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# Learning Beyond Compliance: A comparative analysis of two cohorts undertaking a first year social work module

Avril Bellinger, Faculty of Health, University of Plymouth.
Fumiyo Kagawa, Centre for Sustainable Futures, University of Plymouth.

**Abstract**
This paper addresses a current gap in education for sustainable development (ESD), an international educational movement, with a particular focus on teaching and learning innovations. Reflecting upon the mainstream 'business as usual' approaches in the ESD discourse, theories and practices of transformative social work are considered to make a significant contribution to that end. Empirical research was conducted to examine a new pedagogical approach introduced within an established module taught in 9 different groups to first year UK Social Work students during the academic year of 2007/8. The core change investigated was the replacement of detailed weekly instructions for teaching staff. The new guide articulated a pedagogical framework for the course and outlined themes and objectives, leaving detailed planning and delivery to individual teachers. Explorations were made through a comparative analysis of the responses of teaching staff and students for pre- 2007/8 academic years and 2007/8 year respectively. Data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The research findings include students' positive view towards the classroom-based learning and some indications of deeper and wider understanding of social justice. Staff reported a renewed sense of professionalism. This research illuminates the potential for learning beyond compliance within existing curriculum frameworks.

**Key Words**
social justice, social work, education for sustainable development, transformative learning, curriculum innovation, compliance

**Introduction**

This paper explores the interaction of two different Higher Education (HE) perspectives concerned with promoting social change. The research was conducted in collaboration between the authors: a social work academic and researcher of education for sustainable development (ESD). It reports on empirical research conducted during the academic year of 2007/8 which examined a new pedagogical approach introduced in the first year module of Social Work programme at the University of Plymouth, U.K and the result of this for students and teachers. The paper introduces key characteristics of ESD and its interface with social work to justify the research questions. The context for the research is offered as a story of curriculum innovation in a social work programme followed by an account of the quantitative and qualitative research methodology used. Key findings are presented followed by reflections on the wider implications of social work pedagogies to ESD and to other disciplines.

**Education for Sustainable Development**

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is an international educational movement and it currently enjoys huge momentum through the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). According to UNESCO, the lead agency of the decade, ESD is 'a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities' (UNESCO 2006). ESD addresses interconnected contemporary socio-economic and environmental issues based on the values of respect for dignity and human rights, social and economic justice for all, protection of Earth's ecosystems, cultural diversity, and a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace (UNESCO 2006: 16). The following keywords which are frequently used to define ESD are helpful to understand key tenants of ESD:

> creation of awareness; local and global vision, responsibility (learn to be responsible), learning to change; participation; lifelong learning; critical thinking; systemic approach and understanding complexity; decision-making; interdisciplinarity; problem-solving; satisfying the needs of the present without compromising future generations (UNESCO, 2009: 27).

A central challenge of this international educational movement is deeply embedded in the ambiguous notion of sustainable development and conflicting understandings of the role of education. Despite ESD's comprehensive and inclusive vision, Khan urges critical educators' engagement with the ESD movement since the UN Decade of Sustainable Development is, in his view, 'nothing other than a deductive pedagogical '…greenwash developed by and for big business-as-usual' (2008: 7-8). The contested notion of sustainable development which enjoys wide supports across all political lines is referred to as a 'political compromise' (Sauvé, 2004), a 'political dream ticket' (Bonnet, 1999) or a 'multi-purpose glue' (Perez & Llorente, 2005). It can be seen as a new area of information to be learned but one that does not affect the structures and processes within which the learning takes place. Without much unpacking of tensions between economic, social and environmental sustainability, mainstream sustainability and its manifestation in education, the inconsistencies and incompatibilities of values are maintained (Selby & Kagawa, 2010). Policy-driven phenomenon of mainstream education for sustainable development is, in the words of Jickling and Wals '…a product and carrier of globalizing forces' (2008:39). By uncritically embracing market driven economic growth model, most ESD lacks deep critical reflection (Selby & Kagawa, 2010:39-40):

> …in this untroubled state, there has been a preoccupation with the instrumental and pragmatic task of embedding ESD in institutions and systems through developing and establishing benchmarks, indicators and checklists; developing skills taxonomies; refining auditing and monitoring tools; drawing up performance league tables; and other potentials mechanisms for targeting, standardisation, measurement and control.

In a similar vein, Jickling (2005) has been strongly concerned about instrumentalist and deterministic ESD pedagogical approaches in which teachers hierarchically pass on predetermined expert knowledge/learning outcomes to learners.

**The Social Work Education and Education for Sustainable Development Interface**

Social work is a personally engaged practice in which use of self and a capacity for working creatively in situations of uncertainty are fundamental (Fook *et al.*, 1997; Taylor & White, 2006). Anticipating severe consequences of rising prices resulting from peak oil, floods and other natural disasters through climate change, the field

of social work plays a critical role in working with those communities which are already disenfranchised and likely to be hit first and most severely by those social and environmental challenges. Social workers are predominantly engaged in supporting people in such communities both in the UK and internationally. Taking a global perspective raises questions about the sustainability of individualised eligibility-orientated state interventions when even the comparatively well-resourced UK provision is under such economic pressure. Social work in the UK has not been routinely connected with sustainability. Indeed the proposals in response to the Social Task Force Report (DH, 2010b) are silent on this matter. However the need to address both social sustainability (i.e. creating healthy, equitable, and diverse communities) and environmental sustainability are increasingly urgent in the context of serious global environmental challenges which are already affecting the large number of the world's population (Whiteford *et al.,* 2010).

The transformative tradition of social work theory and practice (Bailey & Brake. 1975; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2007, 2010), means that a focus on individuals should not mean that social work is reduced to a de-politicized and pathologizing response to global pressures.

Transformative social work education is situated within dialectical relationships between the global and the local. It strives to develop context-specific solutions in ways that address the individual and global structural issues simultaneously (Whiteford *et al.,* 2010). Hugman's review of the identity of social work indicates that there is a prevailing trend in the UK towards producing compliant social workers who confine themselves '…to the competent delivery of services' (2009:1143). He urges the profession to seek inspiration from the global South in order to preserve practices that address both individual needs and wider issues of social justice.

It is important to note that some of the general themes underpinning education for sustainable development are already embedded in the theory and practice of social work: substantial knowledge about groupwork (Brown, 1992; Doel & Sawdon, 1999; Preston-Shoot, 2007; Benson, 2009), constructivist approaches (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Healy, 2005) and a concern for the congruence of content and process (East & Chambers, 2007). Similarly, there is evidence that ecological models for assessment and intervention (Brofenbrenner, 1977; DH, 2000a; Jack & Gill, 2003) have been widely adopted in the UK. Criticality is regarded as a pre-requisite for good practice (Ford *et al.,* 2005; Brookfield, 2009). In the UK, students and practitioners are familiar with the notion of ecological approaches. However, these fall short of an ESD definition of ecology. In social work they refer to 'family and environmental factors' (DH, 2000a) or to 'economic and political structures, national and European legislation' (Baldwin, 2000). Such frames of reference are limited to a notion of ecology that is disconnected from global reality and presumes a continuing entitlement to an unequal share of global resources. Most importantly social justice concerns lie at the core of social work education (IFSW, 2000; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009).

The recent UNESCO review on the first half of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development points out that 'ESD-triggered innovations in teaching and learning are still in their early stages' (2009:71). This indicates that accumulated social work pedagogical experiences have much to offer to the ESD. UNESCO goes on to state that:

> there is a world-wide call for alternative methodologies that can strengthen people's SD [Sustainable Development]-related capacities such as: understanding complexity; seeing connections and interdependencies; participating in democratic decision making processes; and questioning dominant and long-accepted systems and routines that appear fundamentally unsustainable. (2009:71).

Social work education theories and practices are not free from obstacles. For instance, helping learners to develop critical and creative capacities within a current dominant framework of higher education presents some challenges. Increasingly students see themselves as consumers with a right to expect that teachers deliver the education, training, and qualification for which they have paid. Failure may even result in litigation as students exercise their right to complain about course delivery (Onsman, 2008). In this way, the world of higher education mirrors the commercial and service environments in which consumers have a right to consistent, equal and quality assured education. Such a culture produces pressure on teachers to demonstrate that students have not been disadvantaged by differences in their experience and can drive teaching towards a formulaic approach

(Leathwood, 2005). Almost twenty years ago, the dangers of a reductionist approach were identified by Bel Hooks:

> At this historical moment, there is a crisis of engagement within universities, for when knowledge becomes commoditized, then much authentic learning ceases. (Hooks, 1989:51)

More currently, Kathy Maclachlan (2007) reviews the increasing constraints within HE institutions and their impact on teaching practices.

Equally it should be noted that the UK social work employment environment is one of increasing regulation, micro-management and targets based on short-term politically driven imperatives (Jordan & Jordan, 2000). Graduates are expected to arrive at their first jobs able to deliver services with economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Jones, 2008) to people whose needs have been defined as extreme within that particular agency's eligibility criteria. Thus, whilst the values of social justice and human rights and the practices of community engagement are embedded in social work teaching internationally, it can be a challenge for both teachers and students to negotiate these competing realities. Students can find the relevance of classroom teaching hard to retain in the messy complexity of the practice environment where their task is often highly constrained by bureaucratic process (Peckover *et al.,* 2008; Hugman, 2009; White *et al.,* 2009).

**A Story of Curriculum Innovation**

This research collaboration came about as a result of the social work academic's participation in the Centre for Sustainable Futures (a HEFCE funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) which has a mandate to embed sustainability content and pedagogy into all disciplines. Module changes were already in progress when the researcher identified them as being an example of ESD and so an appropriate focus for study. The interface between the two areas described earlier meant that a lens of ESD could be used to interrogate the social work process to the illumination of both.

Foundations for Professional Practice is a one year core module (20 credit) at Stage 1 of the BSc (Hons) Social Work Programme, an honours degree which leads to the nationally recognised professional qualification, at a university in the UK. The programme is offered at the two geographical locations within the South West of England to approximately 100 students. This module is 'a core strand of the degree and carries the principal task of developing critical reflection, awareness of social injustice, professional identity and academic skills' (Butler, 2007:1). Its learning outcomes include academic skills, the development of professional identity and understanding of social work values and self-assessment skills.

The module consists of classroom-based learning and practice learning experience. For the former, students spend two hours per week over two academic terms, while for the latter students spend a minimum of 40 days in community-based agencies offering social care activities and undertaking a community development project. 100 students are divided into small groups of ten to fifteen and each group is taught by an academic teaching staff member supported by a Practice Learning Manager (practice educator employed by the university) who is in charge of community-based practice learning. It is well understood that the task of connecting classroom teaching with practice is problematic (Thompson, 1995; Clapton *et al.,* 2008; Bellinger, 2010). So the inclusion of learning in classroom and practice environments, together with joint teaching by practice educators and academic staff was intended to promote students' ability to connect theory and practice.

During the academic year 2007/8, changes were introduced for this module in the classroom based learning environment, whilst retaining the same learning outcomes from the previous year. Lying behind this decision was the teaching staff members' dissatisfaction with the detailed weekly instructions they were previously required to use. During the summer of 2007, those who were involved in the delivery of this module were invited to discuss their concerns and suggest alternative ideas about pedagogies. They were unanimous in a wish to use teaching approaches that were more congruent with their concerns for social justice. Subsequent collaboration between the authors identified that these motives were in harmony with ESD principles. It was also considered that the alternative approaches would in turn help students deepen and widen their own personal awareness and commitment for social justice through their profession. Staff were invited to generate ideas about how students could be helped to learn the module outcomes and these were generated through a workshop session.

Reflecting upon the concerns and suggestions raised during the meetings, module leaders came

up with two concrete changes. One was the replacement of the detailed instructional 'Teacher Guide' with one which clarifies a pedagogical approach for this course and gives some practical guidance to the teaching staff . Underpinning the change was an approach to adult learning that was holistic and concerned with acknowledging and working with the whole person using a variety of media (Miller, 2007). The intention was to support students at the beginning of their social work course to challenge their acquired frame of reference and become more open to other ways of thinking and being in the world. This included making space for reflecting on 'disorientating dilemmas' in which individuals' previous ways of making sense of the world were disrupted and subjected to rational examination (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). It also acknowledged that such deep and transformative learning has significant emotional and spiritual dimensions (Dirkx *et al.,* 2006). Significantly, no attempt was made to adjust the content of the module teaching to include explicit focus on environmental aspects of sustainability. In planning the module changes, none of the teaching team saw this as a priority so this would have seemed artificial.

In place of detailed instructions for each session, the new teacher guide identified aims and objectives for each theme spanning a three week period. These included: developing the framework for learning; understanding groups and how to work in them; being a skilled learner; seeking and using feedback; interacting with the public; what is social work; social justice; critical reflection and identity. Teaching staff members were highly encouraged to use their own resources in response to specific group needs. The guide suggested the importance of using: (1) an engaged pedagogical approach by modelling the behaviours which tutors were trying to promote; and (2) various interactive pedagogies by linking theory and practice in a critical manner (Butler, 2007). Another key change was fully to embed students' reflections within each classroom based learning session by allocating at least 15 minutes per session reflection time. Students were invited to reflect on their learning experience through, for instance, writing an individual reflective log for which they were offered guided questions.

Following the initial review meeting, there were conscious efforts to continue dialogues among the teaching staff members in the pedagogical innovation process. The research interviews with staff by the ESD researcher, (see below) produced a level of reflection that sharpened critical awareness and affirmed positive practice. In this way a constructive learning environment was modelled in order to generate a sense of ownership and community of learning (Wenger, 1998) among all the teaching staff.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

Through their collaboration, the authors recognised that social work had developed and been implementing the content and pedagogical elements which are underrepresented within the current ESD discourse (UNESCO, 2009) as quoted at the beginning of this paper. It was considered that examining the example of curriculum innovation experience explained above would help to advance the current discussion on theory and practice of ESD. The empirical research examined both students' and teaching staff's experiences with regard to a new pedagogical approach. Two research questions guided the inquiry:

- In what way does the change in the pedagogical approach of the module influence students' learning and their development of social justice awareness, in particular?
- In what way does the change in the pedagogical approach of the module influence tutors' approach to teaching?

These questions were examined in a comparative manner by analysing three types of data. First, two sets of on-line student questionnaire surveys were implemented from April to June 2008. One was for the first year students and the other for the second year students. Most of the questions were identical. However, for the second year students, the questions were framed to obtain their retrospective view on the module. 28 first year students responded (the return rate of 41 percent). Because of the very small sample from the second year, the authors have decided not to include the sample from the second year in the analysis.

Second, a portfolio analysis was conducted of 15 pieces of work. Two samples were drawn randomly from four different grade levels (i.e. 40-50; 50-60; 60-70; Over 70) and from both 2007/8 and 2006/7 submissions. These two sets of first year student portfolios were compared (cohort 2006/2007 had only one portfolio for over 70). The coding and analysis were made according to the themes predetermined by the authors with a particular focus on students' social justice

awareness. It is important to note that this coding is value ridden. Category A is considered as a narrow and limited learning outcome, while moving towards category B and then category C is considered as desirable. The students' reflection section within the portfolio was mainly examined. Authors analyzed the data independently and later they compared their analysis.

In addition to the above, student marks for all the student portfolios from each year were compared (i.e. 2006/7 cohort 101 samples, and 2008/9 cohort 100 samples) to check whether there was any significant change in the distribution.

Third, a total of six tutors who have taught the module both pre and during the academic year of 2007/8 were invited to one short semi-structured individual interview. It aimed at eliciting their comparative views on pedagogies they used as well as their views on pedagogical implications for student learning. Qualitative data from the individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with their prior consent. Analysis was made according to emerging themes. The involvement in the research was voluntary and the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed throughout the research process.

**Enabling Learning (Processes) to Address Social Justice**

The analysis of the on-line survey has revealed that the majority of student respondents were positive about the learning experience in the classroom. For instance, a majority of them chose 'strongly agree' or 'agree' to the following statements identified as the module outcomes: [this module] has helped me to understand the role and function of social work in society (82 percent); to be familiar with the knowledge, skills and ethical frameworks that underpin social work practice (79 per cent); to assess my own strengths and learning needs (71 per cent). 93 per cent of the respondents chose 'yes' when asked if there was any significant learning for them in the 108 classroom-based learning. When asked to write about the factors which facilitated their learning, students identified the following factors: group discussion/work (9 responses); teaching/facilitating styles (5 responses); supportive learning atmosphere (5 responses); individual learning such as reading, essay writing, homework (4 responses), work experience/practice (3 responses).

More than 90 percent of the respondents also agree with the statement that the atmosphere of this module is different from other modules they have taken so far. When asked to explain how the atmosphere of the class was different, 10 student respondents explained it using the terms 'informal' 'friendly' 'relaxed' and 'personal.' Others also wrote the class environment was 'comfortable' to express their own opinions and to ask questions (10 respondents). However, it is important to note that a small number of students touched on tensions and dysfunction relating to group dynamics. With regard to the regular reflection time within the module, 64 per cent of student respondents found it helpful for their learning. This reveals an interesting contrast to the teaching staff members' sense of failure to the reflection time experience which will be explained in the following section.

When asked if their understanding of social justice changed since they started their study at the university, nearly 70 per cent of respondents answered affirmatively. Widened and deepened understandings are observed in their written comments to some extent. For instance, one student wrote 'I now know a bit about this, whereas before I knew nothing.' In the words of another student:

> Social justice to me is something that is an ongoing debate with as yet no clear right or wrong answer. Social justice is much bigger and more complex than I originally anticipated.

In the survey, students highlighted an increased level of critical consciousness developed through the classroom learning. For instance, one student wrote, '[this module] has caused me to identify who I am and be more aware of how my identity impacts upon others.' Similarly one student stated 'I am far more aware of how my values can affect how I practise and I now view everything from an anti-discriminatory view point'. Another student began to '…investigate stories or reports in the media in more detail and do not rely on one source of information.'

Some indications of widened and deepened understanding of social justice are also observed through the portfolio analysis. The portfolio analysis comprised two independent readings of the same material by the authors looking for 5 specific themes derived from the literature. In terms of themes: 'reasons for social justice,' 'identifications of issues' and 'student perceptions

about issues of social injustice,' both cohort groups possess more or less similar levels of awareness and understandings. However, there is an interesting improvement in the two remaining themes. Although there was no indication of global awareness among the portfolios of sample students from the 2006/2007, portfolios of the top three grade levels of sample students from 2007/8 indicate more global levels of awareness than local and national levels. Most significant contrast is observed in personal change. Behaviour changes are strongly manifested in all four grade levels of samples students in 2007/2008.

In reviewing the student portfolio marks for the cohorts, it appears that the top ranges of marks (60-69 and 70-79) have shown significant improvement for the 2007/2008 cohort groups. Although the research indicated an overall positive response from the students, clearly it is a weakness in the research that no baseline data was available for the two cohorts under consideration. It must also be acknowledged that further research would be needed to see whether attitude and behaviour changes are sustained and accumulate throughout the programme.

**A Renewed Sense of Professionalism**

There are a number of emerging themes from the interviews with teaching staff members. First, by employing the new pedagogical approach, all of them expressed their renewed sense of joy and excitement towards teaching. For instance, one staff said, 'I absolutely enjoy it… I love the flexibility of it and the opportunity that it offers for lots of discussion and debate within the student groups. In no way is it didactic teaching' (Staff 5). Another staff also put the experience affirmatively as follows:

> [It is] great, refreshing, [and] allowing for creativity. [It is] allowing us to use whatever resources we have, [and] being quite flexible and creative in what we use and how we do it. And certainly the focuses/themes have been issues that are very close to my heart in terms of values, social justice… (Staff 1).

By following the previous mode of teaching, teaching staff members commonly did not feel a sense of ownership or freedom in the ways they taught and the teaching materials they used. Staff 4 felt 'as if we were going through motions, that we were filling two hours with stuff made by somebody else…It was like I was delivering something for somebody else.' The new approach has clearly influenced on staff's self-worth and self-esteem: 'It makes you feel like a grown up. It makes you feel valued' (Staff 1).

Second, the interviewed teaching staff noticed that new pedagogical approach allowed more spaces to address students' experiences and concerns in the classroom learning environment. This does not mean such an emergence never happened before, but during the academic year of 2007/8, they recognized that there were more of these. The less prescriptive teaching structure gave 'permission', in the words of one of the interviewees, to allow spaces for students' concerns. According to Staff 2, such interactions became possible because the new pedagogical approach strongly encouraged students to bring their own experience to the classroom discussions. In this approach, contemporary social work student concerns about ESD issues of consumerism, environmental degradation and food security, had space to be explored without the defensiveness often generated when these issues are 'on the agenda'.

It is critical to note that dealing with emergent learning needs and playing a facilitator's role in that process is not always comfortable and easy for the teaching staff members. Some of teaching members admitted that their tendency was to use teacher-centred methods, although they philosophically support learner-directed and participatory teaching and learning approaches. Staff 4 reflected on one particular occasion when the student group 'started to go off on a discussion of its own' and she felt 'less and less confident in what [she] was doing.' When she noticed students' comments which were not thought through, she carefully asked a few questions 'to get them to thinking about what they were saying without them shutting them down.' In retrospect, Staff 4 states, 'For me it was a moment of learning to let go and trust that the process will actually become a learning environment.' Such a transition is not easy.

Third, the new pedagogical approach contributed to create better working relationships among the teaching staff members. They began to talk more to each other, and to share the module resources which each individual have gathered. Staff 3 now feels a 'very strong sense of teamwork.' Above all, classroom teachers and Practice Learning Managers are working collaboratively more than before. Both began to recognize and use more of each other's strengths in the classroom learning

environment. Previously they were both contributing to a classroom teaching but they normally divided a time slot into two and each looked after only their own section. There were often cases that Practice Learning Managers did not feel comfortable in the 'academic' teaching environment at the classroom. Regarding this point, one Practice Learning Manager states:

> Personally I have had more involvement this year in facilitating … Personally I have gained a lot of confidence, I have to say. I think it has broken down quite a lot of those power issues between practice and academic [staff members] because [of] …having the opportunity to be more involved (Staff 6).

Fourth, in terms of the embedded reflection time, teaching staff members commonly expressed the difficulties or even failure of this approach. All staff members allocated the last 15 minutes for students quietly and individually to write down their reflective logs. In contrast to the flexibility embedded into the main part of the session, this reflection remained as a 'routine' and did not meet the diverse student learning styles with regard to self-reflections.

Fifth, the interviewed staff members identified some wider obstacles in promoting a participatory mode of teaching and learning. One of such example is a gap between existing students' 'give-me-an-answer' attitude and promoting 'no-right-answer' culture. Some of the teaching staff expressed that many students were used to passively receive the information and answers. Students' attitudes to seek 'facts' and 'right answers' are also significantly influenced by the existing assessment modes. They are assessed through traditional means, which do not necessarily capture the new experiences and capacities they have developed through the participatory pedagogies. According to Staff 3, students 'get, and quite rightly so, very preoccupied with assessments and their learning disappears because of that.' This is a remaining challenge. There is also a gap between this teaching method with the consequent attitude students are encouraged to develop in this particular module and other classes which remain 'traditional' by using didactic teaching and learning methodologies. Some staff felt that traditional practices in the wider context of the faculty and university structures similarly inhibit students' genuine participation. Sustaining changes in the classroom setting would be supported through changes in the wider environment. This also remains as a challenge.

**Reflections**

The above sections have highlighted the changes that took place in relation to new pedagogical approaches introduced in SCW 108 during the 2007/8 academic year. Students' positive view toward the classroom-based learning and some tokens of their deeper and wider understanding of social justice alongside teaching staff members' renewed sense of professionalism and an increased level of teamwork culture are encouraging changes.

So what allowed this change to happen? The first factor seems to be a conscious shift of management module leadership style from 'control' to 'collaboration'. It had been the concern of module leaders to give precise instructions with a view to delivering the equal levels of student learning among nine groups across two campuses. It is often believed that the student learning quality can be best managed through a reductionist approach such as micro-managing the behaviour of staff in the classroom. This echoes the ways that practitioners' behaviours are controlled in practice through, for example, detailed recording processes (Parton, 2005; White 2009) and fails to acknowledge the value of trust rather than surveillance (Smith, 2005). However, paradoxically this study has illuminated that democratic decision making process allowed teaching staff members to be more motivated and to become more creative and collaborative than ever before, when shedding the detailed instructions.

Second, the courage which teaching staff took throughout the year, by not necessarily knowing if their new approaches work or not, helped to them to learn. They seemed to be convinced that if teachers would like to support students to become open to learning, they must model such an attitude as a learner, first and foremost. For a teacher, this poses a challenge: whilst it is energising to be working in the classroom in a way that is always new and fresh, it does demand personal exposure, vulnerability and acceptance of the discomfort. Fook & Askeland (2007) articulate how it can be embarrassing or foolhardy to reveal incompetence or ignorance as a teacher but that critical reflection relies on 'disclosing to others what is not understood in order to learn from it' (*ibid*:528).

Third, it is important to note that such a fundamental shift in teaching practice took place without changing either the module outline or the assessment requirements. Whilst curriculum change may be seen in terms of requiring formal and structural change, the curriculum innovation examined here shows what may be possible simply by changing pedagogical approach within the classroom. As discussed earlier in this paper, we are in an educational environment that is increasingly formulaic and evaluates what is done through measuring compliance (Maclachlan, 2007). This research offers an opportunity to review practice within such frameworks in order to promote teaching and learning rather than compliance and what Freire calls 'domestication' (2000). Social justice demands that we not be complicit in maintaining the status quo.

Indeed, to be involved in transformative process is to resist, in multiple ways, standard practices and the social normativity that supports inequities and oppressions (Benjamin, 2007:196).
Although this was a small scale study, the above-described insights will contribute to fill in the current gap in ESD-triggered innovations in teaching and learning. In turn, ESD has enabled the social work team to take confidence in a wider global perspective on teaching practices and to reappraise approaches familiar to the profession. At the time of writing the social work programme has implemented a new, non-modular programme structure inspired by the changes begun in 2007.

Further research into the impact on student and staff experience is in process. Even without wider structural changes, these ideas could be translated to other disciplines and modules. Change can be started wherever you are.

(**Editor's Note:** Fumiyo Kagawa has since left the position mentioned at the start of this paper.)

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# Peer Assisted Learning: Project Update

Eve Rapley, Centre for Learning Excellence

Laying the ground for new initiatives can be an exciting yet challenging experience. Reflecting on the implementation of the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) pilot study to date, the views of students from across the scheme have been reassuringly positive, which is entirely as a result of the endeavours and commitment of the staff and students involved. Pioneering something new can be a lonely road at times, but the feedback and response from the students makes it one worth travelling.

Yes, there have been a few bumps in the road on the journey towards the notion of peer assisted learning being part of the wider student experience at this university. Yes, it has and will continue to take time for something new to become accepted and embedding into the culture of academic departments. Yes, PAL is striving to establish itself against a backdrop of logistical and inevitable staff and student time pressures where other activities are placed higher on the priority list.

Whilst the steps towards success may not always have been big strides, PAL has certainly made its mark upon those who have been participated of the study; first year participants, PAL Leaders and Academic Course Contacts (ACCs) (unit tutors who are responsible for timetabling PAL and directly supporting their PAL Leaders in terms of the flavour and content of the PAL session).

PAL fosters cross-year support between students on the same course. Its origins are from SI (Supplemental Instruction) schemes from the USA (Martin, Blanc & DeBuhr, 1983), which are timetabled, but voluntary, student-led study skills sessions. Utilising trained, experienced second and/or third year students to guide new students and to facilitate discussions, PAL is intended to help students:

- adjust quickly to university life;
- acquire a clear view of course direction and expectations;
- develop their independent learning and study skills to meet the requirements of HE;
- enhance their understanding of the subject matter of their course through collaborative discussion;
- prepare better for assessed work and examinations (Fleming, 2008).

PAL also helps to de-mystify the parlance and academic jargon often used in universities, to unpick themes and topics encountered in lectures and to help new students to help themselves when problems and issues arise.

To put Peer Assisted Learning into context, the