Using a Community Development Approach to Reimagine Field Education During Covid-19

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Abstract

This paper reports on an Australian online placement project that was put in place after face-to-face placements were stopped due to the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. James Cook University (JCU) social work students were offered the opportunity to participate in an online Community Connectors Project (CCP) based on an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model to complete their placement. Twenty students participated in the CCP. The values and principles of ABCD guided the project and meant that students were encouraged and supported to lead and design smaller placement projects responding to identified community needs. This article is collaboratively written by students, field education staff and a community partner.

Here we specifically report on the collaboration between one group of students and a community partner working together to develop a domestic violence practice guideline for a health setting. The article describes the context of the CCP, ABCD as a framework, the student leadership, the domestic violence project and the collaborative partnership. Our reflections consider students as knowledge brokers, challengers and enablers of collaboration and future research engagement.

Keywords: *Covid-19; Field education; Research; Students; Collaboration; Community development*

Background

Social work field education is described as a cornerstone or signature pedagogy of social work education (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). As a distinctive pedagogy, it aims at preparing students for professional practice and linking theoretical learning with practice experience (AASW, 2020a). The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted social work field education in Australia and elsewhere. For JCU social work students this meant they were not able to continue in face-to-face placements in week five of the semester due to Covid-19 distancing restrictions.

Accrediting bodies made adjustments to the requirements of how field education could be delivered in the context of social distancing requirements and changes to social service deliveries (AASW, 2020b; Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE], 2020; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020). The Australian Association of Social Work (AASW, 2020b) highlighted that student learning, general wellbeing and financial wellbeing are core concerns, and moved to allow the higher education providers some flexibility in the provision of field education in response to the dynamic and challenging context of the pandemic. They allowed for a 20% reduction in placement hours in 2020, changes to on-site requirements regarding placements in workplaces, and recognised non-traditional placements or student projects "... if adequate social work supervision can be provided and individual learning outcomes can be met" (AASW, 2020b).

The field education team put together a project proposal and gained permission from the university and the AASW to run the CCP with impacted placement students. The project plan outlined the aim of the CCP as creating a simulated student learning experience reflecting the unprecedented situation that social work students faced and responding to community need at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The AASW produced an information and guideline document with advice and links to reliable information for the rapidly evolving Covid-19 situation, pointing to the unique position social workers face and referred to the need for the dissemination of accurate information to the community, and interventions designed to address the increasing level of anxiety and fear arising from the pandemic (AASW, 2020b, p. 3). This was echoed in the CCP plan, which outlined that social work students would link expert advice and local knowledge to connect information and services to people in their community. The CCP placement would enable students to progress community development skills to collate and deliver accurate information to communities using various technology and e-platforms. The key outcome would be the opportunity for students to complete their placement and provide a platform for building community resources and resilience. Placement students who were not able to continue placement in their organisation were asked to put in an Expression of Interest to continue placement in the CCP. A total of 43 students were enrolled in a social work placement in semester 1, 2020. Sixteen students were able to continue placement remotely with their placement organisation. Of the remaining 27 students, 20 commenced on the CCP.

The 20 students were on placement with the field education team of the social work academic group. Each student was allocated a field educator (social work supervisor) and a liaison person as per AASW (2020a) requirements. In general, supervisors and liaison people were drawn from the academic team. However, in some cases, external social workers had been appointed to a student placement as an external supervisor or liaison person already and these continued in that role when the student commenced in the CCP. Jo, as a field education lecturer and the project leader, was allocated as a task supervisor for each placement to ensure that there was a general oversight of the CCP. Task supervision took place in the twice-weekly CCP meetings. Field educators provided weekly social work supervision to each student, alternating between individual and group supervision (up to four students in each group) each week.

It is important to note that online research or project placements, instead of being the exception, suddenly became the norm as placement students continued their placements through this project. This required the consideration of a specific framework for working with a large group of students, many with no previous research knowledge and skills, to create a meaningful learning experience. Project or research placements have always been permissible under the accrediting standards if students are placed in host organisations (AASW, 2020a). Project work and research placements can expose practitioners and students to research and using evidence in practice. Research by Harvey, Plummer, Nielson, Adams and Pain (2016) found that pre-exposure to research, personal characteristics and research opportunities at work facilitated increased engagement in research. The authors highlighted that, through the initial involvement in research projects, practitioners could build research momentum, develop a track record and become established clinician-researchers (Harvey et al., 2016). However, the complexity and demands of social work practice can mean that research becomes a low priority for practitioners (Beddoe, Yates, Fouché, & Harington, 2010). Being involved in research during field education is useful for student learning and can also increase the research capacity of the agency (Appleton, Rankin, & Hare, 2016; Beddoe et al., 2010; Zuchowski, Heyeres, & Tsey, 2020).

It is suggested that, by participating in research placements, students are prepared for using evidence and research in practice. Here, students were engaged in actively using research and project management skills to undertake an off-site/remote online group placement.

Asset-based Community Development framework

The CCP was based on an ABCD framework to design, inform and facilitate the online research placement. None of the placements required ethics approval as data collection involved document collation, analysis and internet, database or literature searches. One project involved drafting an ethics application for future research. ABCD invites members of the community to create and be involved in the process of sustainable change, and assists individuals to increase their connection with, and participation in, the development of their community (Kenny, 2006; Nurture Development, 2020). As a field of practice, community development practitioners are employed in various industries as a way to build resilience and

connect resources within communities. It is the mapping and mobilisation of resources that contributes to building sustainable communities (Kenny, 2006) and this process can spark an interest in research.

ABCD was used to frame the CCP as it maximised opportunities for students to contribute to the development and outcome of the project – within the limitations of the impacts from the pandemic. Students were asked to use ABCD as a framework to focus their awareness on identifying the assets, the resources, talents, experiences and networks that were in the community that could be useful in a crisis such as Covid-19 (Kenny, 2006). Students were observing and responding to a public health crisis in "real time", and many quickly adjusted their expectations and adapted their learning goals to reflect the changed circumstances. Therefore, the focus of the CCP was on assets and strengths rather than deficits that could otherwise be the focus in a crisis (Kenny, 2006).

Additionally, the ABCD principles were also used in working with the students as a community. The application of ABCD by the JCU field education team provided the CCP with the flexibility and scope that it required to grow organically with the students throughout the life of the online placement. Students were asked to come together around common interests of choice, helping them to develop and discover their own gifts and assets (Nurture Development, 2020). Within the first two weeks of the CCP, students self-assigned to several student sub-groups that focused on a variety of social issues based on areas of interest and topics of the students' choosing. Students proposed potential topics/areas of interest in the CCP meeting and provided information about why the topic would be of interest. In the subsequent meeting, all students then self-assigned to a topic of their interest and started working as a group on the topic. Whilst the project was overseen by the field education team, the resulting projects were student-led in accordance with the principles of community development with a capacity building focus (Kenny, 2006).

The Community Connectors Project

From its genesis, the CCP was a collaborative process. Moreover, it presented students with a student-led collaborative placement project. The result was a collection of information and resources developed by student research using various technologies. Students researched the impacts of the imposed regulations and explored the community resources and service responses during the Covid-19 crisis. The overall CCP was designed, developed and delivered by students with support from the Field Education team. Some of their individual projects also allowed for collaborative work with industry and community partners.

The online placement was designed to teach project management skills and build capacity for students to work autonomously. This was achieved with strategic weekly topics and a graduated transition to students facilitating and leading the weekly project management meetings. Students quickly responded to this approach, demonstrated by independent contributions to the project with helpful process mapping and tools to assist their peers and contribute to the evolving nature of the project. In addition to augmenting their learning and engagement, this allowed students to tap into their strengths and further develop essential practice skills.

The CCP ran over 13 weeks with the first two weeks taken up with exploring the CCP scope and processes, exploring learning online and participating in group and online supervision, and brainstorming and establishing what issues students were interested in exploring. The remaining 11 weeks allowed each group to work on their identified projects, provide weekly project updates at the CCP meetings and present their outcomes at the end of the CCP phase.

While information about ABCD was provided in the project plan, on the subject site, and as part of some of the teaching of the field education staff, students also developed and led collaborative sessions on the relevance of ABCD to learning, the project and working with community partners. The students who led those sessions asked the group to map what is available in the community during Covid-19 to respond to the topic under review (Kenny, 2006; Nurture Development, 2020).

The CCP provided a comprehensive and collaborative learning experience for students to meet the learning outcomes of a field education experience, whilst researching and producing accurate, timely and relevant information for community, and resources for use by educators, supervisors and social work students. However, getting to the point of reconceptualising what can be learnt and how, could be a challenge for students. Active engagement with the placement liaison people, their individual supervisors and discussion in the CCP meetings facilitated students adjusting their learning plans to the new context. Students had to be helped at times to reconceptualise their learning goals, for example, thinking about the community as the client; or considering the range of interpersonal skills they were using in online meetings and discussions; or exploring how culturally responsive practice could be advanced in the development of resources, consideration of cultural differences within the CCP and their community partners.

Issues in the community – domestic violence during Covid-19

Social work is a field of practice that is based on values such as human rights, social justice, equity, safety, and human dignity (AASW, 2010) and students chose issues and topics that were linked to social justice and human rights. One group of social work students chose to focus on addressing domestic violence through collaboration with Queensland Health. The eight students who named themselves "the Domestic Violence Warriors", had undertaken research about domestic violence and services that were available during Covid-19. The students were alarmed by the reported increase of domestic violence during Covid-19 (Neil, 2020). Domestic violence is a social phenomenon which violates basic human rights such as self-determination, safety from violence, and dignity (United Nations, 1948). Research shows that one in six women in Australia have encountered violence by "a current or previous partner since the age of 15" and that domestic violence has long-term effects on victims (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019, p. iv). Covid-19 has resulted in the Australian government introducing social distancing restrictions through means such as isolation which has resulted in an increase of people being present together in homes. Research shows that public crises such as Covid-19 result in an increase in domestic violence for reasons such as increased stress and families and partners being in confined spaces together for longer periods of time than usual (Neil, 2020; The Lookout, 2020).

Progressing the work on domestic violence in collaboration with community partners

As part of their initial research on their chosen topic, some of the students reconnected with their original placement agencies and supervisors as sources of knowledge and direct practice information. Through starting placement initially with Queensland Health, one of the students in the group, interested in the issue of domestic violence, had contact with the social work clinical educator at the Townsville University Hospital. As a result of this, the group contacted the Queensland Health Clinical Educator for Townsville, initially to link in and see what information about domestic violence during the Covid-19 crisis might be useful for health. The student provided an overview of the CCP, introduced the group's topic of interest, and gave a summary of the placement goals. The clinical educator was on board with the idea of collaborating through a partnership and provided direction for the group's placement project by suggesting that the students produce a practice guide for social work students in hospital settings working with people experiencing domestic violence.

For the Domestic Violence Warrior group, that meant that they started additional regular meetings in their subgroup to collate information, and to then focus on developing the domestic and family violence practice guide for social work students and, potentially, health professionals. Meetings between students were held weekly via Zoom and additional communication occurred through Facebook Messenger. The group also used SharePoint as an online forum to circulate documents, research, journal articles, and other relevant domestic violence material. While working specifically on the domestic violence project, the students continued to link into the overall CCP meetings with the field education team and the other CCP students, exploring progress, presenting ideas, strengthening engagement and learning. The clinical educator participated in the students' Zoom meetings to provide guidance and feedback about the group's progress on the practice guide.

The clinical educator and the students mapped out the goals for the domestic violence projects. After discussions with the clinical educator, they researched, explored and designed a "standardised domestic violence screening tool", that included a list of questions that a nurse or other health professional could ask a patient that may help to identify if the patient had experienced domestic violence.

In collaboration with the clinical educator, the following content for the practice guide was developed: the current domestic violence framework for practice; domestic violence as a public health response; domestic violence screening used in health, risk assessment and management; and North Queensland local services in Covid-19. Additional topics were proposed by the students and included in the final guide. These were culture, diversity and a list of regional domestic violence service providers. The student group adopted a public health and gendered approach to researching and writing the practice guide. Group members delegated the topics amongst themselves and focused on forming a cohesive document covering these issues. One subgroup, for example, undertook a literature review to evaluate existing domestic violence screening tools in health settings. The final product was a 70-page PDF document entitled "Domestic and family violence: a practice guideline." The document was presented by group

members to the social work department at the Townsville University Hospital via Zoom at the end of the placement period. Group members had the chance to collaboratively present the practice guide and answer questions raised from the social work department regarding the content of the guide. Feedback provided by social work practitioners highlighted the usefulness of the document in being able to assist in their community knowledge of the altered delivery of services during COVID-19 restrictions. The presentation also raised a valued and robust discussion within the social work department on the use of standardised assessment tools in domestic and family violence practice and the role the department ought to be playing in this space.

Reflections

Participation and leadership in the CCP provided students with an opportunity to become knowledge brokers relevant to the topic they identified as crucial in current contexts. As knowledge brokers, they collaborated in the creation, sharing, and use of evidence and knowledge and maintained the link between the researchers and the audience by engaging in knowledge translation (Meyer, 2010). As knowledge brokers, they were a central part of "an interactive process between researchers and decision-makers so that they can co-produce new knowledge to inform policy and/or practise decisions" (Phipps, 2011, p. 2). Students worked to use internal and external assets and strengths. Internal assets and strengths included student leadership, IT, design, project planning, group facilitation, topic comprehension, research, and conflict resolutions skills, for example. In the group meetings, students explored and discussed what each person could bring to the project, and divided up tasks and topics. External assets and strengths that were drawn into and supported the project, included Melissa (the clinical educator), the extensive library and web resources, students' networks, the hospital's social work staff, and CCP peer group and lecturers. A project designed and focused on identifying and using assets and strengths assisted students to lead the work (Kenny, 2006), but also to successfully reach out to and collaborate with a community partner.

Co-design of research can enhance the capacity of students, practitioners and services to improve practice and policy by increasing research confidence and collaboratively exploring how research findings can be translated and used for critical decision making. Co-designed research can facilitate a process of 'all teach, all learn', embodying a process of mutual learning and growing (McPhail et al., 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2020). In this project, students were learners, but through research and collaboration were also providing useful new insights about screening tools, practice and knowledge useful during Covid-19 and beyond. On reflection, there were many examples of unexpected learning. Students reported various aspects of practice knowledge and skill development that they had not originally considered the most common of which was research skills.

However, participating in collaborative processes posed challenges as well as learning for students. Helen, a student, outlined:

> The preliminary stages of being a member of the Community Connector project
> was difficult. There appeared to be no clear purpose for the group and I was unsure

what was expected of me because there were no guidelines in place. Whilst research placements are not a new phenomenon, the size of this research group and the intent of the research was new for all of us, both the students and the University.

The focus of the weekly project meetings quickly developed to building an online community, exploring topics such as grief and loss, motivation, self-care and anti-oppressive practice whilst learning about social work practice; positioning as a practitioner in training working from home. ABCD helped students to have a way of running their own meetings using their own strengths and capacity. Helen reflected:

> Within a short time further clarity around a purpose was gained, and I believe a contributing factor to the success of this project was that the students basically drove it themselves. With some initial guidance from the lecturers, the students decided what areas we wanted to focus on, we formed subgroups within the main group depending on which element we chose to align ourselves with and we decided in what format our projects would be presented on completion. The students collaborated with multiple agencies, determined where there were gaps in services during this novel Covid-19 event, and worked together to fill those gaps. Ensuring that each student was tasked with facilitating a meeting was great because it gave the more reticent students a voice and over the course of the project we came to be a great, supportive team who were not afraid to speak up for and with each other.

While the ABCD approach provided a framework for the project, it needed to be cocooned with the support of the field education and the clinical educator. Jo, a field education lecturer, shared that:

> For some students the asset-based approach caused frustration. Anecdotally it appears that many students reported that a structured learning project would have been preferred over a student led framework.

During the conceptualisation, key areas such as online group work could have been further explored and the realistic amount of time and resources that this type of project would require was not available. Jo reflected:

> Students reported a type of grieving experiencing as a result of the abrupt cancellation of their agency-based placements. This is an important aspect of the experience that was managed in an ad hoc manner and would become a significant theme for some of the student cohort.

There are lessons for the future to improve collaboration. While the suddenness of the lockdown due to Covid-19 meant that preparation and planning for the CCP was limited, future projects need to consider how project outcomes and processes can be further clarified. Helen outlined that:

From my perspective as a student who was forced into this situation because of circumstances and not by choice, I would have liked there to be more clarity around the group purpose at the very beginning. It is impossible to be critical because obviously the lecturers were scrambling to offer us a solid and worthwhile placement experience in light of the unusual circumstances borne by the virus, however the early weeks of the project were very stressful. Students were isolated at home, there was little communication in the early days and certainly no clear picture of intent. In saying that, myself and other students I have liaised with are very grateful that we were able to complete our placement hours despite being pulled off our original physical placements.

Sandra, a field education lecturer, reflects on the process of facilitating the CCP and sitting with uncertainty:

We had been quite open and honest with students about our feelings and experiences of this new and unfamiliar way of working with students. This invited a range of different responses. From our perspective, we understood that we modelled what we were also trying to teach, that social work as a practice requires flexibility, innovation and resilience to effectively respond to the unknown and unexpected. Some students experienced difficulties to adjust their understanding & thinking to this new context, where not only the content was new to them, but also seemingly to their educators.

As students were looking for reassurance, continuity and familiarity, it is important from the perspective of the educator to 'package' this new experience within a clearly identified framework. In this context I thought that having the connection to the community partner really helped students to see purpose in their placement activity and reassuring them that they do use their time meaningfully.

The project had positive implications for the industry/community partner. Melissa shared that the students' ability to capture their learnings in the document is a valuable piece of work which aims to strengthen our social work field education and upskill our workforce for this complex and challenging area of work. It is hoped future students may be able to use this educational piece of work as a launching pad for further future work in this area. This project provided an opportunity for collaboration between a student-led group and service provider. It provided an opportunity to meet a student educational need for field education, and an opportunity to engage in an innovative project to directly enhance clinical practice in a complex area of practice in an unprecedented time in social work health practice. Melissa, the clinical educator from Queensland Health, highlighted:

The standout achievements of the document were the students' ability to examine domestic and family violence as a public health response in the context of a gendered violence. The document examined a number of crucial points in understanding, assessing and responding to domestic and family violence. The group explored the use of standardised risk assessment tools utilised across health systems in Australia and

evaluated the effectiveness of these tools within the domestic and family violence space resulting in valued discussion about the use and effectiveness of these tools for future practice. The group undertook an exercise of mapping local domestic and family violence services including any modifications in service delivery which were occurring due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This information was included in the practice guide to assist and support service providers in being able to access and provide up to date information when delivering services. This valuable piece of work will provide the Social Work Department with an educational tool to support future social work students' field education and for social workers delivering service during Covid-19 restrictions.

A number of important precursors had been in place supporting the collaboration between the education institution and the community partner which, in hindsight, are also being identified as necessary for such work to occur in a sustainable way. Sustainable is understood here in the way of continuing and expanding on this research relationship. The existing and mutually respectful relationship between the field education team and the clinical educator helped progress the collaborative work. There was a prior, shared understanding that both parties are interested in joint research student placements. Furthermore, the willingness and capacity of the community partner to regularly provide input on the students' group work and connect with them regularly was instrumental in achieving a successful outcome. Collaboration requires adequate resourcing, which translates here to having the time available to work alongside the students.

The collaborators on this project reflected that the project displayed a great example of collaboration and provides an opportunity to pave the way for future projects. There were enablers that facilitated the engagement and the success of the collaboration.

Melissa reflected that:

A significant enabler which allowed this collaboration was the pre-existing relationship between the department and the university. This allowed for prompt engagement in a fast-changing environment and the ease of communication and information sharing.

For collaboration it seemed important that the interests of the university, the students and the industry partner converged for successful project engagement and student learning. Ines, the field education coordinator, shared:

The domestic violence warrior group were enthused about researching domestic violence during Covid-19 and once the clinical educator was approached and got involved this helped shape the project, keep motivation and help achieve a sense of purpose and accomplishment. The partnership with an industry partner greatly enhanced their learning, about the topic, research, applying research to practice and collaborating as a team and with others.

This project sets out a clear path of how industry and students can come together to produce quality pieces of work which meet, not only the needs of the learner, but add value to clinical services. Research placement as such can be valuable to students and industry (Zuchowski et al., 2020). Pre-exposure to research and research opportunities can increase engagement in research (Appleton et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2016). Our reflections show some increased interest in research. Students shared the following thoughts about future engagement in research:

> A key purpose of the CCP was to facilitate student capabilities in using evidence and research in practice. I was able to learn the basic tools of research through collaborating with and receiving support from field educators and this has inspired me to use research in future practice. This experience has allowed me to appreciate the importance of evidence-based practice in social work through retrieving new information about a variety of subjects, analysing existing knowledge about these topics, and merging these to create new understandings based on corroboration for the future. (Finola)

> Research was not something I had considered undertaking seriously, particularly on placement. I imagined it to be a boring necessity that paves new ways in social work theories. Through my experience on the CCP project, I have learned otherwise and now find it to be an exciting and ground-breaking arena to be involved in. The assignments I am required to undertake in other subjects have now evolved enormously and I really enjoy that component of my learning. (Helen)

As field education staff, students and industry partner we have come together to critically reflect and engage in producing new knowledge. For the industry partner, Melissa, the successful collaboration resulting in the "Domestic and Family Violence Practice" guide has resulted in the development of a quality foundational document which can be used as a teaching tool for future field education students. It is hoped that this piece of work will be a building block for future students with an aim of enhancing clinical responses in Domestic and Family Violence services.

Conclusion

Our cooperative inquiry highlights that the ABCD was useful in working with students to successfully bring the CCP to fruition. Students needed to find their feet in the CCP when faced with the sudden end to their previous placement due to Covid-19. The ability of students to adapt and work with the field education team demonstrated the strengths, resilience and commitment to learning throughout a challenging period of time. Students successfully managed to collaborate in order to envision, develop and implement their own project. The inclusion of external partners very much enhanced the quality of learning and the outcomes. The guidance and possibility of working with the clinical educator allowed depth in knowledge and project outcomes, but also the opportunity to closely collaborate with a senior practitioner in a real-life setting with outcomes that will shape clinical practice.

The adaptation to an online placement project exposed the possibility for future placements, including opportunities for research engagement of students in field education and group placements. It would be important that future research explores whether this kind of project placement will increase research engagement. The placement needs to be facilitated and resourced well, and our reflection suggests that an ABCD framework for working with the community of students is valuable, but needs careful unpacking and guidance.

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