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Editors

Peter Camilleri

Martin Ryan

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Carolyn Noble

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EDITORIAL

This edition gathers a wide variety of articles concerned with social work and welfare education. In this edition we have important debates about how teachers should and can deal with topics associated with teaching content about aging (Karen Heycox and Mark Hughes), what is good teaching from a reflective position (Phillip Swain), how to maximise the opportunities for work-based learning (Justine O'Sullivan, Brenda Bartlett, Karen Heycox and Carolyn Noble) and how to prepare final year students for critical practice with diverse and marginalised populations (Mark Furlong and Virginia Mansel-Lee). Also included is a research report by Elizabeth Moore and Manahar Pawar about promoting international exchange in social work practice, research and education.

It is also the first on line publication of Advances. AASWWE executive has decided to put this edition and all future editions of this Journal on line for easy access for potential readers and contributors. We hope this easier access will increase the profile of this Journal and as a result encourage more contributors to seek this journal for the dissemination of their research and scholarship, across Australia and now internationally. Access via AASSWE homepage www.aaswwe.asn.au will extend the readership considerably.

Enjoy!

Professor Carolyn Noble (Acting editor)

December 2006

Social Work Students' Attitudes Towards and Interest in Working with Older People: an Exploratory Study

Karen Heycox¹ and Mark Hughes²

This article reports on an exploratory study of the attitudes towards older people of final year social work students at the University of New South Wales. It also investigated students' interest in working with older people in the future. While it was found that overall their attitudes were fairly neutral, as with international studies there were slightly more positive attitudes towards the 'young-old' than the 'old-old' and towards older women compared to older men. Additionally female students were slightly more positive than male students in their attitudes towards older people. Interest in working with older people in the future was significantly associated with prior exposure to a course on ageing issues. The paper concludes with recommendations for an audit of program content on ageing issues and the challenge for researchers in accessing students' actual attitudes beyond the neutral and professionally more acceptable responses. It also proposes some other areas for further research, such as an examination of educators' attitudes towards older people

Background

The opportunities for developing social work practice with older people seem considerable given population ageing and the fact, identified in US studies (Cummings, Galambos and Decoster 2003), that even if social workers are not working specifically in aged care settings they are still likely to have considerable contact with older people. However, despite this there is concern that there is a general lack of interest within the profession in practice with older people. For example, it is notable that in a recent content analysis of articles published between 2002 and 2005 in *Australian Social Work* only 2 (1.8%) of 112 papers related to the aged care field of practice (Bigby 2006).

A particular concern for us, as educators, is understanding students' interest in work with and attitudes towards older people. International studies consistently point to the fact that students in health and social care – including medical, nursing and social work students – frequently see practice with older people as low status and low priority when compared with other user groups or settings (Anderson and Wiscott 2003; Intrieri, Kelly, Brown and Castilla 1993; Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson and Feldman 2000; Weiss, Gal, Cnaan and Maglajlic 2002). In a comparative study of first year social work students' preferences in the UK, USA and Israel, the most preferred service user groups to work with were children and adolescents, while the least preferred agency setting was an old age home (Weiss et al. 2002). In part this may reflect societal ageism: young people, in general, report reasonably high levels of anxiety about ageing and hold many negative stereotypes about older people (e.g. McConatha, Schnell, Volkwein, Riley and Leach 2003).

Scharlach et al. (2000) raise concerns that such societal stereotypes may be reflected in social workers' practice and policy decisions. Professional ageism may also play a role, particularly in the construction of social work with older people as less skilled

¹ **Karen Heycox** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

² **Mark Hughes** is a Lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

work. According to Hugman (2000) practice with older people may not involve as much direct 'change work', as with other user groups, and thus may be mistakenly seen as not as 'real' a form of social work. In our own teaching experience students appeared to have had a limited understanding of the potential range of interventions that may be engaged in with older people, with practical assistance seen as the standard intervention strategy with this service user group. A lack of organisational supports and resources for more innovative work with older people may also act to reduce students' interest in this area of practice.

Specific studies on social work students' attitudes towards older people have been conducted primarily in the United States (Tan, Hawkins and Ryan 2001; Gellis, Sherman and Lawrance 2003; Mason and Sanders 2004; Scharlach et al. 2000; Hatchett, Holmes and Ryan 2002; Anderson and Wiscott 2003), as well as in other countries such as Singapore (Mehta, Tan and Joshi 2001) and Spain (Moraru 2005). Variables identified as correlating with more positive student attitudes towards older people include:

- Prior close relationship with an older person: those students who feel close to an older relative or an older non-relative view older adults more positively (Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk and Solomon 2000; Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001)
- Exposure to a course on gerontology: where students take specific gerontology classes (especially where contact with older people is included) they tend to view older people more positively (Cummings et al. 2003; Gorelik et al. 2000; Tan et al. 2001).
- Gender of student: while both male and female students tend to be fairly neutral in their attitudes, female students generally appear more positive (Gellis et al. 2003; Tan et al. 2001).

Studies also identify particular qualities of older people which correlate with more positive attitudes. Some results suggest that the 'young-old' tend to be viewed more positively than the 'old-old' (Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002), that older women are viewed more positively than older men (Hatchett et al. 2002), and that those who may be perceived to have a better health status are also seen more positively (Hatchett et al. 2002).

This research on social work students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people emerged from our own awareness that students frequently rate work with older people as a low preference area for placements. We were also conscious of a need for more ageing content across our own social work program and the need for students to be exposed to ageing issues and gain the skills that are required for effective and innovative practice with older people. One strategy introduced to address this is an elective course, entitled 'Reflective Practice with Older People', in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales (Hughes and Heycox 2005). Throughout the course we provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their own and others' ageism and enable them to develop an awareness of the diversity of the older population and the range of skills required to work effectively with this group. Students also consider their own hopes and fears as they grow older, as well as strategies to challenge negative cultural images of ageing. In terms of course content emphasis is not just placed on practical interventions (such as

those needed when arranging care packages or residential placement), but also other strategies such as therapeutic work (e.g. around grief and loss), family therapy, and conflict resolution. We also highlight a range of different settings in which social work practice is carried out with older people, not just aged care settings. An additional learning feature of the course is student observations in health and welfare settings where older people are present, such as hospital reception areas, senior citizens centres and day respite centres. While evaluations of the elective course have been positive (Hughes and Heycox 2005), we are aware that not all students are being exposed to this material and thus there is a need to examine in more depth the attitudes and interest levels of the wider year cohort.

Methodology

The sample comprised 4th year social work students who were undertaking their final placement and were present at a placement seminar at the university. The project was given ethics approval by the University of New South Wales and students were advised in advance of the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation. No inducements were offered for participation.

The data were collected via a self-completion questionnaire, comprising mainly forced-choice questions.

Two dependent variables that were examined and that will be referred to in this paper were:

- Attitudes towards groups of older people; that is, attitudes towards women 65-74 years, men 65-74 years, women 75 years plus, and men 75 years plus. This variable was measured using a 20-item semantic Likert scale developed by Sanders, Montgomery, Pittmen and Balkwell (1984), a scale that has been widely used in research on this topic (Mehta et al. 2001; Tan et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002). In this scale respondents are requested to circle a score from 1 to 7 where 1 equals a positive attribute and 7 equals the corresponding negative attribute. For example, 1 = happy, 7 = sad. (The midpoint 4 is neutral.) Prior testing of this instrument has established a Chronbach's alpha score of .967, indicating a high level of internal reliability (Sanders et al. 1984).
- Interest in working with older people; this was measured by a 10-point scale where 1= never want to work with older people and 10 = definitely want to work with older people. We developed this scale for use in a previous study that looked at changes in interest level after exposure a gerontology course (Hughes and Heycox 2005). Having a range of 10 enabled students to present a greater diversity of views than might have been possible with a smaller scale.

The independent variables included:

- Personal characteristics of the students, such as their age and gender.
- Prior relationship and/or work experience with older people. As with prior studies we asked students to identify where they have had at least one self-defined close relationship with an older person. This was further categorised

as a personal cohabiting relationship, a personal non-cohabiting relationship, or a relationship established during paid work, a student placement/practicum, or while carrying out volunteer work.

- Exposure to any prior courses on ageing at university or elsewhere.

Data were analysed through frequency distributions and univariate statistics. Bivariate relationships were also analysed through comparison of means, t-tests and ANOVA. Correlation coefficients were produced by the eta statistic. Like other correlation statistics the closer the eta score is to 1 the greater the association between the two variables, while the closer the score is to 0 the lower the association.

Limitations to the study include the fact that the research was carried out with one cohort of students at one university and consequently the sample was relatively small, particularly the sub-group of males. Another limitation was that the researchers were known to the students in their role as university lecturers. A further limitation, in terms of establishing causal relationships, was that we only surveyed the students at one point in time and that the study was not set up with a pre-test of the dependent variables or a control group.

Findings

Sample characteristics

Fifty five (85%) students completed the questionnaire out of the total 65 final year students. Of the 10 that were missing one did not wish to complete the questionnaire and the other nine were absent from the seminar. The mean age of the sample was 25.3 years; the median age was 23 years; with the youngest being 21 years and the oldest 42 years. Of the sample 49 (89.1%) were female. Thirty-four students identified their ethnicity as Australian, and a further four identified as European Australian, two as Australian Asian, one as South American Australian and one as Middle Eastern Australian. The remaining students identified their ethnicity as European (3), UK (3), Asian (4), Pacific Islands (1), New Zealand (1) and Eurasian (1).

Prior close relationship with an older person

As with international studies (Gorelik et al. 2000) the vast majority of the sample had at least one close relationship with an older person (52 of the students or 95%). The non-cohabiting personal (e.g. family or friend) relationship was the most frequently reported type of close relationship (40 students or 73%). While 17 (31%) students in the sample reported having at least one close cohabiting personal relationship, a smaller number of students (13 or 24 %) reported a close relationship while on a student placement, on paid work (10 or 18%) or on volunteer work (5 or 9%). One student reported a close relationship with an older neighbour.

Attended a prior course

Just under half (23 or 42%) of the students had previously attended a course on ageing issues. It should be noted that most of these (18 or 33% of the sample) had attended an elective course on 'Reflective Practice with Older People' run in the School of

Social Work. Only 5% of the students had attended a course on ageing/older people as part of their work and 4% had attended one run by a non-government organisation.

Interest in working with older people

In relation to student interest in working with older people in the future, the average score for this sample was 5.13 (10 = definitely want to work with older people); while the median was 5. This indicates only a moderate interest in working with older people. In terms of range, three people scored 1 and three people scored 2. That is, 11% of the students were in the low interest range. At the other end two people scored 9 and three scored 10. That is, 9% were in the highest interest level range.

We looked at a range of factors that may have impacted on students’ interest in working with older people. There were no significant relationships identified between interest levels and age or gender of students, or the type of prior close relationship with an older person. We did, however, identify significant positive relationships between prior exposure to a course on ageing issues and interest in working with older people (see Table 1). This relationship was even stronger for those who had attended the elective course on ageing in the School of Social Work, compared with those who had no prior exposure to a course on ageing issues.

Table 1: Interest in working with older people by prior attendance at an ageing course (n=55)

	Mean	F-score	Eta
No prior course attended	4.37		
Any prior course attended	6.35	5.27	.414**
Elective course attended	6.78	14.67	.467***

** p < .01, *** p < .001

Attitudes towards older people

In terms of students’ attitudes towards older people, the average scores for all groups of older people were mainly in the neutral to positive range (see Table 2). The less positive scores related to perceptions about older people as active, healthy, flexible, progressive and uncomplaining. Most positive scores related to older people being seen as wise, kind, knowledgeable, trustworthy, friendly and good.

Table 2: Attitudes towards older people (n=55)

Characteristic	Mean	Characteristic	Mean
Wise	2.56	Happy	3.47
Knowledgeable	2.62	Independent	3.61
Interesting	2.68	Optimistic	3.76
Kind	2.80	Attractive	3.78
Good	2.82	Tolerant	3.87
Trustworthy	2.83	Healthy	3.92
Friendly	2.87	Uncomplaining	3.92
Generous	3.12	Active	4.02
Neat	3.19	Flexible	4.05
Productive	3.46	Progressive	4.25

Note: 1 = most positive, 4= neutral, 7 = most negative

In relation to the attitudes composite score (where 20 = most positive and 140 = most negative), students had more positive attitudes towards older women (an average of 65.9) than towards older men (68.8) and were also more positive towards the 65-74 year olds (64.5) than the 75 plus age group (71.5). This trend of less positive attitudes towards the older groups and towards men was reflected across most of the characteristics studied. For example, Table 3 highlights the scores in relation to the least positive items. No significant associations were identified between students' age, exposure to an ageing course or the nature of their prior close relationship with an older person and their attitudes towards the four target subgroups of older people.

Table 3: Age & gender older people target groups by less positive characteristics (n=55)

	Healthy v. Sick	Active v. Inactive	Flexible Inflexible	v. Progressive v. Conservative
Women 65-74	3.52	3.69	3.69	4.00
Men 65-74	3.71	3.67	3.97	4.12
Women 75+	4.11	4.36	4.24	4.47
Men 75+	4.34	4.36	4.31	4.42

Note: 1 = most positive, 4 = neutral, 7 = most negative

As Table 4 illustrates, there were some consistent differences between male and female students' attitudes, however these differences were not statistically significant. This is most likely because of the small number of men in the sample – a factor common to social work programs. In this sample male students demonstrated less positive attitudes than female students. Again, however, it is important to note that the students did not rate any of the groups of older people in the negative range of scores.

Table 4: Age & gender of older people target groups by student gender (n=55)

	Female	Male	Total
Women 65-74	62.2	69.5	62.9
Men 65-74	65.4	70.8	66.1
Women 75+	68.4	72.5	68.8
Men 75+	70.9	75.6	71.5

Note: 20 = most positive, 80 = neutral, 140 = most negative

Discussion and implications

While the limitations of the study need to be borne in mind, overall the results of this research are consistent with international findings on social work students' attitudes towards older people and their interest in working with them in the future. It is notable that in our study the nature of a prior close relationship with an older person was not significantly associated with interest levels or attitudes. Overall, students' interest in working with older people was moderate and arguably moderate-to-low for those who had never attended a course on ageing issues. Similarly students' attitudes tended to range between positive and neutral; rarely did they report negative attitudes towards older people. This finding and the range of positive and less positive responses provided by the students are broadly in line with other studies (Mehta et al. 2001; Tan et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002). It is noteworthy that students' less positive perceptions of older people related to such items as their levels of activity, health, and flexibility, while their most positive perceptions related to items as wise, kind and

trustworthy. These results tend to reflect both the common negative and positive stereotypes of older people.

While on the surface it is reassuring that social work students did not express overtly negative attitudes towards older people, we are unable to discount social desirability as playing a role in students' responses. On reflection we maintain concerns that where students are required to make choices in terms of their learning, such as for placements and elective courses, they tend not to choose practice with older people. Previous research on attitudes instruments suggests that they are particularly susceptible to students adjusting their views in line with their perception of the desired responses and to appear non-judgemental (Morrison and Morrison 2002). That our research was carried out by their university lecturers may have exacerbated this problem, especially for the group who did the 'Reflective Practice with Older People' course. Attitudes towards older people instruments need to better account for such factors. Lessons may be learned from the development of homophobic attitudes instruments (Morrison and Morrison 2002), which have strived to overcome this problem. Further development of attitudes towards older people instruments is needed to ensure that any hidden negative attitudes or stereotypes are able to be measured.

Attendance at a course on ageing issues was a factor that was related to interest in working with older people, although unlike other studies (Gorelik et al. 2000; Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001) in this study it was not found to be associated with more positive attitudes. Given that this study did not involve a pre-test or a control group it is difficult to determine the degree of impact of the course on students' interest levels. It is possible that they were already interested in work with older people (that is why they chose the course) or that other intervening variables affected the result. Nonetheless the result does conform to international findings, including those based on more rigorous quasi-experimental designs (Cummings et al. 2003; Gorelik et al. 2000).

Consistently students reported less positive attitudes towards the older target groups (i.e. 75 years and over); again these findings confirm those of international studies (Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002). It is possible that perceptions of reduced health among the older age groups, as hypothesised by Hatchett et al. (2002), may have influenced students' responses to some items. However, while less positive attitudes may be expected towards the 'old-old' group in relation to items such as health, dependency, or the perception of them as active, it is surprising that these trends were apparent across most attitude items. And although the results were not statistically significant, it is notable that male students were consistently less positive towards each of the four target groups than female students; this appears in line with significant findings from previous research (Gellis et al. 2003; Tan et al. 2001).

Further research in this area may benefit from an investigation of academic and field staff's attitudes towards older people and a comparison of these with students' attitudes. More detailed examination of how students perceive work with older people would also be valuable. This may include an analysis of what intervention strategies (e.g. counselling, practical assistance, case management) students believe are possible and appropriate with this service user group, and to what extent these strategies are viewed as challenging or interesting. It may also be of value to compare the attitudes

of students from different year cohorts, as well as study attitudes over time and at different tertiary institutions.

Given the findings identified in this study and those from previous international research, we would emphasise the importance of social work students being exposed to ageing issues, both in stand alone courses and integrated in a range of different courses throughout a degree program. Such courses could include content that challenges students' ageism, including their stereotypes and negative images of old age. For example, educators could invite older people from community organisations to be guest lecturers. Additionally, older people could be included in case scenarios and role plays used in different courses across the program. These scenarios and role plays would not necessarily have to focus on aged care, but simply include older people as significant figures in other people's lives (e.g. as lobbyists or community advocates).

Although our study did not identify significant relationships between the type of close relationship with an older person and students' attitudes and interest levels, overseas studies have identified the importance of exposure of students to older people in promoting more positive attitudes. This latter point was borne out in the evaluation of the elective course run at the University of New South Wales, with students particularly valuing their observations of older people in health, welfare and aged care settings (Hughes and Heycox 2005). Consequently we would still emphasise the importance of social work students gaining more practice experience (e.g. placements) in aged care settings and in other settings – such as hospitals and Centrelink – where older people are likely to be present. Educational strategies can be enhanced by the inclusion of direct contacts between students and older people. More generally the social work profession could promote work with older people as an important and skilled field of practice. As a starting point for these strategies we would recommend an audit of gerontology content in social work programs. This would be a similar audit to that recently conducted on the level of mental health content in Australian social work degrees (National Standards Implementation Group Secretariat 2003).

Conclusion

This paper reported on a study of final year social work students and found that exposure to a course on ageing issues was associated with students' interest in working with older people in the future. While student attitudes were generally in the neutral range, the old-old and older men were viewed less positively than the young-old and older women. More work needs to be done to obtain a better insight into the actual attitudes of students, in light of our perception that their responses on research instruments do not fully match the choices they make. Also in terms of the extent of exposure of students to both course content on ageing and older people, we need more information on what social work courses are currently doing via an audit of social work programs. It is critical that we gain a better understanding of students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people given population ageing and the increasing opportunities for social work practice with older people both in aged care and other settings. As a profession social work has much to offer in the delivery of services to older people. However – as evidenced in the small number of papers on

aged care published recently in *Australian Social Work* (Bigby 2006) – there is still a long way to go in advancing social work scholarship and practice with older people.

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Title - “...Why am I Here? ...Why I am Here ...Striving Towards Good Teaching Practices within Social Work Education”

(A/Prof) Phillip A. Swain¹

This article reflects upon the author’s personal journey toward the goal of more reflective, responsive and engaging social work educational practice. It considers what ‘good teaching’ means, particularly within the author’s experience of contemporary social work education, and on the impact of exposing teaching practice to external critique, through a recent teaching innovation at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

Introduction

“Teaching is an interactive process... Good teaching involves building bridges between what is in your head and what is in the students’ heads” (McKeachie, 1997 p.1224).

...but how to ensure that the interaction is most beneficial? - that is the challenge. The reality of contemporary student experience is very different from a generation or even a few years ago: today the student is probably working, possibly full-time, may well have family responsibilities, and is juggling a complex array of personal family and employment commitments alongside educational demands (Darlaston-Jones and Cohen, 2003; Frey, Faul and Yankelov, 2003; Voysey, 1998). Many social work students will be older, or having a career change, and already with some experience in the human services, along with the mortgage, family and other demands upon time, energy and resources (School of Social Work, 2001). Jirovic, Ramanathan & Alvarez (1998), researching the perceptions of social work students of their classroom educators, found social work students perceived that teaching excellence necessitated knowledge of the subject matter, preparing and organising, grading and testing fairly, assigning an appropriate workload, relevant and clear content delivery, and demonstrating enthusiasm for the content of the subject. Of these characteristics, a key requirement was instructional skill (Jirovic, Ramanathan and Alvarez, 1998 p.230).

Universities fulfil, arguably, a variety of roles - “education and knowledge transfer, development of new ideas, a place for scholarly work, intellectual training, social critique and community engagement...” (University of Melbourne, 2005 at p.5) Nevertheless, contemporary student realities and their expectations may sit in juxtaposition with academic commitment to provision of first class learning resources, and an adaptive curriculum which is responsive to social demands and student diversity (University of Melbourne, 2004, 2005, undated). Despite the best efforts of the academic the contemporary student may well arrive just in time for the relevant class, or may not attend at all if the greater portion of the lecture or presentation content is available in an alternative format, such as via the web, notwithstanding educational commitment to the view that “...the social work perspective [is] that learning takes place within the sustaining tradition of in-person based instruction” (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000, p.111). They may already be moving toward the exit before breath has been drawn after the last sentence of the lecture - to resume child care responsibilities, or to get back to their place of employment, or to

¹ Philip Swain is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Melbourne University

get to their next class. If, as Ramsden (2003, p.98) suggests, "...good teaching is open to change...", then development of good teaching practice necessarily involves critical self-reflection, attention to best educational practice, and a willingness to hear and respond to both academic peers and student voices. This might seem a self-evident and basic principle, but how routinely are such practices accepted as part of everyday academic expectations?

This article presents some reflections upon the process of considering what 'good teaching' means within contemporary social work education, and upon a personal journey along the path toward the goal of more reflective, responsive and engaging educational practice.¹ The process is, of course, ongoing.

Background

When contemplating enrolment in a formal course of higher education training, the Graduate Certificate in University Teaching ("GCUT") introduced in 2004 at the University of Melbourne (Australia), a senior Faculty colleague suggested "Don't do it - do something else to fill in your time!" Why, after years of sessional, part- and more recently full-time employment in the tertiary sector, would a course designed to promote excellence in teaching, hold attraction? Why, indeed. My teaching generally rates well on the various student feedback scales which, notwithstanding the queries regarding their reliability and validity as measures of teacher effectiveness, have been shown are still a legitimate means of assessment of teaching ability (Adams, 2004; Felder, 1992; Wolfer and Johnson, 2003), and not simply a product of the popularity of the course or the entertainment provided by the instructor (Jirovic et al, 1998, p.236). In addition, I enjoy social work teaching and have a reputation (so far as is ever communicated to the individual concerned!) of teaching enthusiastically and drawing upon relevant links to research and professional social work practice. Why, indeed?

It has always struck me as odd that in every tertiary teaching position I have held I have never actually been asked the most obvious question - "what makes you think you can teach?" Academic interviewers ask about my professional background, my areas of practice interest, my publications and research interests, but never whether I could *teach*, and far less whether I could teach *well*, or could develop such skills. Not once. Annual appraisals of academic performance and career planning, a feature of academic and most professional lives, incorporate reviews of teaching performance, drawing principally (in my experience) upon student assessment of teaching and course material, but rarely if ever on independent, external assessment of the competency, innovation or creativity of the teacher. It often seems to be assumed that a competent and experienced practitioner would be (become) the skilled teacher as well... somehow. Yet just as "...it cannot be assumed that effective scholars make

¹ In 2004 the author enrolled in the inaugural intake at the University of Melbourne into the *Graduate Certificate in University Teaching* ("GCUT"), to be completed over four semesters in 2004-2005. This article presents an overview of the processes of reflecting upon teaching innovation and improvement which the Certificate has encouraged in participating students. The author acknowledges with gratitude the valuable insights offered by staff of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education ("CSHE") at the University of Melbourne, and Mr Stuart Evans, Fellow of the School of Social Work at that University and mentor/observer during the Certificate course, and the comments of the anonymous academic reviewers on the draft of this article.

effective teachers” (Valentine, Edwards, Gohagan, Huff, Periera & Wimson, 1998, p. 275), is there any particular reason that the experienced practitioner will make a skilled teacher? Perhaps, rather, teaching is not considered as important in comparison to research, publication and higher degree supervision, at least in the contemporary academic climate (Lager & Robbins, 2004)?

The GCUT course was an opportunity to critically re-examine what ‘seems to work’ in educational delivery in the light of contemporary educational best practice and wisdom. It was an opportunity to join with both beginning and more experienced academics from across wide range of disciplines, all committed to the critical examination of the theory and process of teaching, to learning from others, to being open to challenge and to improvement of teaching effectiveness. What makes for ‘good’ teaching, Ramsden (2003) argues, is reflective more of the teacher’s commitment to teaching and to his or her students, than to a set of particular skills; indeed, the most significant areas in the assessment of good teaching are a positive attitude to students; an ability to communicate well, and a lively interest in improving teaching through reflection and action (Ramsden, 2003 at p.216). A critical examination of all three aspects could do no harm.

Apart from the ubiquitous student feedback rating, there are a variety of ways by which teaching effectiveness might be assessed - including direct classroom observation, using videotaping of classes, through evaluation of course materials, or assessment of instructor evaluation of students work, and by critique of teaching portfolios (Keig and Waggoner, 1994 at p.41). The GCUT course incorporated several such dimensions: it included the opportunity to develop written teaching plans for several nominated smaller or larger group teaching sessions, and to receive critical feedback on those plans; to be directly observed whilst presenting to a small or larger group of students, by fellow GCUT academic participants, course teaching staff, and a nominated colleague, and to receive critical feedback from the observers; and videotaping of a teaching presentation (and the opportunity to reflect on the video tape and what it identified of individual classroom teaching styles, strengths and areas for development). What follows in this article represents an attempt to bring together the insights and suggestions of those who have attempted to help me to develop a response to the rarely-asked question “what makes you think you can teach?”

On planning to teach...

Teaching - or at least teaching well - is not just filling in an hour within an already crowded timetable. Of course, it is also much more than just what occurs in the small or larger group classroom presentation, particularly in social work and similar professional courses where socialisation, mentoring, modelling, and exposure to the values and ethical principles of professional practice are arguably as much a part of the teaching and learning experience as the theoretical and skill content of the classes themselves (Frey, Faul & Yankelov, 2003; Knight, 2001; Kreuger and Stretch, 2000). Social work education needs to engender an appreciation of the importance of policy analysis and critique (Pawar, 2004), together with key practice knowledge and skills (Ife, 1997), so that the beginning professional is supported in moving towards ‘...a more formal, systematic, critical and self-critical, informed and accurate understanding’ (Adams, 2004, p.126) of practice within its socio-political contexts.

Indeed, it has been argued that the development of interpersonal skills and frameworks of understanding cannot be learned in the absence of the socialisation and role-modelling opportunities provided by direct exposure to professional educators and skilled field placement practitioners and in turn the political, economic and cultural arenas of practice (Cleak & Wilson, 2004; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Important within the sites for such critical exposure are small and larger group presentations to students, and so the GCUT focus was upon expanding competencies and confidence within these particular aspects of the educational experience, and in turn so this article was developed. Whatever the form of teaching presentation, it is undertaken with various purposes in mind: to establish a broad outline of a body of knowledge; to set guidelines for the independent study students may later undertake; to model the intellectual attitudes and approaches that students will hopefully adopt; to encourage interest in a topic; and to set the culture for discussions in other forums (Brookfield, 1990). To teach well, it is also important to research the culture, backgrounds and concerns of the particular student audience, and to personalise the presentation both to capture and retain audience attention and to create a sense of authenticity in the presenter (Brookfield 1990, at pp.78-79).

A teaching 'plan'?,... what... written down? ... of course I have a lecture plan, just as I do for seminars, and whatever... but do I need to write it down? Who has time to do that for every lecture and seminar?

It was interesting to reflect on what the process of making explicit the usually implicit task of considering 'where do I want to get to today?'. It forced a fresh consideration of who is in the class and their background - some social work students, some mature age students, some doing combined degrees, some yet to undertake a first fieldwork placement, others about to graduate. The physical environment became more that just 'will the overhead projector work today?' - but rather a real consideration of what resources are needed? Is the space conducive to other ways of engaging with the students, given class size and the amount of material to be covered? Given the concentration spans of the average student (estimated at 12-20 minutes - (Brookfield 1990), what specific steps can be taken to incorporate a variety of approaches to the subject matter - video, discussion, other activities - in the class? Can a medium other than the voice be included? And how much time is available (is actually available?) to cover the material that needs to be presented? ...Interestingly, this was an issue which all those who observed my classes commented upon - the need to ensure that presentations fitted the time available and that, notwithstanding the temptation to head down interesting conceptual byways during the presentation (often reflective of personal interests and important practice dilemmas), it was still important to keep a watch on the clock, so that the presentation could return to the central focus and appropriately conclude on time....

The process of formally, explicitly considering the goals for each presentation, the disciplinary and subject-specific context in which it occurs, the conceptual framework within which it belongs, and the structure of the particular presentation, can be salutary. It is important to consider where this particular presentation fits within the subject, within related areas of study, and within the course in which students are engaged - to engender an environment in which "...students to become active participants in the learning process by sharing ideas and experiences"(Darlaston-

Jones et al., 2003). The idea of developing a lecture or presentation series, as sequential, inter-connected parts of a larger whole may not sound particularly sophisticated, but the process of considering the whole and then each constituent part can be challenging. It can also, I suspect, encourage a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning (Steinert, 2004) by making that whole more relevant to those on the receiving end - the students in the classes.

The utility of collegial feedback...

Ramsden (2003, pp.93-99) argues that effective tertiary teaching needs -amongst other things - to reflect a commitment to the discipline and subject matter, a concern and respect for student and student learning, the development of clear goals and intellectual challenges, use of appropriate assessment and feedback, and a willingness to learn from students themselves. Good teaching requires not simply discipline-specific knowledge, essential though that is -

“...successful teachers are knowledgeable about teaching strategies and learning theories, committed to the individual development of students, cognizant of the complex contexts in which instruction occurs, and concerned about colleagues teaching as well as their own....” (Keig et al., 1994 at pp.14-15).

Despite on-going debates about what constitutes ‘good’ teaching, there is anecdotal and academic support for the view that direct observation of the teacher by informed peers can be a useful catalyst to instructional improvement (Keig et al., 1994), though ‘honest and thoughtful self-evaluation’ by the teacher is also critical (Keig et al., 1994, p.18). Perhaps easier said than done.

I was observed three times - once before academic peers in a demonstration teaching session, a second with a colleague as mentor/observer in an actual teaching session with social work students, and finally another lecture with both colleague observer and an academic observer from CSHE staff. I've taught at various Universities for almost fifteen years, though only full time since the late 90s, and have almost always had others - even if mainly higher degree tutors, though only occasionally fellow academic colleagues - observing and participating my classes. I thought that knowing that I was being observed would matter not a whit, but it was surprising how nervous I felt, even on the first occasion which was really just a demonstration session before others undertaking the GCUT course, with no actual students present at all. And it must have shown in the actual classroom too - my tutor Karen commented after the student lecture when I was also observed - “I knew something was happening - you were a bit nervous today!”

There are, however, limitations to the usefulness of being observed by colleagues. One is the difficulty of association, especially perhaps in relatively small department where there may be limited available and experienced staff options from which pool an observer can be selected. Being an observer can be a considerable time commitment, and requires both the observer and the observed to be willing to be frank and open, yet respectful and willing to give and receive constructive criticism... not always easy within the bounds of a professional working relationship often

marked by educational status hierarchies and power differentials, or in a small department where the same colleagues may coordinate and lead one subject area but be led in another. The tutor in one subject may be a higher degree student under the supervision of the subject coordinator, or perhaps an early career academic in a subject long taught by a senior colleague - how can the doctoral student-tutor effectively critique the teaching performance of her or his supervisor? Where there are close personal or professional associations the rating (assessment) of teaching is likely to be less reliable and higher, and in any case ratings by academic colleagues have been shown to tend to be higher than those of students, whilst there are time and cost considerations in observing a sufficient number and range of classroom activities in order to be able to generalise from the particular instance of observation to an appreciation of overall teaching effectiveness (Keig et al., 1994).

In my own case, I was observed in the classroom setting on three occasions, two by my Departmental colleague alone (a recently retired member of staff), and a third by that colleague and the CSHE advisor. Their feedback was both encouraging and challenging -

“... your use of story telling was both relevant to the subject content and helpful in developing the social context for learning... this was also helpful in encouraging people to think about some of the broader policy and theoretical issues from a personal perspective, again giving the subject a certain immediacy and encouraging engagement....”

“I also really appreciated your strong emphasis on the question of “why? - why consider policy?” To argue this is to pay your students respect. You are committed to convincing them, not just imposing something on them.”

but presented important reminders as to the power of the presenter to manage or manipulate the nature of the information presented, and to control the process itself -

“[you need] to be careful of the tendency to over-identify with the understandable and transitory cynicism of students, as they make their accommodations between idealisation and rejection of given knowledge.... The cumbersome and sometimes unfair nature of the justice system needs itself to be placed in a context that engenders both a sceptical respect and a willingness to engage in progressive change.”

“...your voice is strong and varied, the pace was fine - but watch a tendency to continue making extended points after your allotted time is up. The group was actually ready to finish.”

“...sometimes the pace of his lecture gathers and unhelpful momentum that hints of the wish to rush content that might otherwise require more time for intelligent digestion: more is not always better.”

Salutary lessons, but made more comfortable to digest by the context of collegial support and encouragement within which they were given. As Wolfer & Johnson (2003, p.118) note -

“teaching excellence occurs in particular classrooms.... [it] is not the teaching behaviour per se but how this behaviour fits within the particular group of students that is of the greatest importance...”

- *this* cohort of student, in *this* department (with its particular staff demographics and hierarchies), in *this* university, in *this* socio-eco-political context. The policy-practice dimension - as remarked upon by one observer - is important; for the professional social worker-educator this nexus should be central to all preparation for professional life, though at times it can be clouded by the ever-present focus on direct interpersonal practice. How can one intervene at an individual level without an awareness of the socio-cultural, historical, political and policy contexts within which that intervention occurs? Policy analysis and critique is not and should not be seen as something that only policy analysts do - but rather as a key component of the ethical practice of every social work practitioner, whatever the immediate focus of his or her practice, with policy perspectives presented within the teaching of practice conceived as part of the one process (Ife 1997, p.171).

*As social workers, we're used to both seeing ourselves in action, in various settings, and to being exposed to critique regarding our interpersonal and communication skills - it's part of the process of integrating skills into one's array of professional techniques, and part of developing the self understanding and awareness which are expected of and essential to good professional practice (Australian Association of Social Workers 2000). The use of video and other observational techniques - the one-way mirror and interviewing rooms, for example - are common devices used to teach and observe interpersonal skills in undergraduate social work courses; in professional practice placements students and field teachers continuously use direct observation to monitor and model appropriate professional skills. And I've seen myself many times on video, in these and other professional settings.... I think I know pretty well what I look and sound like to others...
...but did I really move about that much? There's not a lot of value in having a slide on the screen if I stand in front of it! And what's with all that arm waving? and my voice - perhaps it does get a bit mono-tonal at times....?*

In professional social work education an important part of interpersonal skill development is an emerging awareness of the use of self, and the impact of communication techniques, verbal and non-verbal cues upon any relationship (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund, 1995) - but these competencies are not only for the student practitioner to develop but also for the academic educator to demonstrate in the teaching practice. Even when it is part of everyday professional or ongoing education, it is valuable to see ourselves as others see us, at least from time to time; to recognise the quirks of presentation, language and non-verbal behaviour that to us are second nature but may detract from the educational goals set for the session in question.

Some conclusions

Effective teaching needs to incorporate “... something more than simply passively taking notes in a lecture, and a few fleeting experiences of debate and discussion with a handful of exciting, supportive lecturers and tutors” (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003).

The personal experiences of being taught will, for some perhaps, be underscored by the recollection that "...[m]any lecturers seem to assume their inalienable right to bore...." (Brookfield, 1990 at p.71). As educators, we need to continually remind ourselves of the context of a particular social and political climate, and a particular cohort of students with their unique characteristics, within which we teach - as (Ramsden, 2003, p.107) contends "...teaching always takes place in particular contexts....".

The GCUT represented an opportunity to explore contemporary best teaching practice, research and educational thinking, and to be challenged to make the theory-research-practice link in relation to teaching itself, rather than only in relation to the primary professional disciplines of the participants. It offered a rare opportunity to explicitly consider what 'good teaching' was, how it was understood and defined, and how aspects of good teaching could be developed and applied across and within particular disciplinary contexts.

One of the outstanding dimensions of the GCUT was the opportunity to engage with fellow academic staff from across a variety of faculties and departments, and across various levels of teaching experience, all of whom were committed to teaching well. It provided continuous opportunities to interact with and learn from other participants, to explore how an approach to one educational task could offer ideas for other teaching, assessment or subject development.

The capacity for teaching to be mentored and externally assessed is an opportunity to be cherished. As noted above, mentoring and constructive feedback on teaching competency rarely are available (at least in my experience) at tertiary level - there are too many other demands on academic time to spend time in classes where one does not have to be. Too often the only observers of how well (or poorly) we teach - apart from the students in our classes! - are postgraduate tutors or beginning academic staff - neither in a position to offer effective critique of teaching by their more senior colleagues (who may also be their PhD supervisors!). The opportunity for actual teaching, and for the preparation for teaching in the form of subject and student materials, to be observed and critiqued can provide a rich occasion for reflection and growth.

Of course, the assessment of teaching competencies needs to incorporate a variety of perspectives, not the least of which is that of the students involved in the process - student perceptions of teaching effectiveness may differ considerably from those of academics themselves. Nonetheless, the process of critically planning to teach, and what and how to teach, and of being observed in the process of teaching, can be both challenging and rewarding. It can encourage a reconsideration of what is being taught, and why, of what learning outcomes are sought, and of the relationship between the particular teaching opportunity and the overall learning environment inside and outside the classroom that pervades the student experience and shapes her or his preparation for professional life. Critical review of teaching competencies and of the rationales for the approaches being used can help to ensure that teaching "...expands, challenges and transforms students' previously narrow and parochial perceptions" (Haynes, 1999, p.43). The challenge, in amongst the pressures to research, publish, supervise and administer - all with benchmarks of excellence that

seem to be raised each time academic performance levels are attained - is to remember that

“...effective teaching refuses to takes its affect on students for granted. It sees the relation between teaching and learning as problematic, uncertain and relative.... it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying that instruction in the light of the evidence collected...” (Ramsden, 2003 at p.98)

The challenge continues, but is critical if teaching excellence is the aim.

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'It is More Complicated Than You First Think!' The Challenges of Work-Based Practica.

*Justine O'Sullivan¹ and Brenda Bartlett², University of Western Sydney;
Karen Heycox³, University of New South Wales; Carolyn Noble⁴, Victoria
University*

Work-based practica (that is practica in the student's usual place of employment) can be viewed as an 'easy option' for locating placements in the context of high competition for a limited range of practica opportunities. Students who are currently working in the human services sector as well as mature age students with family/life responsibilities also see that work-based practica (WBP) is a pragmatic and equitable way of reducing the pressure of study/work/family demands. It can also increase access to a professionally based award with a huge practica load. However we would argue that a WBP is a complex option with significant advantages and disadvantages and, before undertaken, university educators need to explore the complexities.

This article presents findings on the third and final stage of a project that explored current practices, concerns, advantages and disadvantages of WBP in social work from the experiences of field-based supervisors and students who undertook WBP during their course. This stage builds on the previous two stages of this project that explored the practices, concerns and advantages and disadvantages of WBPs from the perspective of university-based educators in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and at an international meeting of social work educators. Several recommendations are proposed if WBP is to become a viable option for students.

Introduction

A recurring topic of interest and of some concern that kept arising in the network of university field-based educators group, the NSW/ACT Combined Universities Field Education Group (CUFEG) was the rise in the number of students requesting WBP, especially if they were working in welfare related jobs while studying. In discussing the issues among CUFEG educators it was noted that in social work and welfare work programmes in NSW and ACT, except for regional and distance education programmes, WBP have not been extensively used. This is surprising given support for WBP from the social work and social welfare accrediting bodies - the Australian Association for Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Institute for Welfare and Community Work (AIWCW) - that allows for one work-based placement in social work and welfare courses. Although the professional bodies generally support one WBP, it is our experience that most universities in Australia have exercised caution and

¹ **Justine O'Sullivan** is Lecturer, School of Social Sciences, University of Western Sydney

² **Brenda Bartlett** is Lecturer, School of Social Sciences, University of Western Sydney

³ **Karen Heycox** is Senior Lecturer, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney

⁴ **Carolyn Noble** is Professor and Head of Social Work Unit, School of Social Sciences, Victoria University.

shown a general reluctance to use a student's place of work as a site for learning with many actively discouraging such an option. The exception, as stated earlier, has been the regional institutions who have limited opportunities in smaller regional areas for providing students with a variety and breadth of placement experiences and who use WBP to increase the number of choices for students.

Members of CUFEG were also cautious and were reluctant to support WBP in practice. Several reasons for this reluctance were identified: the pedagogical consideration to provide students with a 'variety' and 'breadth' of placement experiences to prepare them for practice; the assumption that most students were studying full time; and even if they did work it was assumed that it was part-time and in non 'social work' related jobs; its association with the debates about the implications of 'paid' practica; and the tensions about compromising educational elements to the demands of the 'real', paid work.

However, several changes in the teaching of social work and welfare¹ courses have demanded a revisiting of these assumptions. Universities are facing increasing difficulties finding the appropriate number of practica opportunities, particularly for first practica, as more and more competition is emerging with new courses being introduced across the sector. Many if not all students have to work (up to full time) to support their studies - a factor not unrelated to the introduction of fees for university study. For mature aged students with family responsibilities entering university as well as working the pressure of work with study alongside other family/personal commitments is extremely difficult. With the introduction of articulation arrangements with other related welfare and human service courses, many students have to do as many as five separate placements across related fields adding further tensions to the availability of suitable (and different) practica experiences while further increasing the burden, financially and personally. Lastly, the historical, and empirically unsupported, argument that field work is compromised by students doing their practice in their place of employment is being challenged by the growing literature on work-base learning and its benefits to good practice and professional development (Thompson 2006; Fook 2002).

If the educational landscape has changed so dramatically then a revisiting of the issue of WBP is both timely and significant². As knowledge work is increasingly identified as an important part of organisations it makes sense to revisit the students' workplace as a possible site for the practica experience, especially in the context of finding enough suitable practica opportunities and as a genuine response to students increasing requests to do their practica in their place of work. This would hopefully reduce some of the burden of many students having to take unpaid leave to undertake a practica.

So, if Australian universities were to embrace the concept and explore the learning potential in WBP what would be the advantages and disadvantages? Will the students have opportunities for new learning? Will the workplace support such learning? What,

¹ While we include welfare courses in this discussion and in the first two stages of this project, this final stage was conducted only with social work supervisors and students, due to lack of volunteers from the welfare courses.

² It must be noted here that WBP have been used more extensively in other countries, specifically New Zealand and United Kingdom, which have been placing students in their usual place of work for some time.

if any, are the potential conflicts? and what could we learn from this exploration for use in field education programmes – the educational site responsible for facilitating, supporting and monitoring student learning? As one student in our project replied:

So they (university-based educators) kind of discouraged it (WBP) to begin with. If they had encouraged it and been a bit more supportive, it could have been easier (for me to do the course).

Utilizing a grounded theory approach this project, through its three stages, explored the extent and the challenges in undertaking a work-based practica in students' place of employment. This project is important as many social work and welfare work programmes have to reconsider their position regarding WBP as the availability of suitable placements are becoming increasingly more difficult in this competitive market and as more and more students are requesting this option for themselves. It is also timely as organisations, especially human service organisations, are increasingly being acknowledged as important sites for the construction and development of knowledge and worker expertise (Fook 2002). It is also timely to have this discussion as the AASW reviews its eligibility criteria and field education is particularly viewed as an area needing creative and flexible ways to implement effective practica experiences.

In this article we report our findings on the third stage of a three-stage project exploring the experiences of some social work students and field-based educators/supervisors who undertook WBP. The first stage involved an e.survey about the disadvantages and advantages from the perspective of university-based educators across Australia. Additionally comparative data was sought from overseas, via same e.survey in Canada and New Zealand. The second stage involved interviews with university-based educators at an international meeting of social work academics and further information was elicited from a focus group with university-based educators working in New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory (NSW/ACT). In order to continue to address this complex situation and to inform a sound pedagogical basis for deciding whether WBL is real learning or just doing your usual job the third stage canvassed the views of the field-based educators/supervisors and the students, who undertook WBP, about their experience of doing a placement in their place of employment.

Background

For some time now the NSW/ACT Combined Universities Field Education Group (CUFEG), a network of social work and welfare work field educators, has been concerned that while there was increasing competition for practica, especially due to an expansion of social work programs, WBP were not viewed as an educationally viable option by university educators as only a small number of programmes were actually using WBP. All CUFEG (NSW/ACT) members were aware of an increasing demand for WBP by several groups of students. In particular students who have to work to support their study; mature aged students with family responsibilities; rural students with limited choice for placements; and graduates (from related welfare courses) seeking some recognition of their prior learning. While the issue of prior learning is a vexed one and not addressed in this project we were aware that many of these students were actually working, either part or full time in the health/welfare workforce during their studies and saw their request as a valid option. The sub group of CUFEG (NSW/ACT) who undertook this research project started with the question of why WBP were not seen as a viable option by all universities. Particular attention was

directed toward exploring the extent and value of WBP, as there seemed to be varying criteria being used to approve placements in the students' place of work.

In stage 1 of the project Australian university educators were surveyed as to the extent that they used WBP and their perceived advantages and disadvantages. Some comparison was done with overseas university educators via a survey of New Zealand and Canadian educators. The responses from the educators identified several practical reasons for their use especially in terms of increasing the number of options available. WBP were also seen as providing a degree of flexibility for students with competing personal and work commitments thus helping students to complete their program and graduate within a reasonable length of time. Finally many saw the practice of using WBP as a way of being able to attract students from non-traditional backgrounds such as mature aged men and women who currently work in the welfare sector and who might otherwise not enroll in full time courses with an intensive field education program (Bartlett, Heycox, Noble & O'Sullivan, 2004). As expected, while many saw WBP positively several issues were identified as major concerns. Such as how do university-based educators make sure that learning opportunities and associated tasks are separated from the paid workload?, how does student learning get 'quarantined' or 'protected' from the work expectations, roles and responsibilities and, how can agencies make provisions to address the possible confusion of roles; and how to access supervision from someone other than a known colleague? (Bartlett et al, 2004).

In stage 2 of the project more in depth data was sought via a focus group with CUFE (NSW/ACT) members. An international comparison was also explored via five individual interviews with university-based educators who were regional representatives of their professional organisations from the Caribbean, USA, England, Hong Kong and Germany. While all these participants again recognised the value of WBP for students balancing work/study/family commitments many more disadvantages were identified. For example, attention was drawn to the difficulties in failing students in their workplace; students' ability to critically reflect on work practices as a result of the possible conflict of issues with their employing organisation and the potential site of conflict of interest in the close relationship with their supervisor/colleague; difficulties with assessing student/worker in a role different from what they were employed to do; and the adequacy of assessment skills in distinguishing between the competing and complex demands of student as learner and student as worker (Noble, Heycox, O'Sullivan & Bartlett, 2005). By the end of the second stage of the project it was obvious that we needed to ask the agency supervisors/field educators and the students who had undertaken a WBP for their views. Therefore stage 3, the final stage, of the project involved individual interviews with students and agency based field educators who had participated in a WBP.

Methodology

For stage 3 a qualitative methodology was employed which consisted of semi structured individual interviews, via face-to-face and telephone, with six agency field educators and ten social work students to explore their experiences of WBP. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and thematically analysed. Interviews were selected for this stage of the project to provide more in-depth material as opposed to surveys; and focus groups were not viewed as practical due to geographical distances between participants.

Email was used to contact and recruit the field supervisors and students, via the social work and welfare work academics involved with field education who were known to members of CUFEG (NSW/ACT), and who had participated in WBP. Information sheets and consent forms were emailed and faxed to all participants. A research assistant was employed to arrange and conduct the interviews and members of the research team conducted additional interviews. There was no attempt to pair the participants, although several participants were part of the dyad of field educator/student relationship.

Seven questions were asked of each participant and to answered from their role as either supervisor or student. They included the following:

1. What was the name of the agency where the student was employed?
2. What was his/her position in the agency?
3. How was the placement different from her/his usual paid work?
4. How was this arranged with the university?
5. What were the disadvantages for agency, staff/student?
6. What were the advantages for taking an employee as a student on placement or what was the advantage as a student for undertaking a WBP?
7. On reflection, would you do anything different?

Participants:

Students: The ten student participants interviewed had requested a WBP on the basis of their perceived previous work and/or practica experiences. For instance they had a range of experience with paid employment in the government and non-government health/welfare sectors; many had tertiary qualifications in welfare, and in addition had completed placements in the Human Services Sector as part of their diploma or degree. Seven were female and three were male. It is interesting to note that while there were more females than males, the percentage of males is higher than in the general student population of social work students.

The students took the initiative of consulting with their employers about possible learning opportunities within the organisation. They were able to negotiate learning that was new or learning that built on existing skills and knowledge. The work they completed in their WBP, which was often research projects, community development projects and training initiatives, occurred within different settings and with different client groups, and were therefore different from their usual paid work role. Further the WBP learning opportunities that were available were either in geographically different settings with completely different staff or in the same location with the same staff but with different supervisors. Some were in small agencies while others were located on other floors of the much larger government departments.

Agency based field educators: The six field agency educators were predominantly female and were social workers working in either the Government or Non-government sectors. All were experienced as both supervisors and practitioners.

Limitations

While the reason for using interviews in this stage of the project was to gather more qualitative material we also note on reflection a number of limitations in our research design. In particular we note that we have concerns about:

- Accessing a sufficient number of participants where potential participants had changed jobs or locations.
- Time since the placement was concluded and its possible impact on interviewee recall.
- The limitations of using phone interviews over face-to-face interviews.
- The limitations of standardizing responses to the questions as different interviewers were used.
- The limitations of the questions asked e.g. where some questions such as were they paid during the WBP were not specifically asked.

Despite these limitations sufficient and valuable information was gathered to address the questions informing this project.

Findings – Stage Three

The findings are presented in the tables below and the themes emerging are discussed in the following section

Figure 1. WBP Advantages and disadvantages - STUDENTS

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
• Making my whole life easier	• Not reflecting on my learning
• A ‘fairer’ option	• Role juggling
• Value adding to agency	• Living with competing demands
• Benefits of practicum supervision	• Not acknowledged as learners
• Enhanced learning	• Just ‘getting on with it’
• Career openings	• Supervisors resigned/left during placement
• Continued to get paid	• Personality clash with supervisor

Figure 2. WBP Advantages and disadvantages – AGENCY FIELD SUPERVISORS

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
• Easily included in workplace	• Blurring the boundaries between roles
• Improved the student/worker’s job chances within the organisation	• Students walking ‘on egg shells’
• Students’ critical reflection led to agency changes	• Students suffered a loss of learning potential
• Experience different supervisor from line supervision	

Research Themes.

It was interesting to note that the student/workers highlighted many more advantages and disadvantages compared to the agency field supervisors. It could be argued that this may have been due to the students’ own vested interest in an experience that was about ‘them’ and ‘their’ own learning. From the qualitative data collected from this stage, several themes identifying the advantages and disadvantages were identified and are

discussed below. The themes which highlighted the advantages that students experienced in doing work-based practicum could be grouped under a number of headings: *making life easier; being a fairer option; adding value to the agency; learning benefits of supervision; enhancing learning; and opening up career options.*

In this section supervisors and students responses were similar and are presented together.

Making 'life' easier

Under this theme, was the comment by three students who identified relief from work/life stresses in the following: 'It was a financial situation, I was paying off a mortgage' and 'The other side of doing a WBP, is that it has saved my family life', and 'I maintained all my entitlements, leave, flexible hours, etc ... and (by being paid but at a lower rate) I was able to do a full time placement and had paid leave'.

In addition to making life easier there was the benefit of the making the actual initial orientation stage of the practicum easier. One student stated: *'I was quite familiar with how the organisation worked and I knew most of the team before I went there'*. The supervisors also saw advantages in having someone who was familiar with the field supervisor and the organisation, making for an easier transition into the learning experience. As this supervisor noted: *'She knew me & I knew her; I knew her skills and what she was capable of'*, while another commented that *'The big advantage of (student-worker's) doing a placement with us was that someone unfamiliar was not left to wander around without support'*

Being a 'fairer' option

In terms of access and equity issues students saw WBP as providing a way that they could complete their degrees while addressing financial, family and geographic concerns. Three students named these issues in the following quotes: *'There is a big reason underpinning this (wanting a WBP) for me. I am 42 going on 43, I have had to fund my way through university' ... (now) how am I going to keep my job to do prac?'* and *'I have 3 kids so the flexibility of it is good'* and further *'Due to rural isolation...there is not a lot of choice out there for me, so it (WBP) killed two birds with one stone'*.

Adding value to the agency

There were three ways that students saw themselves as adding value to their workplace organisation. Firstly they may have worked on a project, which gave the agency valuable feedback about their current structure, and this resulted in a change to a particular service. As one student put it: *'... the whole situation of volunteers at the agency has now changed. A big finding (of my WBP project) was that nobody knew how much volunteers actually (already) contributed!'*

A further contribution to the agency was in the form of increased knowledge of the larger organisation when the student was placed in a different area to their usual area of work: *'I was able to give them information about the services that were available in*

other parts of our agency so that was an advantage' While another saw an opportunity to bring her social work knowledge to the workplace

Since getting the management job (following the WBP) I do get to talk about the future direction of the agency ... I do get to talk about how we interact with clients yes what systems we have in place, what systems for client and employee care so from that prac I can bring in huge amount of social work agendas

It was not only the students who perceived their WBP contribution to their usual place of employment. The supervisors also saw this contribution. In particular **one supervisor** stated that the agency benefited from the critique that the student could provide to the agency: *'The student was able to question why we did things. It made us look at our processes; it made us change some of our processes.'*

Seeing the benefits of practicum supervision

Supervision is often noted as the pivotal aspect to an effective practicum for the student (Fernandez 1997). Therefore it is noteworthy that WBP students also saw the benefits of supervision to their learning. One student saw this as the highlight of the practicum, for her and her supervisor, *'The supervision was the best thing about it. We both learnt a lot'* and another student saw the importance of supervision in their practicum being linked to their learning needs: *'Supervision was much more focused on **my** learning needs and ways to improve areas'*.

While another student commented that the practicum gave an opportunity to experience supervision, (which was not available as a worker) which enabled reflection on their learning:

There are not enough funds for you to get good supervision (in the workplace). You can't always get a chance to think about what you have to do, you just do it. However, being on practicum and with the supervisor set-up gave me a fabulous opportunity to think in a structured way

Enhancing Learning

The fourth theme under advantages notes that some students did experience enhanced learning by having the opportunity to build on their current knowledge and skills. As this student comments: *'It wasn't new learning, it was about developing existing learning or strengthening existing learning'*. In affirming the usefulness of the current professional association guidelines one student commented on the breadth of learning they gained from being exposed to different aspects of their organisation: *'Having an external supervisor and the chance to skill-up and work in a different area gave me" a huge, broader range and scope of what I could do'*

While university-based educators are often concerned over students' ability to integrate theory and practice in any type of practicum, a student in this study made it clear that this was something they got out of a WBP: *'While it was all new (research) and I was walking through uncharted territory I knew what we were talking about from our classes and our texts'*.

Opening up career options

The next theme confirmed that not only do WBP enable students to complete their degrees they also open up career options in their workplace. One student wanted to move into a managerial position and their WBP allowed him to work closely with a manager and this led to his next job in the organisation: *'I ended up being offered a position here...I am happy because this is the direction I wanted to go with'*

Disadvantages of WBP

While a number of advantages were described above there were also a number of disadvantages identified in the interviews with the student/workers and the supervisors. These were grouped under the themes: *reflecting on my learning; role juggling; living with competing demands; not acknowledged as learners; and just getting on with it.*

As supervisors and students identified separate concerns these are presented separately. First the students' responses, then the supervisors.

Students:

Reflecting on my learning

While some students talked about the enhancement of their learning through a WBP others talked about the difficulty in a WBP of having space to reflect on their learning. One student commented on their own lack of openness to the process of learning assuming that there was no new learning to do: *'(my own) assumption that I "know all the stuff" was a disadvantage'* and another student said: *'When I went into the placement the whole idea was to build on my current area of work, but I didn't really get to do that. In hindsight, I should have (sought) more input into the project'*. A third student compared the WBP with the first placement and concluded *'My other placement (unpaid) was engrossing, and I learnt so much more, (because) my mind was focused on just that'*.

Juggling Roles

This last student's comment also encompasses the theme of Juggling Roles whereby students are confronted with concerns about where their priorities should lay, as worker or student? Concerns here can be summed up in the comment of one student on the stress of the work demands over the demands of the student role: *'I always had the feeling that I needed to keep an eye on my own job. I enjoyed it very much but to be frank I wouldn't do it again'* and another student talked about the difficulty in juggling the roles and keeping any sense of separation of the learner and worker roles: *'so I did Monday Tuesday Wednesday and um then I did ... Thursday and Friday on my other job....'*

Living with competing demands

This juggling act often leads to stress for students to the point of physical exhaustion as they attempt to keep both roles going simultaneously. One student stated that: *'The whole thing was (physically) quite tiring as I had to cram 5 days work into 3... (but) you have to go with it'*, and another noted that: *'The only thing I found really hard was the issue of doing placement while you are working. Because of financial commitments, to fit in the placement and not get paid is really tricky'*.

Not acknowledging learner needs

Familiarity with the organisation and the people can be seen, as noted earlier, as an advantage for the initial orientation period. However this familiarity was also viewed as having a downside in terms of the expectation of others that the student could just do things and did not have any learning needs. One student commented: *'When you know people and they know how you work, they leave you to get on with things & there is an assumption that you will be OK ... familiarity is not a good thing sometimes'*. While the lack of initial anxiety can be seen as helpful it was also seen at times as a lack of challenge and opportunities to learn. As another student commented: *'It was my workplace, so there wasn't the anxiety and excitement that go with doing something new... I didn't get to know another part of the service or the sector'*.

Finally it can be hard for a student to assert their learner needs if they are only seen as only a worker, where the role of student is invisible or unacknowledged. This student outlines this dilemma as: *'Everyone first treated me like I was just an employee... so trying to engage other people in conversations that I would have if I was a student was difficult'*.

The dilemmas around having two roles in the organisation and having one's learner role and associated needs acknowledged can lead to a situation where they are not even permitted the luxury of making a mistake as it impacts on both their and the organization's credibility. In relation to this issue this student commented that: *'Within my own community, it was difficult to say to people that I was a student, because there were certain expectations... any mistakes I made would impact on my standing in the community'*.

Getting on with it

Rather than challenge some of these issues some students decided it was better just to 'get on with it'. Not to do so was seen as causing more problems for them in the organisation. This concern can be summarised by one student's statement: *'So it was up to me to just get on with it, put something together and go from there... was the boat worth rocking?'*

The supervisors identified further concerns. These can be grouped under the themes of: *blurring the boundaries; walking on eggshells; and losing the learning potential.*

Supervisors:

Blurring the boundaries

Earlier we referred to the juggling of student and worker roles for students and the stress this can cause, the supervisors are also conscious of the challenges for them and their student/workers in trying to perform both roles. One noted the complexity involved: *'It is more complicated than you first think'*, while another talked about this in terms of setting up the placement: *'As supervisor and student you do have to spend a lot of time negotiating the (student/worker's) different role'*.

Finally one supervisor spoke of the difficulty in monitoring a situation where the student is pulled between the demands of their work and student tasks: *'To be honest about it, the days did get fudged as to placement. If a big crisis at work came up (student/worker) would do that (thus moving from student to worker). ... I did challenge this situation half way through because I could see that work was taking over a bit'*.

Walking on egg shells

Just as the students could see the difficulty in challenging organisations where they are also a worker, so too were the supervisors conscious of the diplomacy needed for students/workers to negotiate through issues where their credibility and that of the supervisor could be at stake. Both parties had to live with the consequences in their place of work. If the supervisor is off site then this relationship and the consequences may be even more complex as noted in this quote: *'We had to look at the issues on what to do if the agency-authorized program didn't look too good'*.

Losing the learning potential

One supervisor saw the task of challenging a worker in the student role as harder than in another type of placement. This quote also implies a loss of learning potential: *'Probably had the student been an external student I would have pushed them more'*.

Discussion

'I thought they would let me do my job as my prac' (Student)

This quote highlights the crux of the challenges regarding WBP. Clearly WBP is complex and as this project shows the advantages and disadvantages are significant for the students, the educators, and the supervisors. There is no clear advantage one way or the other. If we focus on learning then WBP have more obstacles in providing students with a protected leaning environment unfettered as far is possible by potential conflicts of interest. If we focus on students request for more flexibility, recognition that their workplace is a valuable site for learning and getting paid to alleviate the financial strain, then WBP has possibilities. However as the pressure for placements and the pressure from students continue, educators need to make a decision as to whether WBP will be available for all rather than at certain universities, in certain agencies and for certain students. In this sense the issue needs to be addressed and a way forward

identified. This research project reminds us that a WBP is just not an easy option to resolve the issue of supply. If the disadvantages outlined in this article are taken seriously then there is a challenge in developing WBP. Even some students are aware before undertaking practica that there are potential disadvantages associated with WBP such as possible conflict of interests and the quality of the learning available. Yet we still need to address access and equity issues for students who have to work and take care of their family and other life commitments. The reality is many students are concurrently working in the welfare field during their course and want to maximise on this experience a part of their learning opportunities.

Two key questions emerge as paramount: what are the gains for students in undertaking a WBP? and what guidelines and parameters need to be established in order to address the challenges? In shifting the focus from whether to use WBP or not to how can universities ensure that learning is taking place in the workplace then we can move the debate forward. In shifting the debate from WBP or not, to the quality of the placements then we can see some fruitful progress.

We have argued elsewhere that reflective learning can be found anywhere, anytime and in any setting (Noble et al 2005) and as Fook (2004) argues reflective learning is as important for organisations as for the individual learners themselves. This is true for *all* students doing their practica. Placements are not the only site of student learning but the *only* opportunity they get to test out the realities of theory against practice imperatives. What is needed, then, is a re-conceptualisation of the practicum so that students' existing knowledge and skills are recognized while also enabling a space for building new learning. With regard to WBP the goal would be to enhance the student/worker's ability to be a different worker who can bring their social work knowledge and practice skills back to their workplace for the benefit of the organisation and its staff.

This can be done in a number of ways: by using the learning contract, liaison visits, classroom integration classes as well as supervision as possible sites to articulate the areas of conflicts of interest and barriers for new learning. This helps in the establishment of a learning agreement that reflects where new learning can occur. It may also be necessary to have 'in situ' meetings involving all relevant parties to the practicum before the placement commences. This could involve university educators, liaison staff, students, and agency based field supervisors but also key agency representatives who are involved with the students in their usual 'worker' roles. Such a meeting could hopefully address all potential possibilities for, and barriers to, learning for the worker/student. Key issues that would need to be addressed in this meeting would be:

1. What boundaries need to be set to make sure the student role is separate from their worker role?
2. How would possible collusion between the student/worker role and the supervisor/worker role be addressed?
3. What effect does payment and other non-monetary benefits have on the practicum experience?
4. How have the worker and learner roles and responsibilities been separated?
What monitoring will be done to ensure the separation does not get blurred?

5. How have the learner tasks been separated from the tasks expected from the work organisation?
6. Is there a genuine opportunity for 'real' learning available in the workplace or is it an easy option to offer the placement to this person? i.e. Student/worker is already known; fits in easily.
7. Is there agreement between all parties that new learning can occur?
8. Is the organisation/ agency/ supervisor able to assist the student/ worker to separate from their work demands
9. What was the prior knowledge of/relationship with the potential supervisor and colleagues and the implications if there are performance issues i.e. would they lose credibility in future working relationships or job offers?

Lastly even before a WBP is considered university-based educators could be proactive in helping the student identify and address particular issues by getting them to:

1. Consider what is the real or imagined potential of any conflict of interest of supervisors and organisations prior to approval of each WBP.
2. Consider what are the issues students and supervisors might have to confront in a WBP e.g. the implications of being a student versus a worker.

And then:

3. Ask the student to list them in order of importance and address each concern individually.
4. Ask the student to clearly identify their current level of knowledge and skill areas against the potential new learning.

In relation to the blurring of roles during the practicum an important strategy identified by a student participant was the use of rituals to set the boundaries between work and placement

... yeh I had to have a very clear boundary between the projects and (name of sup) was really quite strict about that and she was good about it because she said look I am not going to police you because I'm not going to be a policeman but I want you to do it and I trust you that you will do it' and I honoured that.. I did honour that and I said 'you have been good enough to be my supervisor so that's why when ten o'clock would come I would clear everything from my desk and I would put stuff away and get out my prac stuff and (focus exclusively on it)'

The interviewer in summarizing what the student was heard to be saying replied: *'it sounds like there was almost a ritual, the cup of tea and the clearing of the desk as a demarcation line with the student replying: 'yes because one of the real problems was sitting at the same desk and it's not always easy to take your hat off and put a new hat on'.*

Overall our project has identified that a WBP can make the organisation of practica easier for the university as it can reduce the orientation period; acknowledges already established knowledge; accelerates learning; is easier on the student's family/home life; and is a fairer outcome for students coming into the programmes with life and work experience gained previously. As the student, in arguing for a WBP for all her placements, states

this organisation is so large that I believe that students should be able to do both placements here if they are mature aged. Mature aged students are different from young students, I have already got a welfare based study behind me and I feel with all the life skills I have going to two different places is ludicrous”, I am not 20 years old...To say that I need other sorts of experience when I have had it in other areas of my study and in my different positions in an organisation..

While we would not go as far as to say that both practica should always be in the students' usual employment (especially in small organisations) we can see there will be occasions when it is feasible as long as the conditions of locating a challenging learning opportunity are applied, whether it be a WBP or not, rather than the WBP or any similar option being seen as the 'convenient' option for all concerned.

Conclusion

Clearly introducing WBP is a more complicated process than simply seeing it as an option to address the scarcity of placements. This project has identified the complexities of undertaking a WBP and has shown that there are significant advantages and disadvantages. A number of strategies have been outlined for various points in the practicum-in the negotiation, liaison and monitoring phases to address the potential difficulties rather than dismiss the workplace as 'too hard'. In acknowledging some of the issues raised in this research by students, university-based educators and field-based supervisors and in identifying important pedagogical strategies to be undertaken before beginning a WBP we may be able to rethink the earlier resistance and make WBP another option as a means of integrating learning in the field education programme as a way of flexibly addressing concerns raised.

However students and educators are not the only ones seeking more flexibility and trying to put pressure on the AASW to be more flexible about the field education requirements. Universities are undergoing enormous change that requires flexible approaches to service delivery. It can be argued that a WBP can be a flexible way to organize a practicum without losing the educational benefits. To achieve these benefits educators both in the universities and in the agencies will need to shift their own preconceived assumptions about the disadvantages of WBP and look at ways to address these that will enhance the learning potential for students in order to lead the debate about WBP and set the agenda for its value and use.

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Not One of Us is without Bias: Identifying and Challenging Racism and Homophobia

Mark Furlong¹ and Virginia Mansel-Lee²

This article reviews a teaching process that aimed to prepare final year social work students for critical practice with diverse and marginalized populations. Alongside lecture input, in small group discussions and in the two sequenced written assignments students were encouraged to personalize questions of bias and stigma by recalling both their experiences of being “other-ed” as well as their participation in practices that “other-ed”, such as racist and homophobic imaging and acting. Feedback to the unit’s first iteration in 2004 was generally positive yet a significant minority of students were clearly dissatisfied. Whilst retaining the same formal content in 2005, greater attention was devoted to generating a supportive group process and a positive environment for “negative” self-disclosure. This milieu acted to contain and normalize the students’ struggle with internalized stereotypes, a *stage* associated with their greater preparedness to identify and challenge their own personal, cultural and ideological locations. Within the context of the unit remaining explicit about its value stance, by adopting an approach to the teaching / learning process that neither collided nor colluded, as teachers we believe the 2005 revision better achieved the units aims. First, the unit received broader positive appraisal from students and, second, it appeared that the unit more firmly promoted the prospects for students carrying forward a capacity for critical self review post graduation.

Introduction

“Diversity” has become a buzz word, a Pollyanna term that has achieved an almost totemic status. In this good news account a belief in social diversity is assumed to be as practical as it is straightforward: ‘we are now a diverse community where we tolerate, even celebrate, the points of difference between cultures.’ Yet, there is often a challenging dimension, a behind-the-scenes tension, around social diversity that should not be confused with our easy enjoyment of colourful folk shows of ethnic display or our new familiarity with previously exotic cuisines.

In this off-camera struggle the engines of difference and differentiation are sparked by contradictions of class and sexuality, by the flint-like quality of religious and geographical distinctiveness, by the friction between out-groups who take pride and identity in their opposition to other out-groups as well as to the mainstream (Duberman, 2003). Here, the domesticated gaze of culture with a large “C” is disrupted. As the critical tradition suggests, “difference” is related to how identity is transacted with respect to questions of power, a difficult matter that mainstream proponents of social diversity are not able to consider comfortably (Mullaly, 2002).

¹ **Mark Furlong** is Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria.

² **Virginia Mansel-Lees**, is Lecturer, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University, Wodonga, Victoria

Although explicitly based upon a critical position, the current paper does not set out to detail or extend theoretical or empirical accounts of diversity. Rather, the aim of our paper is to offer a practical example of how a contesting engagement with the notion of diversity informed a teaching practice in a specific site, one that was compromised by resource and design conditions. This practice concerned “delivering” a six week unit – ‘Diversity and Social Work Practice’ – in the second semester of the final year of a four year social work program. This unit comprised three hours of lectures and one hour of facilitated, small group interaction.

In what follows we wish to draw attention to a set of innovative, and necessarily contentious, practical steps that were employed to set-up a teaching-learning process that was designed to enliven, rather than tame, the theme of difference and to bring this theme into a dialogue with how student’s understood “the other.” Rather than pursue the conventional aim of students attaining a purported “cultural competence”, that is of collecting and internalizing normalizing truth claims about different kinds of otherness, about the “them”, we wished to have students be more curious and critical about themselves and their/our culture. Prior to beginning this account, a brief description of key features of the local setting is offered.

Developmental stages

It is not so easy being an undergraduate social work student. As well as much that is positively received, many students feel their studies have involved a sequence of often uncomfortable experiences, not least of which is that these (mostly) young students have been persistently introduced to, perhaps have felt regaled about, perturbing injustices that characterize our local and global conditions. For many these encounters include being pressed by teachers, and by the professional culture within which they being socialized, to take up invitations to be ideologically contesting, practically engaged and personally reflective across all their years of study and practice (Allan, Pease and Briskman, 2002; Ife, 1997). Making this all the more difficult is that these people have to negotiate the task of symbolically entering an occupational category that is poorly valued, if not is distinctly de-meant, in the media and broader community (Valentine, 1994). This subjective process is itself made the more problematic as it is counter-pointed with the student’s own need to identify, and then internalize, an initial sense of their own professional competence (Patford, 2000).

It follows that as these students approach the end of their course, and at the very time they have to focus on making a transition to the paid workforce, it is likely that they will be tiring of, and perhaps even impatient to complete, their studies. It is also likely that they will be experiencing a problematic relationship between their knowledge of what should be addressed and their sense of their own personal limitations (Goldstein, 2001). Potentiating this conundrum is the student’s knowledge of how employing agencies understand and frame professional utility, an embodied knowledge these students have gained from their extended periods of supervised work experience (Patford, 2000). These students know that prospective employing agencies are tough places that have expectations of worker competence that tend to be couched in ways that are “field specific”, that is are deemed relevant for a local setting. That is no employer is likely to celebrate generic social work skills highly, if at all, and it is this set of broad skills that this group of students have learnt.

For example, employers in the mental health field want incoming social work staff to be competent with “mental state assessments”, know the relevant mental health legislation, be aware of specifically useful local service networks, and so forth (Bland and Renouf, 2005). Similarly, skills deemed intrinsic to practice in child protection are specifically valued by the key Victorian employer: the first “behavioural competence” for prospective employees is set out as the capacity to “assess risk” (http://w.w.w.dhs.vic.gov.au/careers/prot_good.htm ; accessed 19.6.06). And, it follows that general hospital employers want incoming social work staff to be able to offer competent “discharge planning”: each specific field tends to know what it wants of its local workers.

The accomplishment of a sector’s declared “pre-requisite knowledge”, “beginning level skills”, “entry level competencies” – however the nomenclature of skills is constructed in a specific location – is clearly understood by all stake-holders as *not* what a generic social work program delivers. Thus, students in the final semester of the Bachelor of Social Work program are aware that there is a tension between the generic knowledge and skills they are learning and the specific competencies that prospective employers favour. Further problematizing this final academic semester is the fact that many students report they are feeling tired and want to “finish-up”, “get-it-over-with.”

So, rather than being further “opened-up”, or “demanded of”, at this point in their studies many students tend to be in the developmental phase of being their own boss. As one student remarked, “I just have one elective to go, something that – at last – I can choose for myself!” Or, as another student said: “we signed-up, we took the program. You ought to know, we have heaps of dept hanging over our heads. So, right now, I am just in the mood to be out of here.” Yet, concurrent with the single elective subject each student could choose from a list of options, it was at exactly this point that “we” teachers had the task of introducing a final course requirement, a short but intense mandatory unit on “social diversity and social work practice.”

As will be elaborated later, this unit was designed to re-focus on, and to consolidate approaches to, social exclusion and stigma with a specific attention being given to racism and homophobia which were to be used as ‘case studies’ within the subject. To undertake the teaching a small group of staff were drawn from La Trobe University’s three Victorian campus locations – Bendigo, Wodonga and Bundoora.

With an emphasis on the second year of this subject’s delivery, the following offers a brief account of how this unit was delivered and received. We believe that we have been able to identify an energizing and (reasonably) novel approach, one that is able to evoke, or perhaps re-invoke, a degree of adventure for students. In what follows a brief outline of the course structure and the pedagogical principles employed is offered prior to a documentation of the context within which the subject is delivered. Details of the teaching / learning process that specified the program is then set out prior to a concluding commentary.

The Course Structure

The subject was organized as a six week block with 3 hours of lectures and a one hour seminar each week. As social diversity is a broad rubric, encompassing such delineations as gender, social class, age, physical, cognitive and intellectual disability, amongst a larger range of signifiers, the brevity of the subject dictated that we could

only focus on several specific examples if a degree of depth was to be engendered. To this end we chose to focus on three topical “case studies” – sexual diversity, indigenous issues and immigration – which we believed were likely to provoke the students’ personal engagement with the critical, high priority themes of stigma, identity and exclusion we were concerned to examine. These topics were introduced in weeks 2, 3 and 4 with each featuring a guest presenter.

These examples were situated within an explicitly critical framework, one that determinedly attended to the above themes. The conceptual stance was introduced in week 1 which presented an “in-house” overview. Week 5 was designed to emphasize practice questions and was presented by a guest practitioner. Week 6 was designed to further develop the material and offer a conclusion. Thus, the sequence was: ‘Introductions and Overview’; ‘Indigenous issues’, ‘Culture and Migration’; ‘Sexuality/ies’; ‘Working with difficult differences’; ‘Appreciating not Depreciating Differences.’ In each of the six weeks there were set readings available electronically. Further details are available directly from the authors.

The pedagogical starting point

As discussed above, students close to the completion of their program of studies are likely to be feeling “tired.” Nonetheless these adult learners can be recognized as “senior” students, that is as reflective and learned adults with much to offer and much to build on (Shardlow & Doel, 1996). Given this starting point a question arises: what approach, what set of pedagogical principles, could offer the best chance of a unit, one that is necessarily based on a lecture format and which has a high ideological quotient, might gain the greatest experiential purchase and momentum?; how could this unit, having as its flag the less than catchy title “Diversity and Social Work Practice”, be positioned to generate a degree of vivacity? Yes, the language used is that subjects are “delivered” but we all know that message sent is not necessarily message received. Three pedagogical principles were at the base of our approach and each is discussed below.

(i) Normalizing bias and prejudice (without condoning either)

If we were to take seriously the idea that our participants are wearing a little thin, yet are also senior students with significant knowledge and skills, it makes sense *not* to offer a predominately theoretical, abstract program as such an approach neither animates those who are feeling tired and flat nor acknowledges their strengths. Rather, we decided to put an emphasis on their personal experience of racism and homophobia by assuming racism and homophobia are themes in everybody’s ‘lived experience’ (Schutz, 1972). The starting task then becomes articulating these experiences – but perhaps doing this in a somewhat different kind of way. The usual configuration is that students are expected to expose themselves, to show “us” who take up the role of teacher and judge with respect to “them” as students, who are appraised as more or less deviant. Rather, as teachers, as practitioners and as people we thought it may be useful if we also talked about our experiences of racism and homophobia.

Getting some purchase on the local and the personal makes sense as the great majority of senior students know how to write essays, which for many have become tasks that

can be turned out as straightforward technical exercises however time consuming this may be. Also, by the final year of a four year program, these students know what they are expected to espouse. So, if we wished to offer the best conditions within which students might personalize our subject matter, if we were to get away from rote espousals of social-work speak, if we wished to perturb the pattern of students putting up an easy avowal of having the right attitude – the “some of my best friends are gay” kind of ward-off – as a first step it made sense to normalize racism and homophobia.

Specifically, towards the goal of engaging students into a deepening of their capacity to practice the disciplines of self-knowledge and self-criticism, we endeavoured to set up a milieu that normalised – but did not condone – bias and prejudice, a nuanced environment that “neither colluded not collided” (Furlong, 2001). This involved starting with the overt and repeated premise that “you and I, each of us, is sexist, ageist, class-ist, etc. – as well as racist and homophobic.” How can we claim that this is true?

We begin from the starting point that identity is dynamically related to our membership of specific reference groups which, to a significant degree, results in all of us being chauvinistic about our own values and which denigrates the practices of “them”, those that are not “us.’ That is we all live in our own particular “clubs”, groupings that each have their own boundary conditions, norms and values. And, more broadly, each of us also lives in larger contexts which are also riven by sets of affectively and ideologically loaded “us and them” delineations. It follows that each student, like each staff person, cannot be blockaded from the interpenetration of these dividing practices, these illogical and unjust but inevitably human judgments, into ones’ subjective experience.

So, one option was to – once again – tell students what they are meant to think. And, although we had only one hour of small groups and three hours a week of large group teaching, which was clearly not what one would have wanted if one was in control of resourcing and design, we did not want to – in the colloquial sense – let these large group times degenerate into “lecturing”, let alone hectoring, students. We knew that this had been the experience of many students previously and we wished to achieve a different tone.

As a matter of course over the two, or four, years of the B.S.W. program students had been regularly exhorted to recognize, and to be ready to act in relation to, social injustice. And, one imagines, this had occurred both legitimately and persistently – yet we did not want to duplicate this ‘we who-know-best are going to tell you what to think’ approach. Rather, we wanted the students own experience to be recognized and affirmed as the concrete site for their own investigations – and to do this in groups. “Your own experience, for example as a blamer and as someone who has been blamed, is the data we want you, and the group, to examine.”

Clemdinning (2005) has noted that ‘exhortation without example isn’t much use.’ If we could have people see themselves as their own example, we knew that this could be both exciting and profitable. If this could become the accepted “tone”, if it led to at least a partial suspension of disbelief, we thought that the work could be experienced as stimulating rather than draining, as enlivening rather than as aversive. Although it was always our ‘espoused theory’ (Argyris and Schon, 1976), after the first year of delivery we came more vividly to the position that it was important to generate a milieu within

which it was both safe and expected that participants acknowledge their prejudices whilst making it clear that this is not to condone such practices. Of course, there are risks and dilemmas in our approach and attention will be given to these in the concluding discussion. For now, the second of our teaching-learning principles will be described.

(ii) The service user is the expert: Rejecting the competency approach to “other-ness”

There is a considerable literature that advocates a ‘competency approach’ to practice with people from diverse communities. Although thought relevant to any group included within the umbrella term ‘diversity’, such as the mentally ill or those with non-mainstream faiths (Hodge, 2004), the notion of practice “competency” is particularly prominent with respect to ethnicity / culture (Cross, 1999.; Fitzgerald, 1996; Galambos, 2003; Weaver, 2005). We took the opposite position, an approach that is informed by the post-colonial tradition (Said, 1978; Gilroy, 2000). In taking this alternative position our premise was that there is no objective and universal knowledge that can totalize any group or individual person. Thus, there is not a minimum set, no core curriculum, of neutral data that practitioners, or indeed researchers, have access to that entitles one to take up the qualification “competent”, let alone “expert.”.

Rather, following Dean (2001) we wished to celebrate a lack of competence as integral to the prospects of gaining an understanding of other-ness:

With “lack of competence” as the focus, a different view of practicing across cultures emerges. The client is the “expert” and the practitioner / clinician is in a position of seeking knowledge and trying to understand what like is life for the specific person who is their client. There is no thought of competence, instead one thinks of gaining understanding (always partial) of a phenomena that is evolving and changing (Dean, 2004; 624).

If one assumes that all groups tend to have a culture, what might be called culture with a small “c”, the same argument can be seen to apply, that is whether the group is defined with respect to disability or sexuality, class or gender, whatever is the delineation, it is preferable to remain ‘not knowing’ and curious rather than to assume a position of expertise. As Keenan (2004; 541) notes ‘a stance of informed not-knowing (can) mitigate against essentialism and stereotyping.’

If this argument is put as strongly as it can be, it follows that all generalizations about “the other” are misleading as they can only have – at best – a partial relevance to “this wo/man.” Whether they are about the sexual behaviours and beliefs of people who are gay, the attitudes of Christians about sexuality, or whatever, generalizations are based on stereotyping, which is a conceptually violent practice. We took the view that “diversity and social work practice” should not be based on some kind of abstracted “other-ology”, that it should not be about students being encouraged to aspire to become mini-experts on “them” – whoever the “them” is in a particular case. In opposition to the liberal canon, that imperializing tradition that has produced such classic texts as Waddy’s (1991) ‘The Muslim Mind’ or Albert Ellis’ (1965) text on ‘oversexed’ women, we *do assume* a ‘client can objectively perceive and present their own culture’ (Cox, 1989; 249).

(iii) The other as mirror

The notion that the service user is the expert on their culture and, more specifically and importantly, on their relationship with this culture, brings into focus the third pedagogical principle: if I am *not* trying to objectify and categorize the other, if I remain curious and try to understand their particularity rather than their commonality, it is their difference that is the condition that enables me to see myself and my location more clearly. Rather than assuming it is the other who is odd, different, interesting, deviant, and so forth, it is possible to turn over one's starting point and to reflect upon, and to experiment with, the premise it may be "us" who takes up the anomalous position (Ata and Furlong, 2005). What can make the work exciting, and which might make it personally stimulating, is to see and celebrate "the other" as a sentient and reflective entity, as a mirror: this person's difference gives one feedback, clarifies one's location personally, professionally, culturally and ideologically. For example, people from more "collectivist" traditions offer a critique of the degenerate individualism that characterizes western ideology (Dumont, 1986; Heelas and Locke, 1981) and western approaches to practice (Al-Krenwai and Graham, 2000; Owusu-Bempah, 1999).

A reflective engagement with other-ness, with a particular example of diversity-in-play, offers a student-practitioner a reflective medium in relation to which one's own actuality is made clearer. Specifically, if it is the other's difference that is held as the independent variable, if we hold their actuality as unproblematic, as "normal", rather than as different and noteworthy, we act to de-naturalize the cultural assumptions and embeddedness of ourselves as both practitioners and as cultural representatives. In saying this we are mindful that the practitioner may not be, and/or may not see themselves as, of the mainstream spiritually, sexually or ethnically.. Also, it is important to note that this difference, or differences, of the practitioner from the putative 'anglo' mainstream may be common to, or antagonistic with, the other-ness of the client.

This possibility acknowledged, we would still argue that the practitioner is likely to have naturalized (much of) the anthropology – the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) – associated with their *belonging* to a professional / therapeutic cadre. This *belonging* is – in and of itself – quite properly a subject for review as it is likely to obscure, even elide, much that is problematic. For example, our capacity to acknowledge our (relative) power and privilege is diminished by the culture found in the helping professions that assumes that what we know and what we do is, at worst, benign or is, more likely, simply assumed to be enlightened and progressive.

And why might students (and practitioners) find this starting point stimulating? It is potentially enlivening because it puts the student and her/his customs, her/his attitudes and habituated patterns of action and meaning, into a developmental and critical frame. Rather than trying to adjust, to work upon, the other one is engaging with one's own life course by identifying *my* feelings, actions, meanings and attitudes which, over time, creates the possibility of making distinctions between how I am now and how I may want to be in the future. Over time and with some real degree of commitment, this can introduce choice points.

There is also a related point here about how marginalized, stigmatized groups – such as those who are gay or indigenous, people of diverse faiths and those who have been officially other-ed (Dominelli, 2001) – do not tend to volunteer to be adjusted, to

undergo psycho-education or to become the subjects of the processes of normalization. These people often feel uncomfortable with, and implicitly or directly contest, the professional project and its distribution of roles and a priori configuration of relationships. There is an old saying that is associated with indigenous people which says: “if you come here to help us, please go away; if you come here because your struggle and ours are inseparable, we will be happy to work together.” It could be that our personal struggle and that of those we wish to work with are always entwined – which makes our work self-interested without this being narcissistic.

The teaching / learning sequence

Towards the aim of affirming, rather than attacking, what students experience and believe, we have so far sketched three principles that were active elements in producing an animating milieu for learning and reflection. Below, we introduce a sequence of classroom exercises and follow this with a summary of two developmentally sequenced written assignments that set out to identify, and then build from, this starting point. As a broad characterization, in the first iteration of the subject we invited students to engage with the process of critical personal review, particularly around tensions between personal and professional values, whereas in the second iteration we prepared exercises for, and developed a milieu which facilitated, practices intrinsic to such a review.

In the class room

Establishing a sense of trust is a sine qua non for effective group work (Brown, 1997; Tyson, 1998) Towards this aim it is helpful if participants engage in constructive self-disclosure. Despite the risk, if one student feels it safe and appropriate to talk about being gay, that can be a terrific start; if another student then feels free to identify their religion, and goes on to articulate this faith’s negative attitude to homosexuality, this is even better *if* the articulation of such differences is contextualized by a group norm of respect and intimacy. Such occurrences can never be the simple product of the fiat of the group leader as the requisite trust has to grow, has to be earned, and a sense of safety will only be felt to be real if the group attains a developmental stage that is capable of containing – neither minimizing nor dramaticising – expressions of significant differences between members.

Thus, the evolution of group confidence in the larger and the smaller groups was a key educational condition. As with all group work, small risks being worked with well leads, over time, to larger risks being possible; larger risks being positively processed leads to a deeper sense of group safety and trust. Yet, developmental phases in a group are never a matter of linear progression. It is both helpful and necessary to have incidents and difficulties, to have moments and interactions that go awry, as it is in the awkward, difficult events being constructively reviewed and re-worked that group cohesion and confidence is deepened. Both in the classroom and in practice, being able to discuss race and sexuality, faith and class, stigma and status, is awkward and necessarily involves being able ‘to talk when the talking is tough’ (Miller, Donner and Fraser, 2004). And, if this is to be done and done well, the Nike approach is never recommended: one can’t “just do it.”

We wished to further the capacity to name and sit with what is difficult, not just as a technical skill but as a personal commitment. How might this be promoted within the groups and in individuals? Contributing to the development of an interactive group context, one that was both supportive and challenging, we used the following three

exercises over the initial weeks as a clear sequence. Although this sequence is set out in a linear manner, we should make it clear that it never actually happened this way. Like “time lapse” photography, what is depicted leaves out a complex set of moment-to-moment contingencies.

(i) When have you felt “other-ed?”

In the small groups in week one the seminar leaders asked each student to privately identify an experience when they had felt they had been “other-ed” (Dominelli, 2002), that is to identify an experience when the student had felt shunned and/or demeaned on the basis of their class, gender, ethnicity or whatever marker they felt had been used to demean or denigrate. The students were then randomly paired up and asked to informally interview each other about the other’s experience. Lastly, and in the “large” small group, each person was asked to introduce the person with whom they had been talking. The proposed sequence of the exercise was signalled to the group prior to its commencement and each student was told not to expose themselves more than was commensurate with what they felt was comfortable for the larger (small) knowing about them.

This exercise acted to “jump start” an engagement with the themes of the subject. Although there was reportedly variation from one group to the next, the level of daring, of active self-disclosure, that took place appeared to create sufficient immediacy and intensity for the group to have the experience that our project was not going to be a reprising of what had come before in the course: this work was personal as it took the student’s own experiences as primary. For example, in the small group the first author facilitated, a review of the exercise undertaken at the conclusion of this first small group reported that no one in the group had had difficulty in identifying at least one instance where they had felt denigrated and outcast. And, as or more importantly, this experience was witnessed: one could be heard if one was “game” to be upfront.

(2) When have you stereotyped?

A parallel exercise, with similar developmental results, was undertaken beginning in week two. This exercise took the theme of “other-ing” and stigma one step further by asking each student to identify an instance where they had initiated, or at least had participated in, an act of “other-ing”, of negatively stereotyping someone, or a group, on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity or the like. In this exercise the pressure was on students to own an act that was embarrassing, even shameful, and this put each student into a position that was, at least initially, contradictory. Yes, in the lectures and in the public aims of the subject, it had been stated and re-stated that everyone is biased, that we are all ethno-centric, sexist and homophobic at least to some degree. Students had been told, “this is the culture, it is within and without you.” Yet, owning this personally and in the group was a distinct challenge as to act this way was to do what *good* social workers should not do.

Even if it could be played as a retrospective event, the actual experience of declaring one’s partiality created a point of tension. The very instance of bias that one was to identify, and then make a decision about declaring to the whole group, would not only transgress the social set of the social work program that one was a signed up part of, almost certainly it would also be an act that signalled a slight upon others in the here-and-now small group. In this group, right here, there were people who were “gay”, “Christian”, “wogs”, and who were therefore the subjects of one’s prejudice.

Unlike the exercise undertaken in week one, in this iteration no one “reported” back to the large group about you. You had to declare it yourself if you were prepared to have your bias witnessed. Around half of the students did take this step and, even for those that did not, the obvious courage of those that did this, and the understanding the groups generally displayed about this “sin”, appeared to go some way towards normalizing, but not condoning, the fact that we are all blamers and stereotypers, villains and stone throwers. And, in the discussions that ensued, especially around those that found themselves at the victim end of these stories, and who were prepared to comment about being at the rough end of such practices, there was something productive, albeit uncomfortable, that arose: within the larger group there was a wincing acknowledgment of the power and the hurt that “other-ing” produces. Consistent with the theory of group work, it was our view that if these awkward and complex elements could be attended to well, “turning points” (Gitterman and Wayne, 2004) might be created.

(3) Speaking directly about difficulties with individuals from groups that have been “other-ed”

As the subject entered weeks three, four and five, particularly as students came to consider the task set in the second written exercise (see below), the intention was to introduce the possibility of practice where “difficult differences” arose. That is we wished to have students come directly to grips with the often poignant, and yet gritty, reality that it is neither possible nor appropriate to simply champion nor idealize those that had been other-ed. There is sometimes prejudice about disability, psychiatric illness or homosexuality in some stigmatized ethnic cultures, or that they may encounter child abuse in indigenous communities. In such instances how might practitioners directly acknowledge, and work with, such difficulties whilst still remaining aware that individuals in these groups have suffered high levels of marginalization and stigma, a reality that also should be acknowledged and in relation to which they needed to be curious, compassionate and an active advocate?

The theme of “talking when talking is tough” (Miller, Donner and Fraser, 2004) was taken up as a motif here. We wanted to be able to find vignettes from the students’ own experience where, for example, “this wo/man, who is someone who has been the subject of (say) racism, may also be violent.” Or, to engage with an example where people who have been the subject of racism might “stereotype and denigrate you.” This question drew examples from students that presented clear ambiguities and contradictions: the student who worked in the judicial system with an indigenous man who had been punished in the “anglo” prison system who talked of his fear of returning to his tribal land to face the certainty that he would be ritually wounded for his transgression; the student who made clear her de-personalization, perhaps even hatred, of all professionals in the mental health field who she blamed for ills her brother had experienced in the mental health system.

What can be done with these vexed presentations? Clearly, we all tend to simplifications when feel stuck, such as to blame or to want for the purely technical. Yet, only the plainest cognitive psychologist, only the most naïve human service manager, could believe there are simple solutions to such complex and contradictory presentations. In these circumstances the naming of the usual suspects, like the offering up of a technical fix, is always and only but one frustration away. At exactly this point

we wished to stop here, to ask each student to review where they were coming from. For us a slow engagement with this material was especially important as it *obviously* re-evokes many of the common prejudices that run rhizome-like through the ground of popular culture: when practice gets stuck, where there is an impasse, we all run to generalisations – “all Islamic people are sexist”, “men are potential rapists – one and all”; “doctors just give people pills”; “just stay away from child protection, they are the problem” (Furlong and young, 1996).

It was exactly in articulating where matters seemed so vexed – those exact scenarios when the going gets really difficult, when each path seems blocked – that we believed offered the best mirror for reflecting one’s personal, ideological, professional and cultural premises. Reflecting upon this material is an ongoing task which, at this point in their personal and professional development, is one that we wished to positively valence. In so far as this was achieved, we believed that the ongoing prospects for a continuing process of reflection would be improved.

In the student’s written work

To deepen the engagement with the experiential and theoretical material, two written assignments were designed. The first of these was due at the completion of week four with the final piece due a week after the completion of week six. The instructions for each are quoted below along with some commentary on how students responded. (It should be noted that the first author read and marked all essays at the larger campus, that is approximately 100 essays for each assignment.)

Assignment one

The task for the first essay was set out as:-

- (i) “In 1000 words identify your resources for, and constraints to, practice with persons from one of the groups studied in this subject, that is aboriginal, immigrant or lesbian / gay persons. This is expected to be a reflective exercise that considers ‘where you are coming from’ in terms of your identity and its politics, your attitudes and preferences and, in general, sets you the task of reviewing what you bring with you in your work with people from diverse backgrounds.”

On the second year of running the subject, the application to, and the general standard of, this assignment was remarkable with the great majority of students entering the spirit of the exercise enthusiastically. An extremely wide series of biographical vignettes were offered, for example there were very personal accounts of bias, and of being biased; poignant stories of uncertainty and struggle around sexuality; essays of anguish and paralysis about indigenous Australians; a sustained consideration of the conflict between the perceived tenets of religious faith and being committed to being non-judgmental. This was in contrast to the first year the subject was run as the personal nature of the essays was both more intricate and more self reflective.

Yet, however personal, however moving, were these accounts, what was assessed and directly commented on was the matter of whether the student undertook to a satisfactorily level the task that was set: was there a clear and comprehensive review and was the quality of this appraisal critically reflective and thorough? Although it

was noted that for some students, really engaging with this essay was personally perturbing, may even have “stirred up the ghosts in the nursery” as is said, just being “personal” was not enough.

For many reasons it follows that considerable care was taken to respond thoughtfully to this written work. If a student had taken real care, if there was an engagement – however incomplete and emotionally raw this may have been – then this should be respectfully noted; even if this person had not done so well technically, and especially if they had “exposed” themselves, thoughtful feedback was in order. Sometimes this was in the form of “thinking into the next assignment, you might like to consider ...”; sometimes, this was in terms of gentle, but direct, challenge: “your analysis is, I think, less accomplished at this stage than your enthusiasm, which is clearly evident”; or, “I am not sure you have put yourself as much on the line as you might of in this essay.”; or even “have you considered it is possible your faith is more patriarchal than you might be happy to acknowledge?” And, for the few students – roughly 10% at the larger campus – who did not appear to enter the fray, they were given very low or fail grades.

The second assignment

The second written task asked students to proceed from the personal to the practical:-

(ii) “Building on assignment one, the task of the 1,500 word second essay is to have you develop your ideas for practice with your nominated group mindful that ‘eligibility’ for contact with social work services tends to reinforce marginalization / social inclusion. Specifically:-

- In relation to someone from one of the marginalized groups we have studied that you reflected upon in part (i)
- put forward practical ideas as to how your practice would be inclusive and empowering without this account ignoring your feelings, attitudes and habits.”

The above two pieces were designed to articulate with the thematic sequence observed in the subject.

Student and staff appraisal

From the perspective of students

Unlike 2004, in 2005 only half a dozen individuals indicated general reservations with the subject, including with respect to the question of this subject repeating content from elsewhere in their studies. That is only 8% of students indicated that the subject had failed to “deepen” their appreciation of the “causes and consequences of marginalization” and only one respondent found the unit lacked “relevance.” This is in contrast to 2004 where a significant minority of students gave the subject a negative report. This was detailed in the qualitative feedback with statements such as “there was nothing new presented”, that the subject was “repetitive”, that it had “re-cycled” information and approaches that had been covered previously in the course.

It might be expected that in the first year a new subject is undertaken results might be mixed. Yes, in the first iteration the majority of students (65-70%) reported a clearly positive response with both qualitative and quantitative indicators reporting that students had experienced a reasonable degree of stimulation and learning. Attendance at lectures, which is usually a key index of student interest, had remained good. The appraisal of the first year's program was collated from written feedback on two distinct levels, that is both "quality of teaching" and "student satisfaction / quality of learning" questionnaires were administered. In reviewing this feedback it should be noted that results were compromised as formal feedback was accessed from only around 40% of the student group.

In 2005 a more rigorous protocol for accessing student feedback resulted in returns being received from 75% (77/103) of students at the larger, metropolitan campus. Analysis of this data by the Academic Development Unit presented a "very-to-extremely positive" account of the experience of students. The received qualitative data was consistent with this positive statistical picture even if this pattern varied to a degree between the seminar groups.

From the teachers' perspective

From the initial planning stage in 2003, through the first teaching period in 2004, it was clear that the teaching group was enthusiastic about this subject: we were "revving to go" even as we expected the students were in the mood to feel less than excited. Before commencing we expected to hear some less than enthused phrases, even some faces pulled, at the prospect of another core subject that consisted of (mainly) lectures. Looking back, perhaps we should have been more aware that in the first iteration of any new subject it can be expected that the first priority is to have the "content" organized and presented.

Yet, mindful of the mixed student feedback, in reviewing this first year we were not happy on several counts. Firstly, we thought we had been less than dynamic and inclusive, less than adept at setting up a safe and interesting process. Secondly, we thought that it tended to be exactly those students who were "sullen", who said "there is nothing new here", that we had failed to find a way to effectively engage and challenge. These students tended to be conservative and were often deeply, if not overtly, religious. As has been described, in the second year we were very pleased with the quantitative and the qualitative response and it appeared we had been more successful at engaging with the more conservative students. How did we come to this conclusion?

One indicator was the specific comments we received. Fairly typical responses were: "(the subject) has been really useful and relevant"; "I must say thanks for this subject. While I have found this subject to have raised my anxiety and frustration levels at times I have also really enjoyed the opportunity to challenge myself with difference. Thanks again"; "thank you for an interesting and lively subject." Or, in a more definitely positive vein: "... (the subject was) engaging, intriguing, stimulating"; "what a great subject!"

Less empirically, for the teachers the 'non-specifics' of the subject, its tone and participation level, seemed far more satisfying in 2005. Whilst it may be debatable to some to see this as a positive sign, another key indicator for us was that in the written

work, and also in the small groups, the level of “negative” self disclosure was far higher than in the first year. Moreover, in the sequence of the written work there was a more general quality of genuine struggle, of students identifying and working with their self-declared bias and cultural embeddedness.

For example, one student volunteered the comment in the first essay that s/he had begun from the assumption that homosexuality was foreign to Greek culture. S/he then noted how “utterly amazed and amused” s/he was to learn that homosexual practices were considered “very normal” in a number of cultures, including in ancient Greece.

At times it could be startling, even a little hair rasing, to read particular comments. One student noted: “I view that everyone in Australia needs to speak English to a competent level ... (and with respect to men touching each other) ... I find (this) hard to be OK with.” Later, the same person noted “ I do bring a very narrow view of how people should be living based on my own prejudices and assumptions.” That this student went on to construct a thoughtful and self-challenging account of work with ‘immigrants’ in her/his second essay was particularly encouraging..

This kind of feedback suggesting that more conservative students could come to the point of seeing their own beliefs as – at least to a degree – contingent, perhaps even as anomalous, was very encouraging. In reviewing our written comments to the essays, particularly with respect to the development of a capacity for reflectiveness between the first to the second, indicated that there had very generally been a level of application to the set task. That is, particularly with respect to how students developed linkages between these essays one and two, we seemed reasonably clear that we had designed and implemented a complementary process. Whilst some students, especially some of the more theoretically gifted, had more “cant” in the second piece that we desired, given it was meant to be a concrete and practical affair, as a generalization there seemed a significant set of indicators that the one/two essay exercise supported the aims of the subject

Conclusion

In reviewing our work with this subject there are a number of qualifications and important reservations that should be explicitly acknowledged. Not least of these is the matter of our own relationship with the matter of “self-disclosure.” As noted earlier, a degree of self disclosure was modelled by the teaching staff. Sometimes, this was relatively easy, for example a hetero-sexual male can say “I’m a gubba, a straight. Yet, in my own way I am, and have been for some time, more than a little bent, a bit *other*. And, I want to be clear that I am enthusiastically anti-convergence, anti-McDonalization.” Yet, this is obviously not always so easy if one, for instance, is gay. Whilst quite formally the subject and it teachers took a deliberately and overtly pro-diversity, anti-oppressive stance, we were also constrained by context: we are in a conservative university environment.

Other risks we encountered included being faced with some troubling disclosures, for example about racism and homophobia. Clearly, this presents a real dilemma in the context that entry to social work programs continues to be almost entirely dependent on applicants having the required academic scores. Yet, even if social work programs had the resources to examine all prospective students, by interview and/or by written examination as do some medical programs, there remain methodological doubts

whether such testing is completely effective. If this is taken in context with the research which suggests that social work students tend to be less, for instance, homophobic than the general population (Camilleri and Ryan, 2006), it still remains the case that our work in this subject seems to confirm the expected view that some of our students are more or less homophobic, often in ways that students believe are buttressed by theological rationales.

With respect to our pedagogical stance, we took the “neither colluding nor colliding” position and continue to believe that this tended to facilitate the process of critical reflection. Yet, we are aware that a question remains: when is “some progress” not enough progress? Similarly, in what circumstances is encouraging people to “state your bias directly” a sign of engagement in this process of review and when are such expressions simply not acceptable? And, these are only several of the questions that remain. Yet, we are enthused with the work so far. Why do we feel this?

As noted earlier, the relevant research is clear that practitioners are assisted in their ‘work with diversity’ by:-

- seeing the other as a mirror who reflects to us feedback about our own personal, cultural and ideological particularity, &
- having a commitment to curiosity and ‘not knowing’

We wished to make a contribution to students achieving this kind of position. As such, our goal was not to have students gain an incremental addition to what they (thought they) knew about “them.” Rather, we sought to catalyse students to be more able to discern:-

- their own outlines – to know themselves;
- the background character of “western’ orthodoxies, their defining milieu, more intimately, and
- therefore to have this background understood as contingent and therefore potentially problematic.

It would only be if this background and its features were brought into relief that the relationship tensions present between persons from the many groups who are bracketed within that of “the diverse” and our current ideological and the market conditions might be the more clearly and critically understood.

Towards this end between the 2004 and 2005 iterations we did not change our commitment to the values of critical theory and practice. Rather, by adopting an approach to the teaching / learning process that neither collided nor colluded with students, we believe we made this contesting stance one that was easier for students to engage with to embed. By attending to the importance of group process, of making sure we critically facilitated rather than hectored, we believe students became more subjectively involved which, in turn, made their “learning work” more personal, more about their contingencies than about some kind of pseudo-objective ‘other-ology.’

Such a turn makes their involvement more exciting and, we would argue, this improves the prospects for students carrying forward a capacity for critical self review post graduation. In so far as we were able to invite students to see that it is their self and

their assumptions that benefit from being identified and interrogated, that is de-naturalized, is the extent to which our own engagement with the subject became exciting. We loved working with this unit and its group of students and this degree of enjoyment is a positive indicator in and of itself.

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Promoting International Exchange in Social Work Practice, Research and Education

Elizabeth Moore¹ & Manohar Pawar²

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) aims to:

- encourage participation between social workers of all countries, and
- provide means for discussion and exchange of ideas and experiences...

The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) aims to:

- support and facilitate participation in mutual exchanges of information and expertise globally

The research summarised below suggests that it is timely for both bodies to support resolutions to the effect of:

The IFSW and IASSW each:

1. Establish a permanent budgeted Solidarity Fund as a mechanism to facilitate the participation of students, practitioners, researchers and educators from low income countries to contribute to their international conferences.
2. That these Solidarity Funds be supported by a publicly accessible policy framework, fund raising strategy and extended application process.
3. That fund raising strategies include a levy to be struck on membership and conference registration fees.
4. That they actively encourage their regional and national affiliated bodies to operate similar Funds to address social justice issues in their areas of administration.

This evaluative research into the Solidarity Fund of the 31st International Congress of Social Work, *Global Social Work 2004* held in Australia found that the IFSW and the IASSW could more effectively use this Fund to promote professional exchange between high and low income countries. The 2004 Solidarity Fund was open to delegates from low income countries to apply for financial subsidy toward costs connected with attending the Congress. It constituted an important mechanism to enable access by social work educators, researchers and practitioners from low income countries to an important and infrequently occurring forum of international professional discourse.

The research revealed the operational complexities that arose for the host organising body, the Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE) in administering the Fund within the international environment. Issues of access to

¹ **Elizabeth Moore** Charles Sturt University, Australia, July 2006

² **Manohar Pawar** Charles Sturt University, Australia, July 2006

communications technology, language differences, total costs and levels of funding, collegiate and social support, as well as national visa requirements and approvals affected both the application process and eventual uptake of grants. Survey and focus group research conducted at the Congress obtained the views of Solidarity Fund Fellows and other Congress delegates about the potential to further develop the Solidarity Fund and maximize its role in enabling social workers from low income countries to participate in international exchange about practice, research and education.

A total of 1,118 delegates representing 64 countries registered for the Congress, 79% of whom accounted for 7% of countries from high income countries and 1% of whom represented 25% of countries, the vast majority of which were low income countries.

Of the 93 Solidarity Fund applications, 45 were granted partial funding, 40 accepted and 30 attended. For the eight countries of Bolivia, Botswana, Coimbatore, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mongolia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, the Solidarity Fund Fellow was the sole delegate. The profile of Fellows was close to 60% female, 78% postgraduate attainment, 78% in senior leadership positions and just over half having 10 or more years practice and/or teaching experience.

The analysis also shows research participants' experience of attending the conference, experience of seeking financial subsidy, views about the Solidarity Fund and suggestions to improve the administration of both the fund and international professional exchanges.

The Congress experience

The positives are reflected in the voices of a Fellow and a delegate:

“For me I am coming from a developing country. By listening to many of the presentations, I realised that in terms of social justice and welfare, we are far far away from the developed countries, and my country needs a lot of things to be done. I don't know where to take it or not, but at least I have a picture of how other countries are trying to build human rights and justice for all people”
(Solidarity Fund Fellow)

“I have already got so much. It's about getting a sense of belonging to something that is bigger than my own country. Breaking down that parochial wall. I'm seeing far beyond now, some of the issues that were there before. Feeling a sense of wanting to contribute too. To organisations that want to run these kind of conferences, and that sense that across the world, there is work to be done...” (Congress Delegate from high income country)

Taking account of the opinions of others, in short, the Congress was valued for its promotion of critical thinking and stimulating ideas; providing reassurance of global concern for developing countries; enabling sharing of cross cultural issues and developments; expanding perspectives to the global community; and providing motivation to extend professional contributions.

Criticisms of the Congress as a vehicle for international social work exchange included the high costs and comforts of the arrangements, the limited opportunities for discussion of the papers and the inaccurate representation of profession. The latter observation was made with reference to the low and absent representation of low income countries and of practitioners and students of comparatively low professional status and to the seeming high representation of males, despite social work being a

female dominated profession. There was a concern that the Congress experience should endeavour to demonstrate social justice:

“... we are eating Mars Bars, we are in a fairly opulent place ... and an award for internationalisation goes to an American man. I’m not saying that no American man should be eligible, but ... (h)ow do you make that decision, based on the power and the resources of American men? ... some women that I know, in Australia, Aboriginal society, and in South America, ... are doing amazing work for communities. So there is something about the process there as well, in mixing majority world with minority world” (Focus group participant from high GDP country)

The Solidarity Fund experience

The critical nature of the financial support to their attendance is illustrated in the following comment:

“Without the support it was not possible to attend. I was not able to afford the total cost due to my low income. For example, the total cost of attending the conference was equal to half of my annual income.”

Other positives included: participation, networking, learning, representation of low income countries and social work profession, the grants process, home stay and complimentary dinner granted to a 2006 conference organiser.

On the less positive side was the limitation of partial funding:

“... the total cost to attend this program is half of my annual income. Can you imagine? I am telling you honestly. So how can a person from my country or other low income countries dream of attending?” It is a real dream, a real dream to be fulfilled.”

“It is not sufficient to just provide registration and airfare support to people from developing countries as they require resources within Australia such as taxi vouchers.”

Solidarity Fund suggestions

Participants made suggestions about the establishment of a permanent Solidarity Fund and administrative processes that aim to increase participation in international conferences by social work educators, researchers, practitioners and students from low income countries. The covered three areas:

- Supporting social work education and practice in developing countries
 - A permanent fund
 - Support to students and practitioners
 - Support to professional organisations
- Initiating research and action research projects
 - Joint sponsorship
 - Translation of break out sessions of practitioners in a similar field
- Developing networks and exchanges
 - Purposive networks

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