
'I thought they would just let me do my job': Work-based practica in social work and welfare

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Abstract

Social work and welfare education courses are underpinned by concepts such as equity, disadvantage and access as the guiding principles of practice with client groups. However, the 'clients' of the university, the students, are often disadvantaged in the current economic climate as they struggle to find the work/life balance with studying. In addition, many students who also currently work in the welfare field feel further disadvantaged as the knowledge and skills they bring to the course often go unrecognised. At the same time, university educators often struggle to locate sufficient numbers of stimulating learning opportunities for practica. We wondered if the time was right to explore work based practica (WBP) as a way of addressing these issues. And we wondered what common practica was across our networks with regard to WBP.

This article presents the findings of a three-stage project on the current practices, concerns, benefits and disadvantages of WBP (that is practica in a student's place of employment) in social work and welfare education in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Recommendations are presented so that WBP can be a more educationally sound option.

Introduction

While the learning environment and the context and process for learning within organisations are recognised as growing in importance, the potential for learning in practica within the student's workplace has not received as much attention or been linked pedagogically to field education. This is despite the fact that organisations, especially human service organisations, are increasingly being acknowledged as important sites for the construction and development of knowledge and worker expertise; and where reflective or, more significantly, critically reflective practices provide the means for organisations to accommodate, adapt, challenge or respond to the complexities of organisational management and demands (Thompson, 2006; Fook, 2004). These arenas are starting to be recognised as sites of learning and organisational and worker learning are beginning to be viewed as enhancing organisational productivity and the development of worker expertise (Thompson, 2006).

However, in Australia, it has been our experience as university-based field educators, that the practice of student's doing their practica in their place of work has been resisted by professional associations and higher education institutions. Where WBP have been used they have been limited and spasmodic (Noble, Heycox, O'Sullivan and Bartlett, 2005). The argument for this resistance has been along the lines that the students need a 'protected' learning environment as well as a 'breadth' of placement opportunities and this is considered difficult if this learning is located in the student's usual place of work.

Attention has begun to focus on the significance of learning in organisations: how learning in organisations is conceptualised; what type of learning is promoted, legitimated and validated in organisations; and how it relates to organisational structure and behaviour (Thompson, 2006; Gould and Baldwin, 2004). However, its relevance to practica in social work and welfare education has not readily been made clear.

WBP would have a renaissance, if we:

- Accept the current scholarship about how organisations learn as well as how learning in organisations occurs;
- Explore how knowledge for both organisational and practice behaviour can create new knowledge for effective service delivery, that is responsive to the changing and competing demands of the workplace; and
- Generate best practice options for 'workers to think and act in more organisationally aware ways' (Fook 2004: 72).

Indeed, we would argue that work based learning is gaining attention. It is not necessarily because organisations are able to create thinking and reflective workers but because of more pragmatic concerns associated with its actual administration and the availability of options for students in an increasingly competitive market and for students facing many additional familial and work demands. For example, Schneck, Grossman and Glassman (1991) refer to the educational reality for students as being influenced by their employment, family and personal factors and argue that decision making in field placements must be viewed as a response to the economic and political pressures both inside and outside the area of field education and the educational 'market'. WBP can be seen as a way of addressing some of these concerns.

Background to the study

The issue of WBP has been a topic of interest for some time at the New South Wales (NSW) / Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Combined Universities Field Education Group (CUFEG) – a group formed a number of years ago which represents staff involved in the field education courses in social work/welfare work programmes in the seven universities, situated in the largest Australian state and in the nation's capital territory.

This group, which meets three times a year to share information, discuss policies in field education and explore particular difficulties with students, found that WBP was increasingly becoming a regular topic, with a number of recurring issues for students, agencies and universities, such as:

- Students wishing to undertake work-based placements due to economic hardship and the need to work while studying full time;

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- Mature-aged students trying to balance family/study demands with the heavy field load;
 - Students who want their knowledge and skills gained from their current work recognised and acknowledged as a reference point for WBP; and
 - Universities trying to locate placement opportunities in an increasingly competitive market with decreasing placement opportunities.

In talking through these issues we noted that there were many inconsistencies in approach and support for WBP across CUFEG universities and that there was no single position among CUFEG members on the value of WBP for student learning.

Acknowledging these concerns, the group decided to undertake a research project on the advantages and disadvantages of WBP. With funds from a small grant from PEPE (Practical Experiences in Professional Education Inc) – a cross-disciplinary educational organisation with a focus on practica – a small project team was established.

The study

A three stage, grounded research project was undertaken to explore the advantages and disadvantages of WBP across Australian, New Zealand and Canadian schools of social work and welfare work. The research focused on all parties involved in the placement experience: students, university-based educators and field-based educators (supervisors). The research included both quantitative and qualitative data derived from an e.survey, focus groups and interviews. Findings from each stage informed the issues to be explored in the next and subsequent stages. The study was conducted between 2003 and 2005.

The aim of the research was to explore the issues surrounding social work and welfare field placements conducted in the student's usual place of work. We used the following questions to guide the process:

1. What is the current extent of WBP used in social work and welfare courses across Australia, New Zealand, and Canada?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages, and to whom, of WBP?
3. Are WBP a viable context for an educational learning experience for students?

Methodology

The research was conducted in three stages. The first stage involved an e.survey conducted with university-based educators, in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The second stage involved focus groups with university-based field educators from NSW/ACT CUFEG. During this phase some comparison with other countries was also sought via individual interviews with international field educators who at the time were executive members of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The third stage explored, via semi-structured phone and face-to-face interviews, the experiences of the other parties in the work-based practicum – the students and field-based educators (supervisors). In each of these stages both the advantages and disadvantages of WBP were addressed.

Stage 1: e.survey with university-based educators: Australia, New Zealand and Canada:

This e.survey, consisting of qualitative and quantitative questions, was designed to explore key concerns such as criteria, context, frequency, policies and practices for all parties as viewed by university educators.

Survey questions asked:

What is the current extent of WBP? What are the criteria used? What are advantages and disadvantages? and Are WBP a viable context for educational learning for students?

The respondents included staff from:

- 14 universities in Australia covering 16 undergraduate programmes, 14 in social work and two social welfare;
- Six New Zealand colleges of advanced education and universities encompassing six social work undergraduate degree and diploma programmes; and
- 21 tertiary universities/colleges in Canada covering 22 programmes, where 20 were in social work and one in community development and social planning.

Only two respondents did not use WBP at all, while the remainder considered WBP for only one placement and, most particularly in Australia, did not use WBP regularly. All respondents to the e.survey had direct involvement in field education such as professional liaison officers or equivalent/field education coordinators/university student unit coordinators or heads of schools/heads of programmes. Despite differences across programmes, higher education institutions and countries, findings from this survey indicated similarities in selection criteria.

The results from the e.survey are represented in Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 below.

The results indicated that field practica in the student's usual place of work as a multi-faceted exercise, where a balance between advantages and disadvantages were constantly juggled. WBP can address many of the complexities involved in implementing a practicum programme such as:

- lack of choice,
- lack of available suitable placements,
- finding adequate numbers of supervisors willing to undertake the demanding task of supervising students (particularly those on their first practicum),
- a means of meeting the demands of stressed students who wish to undertake practica in their usual place of work,
- requiring less time for orientation so less likely for practicum breakdown, and
- a means of enabling the organisation to retain staff, and provide more options and degree of flexibility (especially for rural and mature students as well as university field educators).

It was also regarded as a way of opening up the social work and welfare courses to a different cohort of students who might normally have self-selected not to enroll because of the potential burden of unpaid placements. Finally, such arrangements as WBP could result in the establishment of closer links with agencies.

Table 1. University-based field educators' perceptions: WBP: Advantages and disadvantages to students.

ADVANTAGES to Students	DISADVANTAGES to Students
Income security maintained	By continuing to be paid, significant pressure is created to achieve and complete tasks
Close link between worker's skill needs and student's skill growth	Links between worker skill needs and student focus may limit range of experiences
Familiarity to work context enables minimum orientation time for student	Context familiarity can result in only minimal demand on student to change their established practices; and student may be unable to change supervisors' / colleagues' perceptions about their capacity.

Table 2. University-based field educators' perceptions: WBP: Advantages and disadvantages to agencies.

ADVANTAGES to Agencies	DISADVANTAGES to Agencies
Retention of staff	Loss of opportunity to attract students on practicum as potential new employees
Little disruption of service	Reduction in worker's output
Stronger link between the agency and the university	Exposes agency to university scrutiny
Benefits to other workers	Conflict in role over student between the university, the agency and clients

Table 3. University-based field educators' perceptions: WBP: Advantages and disadvantages to university-based field educators.

ADVANTAGES to University-based field educators	DISADVANTAGES to University-based field educators
Practicum is less likely to break down	Concern that student is doing work rather than meeting learning needs
Building links between Agency and the University	Neglect of Field Education component of Practicum
Attracting different students (workers) you may not have been able to previously	Role conflict for those who are attracted to University courses with a practicum component but are without support

Concerns for using WBP as an immediate solution to the scarcity of placements and as a response to student requests for an 'easier practica load' while studying and caring for their family were balanced by just as many pressing issues such as: the possible conflict of roles; the balance between work and learning; the opening up of agencies to university scrutiny; and the confusion about the role between student and worker with regard to clients and colleagues.

As a result of these responses, important questions were raised, especially in relation to tasks and workload and supervision, 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?
- How can agencies make provisions to address the possible confusion of roles?
- How is supervision from someone other than a known colleague accessed?

While many could see how WBP can 'add value' to the agency, this quote was indicative of the findings which showed the overall dilemma facing educators: 'Pedagogically I do not think (WBP) are a good idea, but I recognise the very real economic hardships students have'. For most respondents this dilemma involved how to balance equity and access issues against providing an environment which would foster critically reflective learning. These questions informed the second stage of the research, where more qualitative data was elicited.

Stage 2 a. Focus group of CUFEG

An external person was employed to facilitate a focus group of NSW / ACT CUFEG members. The focus group was held for approximately an hour of the group's usual meeting time and six participants, representing six universities, self-selected to participate. The responses were written up on butcher's paper and the discussion was also audiotaped. In addition to the survey questions mentioned previously, two others were added:

- Thinking back on your experiences, what would you (or the university) have done differently to meet practicum learning goals?
- What vision of the future of pedagogy of field education is there if workplace practica become more common?

Many of the findings from the e.survey were supported by the focus group; however, important additional concerns were identified. In particular, issues that were identified included the student's inability to express a negative appraisal of the agency, their policies and practices, that is, not being able to critically reflect on the learning, content and context in their dual role of employee and student. There are also difficulties for universities to effectively monitor the student's progress, i.e. issue of student, agency and supervisor collusion were questioned. Another important issue raised was the collusion to protect the student/worker by colleagues. For example one focus group participant noted where a student performed poorly on the WBP but was protected by other workers. This then raised the issue about this student's competence as a worker and how to separate out differing competencies between student as learner and worker and the student role. Further, what were the implications if the student failed? And indeed was it possible to fail an employee?

Further concerns were voiced in the focus group as to whether the WBP students are being assessed on new knowledge and skill development or are they being assessed as a paid worker in a different role, a role they were not employed to do. This situation, one student noted, could result in 'the (field education) pedagogy becom(ing) subordinated to the demands (of the workplace)'. With this concern in mind, another participant noted how her colleague had talked three students out of doing a WBP by warning the students 'don't do it just because it's convenient'.

Yet what is still needed to address this concern is a way to assess prior learning, both competencies in knowledge and skills, and for field educators and liaison visitors to 'skill up' in these areas in order to effectively monitor performance.

Stage 2b. IASSW individual interviews

While much of this project has focused on the experiences in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, we felt it would also be useful to make some tentative comparisons with other countries. At a regional meeting of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), individual interviews were undertaken with representatives from Hong Kong, the West Indies, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These individuals were presidents or representatives of their national associations of schools of social work and social pedagogy and were all familiar with their country's various programmes.

Questions to each representative included:

- Are the issues of work-based learning a topic for discussion? If not why?
- If yes, what are the issues? To what extent does it happen? How are practica organised? Are there any restrictions? What are they?
- What are the perceived advantages for the student, agency, supervisor, university? Please give examples.
- What are the perceived disadvantages for the student, agency, supervisor, university? Please give examples.
- What is your vision of the future of practicum if workplace practica become more common?

Although much of the information from these interviews supported findings from the focus group with the NSW/ACT educators, the responses elicited additional valuable information. Almost every participant agreed that there was little doubt that WBP provided financial benefits for the students as well as providing more flexibility and convenience for students undertaking social work courses by allowing students to more easily combine work and study. As one interviewee noted 'it is a luxury nowadays for students to be just students'. Other advantages of WBP were noted, such as the opportunity: for students to look at their place of work through the perspective of 'learner'; for students to complete their assignments; to 'think outside the box' and become more innovative in developing learning, including self directed learning; and to develop options that are relevant to their professional development within the workplace.

While the IASSW representatives identified a number of advantages, they tended to identify more disadvantages which were also common to the NSW/ACT CUFEG inter-

viewees. For example, while they saw the opportunities for learning in a WBP they still acknowledged that there was the possibility that students could become 'too comfortable' in a WBP and possibly lack the opportunities for critical reflection and critical practice essential to the student role in placements. Also mentioned were possible conflicts of interest and role confusion whereby the student's own work priorities could overtake the student learning agenda. These possible disadvantages were more likely, they thought, to occur in small agencies rather than in large agencies where a clear separation of work and learning opportunities could be made available. As a result, it was suggested that smaller agencies might not be suitable for an effective WBP. Issues for supervision were also raised and if, as in many postgraduate courses, students undertook only one placement then a WBP, despite its common practice, was not deemed suitable.

Several interviewees raised the concern that the previous co-worker relationship between student and supervisor, whether this was a positive or negative relationship, could affect the current student /supervisor relationship to the detriment of the student and their learning needs. Using this scenario to her advantage one student had commented to one of the educators interviewed that she could, in her workplace, now '(do) what I can get away with'. Moreover, WBP could raise equity issues for those other students in the programme who are not getting paid. Issues of power, access and preferential treatment were identified, such as a WBP could limit student choice; provide a different experience than the student thought or wanted; could result in preferential treatment over other colleagues; and could possibly end up as a fail grade with obvious consequences for their position in the workplace. The supervisor in the agency may also pressure the student to prioritise the workload, thus compromising her/his student supervisor role of protecting the student learner's workload to allow for the learning to occur. These educators generally saw that the agency had more control in these situations than the university.

By the end of stage 2 we were aware that we were missing the crucial players in the practicum experience, as we needed to ask the field-based educators (supervisors) and students who had completed a WBP their views. Also, having elicited a range of opinions from educators across many countries and settings, it was evident that we were still left with the question: what is the impact of WBP on the overall pedagogical approach to field education? In order to explore these issues more fully, we embarked on the third and final stage of the research.

Stage 3: Semi-structured interviews - students and field-based educators (supervisors)

This final stage of the project consisted of semi-structured face-to-face and phone interviews with 10 students who had undertaken a WBP and six field-based educators who had supervised students doing a WBP. The students had come into the course with a range of experience in the government and non-government health/welfare sector. Several had tertiary qualifications in welfare and, in addition, had completed placements in the human services sector as part of their previous qualifications. The work on placement was different from their work duties and conducted with a different supervisor and client group. Some were in small agencies while others were located in a different section of the much larger government organisation. The field-based educators were all experienced supervisors and practitioners. 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 the field educators and students and adapted to either the student or field educator:

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 are the disadvantages for agency, staff, etc?
6. What are 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?

Findings from field-based educators (supervisors and students) who undertook WBP

Consistent with previous findings, these participants identified several advantages and disadvantages for undertaking a WBP and are condensed in the tables below.

Table 4. Themes – WBP advantages and disadvantages – students.

ADVANTAGES – students	DISADVANTAGES – students
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 5. Themes – WBP advantages and disadvantages – field based educators (supervisors).

ADVANTAGES – field-based educators	DISADVANTAGES - field-based educators
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	

The value of stage 3 was the qualitative responses given by these participants. Some selected responses under the themes above are identified in the following quotes. Several student responses illustrate the ‘making life easier’ theme: ‘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’. A

supervisor noted: 'She knew me and I knew her; I knew her skills and what she was capable of'. Another supervisor commented that 'The big advantage of (student-workers) doing a placement with us was that someone unfamiliar was not left to wander around without support'. The second theme 'being a 'fairer' option' is illustrated in the following quotes from students: '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 uni... (now) how am I going to keep my job to do prac?' and 'I have three 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'.

In regard to the 'adding value to the agency' theme, one student said 'I was able to give them information about the services that was available in other parts of our agency, so that was an advantage'. It was not only the students who perceived their WBP contribution to their usual place of employment. The supervisors also saw this contribution: '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.' A particular significant advantage was actually receiving supervision which was not available in one's worker role where:

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 (student).

And as a consequence, the student experienced enhanced learning while on placement: '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', which for some students opened up new career options and as a result 'I ended up being offered a position here...I am happy because this is the direction I wanted to go with'.

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. Again selected quotes follow.

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 '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 would have (sought) more input into the project'. And, 'My other placement (unpaid) was engrossing, and I learnt so much more, (because) your mind was focused on just that'. 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. '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'. 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...now *do I know what really happened?* (emphasis added).

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'.

This familiarity with the organisation and the people can be seen, as noted earlier, as an advantage for the initial orientation period. However, it was also seen as having a downside in terms of the expectation of others that the student could just do things, but not have their needs as learners acknowledged. This issue was noted by two students: 'When you know people and they know how you work, they leave you to get on with things and there is an assumption that you will be OK...familiarity is not a good thing sometimes', and '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 continually seen as only a worker. A 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 where one's learner role and associated needs are competing with their work role 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 organisation'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'.

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?'.

While supervisors saw a few advantages they did note a number of disadvantages in WBPs. These could be grouped under the themes of: blurring the boundaries; walking on eggshells; and losing the learning potential.

Earlier we referred to the juggling of student and worker roles for students and the stress this can also cause the supervisors who may be conscious of the challenges for them in assisting their student/workers in trying to perform both roles. The complexity of blurring the boundaries is noted here by one supervisor: '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 their work and student tasks: 'To be honest about it, the days did get fudged (between roles). If a big crisis at work came up he would do that...I did challenge him half way through because I could see that work was taking over a bit'.

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, i.e. both parties having to 'walk on egg shells' more often than not. If the

supervisor is off site then this relationship and the consequences may be even more complex as noted in this supervisor's quote: 'We had to look at the issues on what to do if the agency-authorised programme didn't look too good'.

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'. Some of these difficulties could have been addressed in a more formalised contract between all parties as this response indicated: 'There was no contract between the university and the agency CEO or staff-team; in hindsight this would have clarified the placement considerably'.

Discussion

If the disadvantages outlined in this article are taken seriously then there is a challenge in developing WBP as alternative sites of learning. How can university educators protect student learning in a WBP and at the same time utilise them as a credible learning opportunity? The challenge is to incorporate increased sensitivity to the issues raised and address them pedagogically before and during the placement experience. Placements are not the only site of student learning but they are the only opportunity during their studies where 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 recognised while also enabling a space for building new learning. 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 and classroom integration classes as well as supervision as possible sites to articulate the areas of conflicts of interest and barriers for new learning. For example, the establishment of a learning agreement that reflects where new learning can occur. Also, it may be necessary to have 'in situ' meetings involving all relevant parties to the practicum before the placement commences. The initial meeting could involve not only university educators, liaison staff, students and agency based field educators 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 needing to be addressed in this meeting would be:

- What boundaries need to be set to make sure the student role is separate from their worker role?
- How would possible collusion between the student/worker role and the supervisor/worker role be addressed?
- What effect does payment have on the practicum experience?
- How have the worker and learner roles and responsibilities been separated? What monitoring will be done to ensure the separation does not get blurred?
- How have the learner tasks been separated from the tasks expected from the work organisation?
- 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, e.g. student/worker is already known, fits in easily?
- Is there agreement between all parties that new learning can occur?

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- Is the organisation/agency/supervisor able to assist the student/worker to separate from their work demands
 - 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:

- Consider the real or imagined potential of any conflict of interest of supervisors and organisations prior to approval of each WBP.
- Consider 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:

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

While there was general concern that students in WBP may be limited in their ability to undertake reflective learning, there is a growing body of research that supports the idea that reflective learning can be found anywhere, anytime and in any setting (Gould and Baldwin, 2004; Fook, 2004). This is especially so if university-based educators in conjunction with field-based educators and students undertaking WBP are made aware of the complexities of the tasks, processes and issues involved and have access to pedagogical tools and curricula designed specifically to enable the worker/student to meet their learning goals and professional education requirements in the workplace. Symes (2000) argues that learning in the workplace involves both identifying and creating opportunities which will entail new learning such as seeking out special projects, negotiating for more varied tasks and responsibilities or creating new ways of carrying out routine tasks (p.127). Overall our findings identified the issues, which in turn have provided us with information in which pedagogical responses can emerge to support students' requests for using their workplace for practice. It may be that if adequate preparation, support and learning strategies are put in place then the organisational context becomes irrelevant.

In fact, the growing literature on critical reflection, critical self-reflective practice and productive reflection argues that learning is as important for the organisation's productivity and the quality of the working environment, as well as for the workers, where lifelong learning is seen as a valuable resource investment for all concerned (Thompson, 2006; Boud, Cressey and Docherty, 2006; Gould and Baldwin, 2004; Fook, 2004). Indeed, incorporating a critical reflective curriculum where students and supervisors develop practice wisdom through action and reflection, where ideas, actions and mistakes are explored and new knowledge is created as a result is more important for student learning than the actual place of learning itself. This is especially so if this new learning links theory and skill development as transferable across practice methods, agency contexts and settings and organisational practices, and is supported by good supervisory practice (Fernandez, 1997) and adult educational models. The emerging model for integrating real learning in WBP is relevant for all practice

and can position social work and welfare education in leading the debate about learning in the workplace. Importantly, these developments will address students' access and equity issues as they struggle with work/life/study demands and the struggle of universities with securing enough opportunities for the integration of theory and practice in situ.

Conclusion

This project, carried out over three stages, explored the advantages and disadvantages of WBP from the perspectives of Australian, New Zealand and Canadian institution based educators, as well as some comparative perspectives from IASSW members in six other countries. It also explored the experiences of field-based educators/supervisors and students who undertook a WBP. While many advantages were acknowledged in undertaking a WBP there were also a number of disadvantages identified by all, especially in terms of ensuring students actually had an opportunity for 'protected' learning in the workplace separate from their paid work and the need to address any possible role and workload conflicts before placement begins.

This article has argued that rather than cease providing WBP on the basis of these difficulties the challenge is to address them in ways that both acknowledge the potential learning available as well as the access and equity needs of students. A number of strategies have been outlined for various points in the practicum – in the negotiation, liaison and monitoring phases. Finally, as there is pressure on professional bodies, such as the AASW, to provide more flexible and creative paths to accreditation, including the area of field education, then a more proactive stance on WBP might provide one avenue for the flexibility students and academics are seeking. Further, the move in the higher education sector in Australia and elsewhere towards greater flexibility in course structure and delivery may preempt these concerns as many regarded WBP as almost inevitable, whether there is support from the profession or the educators or not.

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