running. I am even tempted to help others in the future in their marathon running, and will think about being a practice teacher if and when I qualify. Like others, (Doel and Shardlow, 1996, cited in Parker, 2006, p.1017) I agree that practice learning is the cornerstone of social work education, and the experience that is most likely to be remembered post-qualification. Hopefully all of my placement memories will be good ones.

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