

# (Re)presenting the creative potential of learning plans

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**Abstract:** Field education is central to social work education as it is here that students bring alive their classroom-based learning through supervised professional practice. An important part of structuring students' learning on placement is the development of their learning plan. A learning plan links professional activities to be undertaken with learning outcomes to be achieved along with how these are to be assessed within a specific time frame. Whilst the benefits of a well articulated learning plan (sometimes referred to as a learning contract or learning agreement), for structuring teaching and learning on placement (practicum) are generally acknowledged, there is a paucity of research evidence of such benefits in the literature. This article reports on a small qualitative study undertaken with a cohort of fourth year social work students from a Western Australian university, who had completed their final placement. Utilizing a mixed method of textual analysis of student learning plans and focus interviews we sought to understand how students construct and utilise their learning plan in developing their knowledge, skills and values in and for professional practice. Drawing on the findings we conclude with ways to make learning plans a more effective tool for field education placements.

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## Introduction

Field education is a key component of the social work curriculum. In Australia, field education comprises a quarter of a four year Bachelor of Social Work degree (BSW) and is an essential element of professional accreditation (AASW, 2008). Students, in their field agency placements have an opportunity to apply and test out knowledge, values and skills learned in the classroom in a real life context. Here, through exposure to social workers and other helping professionals students observe, experience and learn what it is to be an effective practitioner in context. Reflecting on such observations and experiences and connecting these with their own practice learning, students begin to develop their professional expertise and identity. O'Connor, Wilson and Setterlund (2003, p.193) describe this field education reflective learning experience as a 'systematic exploration of the processes of translating knowledge, perceptions and intentions into action and awareness'. This does not result from a simple addition of theory to practice or vice versa 'rather the integration is experienced as a conceptual leap...where new comprehensive sense is made of elements previously considered unrelated' (O'Connor et al, 2003 p. 197). In this learning process students also identify and work with personal, organisational and social values that shape professional practice.

The Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) sets out in its accreditation document the requirement for Australian universities to ensure that for any placement a learning plan is developed and 'clear expectations for learning goals and performance outcomes, based on AASW Practice Standards and Code of Ethics are established through a consultative process between the university, field educator and student, and documented in a learning plan' (AASW, 2008 p. 13). Additionally social work field education literature often describes the benefits of a well articulated learning plan (sometimes referred to as a learning contract or learning agreement), for structuring teaching and learning on placement (sometimes referred to as practicum) (Cooper and Briggs, 2000; Friedman & Neuman, 2001; O'Connor et al, 2003; Hodgson & Walford, 2006/07; Cleak et al, 2007).

As field education has an educational mandate, the university through the course curriculum and in line with professional accreditation requirements prescribes the learning outcomes to be achieved by students in a workplace context. This is not as straightforward as it may seem. In reality, university expectations of learning needs to be translated within the context of the

learning opportunities available in the field placement agency, the prior life experiences and abilities of the student and the supervisor's abilities and experiences as well as the wider practice environment. To this end a field education learning plan is commonly used as a tool to structure and make explicit the knowing and doing to be demonstrated by students and to be facilitated by supervisors on placement (Rogers & Langevin, 2000; Friedman et al, 2001; Hodgson et al, 2006/07; Cleak et al, 2007).

Although the concept of a learning plan is more or less universal (Friedman et al, 2001), there is no one model in social work education. Notwithstanding this, there is general agreement that the purpose of the learning plan is to develop in partnership between the educational institution, the placement agency and the student to attain a particular set of outcomes and to articulate how these are to be achieved and assessed (Rogers et al, 2000; Friedman et al, 2001; Hodgson et al, 2006/07; Cleak et al, 2007). The learning plan enables the linking of curriculum outcomes, the individual student learning needs and the opportunities and resources in the placement agency and acts as a point of reference in the ongoing assessment of the student's performance in arriving at the final grade for the placement.

Given these ascribed benefits, drawing on our multiple roles of social work academic, field education staff and researcher, we were curious to locate literature that evidenced the use and benefits of field education learning plans to facilitate student learning on placements. We also sought to investigate how a particular cohort of Curtin University social work students went about constructing, documenting and using their learning plans in developing their knowledge, skills and values in and for professional practice. This paper presents our research journey from undertaking a literature review; to gaining university ethics approval to initiating the research; to doing textual readings of students' learning plans and talking with social work students about how they developed and used their learning plans on placement. In drawing this journey together we conclude with reflections on our findings and link these to ways of making learning plans an effective tool for field education placements.

### **Curtin University social work field education learning plans**

At the time this research was undertaken Curtin's BSW comprised two semester-long field education units which occurred in the second and fourth

year of the degree. Field education learning plans were structured around four broad areas of learning and unit learning objectives specific to first and second placement. All of these conformed to Australian social work education and accreditation standards (AASW, 2008). The four broad areas of placement learning were 'social work practice', 'organisational context', 'socio-political context' and 'use of self'. Fourth year students in our research were required to link 13 field education unit learning objectives to the four areas of practice learning. Students were provided with a learning plan proforma to be completed in the context of their placement as set out in the figure below.

Figure 1  
Curtin University Social Work Field Education Learning Plan Proforma 2009

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<b>Area</b>	<b>Learning Objectives/Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>How I will know they are met</b>	<b>How educator will know they are met</b>
<b>Social Work Practice</b>					
<b>Organisational Context</b>					
<b>Socio-Political Context</b>					
<b>Use of Self</b>					

### Searching the literature

Familiar contemporary Australian social work texts (such as Cooper et al, 2000; O'Connor et al, 2003; Cleak et al, 2007) write of the numerous benefits of a learning plan. These sentiments are encapsulated by Rogers et al, (2000, p 225) when they state:

Metaphorically, the document is viewed as a master plan or a map. As such, it guides its constructors throughout the fieldwork journey...Moreover, the contract affords the student, as well as the university, an ongoing personal and administrative track record of the learning that has occurred during the fieldwork. Summing up, the stated benefits of a learning plan lie in its role as a map for guiding teaching/learning; a point of reference when difficulties or the unexpected arise; a framework to provide structure for the overall placement; an administrative and personal record of evidence of learning;

and a review and assessment tool.

We wondered what empirical studies have been undertaken and published to support and expand on the above assertions on the value and benefits of learning plans for social work field education. A literature search for the period 2000-2009 was conducted using scholarly data bases: Social Service Abstract; Informline - Apais; Proquest and Eric. We did not have access to social work abstracts as our university does not subscribe to Social Work Abstracts. Initial keywords used were 'field education; learning plan; social work; and student'. This led to one relevant article, by Friedman et al, (2001), a theoretical paper on developing learning plans. We then modified the search strategy to key words 'field education; field work; social work; and student' and while we achieved many more hits most articles were not directly relevant to learning plans. Two additional articles were identified, one by Hodgson et al, (2007), a theoretical paper on developing learning plans, and an article by Bogo (2006) which reviewed 40 empirical studies of social work field education published predominately in North American peer reviewed journals in the period 1999-2004.

One study cited by Bogo (2006 p. 176) referred to research undertaken by Giddings, Vodde and Cleveland (2003) who identified that a lack of structure, direction and constructive feedback is implicated in problematic and inadequate supervisory styles which in turn results in stressful student placement experiences. However, the authors do not go on to make a link to the use of field education learning plans in providing a framework for guidance, direction and feedback when supervising students.

In the hope of locating relevant Australian research literature we undertook a search of the journal *Australian Social Work* from 1996 to 2009 and found an article by Spencer and McDonald (1998, p.9) which 'reports on a review and analysis of 67 publications in the professional social work literature discussing social work field education published between 1980 and 1995'. Their research was confined to a content analysis of five journals published in either Australia, UK or USA. Although the authors identified pedagogical issues in the literature, particularly assessment of student learning as one dominant concern, no reference was made to the role of learning plans in assessment of student performance. Additionally they noted that the voice of the student is largely absent and where it is present the student is 'talked about' rather than 'talked with' (Spencer et al, 1998 p. 16). Students were not conceptualised as active participants in the design of field education.

Our meagre harvest of relevant research on learning plans confirmed our tacit knowing that the use of a field education learning plan remains under-researched in social work. The literature corroborates our experience that learning plans have the potential to provide a framework for all parties to make teaching and learning on placement more openly visible and accountable. Our research findings may further contribute to enhancing the usefulness of learning plans as an educational and professional developmental tool.

## **The research process**

The research method involved three strategies, a literature review, student semi-structured interviews and a close reading of the student learning plans. Being mindful that ‘meaning does not reside in the text but in the writing and reading of it’ (Hodder, 2000, p.704) the ‘close reading’ represents the reading and meaning making the researchers made of what the students wrote in their learning plans. Data from these three strands woven together inform our analysis. Before commencing the research, the first step was gaining ethics approval, which was a rigorous process in line with the University’s human research ethics requirements addressing teacher student relationships.

## **Recruiting participants and interviewing the students**

Of the 38 students enrolled in the field education unit, 34 had successfully completed the unit. All of these were formally invited to participate in an interview with either one of the researchers. Six students (five female and one male) volunteered.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the students taking between one and one and half hours. Interviews were recorded and reviewed by the researchers. As resources were limited, interviews were not transcribed verbatim but students’ direct comments and reflections on the questions were documented. The interview questions focused on how students went about drawing up their learning plan; how much time and effort they took; what was easy and/or difficult for them to articulate in the plan; how they used the plan throughout placement; what they found

most and/or least valuable about the plan; what they might do differently if there was a next time and what advice they would give to future first placement students on developing their learning plan.

### **Close reading of student learning plans**

Simultaneously, while the recruitment of participants was being undertaken, we read the 34 student learning plans. In this close reading attention was paid to individual words, syntax, and the order in which sentences and ideas unfolded (Wilcox & Watson, 2000).

We individually grouped the plans into high, medium and low in terms of detail (that is whether students completed each of the four sections of the learning plan proforma and how much detail was under each) and complexity (that is the depth to which students identify and make connections between knowledge, skills and values to be developed on placement). Although we both attained a normal distribution curve in our results, there was not a complete overlap in terms of which plans were assigned to which category.

Reflecting on this disparity, we found that while we were in tune with our interpretation of 'detail' there was less clarity between us around our understanding and application of the 'complexity' criteria. To deepen thinking and to develop greater rigour around the concept of 'complexity' in learning plans, we returned to two articles identified in the literature review (Rogers et al, 2000 and Hodgson et al, 2007) to develop a framework, which incorporated Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning with literature located in the critical reflective practice tradition (Fook, 1999; Ghaye and Lillyman, 2000; Taylor and White, 2000; White, Fook and Gardiner, 2006). This framework (Table 3 and 4) guided a second textual reading of the plans. It was hoped that the framework would provide a more reasoned and coherent basis for evaluating the detail and complexity of the plans. Before describing the framework it is necessary to revisit key literature that informed its development.

Firstly, Hodgson et al, (2006/07) assert that learning plans are more than an articulation of a list of tasks and activities undertaken on placement and need to address abstract dimensions of students' knowledge, skills and values to be developed. These more abstract dimensions require logical and conceptual clarity on the part of the learner and supervisor so as to provide

overall direction for the placement in terms of both the focus of professional development for the student and the evidence on which assessment of the student is to be based. At the same time the authors offer a note of caution on the application of a rational planning model to the construction of a learning plan and concur with Rogers et al, (2000 p. 216) that a learning plan needs to take account of 'incidental, accidental or serendipitous learning'. The document needs to be fluid and open to revision in response to the myriad of unplanned and/or unforeseen circumstances that arise in the context of professional practice. Hodgson et al, (2006/07) assert the importance of holding the tension between the demands of a learning plan that is fluid and open to change whilst at the same time being a logical and conceptually rigorous document.

By way of guidance, Hodgson et al, (2006/07) identify a common pitfall in learning plans is to confuse concrete practical activities with more abstract learning objectives. In other words students often identify tasks and activities as their learning objectives and omit or fail to name the more abstract learning objectives to be achieved through undertaking these activities. Hodgson et al, (2006/07 p. 58) conclude that the 'activity is the task (what will be done) that will provide the opportunity for the realisation of the learning objective (what will be learned). In short, a learning objective should be conceptualised in the language of learning'.

In addition, Hodgson et al, (2006/07) argue that a logical and conceptually coherent learning plan should name what constitutes evidence of learning (direct and indirect sources of evidence), link these to learning objectives and estimate when the activity to support the learning is to commence. Their focus on commencement rather than completion of a learning activity is more useful and valid, as it signals when an activity should start in order to achieve the learning objective and recognises that the placement learning is a process that continues beyond the conclusion of a particular placement.

Secondly, Rogers et al, (2000) identified four essential elements that are interrelated and must be combined and balanced in students' learning plans, that of 'being', 'knowing', 'doing' and 'thinking'. 'Being' refers to the use of self and the expression of relational qualities such as empathy; 'knowing' refers to the understanding of theories, concepts and facts; and 'doing' refers to the demonstration of skills, behaviours and tasks. The 'thinking' element refers to higher order cognitive processes of abstract reasoning and reflection required of students in practice. The thinking element connects with Hodgson et al, (2006/07) proposition that learning objectives need to be articulated in the language of learning.



Thirdly, Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (1956), a framework widely used in education and training, provides a common and accepted language for understanding student learning. His taxonomy categorises learning into three domains; cognitive (about knowing); affective (about attitudes, feelings); and psychomotor (about doing). For the purpose of this research we focused on the cognitive domain based on the revised taxonomy developed by Anderson and Krathwohl (eds) et al, (2001) and summarised by Krathwohl (2002). The cognitive domain orders learning processes in a cumulative hierarchical framework from the simple to complex and the concrete to abstract. Thus lower level cognition is factual learning and a higher more complex level refers to abstract learning such as synthesis and critical thinking. Table 1 sets out the six hierarchical levels of learning with associated verbs which can be used to write learning objectives for each level of cognition.

Table 1  
Bloom's (revised) taxonomy (Anderson et al, 2001 pp 67 -68)

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Cognitive process dimension	Associated verbs (some examples)
1. Remember	list, describe, recall, locate, find, state, identify, name
2. Understand	explain, restate, summarise, compare, outline, discuss
3. Application	illustrate, examine, apply, implement, translate, use
4. Analysis	analyse, investigate, differentiate, compare, contrast, explain
5. Evaluate	justify, recommend, critique, evaluate, prioritise, decide
6. Create	propose, plan, compose, combine, construct, design, imagine

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Lastly we considered literature focussing on the use of critical reflection and reflexivity in professional practice. Numerous writers from a variety of disciplines including teaching (Kemmis & Carr, 1986), health (Ghaye et al, 2000; Roberts, 2002) and social work (Fook, 1999; Taylor et al, 2000; White et al, 2006) have favoured the use of critical reflection as a way of analysing and improving professional practice. The term reflexivity is sometimes used interchangeably with critical reflection whereas writers such as Fook and Askeland (2006, p.45) propose that reflexivity adds a further dimension to critical reflection, that of the perspective of the knower in situ and how this influences the interpretation of what can be known/

not known and what actions can be taken. In other words the practitioner includes their self as an active participant in the meaning making of the situations in which they practice.

### **Framework for second reading of learning plans**

Drawing the above elements together we developed a framework for a second reading and analysis of the students' learning plans. The framework consisted of two sections, the first (Table 2) focused on assessing the level of detail and the second (Table 3) on level of complexity in the students' learning plans (see overleaf). The intention was to ensure a level of rigor and consistency in a reading and analysis of the learning plans. Accordingly, we examined the content of the 34 learning plans and scored them on a three-point Likert scale of 'low', 'medium', 'high', in line with the following questions:

### **Findings**

Utilising the above framework we gained a deeper understanding of how students constructed their plans and articulated their practice learning. The 34 plans ranged in length from two to twelve pages with most being five to seven pages. Length did not necessarily equate with a high level of quality either in terms of detail or complexity. In the second reading there was greater congruency between the researchers' ratings of the learning plans. The ratings conformed more or less to a normal distribution with eight plans of lesser quality, four of higher quality and the remainder (22) of medium quality in detail and complexity. Excluding the high quality plans, there was a commonality among the remaining 30 as to the learning objectives students found the most difficult to articulate. These common pitfalls and some better attempts are examined below.

### **Examining detail**

Students generally provided four learning objectives under the areas of social work practice, organisational context and use of self. However,

Table 2

Level of detail: Guide for close reading of learning plans

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1. Has the student set out their learning plan in accordance with the School's provided proforma?
  2. How much content is included under each of the 4 components of the plan?
  3. To what extent has the student translated the 13 Unit learning outcomes into learning objectives specific to the placement?
  4. Does the student make reference to Kolb's (1976) learning styles of 'active experimentation', 'concrete experience', 'abstract conceptualisation', 'reflective observation'?
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Table 3:

Level of complexity – guide for close reading of learning plans

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1. With reference to Bloom's revised taxonomy, what level of cognition is indicated in the student's articulation of their learning objectives?
  2. Does the student differentiate learning objectives from placement activities?
  3. To what extent is there a fit between the student's learning objectives and their placement activities or strategies?
  4. To what extent do learning objectives focus on development of:
    - a. Knowledge (knowing about; knowing how)
    - b. Skills (doing)
    - c. Critical reflection (connecting thinking with being)
  5. To what extent does the student focus on exploration of social work values as a learning objective?
  6. To what extent the student focus on exploration of personal values as a learning objective?
  7. Does the student make the link between social worker values and their personal values?
  8. To what extent are learning objectives explicitly articulated to be able to be assessed?
  9. To what extent does the student use a variety of evidence to demonstrate and assess their learning (knowledge, skills and reflexivity)?
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most students struggled with identifying any more than one or two learning objectives that explored the socio-political dimension of their placement. They tended to write these in more general terms rather than contextualising this objective to their specific placement. For example, a number wrote the following learning objective for the area 'socio-political context': *'Understand how government policies and legislation impact on the role of social work service delivery [in this agency]'*. In contrast only a few students were able to identify and articulate the specific socio-political aspects connected to their placement. One who did this successfully stated her learning objective in this area as: *'Link policy issues of poverty, alcohol/drugs and domestic violence with the placement agency'* (Student 10).

Most students did not make reference to their preferred learning style even though they were exposed to Kolb's (1976) four learning styles in orientation. It was expected that they would incorporate this concept into their plan in order to maximise learning on placement. The following is a rare example of how one student incorporated this aspect in the area 'Use of Self':

*Learning objective: Identify my preferred way of learning*

*Strategies: Identify my primary learning style and consider what this means to [my] learning in the agency setting.*

*Compare my learning style with the supervisor's style of learning. (Student 33)*

This suggests that the student experiences herself as an active agent in her own learning and signals possibilities for developing as a lifelong learner.

## **Examining complexity**

A close textual reading of the learning plans highlighted that all students had difficulty in consistently demonstrating aspects of complexity in line with our assessment criteria (see Table 4). For the purpose of this paper analysis of learning plans is confined to an examination of the complexity criterion that students had most difficulties with (see Table 4 points 1, 4 b & c, 5, 6, 7 and 8).

Learning objectives (point 1) were mainly articulated using verbs that fall in the lower levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al, 2001). Students used verbs such as 'describe; obtain; understand and apply'. Fewer extended their learning objectives to higher order learning behaviours such

as 'compare and contrast; analyse; explore; evaluate or create'. The following are three examples of lower order learning:

*Locate community resources relevant to client needs and support systems. (Student 1)*

*Obtain knowledge regarding funding for Child Health Service. (Student 32)*

*Understand informal and formal structures of power relationships within agency. (Student 23)*

Whereas the following are three examples categorised as higher order learning:

*See how social work values differ or are similar to values of other team members. (Student 15)*

*Identify vulnerabilities (such as personal /professional boundaries) and develop strategies to address these. (Student 7)*

*Evaluate the effects /outcomes of my practice & utilize this understanding to maintain standards of practice (Student 10).*

Learning objectives (point 4 b) were also predominately skills driven with few focusing on technical knowing 'theory to inform' or practical knowing 'theory to intervene' (Collingwood, Emond & Woodward, 2007 p.74).

Many students wrote generalised statements similar to the following:

*Develop skills for funding proposals or reports (Student 16)*

*Develop skills for working with families in crisis (Student 24).*

Neither of these statements articulated what form these skills would take. In the first example the student fails to detail what might constitute relevant skills such as research skills, report, submission writing or negotiation skills. In the second example it is again unclear what the student means by 'develop skills for working with families'. Skills in this practice area could refer to listening skills, conflict resolution skills or problem solving skills and so on.

We sought examples of where students demonstrated in their learning plan the development and use of reflexivity (point 4c). The domain of reflexivity was primarily addressed by students under 'Use of Self' in the

learning plan proforma (see Table 1). Most students used reflection to examine their own responses to practice situations in order to develop their learning. An example of this is:

*Consciously map and come to understand my reactions to specific situations.  
(Student 22)*

Just under half of the students (15) extended their use of reflection and/or reflexivity to interrogate their actions, the implicit assumptions and values embedded in these actions and espoused theories in use. For example the following students critically reflected on their beliefs, values and actions and how these connect to and are framed by the wider professional and cultural discourses:

*Critically articulate my views on the role of and identity of social work and my place in relation to it. (Student 25)*

*Identify cultural values and how these might have an impact on my practice at [agency]. (Student 20)*

Learning objectives addressing value driven, ethical practice (see Table 4 Points 4, 6 & 7) were predominantly framed as an exploration of students' personal values independent of and unconnected to communal values such as professional values, organisational values and societal values. The following examples of students' learning objectives that address the interplay between personal values and practice make no reference to the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) or the organisation's code of conduct.

*Identify and challenge my assumptions, beliefs and values that may impact on my practice in a public hospital. (Student 3)*

*Obtain greater awareness of how my own cultural values impact on my understanding of services provided to customer.s (Student 27)*

In contrast the following is a rare example of a student making the connection between personal values, codes of ethics and the organisational context.

*Explore personal feelings and values and how I position myself as a social worker in a statutory setting...Identify conflicting issues between customers and [the Agency] while maintaining social work values and ethics, AASW Code of Conduct, APS Values and Code of Conduct. (Student 19)*

In using these examples we are not implying that there is no place for students to explore and understand their own value base and how it influences their practice. Quite the contrary, there is an expectation that students will interrogate and clarify their values and from there examine how personal values connect with the professional code of ethics along with the values expressed in an organisational context. Higher order learning is exemplified in a student's ability to create new understandings by bringing together the various elements, in this instance of values, in order to develop their competency, which in this case is working through ethical dilemmas in the workplace.

Students often struggle to align their learning goals with strategies and supporting evidence. From our experience of delivering field education workshops to supervisors, they indicated some difficulties with guiding students to ensure there is a good fit between learning objectives, practice activities and evidence of learning.

The example in Figure 2 below is typical of students attempting to align their learning goals with strategies and evidence of learning that forms the basis of overall assessment (Student 30).

The learning objective is too general providing no indication of what forms of interviewing and assessment skills the student is learning and for what purpose. The strategy is also too general making it difficult to understand whether exposure refers to observation or practice. Though the assessments are more precisely articulated it would be difficult to assess the

Figure 2  
Example from Student Learning Plan

<b>Area</b>	<b>Learning Objectives/Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>How I will know they are met</b>	<b>How educator will know they are met</b>
<b>Social Work Practice</b>	<i>Develop interviewing and assessment skills</i>	<i>Exposure to the interviewing and assessment process</i>	Week 2+	<i>Client engagement and rapport and client feedback. Supervisor observations and feedback proformas.</i>	<i>Observation of interviews; Articulation post interview [in supervision].</i>

student's performance without similar clarity around what is being learned.

In the following example (Figure 3) the student has been more specific regarding the learning objectives and strategies to be used (Student 12):

In this instance the learning objectives and the strategies to achieve these are specific and aligned. This allows for the student to demonstrate and be more readily assessed on their learning.

Figure 3

Example from Student Learning Plan

<b>Area</b>	<b>Learning Objectives/Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>How I will know they are met</b>	<b>How educator will know they are met</b>
<b>Social Work Practice</b>	<i>Identify and apply social work theories and theoretical perspectives in practice.</i>	<i>Familiarise self with 3 or 4 relevant social work theories and theoretical perspectives relevant to the agency/clients through readings, observation and discussion.</i>	Week 2/3	<i>Review social work theories and theoretical perspectives.</i>	<i>Present summary of theories and discuss how these shape my practice.</i>
		<i>Identify what theories I use in practice.</i>	Ongoing	<i>Reflect on their use.</i>	<i>Demonstrate use of theories through observation.</i>
		<i>Apply theoretical perspectives to understand practice situations.</i>	Ongoing	<i>Feedback from supervisor, colleagues on strengths and areas for improvement.</i>	<i>Reflect on feedback to improve my practice.</i>



## Findings from student interviews

The final step in the research process was to interview the six student volunteers (one male, five female) to further explore how they constructed and used their learning plans. The following questions guided the interviews.

Table 4  
Interview guide

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1. Tell me how you went about drawing up your field education plan. (E.g. How did you start/what information did you use; how did you connect your outcomes to unit outcomes? who did you consult; whose feedback did you use?)
  2. How much time and effort did you and others (supervisor; liaison) put into developing the learning plan throughout your placement?
  3. What aspects of the plan were easy/ difficult to articulate? E.g. Identifying learning outcomes and processes for achieving these; identifying evidence to assess achievement?
  4. How did you use the learning plan throughout the placement? E.g. regularly; consult in supervision; occasionally consult; revised ongoingly; once it was completed never looked at it again?
  5. What did you value most about your learning plan? What did you value least?
  6. If you were to do a placement again is there anything you would do differently in developing and using your learning plan?
  7. Any advice you would give future first placement students on developing their learning plan?
  8. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about learning plans and their use?
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All six students commented that a large amount of time was spent in the first weeks of placement completing their learning plan. They used strategies such as *'copying and pasting from first placement learning plan'* and then went on to acknowledge that *'my supervisor's input was critical'* (Student 1). Another student used *'previous students' learning plans provided by supervisor'* (Student 4) for guidance and direction. Student 5 commented on the difficulty of developing a learning plan so early in the placement

when *'you don't know what you need to know'*. She went on to her say she was tempted to *'pad out'* or *'just get something down'* for all sections of plan irrespective of relevance.

We were interested to understand more regarding the students' focus on the skills learning objectives rather than more abstract theoretical objectives. One student summed up this preference explaining that

*placement is about getting skills ...we can do theory in the classroom but not skills in the same way.* (Student 6).

Student 4 had his attention on his future employment saying *'it's [skills] what the market wants'*.

Corroborating with our reading of the learning plans, students acknowledged greater difficulty articulating learning objectives connected with the socio-political dimension of practice. Student 2's explanation highlights how placement context shapes the lenses through which practice is constructed and understood:

*'In my first placement (a women's refuge) everyone talked about the politics of the work – like changes to the restraining order legislation- I couldn't help but see the relevance of it (socio-political aspects of practice). My last placement (a health clinic) was different, we just got on with doing our work – we worked in offices, closed doors seeing our clients. We'd talk but it'd be about an issue for a client, not funding or big picture things .... I just found it hard, filling in the socio political aspects ...I couldn't see the relevance.*

Another area that we identified as lacking in learning plans was a connection between personal, professional and organisational/societal values. When probed, student 3 commented *'when I first look at values I just naturally think it's about me'*. She went on to explain the benefits of supervision for helping her to make stronger links between her value base and social work ethics and the organisation's code of conduct.

All interviewed emphatically endorsed the value of a learning plan for structuring, documenting and evaluating their learning on placement. In the words of Student 1 this was summed up as:

*It was difficult to articulate at the beginning then it became tangible and was useful as record and to review later and remember. I enjoyed it later. It acknowledged my work and showed direction and goals.*

When asked what would you do differently in developing and using your learning plan five of the six students agreed on two areas for improvement. Namely, more direction and guidance from the agency supervisor on the learning opportunities available and on the forms of knowledge and skills needed to be developed to practice in that context.

Drawing on these findings we propose the following pointers for making a learning plan a more effective tool:

1. Develop a rigorous learning plan (in terms of detail and complexity) in a way that is not overly onerous on stakeholders (agency, supervisor, liaison, and student).
2. Use the language of learning and Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives to articulate the more complex and abstract learning objectives as well as the simple and concrete.
3. Recognise that some objectives are more complex and of a higher order of learning than others and therefore need to be weighted differently in assessment.
4. Demonstrate the conceptual connection between objectives, strategies and evidence of learning.
5. Assist students to move from personal reflection to examining the origins of theirs and others' assumptions (personal, emotional, cultural, historical, and political) and how these construct practice. This includes guiding students to locate their personal values within a wider values discourse that encompasses social work, organisational and societal values.
6. Provide guidance to students in the beginning of placement (particularly for the first placement) whilst at the same time supporting students' responsibility and ownership for their learning. This can be achieved in students' preparation for placement; provision of a learning plan proforma by the university; identification by agency supervisor of the learning opportunities available for the student's development of knowledge, values and skills; and provision by supervisors of examples of an agency-based learning plan.
7. Regular use of the learning plan in supervision for direction, guidance and assessment. Encourage students in higher order thinking/learning in conceptualising their learning plans (for example, apply, analyse, evaluate and create).

## Conclusion

This research has gone some way towards answering important questions about how to make learning plans a more effective tool in fieldwork. Exploring students' development and use of their learning plans has highlighted the benefits of learning plans while at the same time identified some of the pitfalls in their construction and use. This study has produced the following further outcomes. Firstly students' voices have been heard through their written words and interviews in a way that highlights their use of a learning plan as they develop their professional self. Secondly, strategies are provided to extend the use of learning plans towards becoming a more rigorous and effective tool in field education. Finally we have developed a framework (as set out in tables 3 and 4) that can be utilised to review and assess learning plans in terms of the level of student learning, as these relate to areas of knowledge, practice, and values. This enables a deeper analysis of student learning and development through the life of a field education placement.

In conclusion, other studies and our research confirm the centrality of learning plans in fieldwork for a multiplicity of reasons. Additionally, this study highlights the difficulty students had in articulating differing levels of learning to be achieved. Whilst they had little difficulty in describing the simpler and more concrete learning to be achieved, they struggled to identify learning that was more complex and abstract. This was particularly evident in relation to the socio-political and organisational dimensions of practice and the intersection between personal and professional values.

Our findings invite fieldwork educators to take a more pro-active role in assisting social work students to think more deeply about their learning on placement and to creatively use the learning plan to achieve this. Students need to be challenged in particular around their development of knowledge, skills and values for professional practice. Doing this we suggest will make for more confident and competent practitioners.

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