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## **Thinking 'outside the Box': A New Approach to Integration of Learning for Practice**

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**Thinking 'outside the Box': A New Approach to Integration of Learning for Practice**

**Abstract**

The integration of learning is a central goal for all professions. The question of how to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and between the classroom and the field, is one which has preoccupied social work education since its very beginnings in universities in the United Kingdom and the United States in the early twentieth century. Between 2003 and 2005, the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education funded a project which piloted a new approach to the integration of learning for practice. This paper reports on the findings of that project, and suggests ways of taking its findings forward in the future.

(105 words)

**Key words**

social work education; integration of learning; theory and practice.

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## **Thinking 'outside the Box': A New Approach to Integration of Learning for Practice**

### **Introduction**

Social work in Scotland is now a graduate profession. With the introduction of a Framework for Social Work Education in January 2003, a new era for social work education began and new social work degree programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate level were launched ([www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk)). As part of this development, the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SISWE) was created as a partnership between all the higher education institutions offering social work training and various stake-holder groups including service users and carers. One of the Scottish Institute's priorities has been to stimulate practice learning and in this context, it funded a series of projects from October 2003 on Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP) with the stated aim 'to improve radically the quality, quantity, range, relevance, inter-professionality and management of practice learning outcomes for the new social work Honours degree' (see [www.sieswe.org](http://www.sieswe.org)). The University of Edinburgh, in collaboration with Glasgow Caledonian University, was given responsibility for investigating one aspect of this wider programme, that is, the integration of learning for practice. Our project used three main methods to examine integration of learning for practice. Firstly, a postal audit was conducted throughout Scotland, in which social work practitioners, educators and students were invited to report what integration of learning meant to them, and how it might be facilitated.

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Examples of good practice were sought, along with recommendations for the future (See Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, 2004). Secondly, a review of literature explored integration of learning across the fields of social work, education and health professions (Clapton and Cree, 2004). Findings from the practice audit and literature review have already been reported in this journal (Clapton *et al*, 2006) and will be described briefly here. The focus of this further paper will be our third research method, that is, the pilot or 'demonstration' project which sought to trial a new approach to the integration of learning for practice. First, a few words are necessary on the Scottish context.

### **Practice Learning in the Scottish Context**

In Scotland, all students on social work training programmes must undertake 200 days of practice learning. This is conventionally organised around two or three practice learning opportunities (placements) where their work is supervised by a qualified practice teacher/fieldwork educator. There is an expectation that whilst on placement, students will have contact with their academic tutor – often in the form of a number of placement visits. Most programmes operate on the basis of two visits per placement and take the form of a meeting to review progress. Developing integration of learning is one of the key aspects of such meetings. Quality assurance of practice learning is met through the operation of Practice Assessment Panels whose role is to firstly, scrutinise individual practice teachers' recommendations and secondly, monitor the quality of the practice learning in general. For a fuller statement of practice learning in Scotland see the work of the Scottish Practice Learning Project ([www.splp.uk.com](http://www.splp.uk.com)).

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### **Findings from the practice audit and literature review**

Findings from our Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice audit and literature review complemented each other in that we found what was best summed up as the continued existence of 'two separate worlds' of theory and of practice (Clapton *et al*, 2006). This was experienced most vividly when students went out to agencies on practice placements, where 'academia' (theory) and 'the real world' (practice) were unhelpfully counter-posed. What was highlighted was the apparent split between the classroom and the field. Whilst attempts had been made (and were being made) to overcome this division by involving practitioners in teaching and delivering aspects of social work training, there was little evidence of any flow in the other direction. In reality, teaching staff had little contact with the field during their students' placements.

There is surprisingly little discussion in social work education literature of the tutor's role in practice learning (Collins, 1994; Degenhardt, 2002). A recent publication in this journal on facilitating practice learning and assessment (Lefevre, 2005) makes no mention of the academic tutor's role in practice learning. Research to date has focussed on the centrality of the practice teacher/assessor in the student's integration of learning (Dick *et al*, 2004; Elliot, 1990; Shardlow and Doel, 1996). However, arrangements for practice learning have been changing with the development of the new degree (Doel *et al*, 2004) and this change brings with it the possibility of a re-examination of the tutor's role. For example, Watson and West (2004) explore the potential significance of the tutor's role vis-à-vis the student's learning in the

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academic context. Writing about the US and Puerto Rican experience, Ligon and Ward (2005, p. 235) argue that the 'field liaison' (tutor) plays an 'integral role in student site placement serving as the link between the institution and field placements, as an evaluator of field educational outcomes, and as administrator of the overall experience'. They also note student dissatisfaction with the field liaison role, echoed in recent Australian literature (Cooper *et al*, 1999; Fernandez, 1998).

This proved to be the starting point in our decision to make the tutor's role the focus for our pilot study on how students' integration of learning for practice might be enhanced. An independent researcher based at Glasgow Caledonian University, Alison Munro, conducted a formal evaluation of this project (see Munro, 2005).

### **The demonstration project**

Our project involved sending a lecturer/tutor out to the field in a new role as 'academic adviser' for a day a week over the course of the students' practice placements. This happened across six sites (three in Edinburgh, one in Midlothian and two in Glasgow) between April and December 2004. In most situations, students were placed in agencies, both voluntary and statutory, in groups. Where placement allocation made this impossible, they were 'clustered' geographically and came together as a group on a weekly basis. In total, ten lecturers, 16 practice teachers, eight link supervisors and 39 students participated in the project.

We did not offer a standard 'blue-print' to academic advisers and their placement agencies. Instead, they were expected to negotiate their activities on the basis of

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agency and student need, as well as their own interests. As a result, they took part in a range of activities which fell into three categories:

1. Work with students

This included: the traditional three-way meetings with practice teachers, group supervision/discussion, dedicated teaching sessions covering, for example, Critical Incident Analysis, Social Work Research and Theory and Skills. Formal input into assessment of students' work and informal support also occurred on a group and individual basis, for example, exploration of 'competencies' or the new social work training standards.

2. Work with practice teachers

Academic advisers were able to support practice teachers through, for example, joint group work with students and through clarification of university placement and assignment requirements.

3. Work with other agency staff

This, too, varied across sites. In-house teaching and the provision of learning materials took place with agency staff, both professionals and non-professionals. Academic advisers offered Continuing Professional Development to agencies, through supplying literature and references to current reading materials, and by running workshops on topics identified by the agencies.

## **Evaluation of the demonstration project**

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Evaluation involved all key parties (students, practice teachers, agency staff and academic advisers) and was carried out using one-to-one and group interviews and postal surveys. Findings from the evaluation were positive all round: all those who took part felt that much had been gained from the project (Munro, 2005). Key findings include the following:

- Informal support given by academic advisers to students occurred frequently and was valued by the students; Academic advisers also felt that they were able to be more supportive to students than otherwise. This meant that in some cases, they were able to undertake 'early intervention' work with students who were beginning to experience difficulties during their placements. Catching such problems at an early stage before they developed was seen as of huge benefit to students.
  
- Agency staff appreciated the opportunity to learn about new research from academic advisers and also to work alongside them more. One staff member commented: 'through having [the academic adviser], the whole organisation has benefited because, you know, it has been about organisational learning as well as students' learning'. (See also Clapton and Daly, 2005.)
  
- The learning opportunities that were made available to academic advisers through being located in the agencies were greatly valued, for example, insights were gained into current policies and practice. This in turn enriched the curriculum at the universities through up-dated lecture material and feeding into programme

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design and content. One group of practice teachers contributed to the university's teaching materials as a direct result of their closer contact with the university; discussions have also begun about co-authoring a workbook for students coming into children and family work.

- Practice Teachers and other agency staff felt that through being involved in the project, a closer working relationship had been fostered between the university and the agencies. This was seen as so much more useful than the traditional tutor visits to students on placement (termed 'often perfunctory' by one respondent in our audit) in which tutors find themselves in a 'monitoring', rather than supporting or educative role.

### **After the demonstration project**

Our work did not end with the completion of the demonstration project in December 2004. The University of Edinburgh and Glasgow Caledonian University have continued to work to 'mainstream' some of the gains of the project. Both universities are continuing, where possible, to send students out on practice placement in geographical clusters with a lecturer/tutor attached to these groups and the agencies in which the students are based. The lecturer/tutor is responsible for standard placement and agency liaison, and, in keeping with the new approach, opportunities for co-facilitating group supervision and academic input to agency staff are negotiated where these arise. Moreover, practice teachers who were involved in the demonstration project have been working alongside lecturers/tutors at The University of Edinburgh to develop pre-placement sessions intended to prepare students for practice, and, at

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the same time, improve their integration of learning throughout their period of practice learning. In keeping with the spirit of demonstration project, these sessions are co-facilitated by teaching staff and practitioners. The sessions include a 15-day agency-based orientation period during which service users, carers and practitioners contribute to an evaluation of students' readiness to practise.

## **Discussion**

It should be acknowledged that, in the current climate of increasing demands and pressures e.g. research assessment exercises, the proposal to invite academic staff members to spend more time on placement liaison seems, at least, counter-intuitive. It is undoubtedly the case that our colleagues who were used to conducting just two visits to students over the course of a placement were concerned that this new approach might be overly time-intensive. Furthermore, some practice teachers were a little anxious that their role in student learning might be compromised in some way by the presence of an academic adviser. In practice, the gains convinced even the sceptics that this was a useful way to proceed. Not only was less time spent by academics in travelling to and from individual students on placement, but by sending students out to placement in groups or clusters, we were able to make the most of everyone's time, academics, students and practice teachers alike.

Overall, the project enabled us to open new discussions about partnership in social work education and, at the same time, re-affirm some fundamental principles about adult learning and the need to support that learning. We believe that the approach we trialled does not necessarily require a huge investment in terms of time or money, but

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it will require a change in the 'mind-set' of all those involved in social work education and practice. It became apparent to those of us who took part in the pilot project that the gap between theory and practice was, in fact, an artifice of the educational process itself; as long as academics hold onto their position as 'expert-knowledge giver' (Friere, 1972), this will not change. The practice placement should therefore be seen as less of a laboratory where specific problems are addressed in the traditional supervisory dyad, but rather as a learning community which must consist of student, practice teacher/assessor and lecturer/tutor, if the traditional divisions between theory and practice are not to be perpetuated.

This model opens up the possibility of developing a community which is useful not only to student learning, but to service users. If lecturers and tutors are able to develop an active and regular presence in service agencies, then they may find that they have something to contribute to activities such as community development and neighbourhood forums. Bob Holman in Glasgow's East End is a living example of a university professor whose knowledge, skills and expertise have made a contribution to the community in which he lives and works (Holman, 1997). Perhaps more modestly, work on this project has taught us that a collegiate model can and ought to emerge centred around the student's practice learning. This would be a way of working and learning that not only provides an opportunity to lend theory to practice problems and issues, but also has the effect of physically abolishing the distance between academia and practice.

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**Conclusion: key messages for students, tutors and practice teachers**

1. The integration of learning for practice can be enhanced when efforts are made to bridge the gap between the university and the field. This involves a more dynamic re-conception of the role and activities of students' tutors vis-à-vis the placement.
2. Practice learning should not be seen as the preserve and responsibility of practice agencies, just as academic teaching is not just the responsibility of university staff. This means that lecturers and tutors have a greater role to play in relation to students' practice learning and the agencies in which they are based, just as practitioners have a role to play in academic teaching.

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3. Similarly, lecturers and tutors have a contribution to make in the Continuing Professional Development of agency practitioners, just as agency staff have much to teach lecturers and tutors about current policy and practice.
4. There is huge untapped potential for the university and the field to work together in social work education, research, policy and practice. For this to be realised, people will have to take risks and 'think outside the box' of their traditional professional and institutional boundaries.

(2414 words)

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