

Editorial

W(h)ither practice learning?

The global recession continues. Traditionally strong economies burble and spit with both signs of growth and contraction, and often at the same time (Claessens et al., 2009). At local levels, service provision and public spending falls under increasing scrutiny. This has great impact on health, social care and development and education, each measured for economic viability and contribution alongside the larger questions of morality and the components of civil society. Tough questions are being asked and tough answers given.

What we do know about past recessions from developed countries is the tendency to increase social development, social work, and health related and criminal justice issues. These outcomes cost economies dearly and require a complex analysis of how much should be spent to alleviate poverty, protect health, rehabilitate offenders and educate populations for the future. Such analyses are inherently political and ideological, sometimes, at the macro level of analysis, detracting from the human issues involved (although the 'personal is political' as we know from feminist scholarship (Hanisch, 1969) and the postmodern turn). There is, therefore a need for highly skilled and educated professionals in health, social care, criminal justice work and in education to work within a complex and tangled context for social and individual good – in whatever ways that is defined (and here again we walk a tightrope of contested definitions).

What we also know is that in previous recessions people who are able retrain, return to or for the first time attend universities gaining the skills and knowledge to participate in society. However, with an increasing emphasis in many countries on the costs of higher education we do not yet know what the effects of this will be and whether we will see new world centres of higher education developing as a result.

These changes and developments have implications for professional education at university level and, of course, for practice learning where this is an integral part of the former. In England, we are working to increase the numbers of quality placements, a major part of practice learning in many professions though by no means all, whilst public services are under threat; two contradictory push and pull pressures. This situation is replicated elsewhere.

So, can the universities play a larger role in practice learning? A 'commonsense' answer may well be a resounding yes, but in times of retraction, the process of teaching larger numbers and developing blended modalities of teaching and learning in itself raises a number of important questions to answer. Our research base into practice learning, placement learning and disciplinary-specific learning techniques is still in its infancy, but this represents an area in which a range of actors within higher education and regional and national economies can work together for the public good.

*

In this issue, Michael Emslie considers the important and often ignored possibility of sexual harassment of students undertaking work-based placements in youth work. While there is a growth in technologies of monitoring and regulating the behaviour of the professional, the other direction of harassment has not been fully tackled. This paper, written from an Australian perspective, offers a corrective to that dearth of literature.

Interprofessional learning is something that represents an aspiration if not actual practice in many professions. The value of cooperating together and recognising one another's value is accepted across health and social care and education in many countries. There may be a need for more research into practice outcomes emanating from interprofessional education but the ways in which such is delivered also require thought. Helena Low and Judy Stone report on an evaluation of workshops to deliver interprofessional learning to professionals in Australia and New Zealand, showing their value in raising awareness and appreciation of the issues.

The next article, whilst social work specific, draws on some of the issues raised by interprofessional education and learning. Martin Canavan considers how professional identity develops within voluntary

sector social work in Northern Ireland. Flexible learning is championed and the centrality of professional identity within the learning process is acknowledged.

The next paper also considers professionalism. In their paper, Marie McNay and her colleagues return to a common theme, a critique of competence-based education in the context of outcome based assessments and policy. They argue that a focus on competency standards may have unintended consequences and students may not develop the high calibre reflective and analytic skills required, in this case in social work.

The final paper in this issue discusses the experiences of one university programme in England in dealing with stakeholders when their curricula were up for revalidation. Tensions and standpoints are identified and discussed.

Undoubtedly, practice learning and teaching will survive however it is defined. There will be changes as we move through another economic challenge. Educators and professionals have the opportunity to mould high quality teaching and learning that is fit for purpose, according to professionals, and reflects the highest academic standards achievable.

Professor Jonathan Parker
October 2010

References

- Claessens, S., Ayhon Kose, M., and Terrones, M.E. (2009) What happens during recessions, crunches and busts? *Economic Policy*, 24, 60, 653-700
- Hanisch, C. (1969) The Personal is Political, in S. Firestone and A. Koedt (Eds.) *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. Reproduced at <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>