

An experience based model for practice learning: International perspective from Australia

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Summary: Social work education in Australia is responding to the changing social, political and economic contexts in which social work is practised. The Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, aims to educate competent social workers able to deal effectively with the changing challenges of the work environment. This is achieved through an experience based model of social work education. This paper, presented at the 2nd international conference of the Journal of Practice Teaching in Health and Social Work in London in April 2003, provides an overview of some social work education issues in Australia. The experience based learning model employed at the University of Newcastle is described and discussed in relation to social work field education.

key words: social work education; experience based learning

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Introduction

This paper offers a description of aspects of social work practice teaching in Australia, but more specifically focuses on the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Newcastle. Newcastle is a regional centre 160km north of Sydney. The Bachelor of Social Work program has been developed at Newcastle using an experience based learning model, which is described in the paper. There are similarities, but also some differences, between Newcastle and other social work training programs in Australia.

Following this overview, a number of current issues for social work practice teaching in Australia are identified and discussed. These issues relate to firstly, the global context and secondly, the changing nature of work and employment.

Social Work Practice Teaching in Australia

'Practice teaching' is not a term in common usage in Australia. In social work we refer to 'field education'. Students complete 'field placements' and they are supervised by social workers referred to as 'field educators'. All social work degree programs incorporate a field education component.

To qualify as a social worker in Australia, a 4 year undergraduate university degree is required. Some universities allow for transfer into the final 2 years of the social work degree after completing 2 years of a relevant undergraduate degree. Students are required to complete a minimum of 140 days of supervised field placement in a social work agency in the course of the social work degree program. At the University of Newcastle students complete three 50 day field placements, one in each of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th years of the degree. Most social work programs in Australia require two 70 day field placements in the final two years of the degree.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional association for social work that regulates social work training and ensures professional standards. The profession is thus 'self regulating'. Social workers are not registered with a

government body. Social work degree programs are, however, monitored, regularly reviewed and accredited by the AASW. The AASW is guided by a code of ethics and practice principles (AASW 1999). The association has established social work degree program requirements including the minimum of 140 days of field education. Graduates from accredited programs are eligible for membership to the association. Most employers require eligibility for membership to the AASW for employment as a social worker.

Social work students are supervised on their field placements by qualified social workers with at least two years of post qualifying practice experience. No additional practice teaching qualifications are required. As a general rule there is no payment for field supervision either to the individual social work field educator or their employing agency. There are some exceptions to this for international students and externally supervised placements. These are discussed later in the paper. Some agencies have social workers with a dedicated field education role, mainly in health services, but such positions are few and diminishing.

Universities have the responsibility for procuring, coordinating and assessing field placements. Some large organisations and government departments have nominated social workers to coordinate social work placements within the agency, but generally organising student placements is a one on one process between the university and individual social workers. As such, it is a time consuming process.

The availability and success of social work field placements relies on good will, a sense of partnership and a commitment to the profession of social work, by both the individual social workers and the employing organisations. For many social workers the supervision of students is seen simply as “part of the job”. For others, however, there is uncertainty and insecurity associated with the field educator role. For some, student supervision is regarded as too great a workload in light of other work pressures.

The benefits for social workers supervising students can include:

- Experience and skills in supervision, which can assist career advancement
- Opportunity to reflect on and discuss one’s practice.

Table 1
Summary of field placement agencies for Newcastle social work students in 2002

Agency type	No. Student placements
Health Service	35
Non-government organisation	14
Government child protection agency	8
School	7
Local government	5
Centrelink (Government income support)	2
Juvenile justice	2
Other government agency	3
Other	3
Total	79

- Assistance in getting tasks done (depending on quality of student work, but particularly with final year students)
- Professional development through field educator workshops offered by the university
- Collaborative involvement with university in social work training.

All Social Work academic staff members at Newcastle, from professors down, are involved in field education through field liaison visits and assessment. There is a strong emphasis on relating field placement experiences to learning on campus in all social work subjects. At some other universities there is a division between 'academic' and 'field' staff. Half a workload allocation of one academic staff member at Newcastle is devoted to overseeing and coordinating the field placement program.

The field education experience of students is linked to their learning on campus in a number of ways. There are preparation for placement classes and field placement discussion classes throughout each field placement. These classes provide students with opportunities to reflect on their field placement work and relate what they are experiencing to university learning.

A compulsory skills based subject must be passed by social work students at the University of Newcastle prior to commencing a field placement. The assessment for this subject requires that each student role play an interaction with a 'client', role played by an actor. A few hours later the student discusses the interaction with a social work academic member of staff. They are required to reflect on the issues, process and dynamics of the interaction. Both parts of the assessment are video taped and observed by three assessors. Social workers from the field are involved in these assessments. Students are required to demonstrate basic listening and empathy skills and the ability to reflect on their own work, regarded as essential for progress to a field placement.

It is intended that social work students obtain a broad range of experience across their three field placements. This range is in terms of client groups, organisation type and nature of interventions. Social workers in Australia are employed in a range of government and non-government agencies. The health system is the largest employer of social workers. The summary of field placement agencies for Newcastle social work students in 2002, provided in table 1, gives an idea of the range of social work agencies.

Whilst field educators do not require formal practice teaching qualifications, they are prepared for and supported in their field education roles in a number of ways. There is a seminar and workshop program for field educators offered by the university, which includes workshops for new field educators and special interest topics. Some of the topics covered in past workshops are 'narrative approaches to field education', 'fostering critical thinking in students', 'working with students who are not reaching standards'. All field educators are provided with a manual and resource material on the field educator and student supervision role.

Each field placement has an identified university staff person who is the 'liaison person' for the placement. The role of this person is to support both the field educator and the student in developing appropriate learning opportunities and to review the progress of the placement. The liaison person visits the field educator and the student at the agency generally twice in the course of the field placement, during which time the goals and outcomes in the placement are reviewed and process is assessed.

Field education subjects are assessed in terms of whether the stated goals for the field placement have been met. Tasks and activities for the field placement are structured around the goals for the field education subject and recorded in a learning contract. This contract is negotiated between the field educator and the student. Progress toward achieving the learning goals is reviewed at mid-placement and end of placement visits by the university liaison person. This is a three-way review process, with separate reports being completed by each party. The final decision about satisfactory completion of the field placement lies with the university.

For each of the three field education subjects, learning goals are structured under the following broad areas of learning. As students progress through the three placements, a more sophisticated understanding and higher skill level is expected in each area.

- Social work values
- Self awareness
- Communication skills
- Ethical and professional practice
- Assessment, intervention and problem solving
- Working with others and teams
- Research and inquiry skills

Experience based learning as a model for practice teaching

The experience based model of social work education developed at the University of Newcastle promotes field education as integral and central to the professional training of social workers. The theory and practice of social work are regarded as being essentially linked and, as such, both campus based and field subjects contribute to practice learning.

The experience based model at Newcastle has been described in detail elsewhere (English, Gaha & Gibbons 1994, Gibbons 1992, 2002, Gibbons & Gray 2002, Plath 1994, Plath, English, Connors & Beveridge 1999). The model has drawn upon problem based

learning (Boud & Feletti 1991), experiential learning (Kolb 1984, Mulligan & Griffen 1992) and critical reflective practice (Schon 1987, Gould and Taylor 1996) in its development. The features of the model are briefly as follows:

- *Learning through doing*: Emphasis is placed upon the construction of learning experiences that engage the students in an active way and build on prior experiences. Eg. simulations, case scenarios, values exploration workshops, visits to organisations, practitioners or clients presenting their stories, videos that impact at a personal level, high profile current news issue, guided personal reflections, group tasks, group presentations, role plays. The use of these techniques on campus provide an important link with experiences on field placements.
- *Critical thinking and reflection*: Self examination, clarification of values and concerns, exploration of different ways of understanding and identification of gaps in knowledge are processes facilitated by university staff and field educators.
- *Self directed learning*: Within the boundaries of learning goals and professional ethics, students are encouraged to explore areas of particular interest and different ways of approaching tasks and assignments.
- *Small group learning*: Drawing on a range of resources and “input sessions”, students work on tasks in small groups. Students develop skills in working with others and an understanding of group dynamics, in preparation for team work in the field.
- *Constructivist*: Through experience, individuals construct their own meanings and understanding.
- *Teacher as facilitator*: University staff and field educators facilitate the learning process as consultants, guides, co-learners and assessors.
- *Theory and practice are integrated*: Theoretical principles are constantly related to the practice of social work. Theory and practice of social work are integrated in the courses.
- *Creativity*: Creativity (in both thinking and medium for presentation) is encouraged when students apply new learning to the set tasks.
- *Team approach to teaching and curriculum development*: Social

workers in the field are involved in campus learning as guest speakers and curriculum advisors.

- *Social justice framework*: The commitment of the social work profession to social justice is explicitly upheld throughout the program.

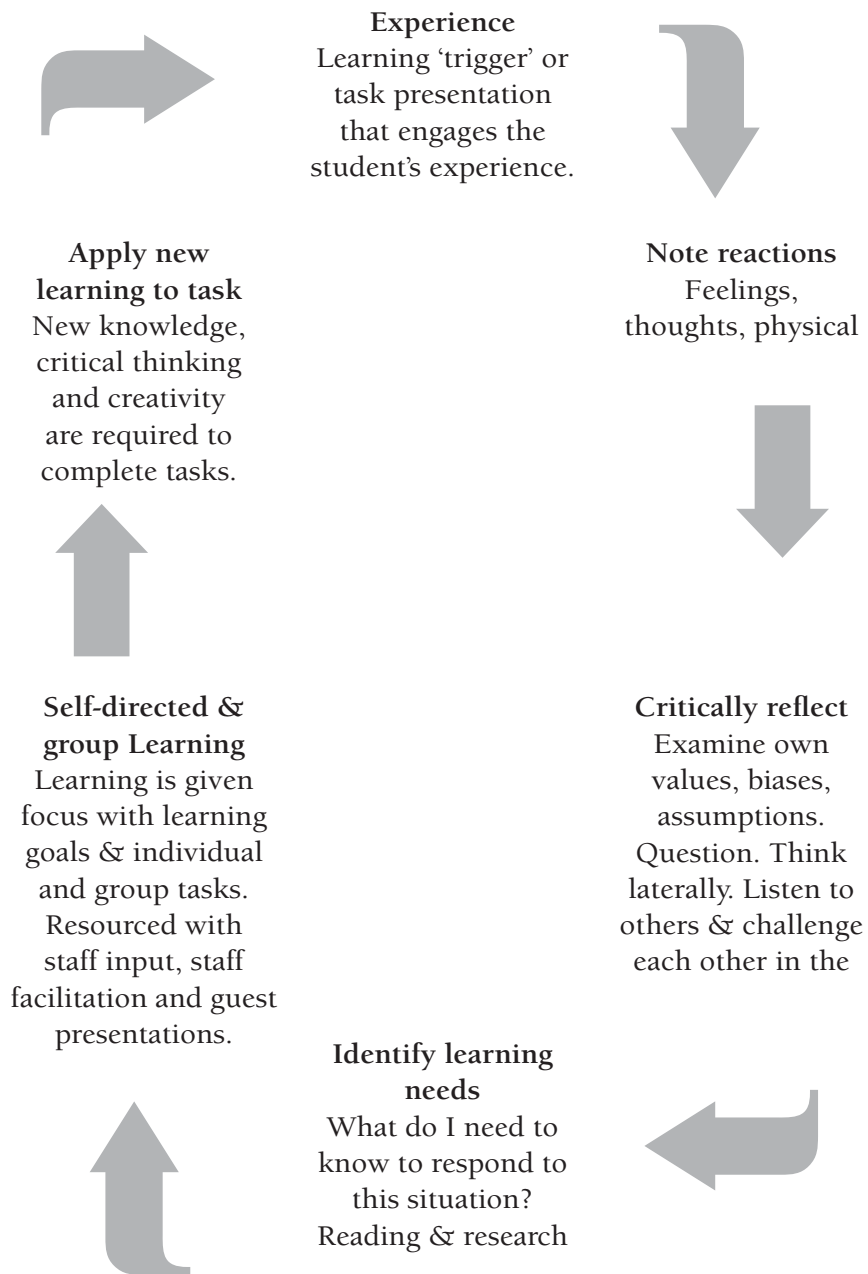
The principles of experience based learning are equally relevant to both field education and campus learning. Figure 1 below represents the cyclical process of learning in an experience based learning model (Based on Kolb, 1984).

Creative approaches to learning and practice are encouraged in both campus and field learning in a number of ways:

- The message that there are many ways of knowing and many appropriate responses to a professional task is reinforced throughout the degree program. As such, students are encouraged to explore a range of possible approaches to set tasks.
- Students are required to experience the use of different media in presenting their work. Visual, verbal, written, electronic and dramatic presentations are utilised through the program.
- The small group process tends to generate creativity as members brainstorm ideas and support each other in experimental approaches.
- Educators continually challenge students to question their assumptions and encourage students to explore new approaches and ideas and to look at issues from differing perspectives.
- Educators aim to model a creative approach in their design of learning experiences assessment tasks and other components of the program.

The focus on experience based learning promotes the essential link between campus and field education. The emphasis is upon training professional social workers, with an integrated approach to theory and practice. From the commencement of the degree program, students are referred to as “social workers in training”. Students’ field education experiences are discussed in class with practice examples being related to current areas of campus learning.

Figure 1
Newcastle's experience-based model



University assessment items are designed to resemble real social work tasks. Rather than writing an essay on a topic students may, for example, be required to prepare a letter to the editor, an information flyer, a funding submission, a report to the board, case file notes or a journal article. In oral assessment tasks students may need to role play a meeting with a politician, a speech at a public meeting, discussing an issue with their supervisor, or a job interview. These assessment tasks are structured around the topic areas being studied. Students learn about language and presentation styles appropriate to the given context as well as understanding the information and content.

A survey of graduates from the Newcastle social work degree was carried out to evaluate preparedness for practice as social workers (Gray and Gibbons, 2002). The following quotes from past students reflect the important connections established between social work theory and practice learning and how an experience based model can facilitate this.

This approach demanded a great deal of personal effort and gave students a lot of responsibility. This has been a positive contribution to my approach to work.

Even though it was difficult, I think the group work, role plays with videos and class interaction with the other students has helped me enormously. I find I can be very creative in a work environment and am able to think laterally thanks to this grounding.

The course was relevant to practice in developing my knowledge and skills through application. This meant that whenever I learnt something the practical application of this knowledge has always jumped to mind. This is continuing.

The lack of direction or feedback meant many of us students never knew what we were quite aiming at or if we were on the right track. This weakness could be seen as a good preparation for the workplace.

The course enabled me to quite naturally apply theory to my practice. I have learnt how to learn. I am aware of my own learning style and can use it well. (Gray and Gibbons, 2002)

The role of practice teaching in a global economy

Having described the structure of social work education in Australia and the principles of the experience based model used at the University of Newcastle, some current issues facing practice teaching in Australia are now discussed. In this section issues are identified in the context of the global trend toward defining relationships in terms of economic exchanges.

The relationships between social work field educators and university social work programs are described above in terms of cooperative good will. The impact of the economic paradigm is, however, forcing changes. Social work field education is resource intensive. As University funding is increasingly formula driven, the time and effort required in procuring, supporting and assessing field placements can be undervalued. It is very difficult for social work academics involved in field education in Australia to devote time to other valued areas of research and publication. Increasing student numbers in social work programs are coupled with shrinking staff resources. Without dedicated field education funding, resourcing well supported learning programs is a struggle.

Similarly, social workers in the field are pressured by employers to optimise throughputs and outputs. The long term value of student supervision is not always recognised by employers. Whilst, as a general rule, neither social work agencies offering student placements nor field educators are currently paid in Australia, the questions about who is responsible for student training and consequently who should provide resources for field education and student supervision are being asked. In some other professions, field supervisors and their employing organisations are paid for student placements. This debate is just beginning for social work in Australia.

On the global scene, we are faced in Australian Universities with a pressure to attract full fee paying international students. International students are a more lucrative prospect for universities than subsidised local students. Universities are putting considerable effort and resources into attracting international students. These students are often supported by government aid programs. Social work agencies offering field placements for these students are entitled, as educational supervisors, to a share of these fees. Offering an international student placement that attracts payment can be a more attractive prospect for agencies than offering a field placement for an Australian student with no payment attached. The economic 'sense' of attracting international students to Australian social work programs can dominate questions about cultural appropriateness of the programs offered and whether this is another example of western exploitation.

The role of practice teaching in response to a changing workforce

The issues for practice teaching discussed in this section relate to the changing nature of work and the role of social work education in this context. Employment opportunities for people with social work training in Australia are varied and continually changing. Social work educators have a responsibility to assist students to become adaptable, independent members of the workforce who are able to be creative and think critically in their work to achieve social work goals such as justice and human dignity. The experience based model described above is fundamentally concerned with achieving this outcome. Banking knowledge and practising techniques is unlikely to be sufficient for the graduate faced with changing contexts and expectations in the workplace.

One of the challenges for field education in the face of these changing opportunities for social work graduates is to offer field placements in non-traditional, but appropriate, positions for social workers, as well as in the traditional social work agencies. This can be done through the use of an on-site student supervisor, who is not a

social worker, and an external social work field educator who comes to the agency on a regular basis in order to provide the student with formal social work supervision. At Newcastle, the types of settings where these externally supervised placements have been successful have included environmental programs, police force, legal / court settings, social policy settings and schools. There are some social workers employed in such areas, but a social work qualification is not a requirement for the positions. These non-traditional field placements are chosen on the grounds that the skills, knowledge and values of social work are appropriate for the work requirements. External social work field educators are engaged by the University and as such paid for the supervision provided.

Externally supervised field placements can be a way to respond to changing social issues and labour market demands. They assist in producing employable and flexible graduates, with an understanding of how social work skills and knowledge can be applied in a range of settings. These field placements are not, however, without difficulties. The lack of a clearly defined social work role can be very challenging for students. Care needs to be taken in the student selection process. Those students able to work independently and with a particular interest in the area of work have been found to be most suited to such field placements.

Acknowledging and valuing the skills and knowledge of the on-site supervisor, whilst requiring an external social work field educator is a delicate tension in such field placements. If the on-site supervisor gets the message that they are “not good enough” disengagement or conflict can occur. Externally supervised field placements have been found to be most successful when the external social worker has a pre-existing relationship with the agency. Another challenge associated with externally supervised field placements is that the assessment and reporting process now becomes a four-way process. Despite these challenges, the opportunities presented by externally supervised placements generally make the efforts worthwhile.

The changing nature of the student population is another challenge social work educators in Australia are grappling with. The young social work student without work or family responsibilities is far from the norm. We need to be considering more closely how effectively we are responding to students’ needs and prior

experiences. Many students have family and work commitments and, as such, scheduling a structured 50 day placement can be impossible. Promoting equitable access by offering flexible field placement opportunities needs to be balanced against the benefits of coordination and integration with campus learning that a more structured field placement can provide.

Students who have worked in welfare related fields are generally faced with a lack of recognition of this work experience in Australian university field education programs. Giving credit for prior work experience and offering the option of completing a supervised field placement in the student's place of employment are possibilities being discussed and trialled in Australia.

The shortage of social workers in rural and remote parts of Australia is an issue of concern for social work educators and employers. There are now social work programs in Australia offered by distance education, thus facilitating access to social work training by people in rural and remote areas. These programs face particular demands with organising, monitoring and assessing field education placements. Whilst the social work degree is not offered at Newcastle by distance education, the completion of field placements in a rural area is encouraged. Establishing relationships with agencies in rural and remote areas has allowed for reciprocal exchanges. Professional education is provided for social workers in the rural area in acknowledgement of their role in student supervision. Generally, however, there are more rural field placement offers than can be filled. The extra costs for students associated with rural field placements (despite small government and university grants), together with work and family responsibilities, rule out the option of a rural field placement for many students.

Conclusion

The education of competent social work professionals relies upon quality learning experiences that allow students to apply theoretical or abstract learning and to practice and develop skills in real social work settings. The reality is that quality professional education is resource intensive and confronts many challenges in the face of changing economic and social conditions. Educators are challenged to develop appropriate and effective teaching models and to provide good learning opportunities for students to develop professional competence. We need to critically evaluate the trends and pressures and engage in political debates that shape the work we do. Learning about the successes and regrets experienced in practice teaching internationally can guide us in those debates as we tread our separate, but similar paths.

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