

Editorial

This Special Issue of the Journal brings together a collection of papers and workshops that were presented at the 10th International Conference on Practice Teaching and Field Education in Health and Social Work in Glasgow, Scotland in April 2014. The theme of the Conference was *Connections*, specifically *Creating connections, repairing disconnections and building relationships in practice learning and field education*.

The Conference was successful on many accounts. In terms of numbers, it was the largest of the ten International Conferences so far – with over 150 delegates from a dozen countries and many different professions. Sixty papers and presentations were given over the two days. Moreover, it was an exciting time to be in Scotland, with Glasgow hosting the Commonwealth Games in the summer and the buzz of an independence referendum to be held in the early autumn. Delegates were given a very warm reception hosted by Baillie Margot Clark of Glasgow City Council, in the stately rooms of the City Chambers.

‘Connections’ was an appropriate theme for the symposium, not just for the international and interprofessional connections that were made, but for the broader political context, in which new kinds of connections are possible. In the United Kingdom, though the referendum did not support Scottish disconnection from the UK, subsequent trends suggest that new connections might be forged, both within the UK and possibly between the nations of the UK and the European Union. We were reminded in a number of sessions of the broader political and social context in which we practise and teach our various professions – see in particular the papers by Pollard and by Simpson and Murr in this issue.

Relationship work is experiencing a ‘come-back’ in the professions. The last phrase in the Conferences subtitle, *building relationships in practice learning and field education* should not, therefore, be overlooked. The importance of the core relationship between practice educator and student is emphasised in many of the articles in this issue (as are the destructive consequences when this relationship is absent or oppressive, as documented in Tedam’s paper). How is this relationship affected by the growth of independent practice educators and the increasing reliance on work-based supervisors? The triad of practice student/practice teacher/

tutor is becoming more of a small group when off-site practice educators, work-based supervisors, mentors and other team members and other professionals are included. This broader base for practice learning is to be welcomed, but the complexities of the relationships involved ask for more research and study. A number of other articles also highlight the importance of good relationships between the different professions. As Howkins and Low and Joseph et al indicate, there is clear evidence that interprofessional education enables effective interprofessional collaborative practice. Positive relationships between the professions in the practice environment facilitate interprofessional learning in practice.

In this issue

We have ten fascinating articles, all derived from papers and workshops given at the 10th International Practice Education Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, in April 2014; the relative informality of the Conference presentations comes through in some of the articles. The papers span many different professions; especially striking is the way all ten articles resonate for the many professional groupings represented in the articles.

Our first three articles are, appropriately, all from Scotland.

Brodie and Coyle consider how partnerships between universities and agencies can be sustained. Their findings are based on the perspectives of social work practice teachers and students in a two-part study, first using an on-line survey and then interviews. The study reveals that the landscape of practice learning in Scotland is changing (and probably this reflects the UK in general), with more focus on the role of work-based supervisors and independent practice educators (who comprised 42% of all practice teachers in the West of Scotland survey), rather than the traditional 'singleton' practice teacher. Trust, respect and cooperation are important factors. The authors point to the need for regular communication, a commitment to shared problem-solving and good preparation of students for placement, such as what to expect from supervision and how best to use it.

On the topic of preparing students for placement, *Eno's* article, *What do you say after 'hello'? Connecting social work students to placement* presents a set of innovative activities to help students make the transition from class to placement: the 'six-word story' activity powerfully reflects the

student's feelings as they are about to embark on placement. The students' work-based supervisors are also prepared with similarly creative methods, such as writing a letter to the student's 'twin' as if they (the work-based supervisor) were their student. It all makes a nice contrast to the traditional induction comprising a stack of policy documents and an organisational flowchart.

Joseph, Diack, Garton and Haxton continue the theme of partnership between universities and practice settings, here focusing on the delivery of interprofessional education (IPE). Many health and social care professions are involved in making these connections: biomedical science; clinical psychology; dietetics; medicine; nursing; occupational therapy; pharmacy; physiotherapy; social work. The authors emphasise the importance of the maxim of learning *with, from and about* other professionals. Like Eno, these authors present innovative methods of teaching and learning: simulated gaming; face-to-face contact learning; and the development of a Virtual Learning Environment for inter-professional learning. The authors emphasise the importance of IPE facilitator training to produce successful experiences.

From Scotland, we move to Ireland. First, we continue the interprofessional theme, as *Reed, Walsh, and Lyons* consider how to sustain a good model of practice education for occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy. The model was developed in the Celtic Tiger era, but now has to brave the age of austerity. To add to the challenge, there has been a large increase in the demand for placements in these three therapy fields. The system that the authors present is supported by an organisational development model with a Cycle of Planned Change, interprofessional working between the three therapies and the development of 'non-traditional' placement settings.

Also in the Irish context, *Murray and McGovern's* 'Two sides of the one coin' reflects on the role of the practice teacher when assessing students who have previously failed a placement. Murray and McGovern are themselves university placement coordinators for social work (University College Cork and National University of Ireland Galway) and are well-placed to consider this topic. 'Evidence, evidence, evidence' and 'reports reports, reports' chant the authors, to emphasise their significance, not just for the practice teacher, but for the student to be able to understand why they have failed their placement. A small study found that practice teachers' motivations for supervising students who had failed a previous placement included a strong commitment to the profession and a genuine

desire to give a student an alternative opportunity. The authors provide a helpful checklist for practice teachers thinking of offering a placement to a student who has failed their previous placement.

Our final five articles are from authors based in England. First, continuing the theme of non-traditional placements, *Pollard* considers concepts of justice and these placements. Pollard's paper was one of the plenary presentations at the Glasgow Conference (2014). Although the author focuses on occupational therapy, his ideas are relevant to community-based non-traditional placements in other professions. Pollard explores the reasons for the growth of these placements (which are not, in fact 'new', having been a feature of occupational therapy practice learning since at least the 1970s and are especially well-developed in South America) and relates this growth to global socio-economic changes, especially the increase in social exclusion, economic injustice and the contract culture in health and social care. Whilst generally supportive of non-traditional placements, Pollard cautions against 'altruistic tourism' and reminds us that there must be long-term benefits to the communities who host these placements if they are to be justified. This should entail universities engaging with these settings on a more permanent and secure basis.

A number of these themes resonate in *Simpson and Murr's* article on the dialectics of change in social work education. The authors document the historic tensions within social work, its contradictions (social reform, social care, social control) and its 'defiantly elusive' nature. They examine different standpoints on what is 'good' social work and 'good' social work education and make the case that a historical perspective is essential in order to understand the profession. They pin their analysis around three historical events in the development of the profession and develop an interesting four-point typology of social work practice assessors. Multiplicity of frameworks in the governance of social work education, alongside fast-track routes that fall outside this governance, continue to fracture and divide the profession. A predilection for perpetual review (almost Maoist in its nature) prevents any synthesis of this dialectic. Although written with social work education as its focus, there are parallel dialectics in other professions.

Next *Howkins and Low* explore some of the issues involved for practice educators providing interprofessional placement learning. The need for collaborative work has been driven home by a number of high-profile cases of abuse and neglect where failure by professionals to communicate

and work together has been a significant factor. Even in settings where interprofessional opportunities seem to be limited, the authors stress the importance of finding and creating them, not least by practice educators from different professions collaborating with each other. Howkins and Low consider the factors that hinder good learning and stress the need for adequate preparation for the role of facilitating inter-professional education and the need for a culture change within the workplace.

‘Practice placements are becoming notorious as sites of difficulty for many students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.’ In the light of this worrying situation, *Tedam* considers strategies to enhance practice education for black and minority ethnic (BME) students, focusing specifically on black African students. The author reports findings from an in-depth study that analyses the experiences of two Black African women, members of a support group called *Padare*, the Zimbabwean word for ‘meeting place’. *Tedam* develops strategies at the individual (student and practice educator) and institutional (university and agency) levels. This includes a duty of care by universities as to where they place students, especially BME students. The level of disrespect and discrimination of one of the practice educators reported in the study will shock the reader and contrasts with the motivations of the practice educators in Murray and McGovern’s study.

Last and not least, *Flanagan* asks ‘How does storytelling within higher education contribute to the learning experience of early years students?’ The author presents findings from a study comprising 45 students working with children 0-5 years (‘early years workers’). She considers the role of story and storytelling in reflective practice and the development of informal theorising – an opportunity to understand events better, not just a re-telling of them, and a way of connecting together and developing group cohesion. Three themes emerge from the findings: an association between ‘story’ and facilitating learning; ‘story’ offering fun within lectures; and ‘story’ having a social function. We might think that story-telling comes easier to early years workers, but the lessons from *Flanagan*’s research resonates for all learners, no matter what age group they will be working with.

We hope you will enjoy these articles and feel connected to the buzz of the Glasgow Conference where they were first presented.

Helena Low and Mark Doel
Co-editors