WEAVING THE THREADS OF KNOWLEDGE:
A FOCUS ON STUDENTS

Annerley Bates
Relationships Australia
Queensland

Merrelyn Bates
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Griffith University

Lyndel Bates
Travelsafe Committee
Queensland Parliament

Keywords : students; supervisors; academic coordinators and practicum experience

Abstract

This research paper will address the process of learning in a cooperative education program from the students' perspective. Each author will consider the student's point of view from a different position.

The paper builds a combined picture of the student's understanding of the placement using a constructivist interpretive methodology that concentrates on verbatim accounts of students' responses as the placement proceeds.

Annerley, who has recently graduated as a social worker, will comment on the interpretations she placed on the practicum experience she had herself during her degree program. She will go on to outline her subsequent honours research into the perspectives of other students completing field placements. The importance of the student's contribution to the student/supervisor relationship will be emphasised by Lyndel, a senior researcher for the Queensland Parliament, who has recently supervised students herself in a demanding workplace. She will give her perspective on the student's need for supervision and direction. Merrelyn, as the convenor of the work placement program conducted by Griffith University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice for degree level students, will discuss her current research into what the university is able to do about how the students learn and what they learn through the placement experience.

The paper will conclude with some important suggestions about innovations that the authors believe should be introduced into the culture of cooperative education in the future if it is to achieve its stated goals.

Introduction

A co-operative education program involves at least three people: the student, the supervisor and an academic coordinator from the sponsoring educational institution. Each will influence the experience and learnings of the student. A number of authors (Fernandez, 2002; Maidment, 2003; Patford, 2000) draw attention to the fact that every practicum experience is not necessarily productive: in fact, they indicate that inappropriate experiences and (in particular) inappropriate supervision can often result in quite negative learning. As long ago as 1993, Gail Slocombe wrote 'field work still remains the single most important factor… yet it is the most vulnerable to mediocrity, lack of standardisation, poor quality control, few resources and the myriad of other frailties so prevalent in …educational climates…' (p.49). She also noted that '…many field educators feel that they struggle alone with the responsibility of student supervision' (p.43). Despite this, students still believe that the practicum is the single most important part of their program. This paper will examine the way students develop independence and autonomy throughout their placement from each of three perspectives: the student, supervisor and academic.

Universities are increasingly relying on field placement experiences as an important part of the preparation of those who choose to work in the human service professions. In the literature about how trainee professionals learn, there is relatively little focus on the effect of interactions between students, academics and supervisors. Annerley, a social work student, completed her honours thesis in 2003, was interested in the way theoretical concepts emerged as students reflected on their direct experiences. Lyndel is a practitioner with some experience of supervising students in the workplace, and Merrelyn is the convenor of a substantial workplace based program for professionals in the criminal justice area. Together, we felt that we could present a report that canvasses some of the major issues of practicum fron the students' perspective.

Methodology for this paper

This collective case study is an attempt to begin to rectify this and follows the experiences of students, supervisors and course conveners. Stake (1995) suggests that any case study is best thought of as 'a deepening investigation of issues', which present themselves in problematic form – as incomplete constructions in which interpretations are being contested. He claims that '…issues are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, and historical contexts'(Stake, 1995, p.17). This study is seen as both identifying and exploring questions raised by the students, supervisors and conveners: it does not claim to resolve any of them.

In Annerley's dissertation she interviewed four students about their field placement experience. The students were asked to describe their experiences and consequent learnings which she then clarified using an interpretive-constructivist paradigm.

Lyndel's study also involves reflection on her own experiences while supervising students in the diverse and challenging workplace environment of the Queensland Parliamentary Service. Her own observations are complemented by conversations with other supervisors in similar situations.

Merrelyn has convened a work placement program in the criminal justice professions and has recently completed her PhD. In it she explored the nature of effective learning activities and

the kinds of institutional and personal interventions that best support the student as he or she develops the autonomy and confidence to 'fly solo'. Her contribution is to outline some of her more important findings.

Results and discussion

1. Annerley: learning to be a professional – The voice of a student

For the purposes of this paper I intend to tell part of the story of just one student, James. All of the students I interviewed identified that strong learning experiences were those where their anxiety levels were raised when they encountered a new problem. The outcome of these challenges generally promoted competence and self esteem.

The first challenge for James was to negotiate the leader/follower roles in the supervisory relationship to make it clear when he felt he needed guidance and when he did not. James tended to see the whole practicum as an adventure into new and undiscovered territory with his supervisor by his side, rather than leading the way. Because of this, the role modelling offered by the supervisor seemed to have had integrity but to have lacked real answers to the most difficult problems. In one particularly distressing case *both* supervisor and student felt defeated and withdraw feeling hurt.

I asked James about the feelings he experienced around this kind of incident.

> *Why the hell do we do what we are doing? Why the hell am I actually trying to be a social worker? Just so I can have these feelings every day and get paid for it?...There's no point to the work that we do because you just hit these stone walls! ...I had to really re-evaluate my personal choices of why I'm doing what I'm doing... and that was difficult!*

Perhaps the most difficult of the supervisor's skills is not how to 'hold the student's hand' but how to let go of it. It was when James was left to fend for himself that the real business of learning began.

Knowledge cannot exist without a knower and all learning can be thought of as learning about the self. With the achievement of autonomy, learners can be left to their own devices in the setting of goals, choice of tasks and selection of learning environments. All students I studied claimed that they felt they had achieved more personal autonomy towards the end of the experience. Whether or not this reflected stages in the learning process was not clear but, at the very least, a hierarchy of needs seemed to have been functioning because each student needed a sense of security before venturing outside existing comfort zones.

2. Lyndel: supervising a student – A Queensland case study

I am a Senior Research Officer with the Queensland Parliamentary Service. My role is diversified and includes assisting a Parliamentary committee, researching a range of issues including areas that I am unfamiliar with and drafting reports for the chair of the committee. I supervised my first student last year and I am currently supervising my second.

My placement students have each completed a project that has contributed directly to the work of the Queensland Parliamentary Service. While completing the project, the student works as if they are an employee and are expected to learn the skills they need to behave as such. As another supervisor explained:

> *[Co-operative education programs are] A process ... where everyone comes in fairly unsure or uncertain about where it's all going and then there's the collaboration between the students, supervisor (and university) over a period of time.*

While learning the rules of the workplace, students tend to remain as close as possible to people and situations they are familiar with. For instance, I have had the students ask me to give them 'permission' to leave the building during a lunch break.

The students seem to arrive at the workplace in a very compliant frame of mind, quite reminiscent of school students. Perhaps as a consequence, they require more supervision at the start of the placement and often require permission before they feel free to act: they tend to treat the supervisor as the locus of power. For myself, my expectation that I should be a facilitator rather than a boss meant that I found it hard the first time I commented on a student's writing. The writing style was completely inappropriate for the task. The student had written passively and in jargon, whereas we wanted writing that was active and written in a 'dear mum' style.

Fortunately though, I have found that as placements progress, students become more confident and autonomous. I can come to work and find the student has already arrived and commenced working on the project. Previously, the student would come and ask for tasks, rather than going straight to work.

3. Merrelyn: designing and implementing a workplace based program – A University perspective

In designing and implementing the Griffith University, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Field Placement course, I have become acutely aware that I need to be offering students experiences more carefully tailored to their *learning about themselves* as incipient professionals than would be the case if I simply placed them into the workplace environment and left them to 'sink or swim'. I have come to believe that the structure of the course and the principles underlying teaching interventions must be congruent and reflect the principles that Carl Rogers called *self appropriated learning* (1971, p.276). It must be the learner who determines what is wanted, not the teacher or the course developer – all they can do is to set the preconditions for learning (i.e. the problem), ask the learner to face those conditions, and offer specific encouragement and advice when asked. In fact, my research indicated that often the most productive intervention a teacher (from either the workplace or the university) can make is to refuse to intervene at all insisting instead that the student make his or her own decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences. My major role is to provide a 'safety net' for the students during their early exploratory period and then carefully withdraw it as he or she gains confidence.

If the following anecdote were not so disturbing in its implications, it would be amusing. After six full days of experience in the workplace, one of my students very timidly confessed in a student workshop that her greatest difficulty on placement was that she did not know where the toilets were. When others in the group asked her how she coped, she said that she

just didn't drink anything when she was at work! Then, to my astonishment, no less than four other students claimed that they had been having the same problem! After we had discussed how one might go about seeking such information, I was able to alert the workplace supervisors to the difficulty; but the naiveté of these students is still almost unbelievable, and the distance they have to travel in order to gain (even minimal) confidence is immense.

Conclusions and implications

More than anywhere else, fieldwork is where students learn how to learn. Perhaps, even more to the point, it is where they learn to model themselves on their facilitators and learn how to become encouraging and optimistic self-teachers. As students discover that autonomous competence is not a static goal that we can achieve, it is so context-bound it tends to move ahead in front of us like a mirage as we approach it, they learn to handle difficult challenges. As they do, new ones appear on the horizon and what was once a visible destination becomes more an 'end in mind' than an 'end in view'. A number of innovations should be introduced into the culture of cooperative education in the future.

Supervisors should focus on meeting the needs of the students. Initially, students will require more support but as the placement progresses the students should develop autonomy and independence. The 'safety nets' that were in place at the start of the placement should be removed to enhance this development of independence.

Every student in Annerley's study emphasised that they wanted to take charge of their own learning and, by implication to take risks, but this does not contradict the importance of the need expressed by all respondents for *direction* particularly in the early stages of practicum. Supervisors need specific guidance on how to provide this necessary 'non-directive' direction. Perhaps preparatory workshops or even short courses provided by the University are needed for first time supervisors in this difficult skill.

The university can improve its programs by concentrating on the nature of the supervisory and professional interventions being made as the student learns. The university must see student autonomy as the fundamental goal of any such program and all teaching interventions need to be designed so they can be internalised by the students so that as independent learners they become their own 'self teachers'.

As long as we live, each of us will continue to learn because change is the only certainty we can have about the future. We have learned that learning, by its very nature, is often an uncomfortable process but there are deep satisfactions on the way.

Acknowledgments

References

Fernandez, E. (2002). Effective teaching and learning in practicum education: Perceptions of student social workers and student teachers. In Practical Experiences in

Professional Education (P.E.P.E) (Ed.), *Effective Teaching and Learning in Practicum Education*. Research Monograph No. 2 67-107, Brisbane: Practical Experiences in Professional Education.

Maidment, J. (2003). Problems experienced by students on field placement: Using research findings to inform curriculum design and content. *Australian Social Work*, 56(1), 50-60.

Patford, J. (2000). Can I do social work and do I want to? Students' perceptions of significant learning incidents during practica. *Australian Social Work*, 53(2), 21-28.

Rogers, C. (1971). *On Becoming a Person*. London: Redwood Press Ltd.

Slocombe, G. (1993). If field education is so vital why isn't everyone doing it?. *Australian Social Work*, 46(2), 43-49.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. London: Sage.