The Practice Educator's Handbook

SARAH WILLIAMS and LYNNE RUTTER

3rd Edition

Updated to include new developments in social work education with new chapters on building resilience and working with marginal and failing learners

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-Qualifying Social Work Practice

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Third Edition

SARAH WILLIAMS
AND
LYNNE RUTTER

Series Editors: Keith Brown and Steven Keen

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The Practice Educator's Handbook

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Foreword from the Series Editors

Practice education has never had a more important role in the development and delivery of quality social work practice. This new edition of *The Practice Educator's Handbook* has been fully updated and has new chapters on building resilience within social work practice and working with marginal and failing learners, both crucial areas within contemporary practice.

Practice Education and the skills that practice educators bring are increasingly seen as vital not just for social work students undertaking a social work programme but for the whole profession as it seeks to be steeped in learning and development drawing upon research and best practice. Practice educators have seen their role develop to include the support of newly-qualified social workers in their first year of practice. This role is rightly being expanded to include supporting the continuous professional development of all social workers as the profession increasingly recognises the value of lifelong learning.

This new edition has been written to support practice educators and all social work professionals involved with the facilitation of learning within the profession.

As with the previous two editions, we trust that the text will encourage you and the social work profession as a whole to reach even higher standards.

All texts in the series have been written by people with a passion for excellence in social work. This book is no different. Other books in this series may also be of value to you as a practice educator as they are written to inform, inspire and develop social work practice.

Professor Keith Brown and Dr Steven Keen
National Centre for Post-Qualifying Social Work, Bournemouth University

Editorial Note:

Unfortunately, since writing this edition, the closure of the College of Social Work has been announced and so the future of the PCF (Professional Capabilities Framework) and the PEPS (Practice Educators Professional Standards) are uncertain. For the purposes of this text we will work to the domains and capabilities as established at this point in time, in the hope that another organisation can take over the remit for these professional standards.

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Introduction

Structure of the book

In the opening chapter we set the scene by providing an opportunity to find out more about how professional development can be supported through learning that takes place in work-based settings. The book then follows the domains set out in the Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work (PEPS) (CSW, 2012) with five key parts.

- Part One. Domain A: Organise opportunities for the demonstration of assessed competence in practice.
- Part Two. Domain B: Enable learning and professional development in practice.
- Part Three. Domain C: Manage the assessment of learners in practice.
- Part Four. Applying learning from Domains A–C to address challenging practice situations
- Part Five. Domain D: Effective continuing performance as a practice educator.

As each part of the book covers a large area of practice, we have split each of these main parts into a number of manageable chapters. You can read a part from start to finish or you can dip into a chapter depending on your specific interest or the amount of time you have available.

The terms 'work-based learning' and 'practice learning' are both used to describe the learning that takes place within a work setting. Generally speaking, however, there are no agreed definitions for either of these terms and they are frequently used interchangeably (Nixon and Murr, 2006). Therefore, throughout this book we will refer to all learning that is located in the workplace as 'work-based learning'.

Who is this book aimed at?

This book has been written for busy social workers involved in supporting, enabling and assessing learners in the workplace. It is aimed primarily at people with responsibility for either qualifying social worker students or newly-qualified social workers (NQSWs) during their first year of professional practice, but it will also be of interest to those with responsibility for other professional learners such as students from other professions, people undertaking post-qualifying awards and those undertaking other forms of continuous professional development.

The book has been written specifically to support those undertaking practice educator awards which meet the staged requirements of the Practice Educator Professional Standards (CSW, 2012) and will be particularly useful for social workers who are new to a practice education role. It will also be of interest to more experienced practice educators seeking support to reflect critically on their practice and further develop their professional capability.

This third edition has been fully updated to include developments in social work education since 2012, with the inclusion of a new Part Four, in which we take a more holistic approach to practice education. Part Four is made up of two new chapters looking at issues which pose a particular challenge to practice educators working in the current professional climate. Chapter 12 tackles the important issue of resilience, while Chapter 13 looks in depth at the difficulties that practice educators are likely to encounter in a failing or marginal learning situation.

How will the book support your practice?

We aim to present an easy-to-read book that will challenge you to take a critical, evidence-informed approach to your thinking and to your practice. Although the book will give you some useful ideas to use within your work with learners, it will not provide you with a 'bag of tricks' that can be pulled out and applied in an unthinking manner. It blends practical information and advice with material aimed at developing an understanding of key concepts and research that will encourage you to think about how and why adults learn in a professional context and how their practice can be assessed fairly and accurately. Throughout the book we have included examples drawn from our own practice and life experiences together with ideas about practice provided by others who have been involved in work-based learning situations. These examples and ideas aim to illustrate how we, as individuals, may have approached a particular situation. These examples represent our individual views on practice and are intended to provide a starting point for you to critically think through your own approaches and not to provide templates for you to apply in practice.

This book should therefore be seen as a handbook to guide your thinking rather than as a textbook concentrating on delivering content. It attempts to offer sufficient theory and discussion to help you gain new understanding in enabling the learning of others but does not give a comprehensive coverage of the literature in this complex area (that has been provided by a number of other excellent books). It uses activities and reflection points to encourage you to think about the application of the ideas we present to your own areas of practice. Research summaries are also included throughout. A summary is provided at the end of Chapter 1 and for each of the following five parts of the book to provide a quick outline of the main ideas presented. Suggestions for further reading are also provided to enable you to explore issues raised in greater depth and extend your knowledge further.

This book will obviously support the development of practice education knowledge and skills but will also support your wider professional development. The integration of practice education within qualified social workers' professional roles can be seen as a natural extension in many respects. Skills and abilities required for the enabling of others through a learning and development process are obviously aligned with those used for social work with people who use social services (e.g. use of discretion, anti-discriminatory practice) and with those used when working alongside other professionals (e.g. communication, diplomacy). It is apparent that much prior experience will be relevant to this subject area and a great deal of material that is covered in this book and in associated programmes will be transferable to other areas of practice, such as supervision and management, as well as to direct work with service users and carers.

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Chapter 1

Practice educators and work-based learning

Introduction

Have you ever spent time considering what makes you special? Not you as a person (although we are sure you are), but you as a professional. What knowledge, skills and attributes have enabled you to undertake the difficult task of supporting and safeguarding some of the most vulnerable people in society? Have you asked yourself how you reached the stage in your professional development you are at today? How you gained your knowledge, built your skills and developed your attributes? And, rather importantly – since this is a book for practice educators – how you can now use your learning more effectively to undertake the vital role of supporting the development of others?

In this opening chapter we will introduce some ideas that encourage you to think more deeply about these fundamental questions. We will also aim to convince you (if that still needs to be done!) that increasing your capability as a practice educator is not just an important contribution to your profession, but is also a key part of your own development as an experienced professional. We will start by looking at theories that explain how people make the journey from novice to expert. Then move on to think more specifically about the attributes that professionals need to function more effectively in the workplace. We will look at all of these issues against the backdrop of developments in the wider social work profession. The themes we introduce will be further developed in later chapters, where we will also consider how the ideas discussed can be applied to practice situations. Towards the end of this chapter we will look at the contributions practice educators can make to the wider professional learning process in the workplace and think about how values will inform the approach that you take when you are supporting the learning of others.

Why is work-based learning and assessment such an important part of professional education?

When we buy a new vehicle, we want to know that it has been thoroughly road tested. Few of us would be happy to choose a car that was simply predicted on paper to be reliable, efficient and able to keep us safe. Road testing allows engineers to fine-tune their product, to make improvements and assess the overall performance of the car in the environment in which it will be used. Similarly, professionals who carry responsibility for the safety and security of vulnerable people need to have an opportunity to have their skills 'fine-tuned' and their knowledge and attributes 'test-driven' in a real-life setting.

For all the reasons given in the previous paragraph work-based experience should be a really good way to learn how to undertake a professional role. Learners have the opportunity to find

out more about the realities of practice, extend classroom-acquired skills and knowledge, improve their performance and be assessed actually doing the job that they are being prepared for. However, anyone who lives in the real world will know that the picture is not always so rosy! Involvement in work-based learning can be a frustrating, confusing and confidence-sapping experience. Learners can be exposed to sharply contrasting opinions and approaches, are often given conflicting advice and need to thread their way through the minefield of working in a complex and unfamiliar organisation. These challenges arise primarily because social work is a messy and uncertain profession, but also because the work environment has not been designed to support learning. It is difficult to predict and control, the quality of the experience is dependent on a wide variety of factors and the needs of learners are often, not unexpectedly, put in second place to those of the organisation.

Because work-based environments are such unpredictable and complex places to learn, the quality and nature of the outcomes achieved can be just as unpredictable as the environment. In the next section we will begin to think about how people actually learn from 'messy' experiences in the workplace and what the implications of this will be for you as a practice educator.

How do professionals learn in the workplace?

Not necessarily in the way many people think! When we ask people attending our courses to describe how learning happens at work, most start by talking about formal events or activities such as in-house training, supervision, shadowing more experienced workers or being taught about new processes. Although these types of activities are clearly important, research suggests that this is by no means the only way that people learn in the workplace (Eraut et al., 1998; Wenger, 2000; Ford et al., 2005; Nixon and Murr, 2006). While we are at work, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, learning is happening pretty well all of the time – everything we see, hear or do has the potential to shape the way that we will practise in the future (Wenger, 2000). Eraut (1994) stressed the fundamental importance of informal learning when he suggested that 80 per cent of what we know is acquired in this way.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Reflect back on something you have learnt at work that has made a difference to the way that you approach your professional role. Do you think that informal learning played any part in how you gained this new knowledge or skill? Try to think quite deeply about this question – not just considering how you gained new information or ideas but also how you decided whether or not you agreed with what you had learnt and how you gained confidence in applying that learning in practice.

Comment

It is worth remembering that even in learning situations that we think of as formal there are aspects of informal learning – for instance, coffee breaks during seminars where a learner has the opportunity to talk about the material presented by the facilitator with their colleagues. The informal 'chat' is an important part of the learning process as it helps them review what

they have heard, consider how that new information changes their existing ideas and form and test 'theories' that incorporate their new knowledge. Similarly, in a work-based setting, informal learning will often enhance and reinforce more formal learning experiences. For example, students can learn a great deal from a process that includes shadowing experienced workers and reflecting formally on their observations. But the learning from these types of experience does not necessarily end there – later in the day or even the week, a casual conversation with a fellow student, colleague or service user may give a new insight into the work that was observed. This could be because the other person helps the learner appreciate an alternative perspective on their experiences, provides new information, or simply asks curious questions that encourage a different understanding. Of course, it is not always a conversation that triggers informal learning – hearing something on the news, watching a film or a television programme or reading a book with a story line or character that makes a learner think more about a situation they have encountered at work can also be influential.

In work-based settings most learning occurs through this type of blending of formal and informal experiences, some of which may not even be recognised as part of the developmental process. It is therefore important that practice educators think quite broadly about how the people they are working with will learn from their experiences in the workplace. This has implications at every stage of the learning process and should be taken into account when planning, managing and facilitating experiences as well as when assessing performance and the achievement of learning outcomes. So, when you are promoting any form of learning you need to think about the whole context in which the learning is taking place and not just the aspects of that experience that are under your direct control.

CASE STUDY 1.1

Delia is a final-year student in a Children and Family team. She has been in the placement for a month and her practice educator, Georgia, believes that she is now ready to take more responsibility for her own cases. Before Delia starts to work independently, Georgia reminds her about the organisation's Lone Working Policy, which was first introduced during induction. Georgia illustrates how the policy should be used to guide practice by talking about how she applies it when she herself visits service users. She is confident that Delia understands that she should always let someone know when she arrives to visit a service user and when she expects to leave.

However, after two weeks Georgia discovers that Delia has not always followed the policy, occasionally moving from one visit to the next without checking in with the nominated person in the office. When she asked Delia why she had been doing this, Delia told her that she was doing exactly what she knew other people in the office regularly did when they were making low-risk visits. She said that it was often really difficult to get through to the office on the phone and she was worried about arriving late.

Georgia realised that Delia was receiving 'mixed messages' because there was a contradiction between the Lone Working Policy and what she regularly saw happening in practice. In this kind of situation it would not be unusual for Delia's learning to be driven more by what

she perceived to be the practice norm, than by her formal 'teaching'. This is because people in group situations are heavily influenced by social norms and are most likely to conform with the behaviour of groups to which they aspire to belong (Turner, 1991). Being aware of social norms in the workplace and the pressures that they may place on learners will help you to be clearer in your supervision sessions about what is expected from the learner. Encouraging reflection on the norms that have developed in the group may also be a useful learning process.

One of the biggest potential drawbacks of any learning system that relies so heavily on the next generation of professionals learning from the last is that while this can be an excellent way of passing on desirable behaviours and valued skills, it is equally good at maintaining those behaviours and practices that need to be changed. Although in the case study above, Delia was actually very clear about why she was not consistently following the policy, we are not always so aware of how our views and behaviours are being influenced. As a practice educator, you can help the learners you support to gain an insight into their own learning processes by explicitly discussing with them when and how they have gained new skills and/or ideas. This has two key functions: first to increase their awareness of maximising opportunities for learning in the workplace and second to encourage a more critical approach to the influences on their thoughts and practice.

REFLECTION POINT

One of the things that can be confusing for learners in the workplace is the mismatch between what they are told and what they see. As experienced workers we often take shortcuts that would be unwise for someone with less experience. These shortcuts can become the social norm or accepted way to practice in established teams. Can you think of any examples of this kind of behaviour in your own team? How do you think this would impact on a learner joining the team?

So, while we can see that it is reasonable to argue that learning in the workplace is an essential part of an individual's preparation for professional practice, we need to take into account the fact that the learning processes can be difficult to plan and regulate. This becomes particularly significant when, like now, there is a need for a major development in the way that a profession is required to function. In the next section we will move on to explore why this point is especially pertinent in the current climate and look at how the government is promoting an agenda for reform in the social work profession.

Placing work-based learning in the wider social work context – the agenda for reform

Given the difficulties faced by the profession and the unpredictability of the social work task, it should not be a surprise that things occasionally go wrong. In the last twenty

years, social work has been placed under the spotlight and, on a number of occasions, been found seriously wanting (e.g. Laming, 2009). Undertaking roles providing support for vulnerable people will inevitably involve challenge, but it could be argued that the pace of modern life and the complexities of our current society have led to a step change in the pressures being placed on social workers and allied professionals (Brown et al., 2005). As a result of government and public concerns about the competence, effectiveness and sustainability of the profession, the Social Work Task Force was asked to make recommendations that would lead to improvements in the quality of service provision (Social Work Task Force, 2009a). Several of these recommendations have now been implemented and are beginning to play an important role in reshaping how social workers are recruited and educated as well as how they are supported, managed and regulated in practice. These include:

- setting up the College of Social Work;
- introducing an overarching set of generic professional standards – the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (CSW, 2012c);
- amending the qualifying degree with tighter specification of admissions, content and practice learning requirements;
- improving practice education through the introduction of professional standards for practice educators – the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) (CSW, 2012);
- introducing an assessed and supported year in practice for newly-qualified social workers (ASYE);
- developing a more coherent and effective continuing professional development framework for qualified workers.

In February 2014, the Department of Education published a review that looked specifically at the education of children's social workers which concluded, in addition to the reforms already implemented, that there was a need to specify 'what newly-qualified social workers should know and be able to do at the end of their first year in practice' (Narey, 2014). The Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Social Workers has since been published to meet this need (DoH, 2014), with a similar framework for social workers working in adult services published in 2015 (DoH, 2015). The unexpected announcement in June 2015 of the closure of the College of Social Work has left the future direction of this and other key aspects of the assessment and regulation of the social work profession in some doubt.

REFLECTION POINT

What do you think we have learnt from the reforms of the last five years? Are we any closer to understanding what knowledge skills and attributes are needed by social workers and do you think we are any clearer about how to make social worker education fit for practice?

How will recent changes help practice educators ensure professional learners are fit to practice?

Although the reforms outlined in the previous section are all widely considered to be essential precursors for the improvement of social work practice, the introduction of the PCF has been of greatest significance in terms of driving forward changes in work-based learning.

This is because the PCF (CSW, 2012c):

- sets a clear expectation that social workers will continue to develop their skills and knowledge throughout their career and not just up to the point of qualification;
- acknowledges the complexity of practice by encouraging a shift in focus from the assessment of discrete competences towards a holistic appraisal of overall professional performance;
- emphasises the central importance of reflective practice.

To understand why these features of the PCF (CSW, 2012c) are quite so significant and how they are supporting a change in the way that learning in the workplace is enabled and assessed, we will now move on to explore the differences between social work competence and capability.

From competence to capability – promoting a new way of thinking about practice

The assessment of competence in a range of specified areas, primarily at the point of qualification was, historically, considered an important part of ensuring that social workers were fit for practice (Williams and Rutter, 2010). However, it is now widely recognised that a different approach is needed to support a rise in professional standards (CSW, 2012). This is because social work competences are a bit like the ingredients used to make a cake – important, but not enough by themselves to ensure a successful outcome. Although having the right ingredients is a good starting point, anyone who has made a cake will know that there is more to baking than putting good quality ingredients into a bowl and hoping for the best! Like social work, a cake is more than the sum of its parts. The way the ingredients are brought together, the length of time that the batter is mixed, the temperature of the eggs and countless other factors will determine how the cake turns out. Subtle differences in techniques together with the knowledge and flexibility to react to the unexpected – such as missing ingredients or an unreliable oven thermostat – will make a huge difference to the finished product. Similarly, while it is important that social workers develop all the right competences (or ingredients), simply having these in place will not be enough to ensure they are always able to practise effectively in more challenging and complex settings.

Since it is, at least in part, the ability of some social workers to deal with complexity, respond flexibly and use professional judgement confidently that has drawn past criticism (e.g. Munro, 2011) we can see why the refocus from the assessment of competence to the promotion and evaluation of a more holistic and critical approach to practice may be needed. This process of holistic and continuing learning is often described as the development of professional capability (Barnett and Coate, 2005).

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