**PRACTICE EDUCATION**

**Mark Doel**

*Emeritus Professor, Sheffield Hallam University, UK*

All professional education includes one or more periods of learning in the field, often called a placement; sometimes this is as much as half of the whole course. So, student teachers spend time in classrooms, student doctors in hospitals and general practices, and student social workers in a variety of social care agencies. These opportunities for learning are supervised and assessed by experienced professionals who have usually undertaken additional training in order to fulfil their responsibilities. Ultimately, these practice teachers (also known as student supervisors, practice educators or mentors and field instructors) are gatekeepers to their profession, with the ability to recommend a pass, fail or not yet competent decision in respect of an individual student.

*Practice curriculum*

Increasingly, the content of a student’s learning on placement has been codified into what is sometimes referred to as a practice curriculum. For example, the Practice Capabilities Framework requires social work students to demonstrate their abilities in nine areas: professionalism; values and ethics; diversity; rights, justice and economic wellbeing; knowledge; critical reflection and analysis; intervention and skills; contexts and organisations; and professional leadership (College of Social Work, 2012).

The tendency to focus on curriculum *content* should not distract from the significance of other important elements of any curriculum, namely the *methods* used to teach and learn the curriculum and the ways in which evidence of the learner’s progress will be gathered and *assessed.* Again, there have been considerable changes over the last few decades which have seen a move away from a relatively passive, ‘apprenticeship’ model (“do as I do”) to more active, creative approaches that are founded in principles of adult learning. In particular, these principles recognise that individuals have different learning styles and it is important to understand these and respond to them if the learning is to be effective.

Before the development of the practice curriculum the person most responsible for the assessment document for students on placement was the student supervisor, with the unfortunate consequence that students were as likely to be judged by the quality of their supervisor’s report as by their own practice abilities. The introduction of the *portfolio* method of assessment was a considerable breakthrough. Through the compilation of their portfolios, students learn how to identify and collect their own evidence – describing it, analysing it and reflecting on it. They are much more the authors of their own assessment documents, with the practice educators verifying the evidence and making their own judgements by way of briefer reports focused on the different elements of practice that students are expected to learn.

A considerable difficulty for practice education is the notion of standards and ‘good enough’ practice learning. The students are, after all, students - learners who will be expected to improve over time and with experience. To use an analogy from driving, can they be allowed to crash the gears as long as they don’t run anybody over? The problem with complex professional practice is that there are differing judgements about what, in professional terms, constitutes crashing of gears and bruising of pedestrians. Some have viewed the tendency to focus on competences as neglecting more holistic practice abilities and there has been a re-focusing on the importance of professional behaviours and attitudes. Decisions to fail students are notoriously difficult and fraught (Finch, 2013).

*Challenging the theory/practice, academy/agency dichotomy*

‘The student learns about theory in the class setting then puts this into practice in the field.’ This is a commonly accepted cliché in professional education. However, it is deeply mistaken and has led to much that is flawed, in particular the sense that theory and practice are so irretrievably incompatible that, even after a vigorous shaking, like oil and vinegar they always destined to separate.

First, class-based learning should involve workshops and seminars in which students have the opportunity to rehearse practice skills – for example, leading simulated groups to hone their groupwork skills. Secondly, whilst on placement the best practice education helps students recognise their own theorising – the hypotheses they use in order to make sense of their practice experiences and come to a judgement to make a decision. Practice educators should assist students to question assumptions, test and research the evidence, and join communities of interest with other professionals to learn more about what works with whom and in what circumstances.

As long as ‘theory’ is seen as some distant body of knowledge that accrues in academia but somehow doesn’t manage to leak out, it will confirm those practitioners and managers in their opinion that students should ‘forget all that theory stuff now you’re in practice.’ However, there is nothing so dangerous as a practitioner who is unaware of their own theorising and who acts on their unquestioned assumptions. Students must learn the truth behind Kurt Lewin’s dictum that ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’.

Practice education is an exciting, challenging and rewarding activity for both the practice educator and the student. Each profession has what has been described as its own *signature pedagogy* (Shulman 2005), which are the types of teaching that characteristically organises the learning of students in the different professions. The ‘nursery’ for the medical profession, for instance, commonly instils the notion that authoritative certainty is a desirable characteristic; whilst social work’s ‘nursery’ treasures the opposite – philosophic doubt. So, though we have been considering professional education as a single entity, its qualities vary greatly from profession to profession (Doel and Shardlow, 2009).

*References*

College of Social Work (2012), <http://www.tcsw.org.uk/pcfDisplay.aspx>

Doel, M. and Shardlow, S.M. [eds] (2009), *Educating Professionals,*Aldershot: Ashgate.

Finch, J. [ed.] (2013), ‘Failing Students’, Special issue of Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, [11.3], London: Whiting and Birch.

Shulman, L.S. (2005), ‘Signature pedagogies in the professions‘, in *Daedalus,* 134.3, pp. 52-59.

*Further reading*

**Doel, M. (2010), *Social Work Placements: A Traveller’s Guide*, London: Routledge.**

This book has an imaginative approach to practice education in social work, using a ‘Rough Guide’ travel guide approach to student placements that views the placement as a journey through the professional landscape.

**Doel, M. and Shardlow, S.M. [eds] (2009), *Educating Professionals,* Aldershot: Ashgate.**

This book has chapters from leading names in practice education from nine different heath and social care professional groups: community mental health, health visiting, medicine, midwifery, nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, social work, and speech and language. Each chapter presents the state of practice education in the respective profession, and uses a common community of people to illustrate how students from the different professions might learn (and learn together) at this common site. There are also chapters on using the community as a site for learning and on interprofessional education.