



Mirror, mirror on the wall who enhances integration of learning most of all?

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Course details

Course title Masters in Social Work

Level postgraduate

Year final

Discipline/Subject areas Social Work

Activity details

What we did

A pilot enquiry into the key moments, processes and people involved in the enhancement of student learning on a social work degree training programme

Why we did it

Arising from work begun into bridging the theory/practice divide by developing closer practical links between academics and students during the practicum, we identified the importance of further research into what students think about optimising their enhancement of integration of learning.

What we wanted to achieve

To find out who students thought were the key players involved in the integration of learning.

A short description of what we did

Conducted a questionnaire survey of 50 students who had just completed their two-year Masters in Social Work training. The idea was that by accessing student thinking at the end of their learning experience but before they had entered professional practice, it would be easier to identify the pivotal players, relationships, processes and situations that contributed to any 'light bulb' moments during the training programme.

What worked well

- The questionnaire's two-sides of an A4 page multiple choice format was concise enough to be completed quickly
- Students also used the space provided for qualitative comments

- Including broad-ranging prompts for particular questions e.g. when asked who or what was most helpful in integration of learning we included fellow students, friends, administrative staff and relatives. This produced more interesting responses than might have been e.g. students may have stuck to the more obvious sources of development such as lecturers and practice teachers.

Problems and/or issues

- Because of timing of the pilot, the response rate to the questionnaires was poor, being in the region of 20% therefore the comments cannot be generalised and rather ought to be seen as a 'toe in the water'
- E-mailing the questionnaire was felt to detrimental to completion rates because students received frequent emails at this point of the programme e.g. regarding exam boards, graduation etc.

What students thought about it

The views and experiences of students are under-represented in the research on the integration of learning and this pilot, because of anonymity, has given them an opportunity to be frank about their learning experiences, when asked to rank significant people, lecturers were ranked far behind practice teachers and fellow students.

Key messages

Students drew attention to the professional and vocational elements that lent uniqueness to the social work course, e.g. the importance of induction to academic learning, the value of tutor/lecturer-student contact. They favourably contrasted learning in practice with class-based teaching.

This has led us to make the following suggestions for Social Work Degree Programme providers:

- **Recognise and build on the individual factors** involved in students' 'transformational learning'. Students find the following useful:
 - Coursework, which is personally relevant to them
 - Identification and discussion of multiple perspectives, i.e. the discovery that knowledge is contested
 - Opportunities to encounter conflict (outside and inside self) and reconcile it.
- **Pay attention to the learning environment by recognising and capitalising on**
 - Critical transitions e.g. by establishing 'Freshman Academies' as in the USA at the beginning of training; and at the end, having initiatives that 'Mind The Gap' between training and the world of qualified practice
 - The value to students of being part of a 'different' group as regards the added vocational element of social work. Social work courses are not mainstream in universities, there are personal/academic/professional cross-overs that tend not to exist elsewhere in traditional university education. With these come positives such as organic connections with the field and emphases on non-orthodox educational methods e.g. group discussion, being 'put on the spot' and experiential learning.
- **Boost engagement possibilities between students and lecturers/tutors.** Students responded with clear messages about the importance of practice teachers and spoke at some length in negative terms about the lack of support from academics and tutors. The tutorial relationship is poorly documented and the tutor role ill-defined. There is evidence (Watson and West, 2003) of mis-matches between student and tutor expectations of the role of the tutor with students expecting more opportunities for individual relationships and feedback yet getting less. Therefore:
 - If making and sustaining relationships is the key social work skill then it follows that if this is not modelled in staff-student relationships then students will not learn what is intended. Lecturers need to walk it as well as talk it.

- Revise teaching methods. Why attend lectures of 70 students when you can get the notes electronically and study the recommended reading? An emerging message is that lecturers and tutors run the risk of becoming irrelevant in a world where knowledge is coproduced and co-developed on a non-hierarchical basis, e.g. wikis and the internet. 'Flatter', more collaborative ways of learning have long been a feature of the public and private sectors and we need to catch up and let go of an out-dated commitment to a model of teaching that is transmission delivery and move to learning facilitation.

Related documents or links

Clapton, G. Allan, M., Cree, V., Edwards, R., Forbes, R., Irwin, M. and Perry, R (2006) 'Grasping the Nettle: Integrating Learning and Practice revisited and re-imagined', *Social Work Education* 25 (6) 645-656

Clapton, G. Allan, M., Cree, V., Edwards, R., Forbes, R., Irwin, M. and Perry, R. (2008) 'Thinking 'outside the Box': A Radical Approach to Integration of Learning for Practice', *Social Work Education* 27 (3) 334-340

Watson, D. and West, J. (2003) 'The role of the tutor in social work education: building an emancipatory tutorial relationship', *Social Work Education* 22 (2) 139-149

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