

Curriculum and Pedagogic bases for integrating practice experiences within higher education

Case study #1: Learning circles in Human service programs (Griffith University)

Program focus

The Human Services and Social Work program at Griffith prepares students as social workers and human service professionals. However, students undertaking field placements in human service organisations often encounter experiences that are confronting for novices, yet are routine aspects of human service work. So, there is a need to prepare students to respond appropriately to these events, and maximise their professional learning from their practicum experiences more generally.

How practice or workplace experiences are provided

The practicum placements occur in the third and fourth year of the students' programs where they are assigned to diverse range of human service workplaces and engage in a range of activities that support the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

How those experiences are integrated into the course curriculum

The practicum arrangements are integrated across the course program and considered an integral element of the overall course curriculum. Also, they are mandatory elements for the university programs to be accredited by the relevant industry associations.

Particular curriculum practices

In particular, the sequencing of the learning circles interventions was to place them before students engage in practicum experiences because of feedback that students felt unprepared for some of the confronting experiences they faced during these practicums. These interventions were continued throughout the practicum period in order for students to share experiences and develop further the professional knowledge. They were also used for debriefing and consolidation of learning at the end of the practicum period.

Particular pedagogic practices

The aim is to more effectively integrate the students' experiences across the university and practice settings by using learning circles fortnightly with groups of 6-15 students. This strategy comprises students engaging in a teacher facilitated process of reflecting upon experiences they have encountered in the practice setting. In the learning circles the students engaged in democratic discussions which assisted them to:

- understand that high quality practices in the human services sector are possible;
- develop strategies to cope with working in a challenging sector;
- engage in reciprocal and co-operative learning between colleagues; and
- develop skills that enabled them to be more insightful, reflective, critical and self-directed.

For novice professionals, learning circles encourage and support critical reflection in understanding important issues, in their own time and based on what they already knew. The learning circle strategy provides a "safe" space for debriefing, focussed time to discuss workplace issues, modelling of critical thinking and reflection processes, and encouragement for reciprocal and co-operative learning.

Any evidence

The students suggested that preparation for the placements should include opportunities to:

- reflect upon and be advised about what was expected of them in their placement;
- discuss professional boundaries and how these are maintained when interacting with clients and other human service workers;
- discuss strategies for leaving work behind at the end of the day;
- develop strategies for dealing with phone calls and difficult people; and
- develop strategies for building resilience.

The students suggested that course organisers need to maintain a balance between providing such opportunities and overly emphasising the potential for confronting circumstances that may generate unnecessary anxiety about the practicum and the professional practice more generally.

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