Promoting research literacy during the social work practicum

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Abstract

Recent research in New Zealand (Beddoe, 2010) and elsewhere (Joubert, 2006) has documented low levels of confidence amongst social work graduates in conducting applied social research. This article will examine the reasons why research literacy amongst students and graduates appears to be at a low ebb, and will report on the early developmental phases of a field education model being piloted in Christchurch, New Zealand, to promote knowledge and skill development in practice research. The process used for planning a suite of practice research placements is outlined, together with examining the application of the communities of practice model for facilitating this intervention. Practical strategies for including research learning objectives and activities are provided, with the view to encouraging routine inclusion of different tasks associated with systematic inquiry into all field placements. The evaluation design for the group of practice research placements is outlined with considerations of the project limitations and potential for future development. A second article on how the project progressed will be submitted later in 2012.

Introduction

Social work curricula and texts routinely cite the importance of research activity to promote knowledge development, practice evaluation, civic engagement and advocacy (Connolly & Harms, 2009; Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). At the same time political exigency for cost- effective intervention and outcomes has linked notions of 'best practice' with a strident 'evidence-based' discourse (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2006). These trends, together with calls to strengthen the teaching/research nexus in higher education more generally (Jenkins & Healey, 2009) and a strong service user movement in the UK promoting consumer-led research initiatives (McLaughlin, 2010), have brought about an increased focus on research activity within social work. However, despite these multiple drivers to engage in research, social work practitioners continue to report considerable ambivalence about doing so (Beddoe, 2010; D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). In particular, practitioners cite multiple obstacles to engaging with and in research activity. These obstacles include a perceived lack of research culture within social service agencies and social work as a profession; and a lack of time, confidence and

support for undertaking research activities, with systematic inquiry in practice not being considered 'core business' by the industry (Beddoe, 2010, p.232).

At the same time students have traditionally had limited opportunities for learning how to conduct research outside of the classroom setting where development of research knowledge has become a de-contextualised activity based upon instrumental learning (Lorenz, 2003). While examples of using the practicum to promote research learning amongst social work students and field educators have been identified overseas (Winokur, Valentine & Drendel, 2009; Berg-Weger, Herbers, McGillick, Rodriguez & Svoboda, 2007), similar initiatives do not appear to have been trialled in New Zealand. However, the Growing Research in Practice (GRIP) project carried out during 2006-2007 in Auckland was a programme designed to build research capability and confidence amongst social workers. GRIP included 43 practitioners from eight social service agencies who were mentored in conducting practice research in their agency settings by a collaborative group of academics from a number of institutions (Beddoe & Harington, 2011). The exemplar of GRIP provided the impetus for adapting this model of research teaching and learning for work with social work students and their field educators on placement.

To address the factors that appear to inhibit practice research learning, a strategic decision has been taken in Christchurch institutions responsible for social work field education to use inquiry-based placements to augment existing practicum learning opportunities. For the purposes of this project practitioner research has been defined as 'a central commitment to the study of one's own professional practice by the researcher himself or herself, with a view of improving that practice for the benefit of others' (Dadds & Hart, 2001 cited in Lunt & Fouche, 2010, p. 220). In the context of this project the practitioner is the field educator and the student is an active participant in the inquiry process. Such research activity is expected to have practical utility for the profession, the service organisation, practitioners, students and clients. Research of this nature is usually conducted within a local context, small scale and short term, with the practitioner carrying out a significant portion of the inquiry (Lunt & Fouche, 2010).

Strategic development of practice research education

Social work teaching staff at both the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) and the University of Canterbury have come together to pilot the research practicum project specifically to foster and support student and field educator engagement with research activities. This pilot is being conducted during the second half of 2011 and has been funded through an application to Ako Aotearoa, Southern Hub. Ako Aotearoa is the New Zealand national centre focused on the development of teaching excellence across all forms of higher education in New Zealand.

The focus of this particular project is on developing research literacy amongst social work students and their field educators using the placement as a forum for engaging in practice-based inquiry. As such, the project is designed to increase practicum field research opportunities; improve research knowledge, skills and confidence amongst both students and their field educators; and foster the knowledge production from empirical data and evaluation within the Canterbury social service industry, where a number of innovative practice initiatives are being offered.

As part of this project the process of facilitating collaborative research placements and developing an applied research teaching and learning model will be mapped to provide guidelines for establishing future education/ industry research collaborations. The project will also incorporate an evaluation component where students and field educators will have an opportunity to provide feedback about using agency-based research initiatives to promote and improve social work student learning and field educator supervision in this area.

During the placements, both students and field educators will be involved in the development of an online teaching resource to illustrate ways to conduct and supervise research learning. A set of cards that together form a research teaching kit will also be designed by participants to stimulate discussion and learning in the classroom and agency settings on topics related to carrying out systematic inquiry. Instructions on ways to use the cards in classroom and field settings will be written by the student, field educator and academic participants during the project. These activities have been planned to stimulate a constructivist learning environment whereby students and field educators have opportunity to be both consumers of, and contributors to, the bank of research knowledge and development in social work. In this way, the project has been planned to model experiential situated learning with potential to support a local Community of Practice (CoP) focused on social work practice research.

Communities of practice and research development

'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4). The purpose for coming together is to use the process of shared activity to generate best practice, knowledge building, innovation and problem solving. The notion of CoPs emerged out of an examination of situated learning during the 1990s, where it was found that significant peer practical learning and problem solving occurs through informal exchange within social relationships in the work setting, as opposed to the more formal classroom didactic teacher/ student arrangement, that tends to be isolated from the workplace (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Integral to this process is the development of mutual engagement, shared meaning, and the development of a shared 'repertoire' – or language and set of common resources (Wenger, 1998). The CoP model has subsequently been refined and utilised across diverse educational, organisational and discipline-based interests, to strengthen knowledge development, networked learning potential and practice innovation (Li, Grimshaw, Nielsen, Judd, Coyte, & Graham, 2009). Integral to the CoP model are the notions of social learning, identity building, collaborative knowledge sharing and creation. This model has been used elsewhere in social work to promote learning, particularly in the area of ongoing professional development (Cook-Craig, 2009; Gray, Parker & Immins, 2008). However, no examples could be located of using CoP for developing research education in social work.

CoPs are made up of three key elements. These include the domain of knowledge, which defines the scope of inquiry; a community of people engaged in the inquiry process; and the shared practice the community develops, including tools, frameworks, ideas and information (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). For this project the 'domain' is centred on fostering practice research in local social service agencies. This domain captures the purpose of the research practicum project. The 'community' includes staff from both the

University of Canterbury and CPIT, students from both institutions and field educators from eight Christchurch-based social services agencies. The 'practice' within this community will revolve around the development of social worker and organisational knowledge and skills about 'how to' conduct social research in the field.

Central to the notion of developing the community is that some participants will be located at the periphery, having limited participation at first but becoming drawn into central engagement over the course of the project. This movement, both into and out of the community, reflects a dynamic system. In this project the community consists of social work practice researchers and participants who are at different points of engagement with the domain and community itself. Some of the academics are more experienced researchers than others. Some of the field educators are confident researchers, and others are developing their participation and expertise. Some of the students have a stronger researcher identity than their peers or the field educators in the project. Increasing participation entails learning the language and the appropriate use of research tools used by the community.

One of the significant challenges in developing practice research in social work is the lack of culture and infrastructure within the social service industry to support efforts for systematic inquiry (Beddoe, 2010). While educational institutions have literature and research library database facilities to conduct reviews and access to expert advice on research methodology, these resources are not readily available within agencies, particularly small non-government organisations. As such the utility of forming a CoP that includes industry and education stakeholders is self evident, as agencies are engaged with practice opportunities and client populations on a daily basis, while education institutions have well-developed sources of research infrastructure. Together these elements present obvious synergies for developing practice research learning.

A second challenge for field coordinators and educators is to plan student involvement in research activities that will be meaningful, yet suitable to fit in with the time-limited nature of social work field placements. Student placements for the research practicum are 60 days in length and therefore allow inadequate time to undertake a complete research project. However, meaningful engagement by students in systematic inquiry is possible when agencies and field educators allow students to participate in elements of a complete research process, whilst undertaking responsibility themselves for the overall project. This arrangement further highlights the utility of a CoP in which social service agencies identify areas of inquiry and take responsibility for a project, with students assisting in specific activities. The breakdown of research activities suggested by Beddoe & Maidment (2009, p.59) has been used in this project to guide discussions about discrete research tasks that students on placement may usefully undertake.

Planning the research practicum

This project is still in its early stages of implementation. Steps taken in the planning process have included briefing student cohorts about the potential to undertake research placements, and meeting with staff from field agencies interested in offering and supervising a research placement. A briefing meeting has been held with potential field supervisors from eight agencies to explain the project and begin the process of formulating feasible projects to conduct on placement. During this briefing, staff from CPIT and the University

of Canterbury provided an overview of the project and its objectives; the research process; resources and support available; and expected outcomes. The purpose of the meeting was to inform agencies about the scope of the project and its evaluation; canvas the variety of potential research topics that will be made available for students to investigate; and help field supervisors start planning for how they might prepare themselves and the agency for hosting a placement of this nature.

Two field supervisors that had previously had students undertake research on placement were present at the briefing. These field educators were able to elaborate on their experiences of supervising practice research and give examples of the types of tasks the students had undertaken, which included assisting with analysis of primary interview and evaluation data, report writing and mining a set of secondary data to inform a social policy submission.

In order to break down the complete research process into achievable tasks that could be completed during the course of the placement, Table one was distributed to participants to consider, as part of their own planning.

Table one shows the different points where students can enter into a research project and complete discrete tasks. Two of the agencies with field educators at the briefing meeting already have reasonably large-scale inquiries in progress. In these agencies it is expected that students will contribute to the instrument design and data collection processes. The remaining six agencies attended the meeting with some ideas for their research and used the forum to refine these down to achievable research objectives that could be completed during the placement. A template was distributed for field educators to fill in and give back to the institutions for the purposes of discussing the research placement options available with interested students. A copy of this template can be found in Table two.

This template was designed to help field educators start refining ideas about the scope of their research project and the specific tasks they would make available for students to complete.

Agencies have been encouraged to offer a mix of research and direct practice opportunities for students to undertake during the placement with the proviso that at least two days per week will be spent engaged in completing research-oriented work. This mix of direct practice and research will enable the links between these two modalities to be examined carefully in supervision. It is anticipated that both individual field supervision and CoP group learning opportunities will help students understand the link between research and practice by exploring how research can be used for micro and macro advocacy within and outside the agency setting; translating how the micro skills used in practice to engage, assess and intervene with clients are also required to successfully complete the different phases of the research process; examining the role ethics, cultural sensitivity and responsiveness to difference plays in both practice and research.

Students are likely to participate in a diverse range of research endeavours during their placements. These projects include helping to conduct a community needs analysis; investigating the role of volunteers in a large not-for-profit agency; engaging in an agency consultation and service audit process (to respond to post-earthquake service delivery planning in Christchurch); mining extensive sources of secondary data to identify trends in adolescent

Table one. Discrete research tasks to complete on placement.

Pre-fieldwork	Fieldwork	Post-fieldwork
Prepare a funding application to support a research project for submission to a philanthropic trust or alternative funding provider	Following the process for conducting the research as outlined in your proposal and ethics application, make contact with your research participants and begin gathering your data	Complete data entry of quantitative results
Complete a literature review on the topic under investigation	Depending on the method of research you are using you will need to ensure you have the practical resources to gather your data. These might include:	Code interview and focus group transcriptions using the method outlined in the research proposal and ethics application. Having more than one person coding interview data independently strengthens the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative data analysis
Draft a proposal outlining the research questions, aims, proposed participants, funding implications, ethical considerations and timelines for completion	• printed questionnaires, envelopes and postage • recording mechanism for interviews • Flash cards or test papers for conducting standardised tests • appropriate supplies or equipment if you are to become a participant observer in a specific group or community (craft group or political campaign office)	Draw up a set of preliminary findings and meet with the reference group to discuss these. Make links back to the material covered in the literature review
Draft an ethics application for submission to the agency management	Systematically record in a research journal all of the names, contact details and times you have made to meet with research participants. Top priority needs to be given to any meeting arrangements you have made with your participants	Write up research report for the agency
Liaise with agency staff to find out correct process for agency research ethics approval and access relevant standard application forms if available	If you need to access secondary data located in secure environments, timetable in visits to access hardcopy material in collections such as archives, hardcopy text, film or digital information. Begin by first sourcing what you can via the internet	Disseminate research findings and recommendations to the participants in ways that were agreed during the first phase of the project. (presentation, summary report)
Write up ethics application and submit this to the agency and any outside independent committee for approval		If appropriate organize a 'launch' for the research to re-engage with interested stakeholders and fulfil reporting and accountability duties while also raising awareness of the findings
Once approval has been conveyed, begin the practical arrangements to carry out the fieldwork for the research		Begin the planning process for how the research recommendations may be actioned to shape future practice or policy development

(Beddoe & Maidment, 2009, p. 59). This table is reproduced with the permission of Cengage Publishing, Melbourne.

Table two. Agency Project Summary.

Name of Organisation:	
Name of Field Educator/ Supervisor:	
Phone:	Email:
Physical Address:	

Description of the project and phase of the research process that the student will be involved in:

Balance of research tasks and casework practice for the placement:

Research tasks that the student will participate in:

Other expectations of the student:

Resources available to support the student (e.g. people, library, data sources, etc.)

mental health presentations; conducting a file audit of clients who had self-harmed, within a particular agency setting, to identify service responses and trends. Clearly, projects of this nature require ethical review prior to commencement.

Early ethical considerations

At the outset of planning for the research practicum it was decided that the ownership and governance for each practice research project would rest with the agency. This is particularly necessary when all of the projects are generated out of agency concerns and interests with most continuing to run for longer than the life of one placement. All of the research projects include oversight from a nominated agency staff member. As such the processes for gaining ethical clearance for each piece of research will be determined by individual agency management. The large statutory stakeholders offering placements have established Ethics Committees tasked with undertaking research review and approval processes. The smaller NGO stakeholders will seek management committee approval for conducting their research and will consult with others who have a stakeholder interest. This process does not mean that students themselves will not be involved in grappling with the ethical considerations in planning and conducting research. It is likely that some will be involved in the early stages of developing a research project and this will include helping to write a proposal and prepare an ethics application. All students will be participating in a CoP-structured tutorial on research ethics as they apply to each agency project.

Evaluation

Since this practice research project is being piloted, students and field educators will have opportunity to evaluate their involvement, learning and research outcomes. The project is being evaluated using methods in keeping with a case study design (Mark, 1996). CPIT and the University of Canterbury staff have submitted applications to gain approval to conduct the data collection and analysis necessary to carry out this evaluation process. Gauging how participants experienced being part of the CoP, will be integral to the process.

Procedures for evaluating different aspects of student and field educator involvement will include the administration of the pre- and post-placement Research Confidence Scale (in development phase); conducting individual semi-structured interviews; content analysis of filmed presentations regarding research teaching and learning; observation of group process; and collection of key information emerging out of the experiential development of the Research Kit (set of cards). Together these multiple processes for data collection reflect those traditionally used within a case study design and will enable triangulation of the data to occur (Mark, 1996). In this way practice research concepts, interpretations and understandings of different processes and participant outcomes can be clarified and verified when compared and contrasted.

Anticipated project outcomes

It is expected that the practice research placements will result in diverse outcomes situated at micro, meso and macro levels of influence. Specific outputs from the project will include firstly, the development of a teaching and learning resource (video-streamed case scenarios) related to authentic research initiatives (these recordings will not include any

agency or client-sensitive material); secondly, the development of a research teaching and learning kit for use in classroom and field; and thirdly, the development of a collaborative industry/education partnership model for fostering social work practice research. While it is anticipated these resources will be useful for future practice research teaching and learning it is hoped that the project will result in strengthening research mindedness, research culture and confidence beyond the individual students and field educators participating in the research placements.

In the current political milieu the drive for professional accountability and demonstration of quality practice standards is strong. Within this environment research activity is 'perceived as significant to the safety of the profession in contestable spaces, evidence of the contribution of social work and vital to the maintenance and development of excellent practice' (Beddoe, 2011, p.557). Previous studies about practitioner engagement with research have identified the prevailing culture within the employing agency towards research has significant bearing on whether this activity is supported or not, with most noting limited encouragement to engage with this type of work (Beddoe, 2011; Lunt, Shaw & Mitchell, 2009; Orme & Powell, 2008).

Active support from the human service industry sector is critical to strengthening research capacity within social work. This sector has the mandate to develop institutional conceptualisation and strategies to promote practice research links and legitimise use of staff time in inquiry-based activity. While there appears to be strong support amongst social service agencies to improve practice using structured critical reflection in supervision (Davys & Beddoe, 2010), the potential for utilising research to promote transformative change, advocacy and client empowerment appears to be less well understood. It is hoped that supporting research placements might help field educators and other agency staff see how systematic inquiry can add value to practice as well as the advancement of emancipatory client outcomes. While this possible outcome is focused on culture and attitude change and not easy to evaluate, these topics will be explored in the semi-structured interviews with the students and their field educators near the end of the placement period.

Further project considerations

During the planning stages of the research practicum the team considered potential risks to the successful conduct of the project. One anticipated risk identified early on included the potential for agencies or students to pull out of the project mid-way through. The project team had not, however, anticipated the major disruption to work and life generally in Christchurch due to the major earthquake activity. Interestingly, service delivery changes brought about by the earthquake (through loss of buildings and redeployment of staff into crisis work) has necessitated some agencies to re-evaluate their future role and delivery options. These considerations have opened up new opportunities for students to be involved in placement learning focused on service development, research and planning.

The pilot status is an obvious limitation to the project with the practicum research placements being time limited and small scale in nature. A challenge for the team and participants will be to consider how an intervention of this nature can be developed into a sustainable long-term option for future practice research teaching and learning. Models for practicum education/industry collaborations have been trialled to foster research and innovation in a

range of disciplines. Reports from these collaborative ventures noting outcomes are readily available (Thune, 2011; Ljunggren, 2009; Etzkowitz, 2008) and will be used to help inform both the evaluation process and future modelling for collaborative practice research education in the Christchurch region.

Conclusion

One assumption in developing this research practicum project is that sound practice is supported by a good degree of thoughtfulness, scrutiny and systematic inquiry. The purpose of piloting this group of research-focused placements is to help improve the state of research mindedness within the current social work student and practitioner populations. It is anticipated the CoP model will sustain and nurture the progress of student research activity and learning during the placement. At the same time it is hoped that engagement with the CoP may also provide an avenue for developing local professional leadership in social work research amongst the current cohort of students and field educators. Certainly, using this model of teaching, learning and research will help cultivate an infrastructure and discourse to support future research activity in the region. These endeavours, however, require a significant cultural shift in thinking and practice amongst the social work community, where research becomes part of the everyday dialogue and 'toolbox' practitioners use to inform practice and evaluate their work. A second article reporting on the evaluation of the CoP project will be made available later in 2012.

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