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Integration of Learning for Practice

Literature Review
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Gary Clapton
Viviene Cree
University of Edinburgh

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Introduction

In November 2003, as part of the Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP) project funded by The Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, the University of Edinburgh was commissioned to carry out a review of literature in relation to the integration of learning for practice. This review should be seen alongside the other two LEEP projects which are investigating inter-professional learning and agency-based learning opportunities, but is nevertheless a stand-alone review.

Lead responsibility for conducting and writing this literature review rests with Gary Clapton, assisted by Viviene Cree, but all the project team members have contributed ideas to the process.

Lessons from the literature review and from the practice audit which has been completed at the same time are being taken forward into the demonstration projects which will pilot new ways of encouraging students, practice teachers and lecturers/tutors to integrate learning in practice.

LEEP 1.1 Project Team

Marie Allan, Gary Clapton, Viviene Cree, Ros Edwards, Ruth Forbes, Madelaine Halabi, Marie Irwin, Wendy Paterson, Richard Perry, University of Edinburgh

The Integration of Learning for Social Work Practice: A Strategic Approach

Integration of learning for practice is one of the central underlying aspirations of the new social work degree. Managers, educators and policy-makers all hope to see newly-qualified social workers as ready to practise as possible; this has sometimes been expressed as 'hitting the ground running'. But what is 'integration of learning for practice', and what should be done to facilitate it?

An initial search of bibliographic data bases for the phrase 'integration of learning' brought forth literally thousands of references. At the same time, a more social work-related data base (SWAP/ILT) produced no hits at all. What are we to make of this? A further examination of the thousands of references on one major data base (Educational Research Online) showed that it was possible to eliminate quickly a large body of literature which was inappropriate to this review. This included discussions that were focused on integration of school subjects, such as the integration of learning in relation to the teaching of mathematics and literature. It was also easy to rule out integration where it was described as a tool to combat discrimination and inequity, such as in the integration of pupils with disabilities into mainstream schools. Discussions of the integration of learning in respect of children in immigrant or asylum-seeking groups were also not relevant. This sifting process resulted in the conclusion that it would be necessary to ensure that any discussion of the integration of learning would have to be not only related to social work i.e. **discipline-specific** but also it would have to be outcome-focused i.e. concerned with **practice readiness**. Thus it was possible to search for material that discussed efforts to develop the social work-qualified student, whose learning has been integrated and who is fit for practice. However, despite much discussion of integrated learning during the education of social workers, I could find only two attempts at a definition of what integrated learning might look like. Gibbons and Gray's (2002) definition relates to work on the development of an Australian social work course and seemed to be the most helpful:

> …integrated learning means integration of theory and practice, the individual and social, art and science, field and classroom.
> (p.539)

This best captures the essence of the integration of learning – the unity of what can often be seen as opposites, or at least oppositional.

The learning process as a whole has been characterised as something of a mystery - a 'black box' (Cree et al 1998) - that offers up nothing that can tell us categorically how learning takes place. The transfer of learning debate is a good example of the difficulties that might arise in any pursuit of a single definition of the integration of learning for practice. In an exhaustive review of the literature, Cree et al (1998), followed up by Macaulay (2000), come to the conclusion that while the transfer of learning is difficult to pin down and conceptualise, it can nevertheless be demonstrated in practice. This seems a pragmatic way to proceed, so rather than seeking to further discuss definitions of integrated learning for practice, we have sought out examples and discussions of **strategies** towards promoting and enhancing learning and readying students for practice. We will look at these where they exist in the field and in the classroom and will discuss those examples that seek to cross-cut between academics and practice learning educators, college and placement. As an aid to this, we begin by exploring some recent studies of readiness to practice.

Readiness to Practice in Social Work

Although the study by Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) surveyed the experiences of social work students who had qualified under two different qualifying standards (CQSW and DipSW) the findings remain influential, especially because similar findings have emerged subsequently in relation to single-standard cohorts of qualifying students. Marsh and Triseliotis found that although 9/10ths of the students in their survey felt prepared or well prepared for practice, only 2/3rds attributed this to their social work course. In Northern Ireland, Rea (1997) found that 39% of the social work students that she surveyed felt that their qualifying programme had been ineffective in helping them respond to changing work demands. Similarly, almost half of 115 recently-qualified social workers in Wales felt that 'in some skill areas' their training had been 'less than adequate or poor' (Pithouse and Scourfield 2002). Elsewhere outside of the UK, an Australian survey of newly graduated social workers (Fook et al 2000) found that only a third of their study group (12 out of 33) felt either well or adequately prepared for practice. In their survey of newly-qualified

social workers on DipSW courses in England, Wallis-Jones and Lyons (2002) found that 21% were dissatisfied with their preparation for practice.

These studies may be seen as a major blow to confidence in social work training in the UK and Australia. But perhaps the picture is less clear than this; reality may be far more complex. In re-examining the studies, it could be argued that these figures indicate relatively successful training outcomes; no one would expect 100% satisfaction from those undergoing training. The Wallis-Jones and Lyons study results could thus equally be read as a (qualified) success; it may not be possible to prepare every student for every vagary of practice and human behaviour that they might meet. It may be that the 'proficient practitioner' (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986 p.5) is only achievable in the practice years that follow qualification:

> …professional learning, in terms of integrated and meaningful practice learning, may mostly take place, in learners' perceptions, after the formal course of study. (Fook et al 2000 p.135)

In a field of practice where the student will be 'continually called on to cope with uncertainty and surprise' (Schon 1995 p.45), perhaps attaining 'advanced beginner' status (Dreyfus and Dreyfus op cit.) is all that educators can and should aspire to for their students.

Theory and Practice

This takes us into the familiar area of the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In both concrete and strategic terms, in order to best sift and interrogate the social work education literature, it may be that proposals for the development of the integration of learning for practice can best be approached via a study of exactly what is taking place to 'join up' the learning of theory and practice. Considerable debate and discussion has taken place about how to assist students in relating theory to practice. The particular issue of relating theory to practice is an example of the efforts that have gone into developing social work education and was highlighted thirty years ago by Argyris and Schon (1974). Today, many writers have acknowledged the continuing 'theory/practice dichotomy' (Napier and

Fook 2000 p217, see also Cree et al 1998, Fernandez 1998, Watson et al 2002). Thompson indicates the precise nature of concerns:

> there is an unacceptable gap between theory and practice, a disjuncture between what is taught or learned and what is practised… theory has come to be seen as the preserve of the academic and practice as the domain of the practitioner.
> (Thompson 2000 p.84)

Efforts to address this gap (and dichotomy) have been considerable both within academic settings and practice agencies.

Frameworks, Methods and Techniques to integrate learning (I): The Field

Of all the various sites of learning e.g. classroom, placement, tutorials, with peers and self-directed (Cree et al 1998), it seems that most responsibility is placed upon the placement/'field' to see that learning is variously, enhanced, concretised, transferred, assimilated, integrated. For instance, Goldstein argues that: 'We need to turn to the field as the educational setting where we can explore what, specifically, students need to learn and know' (Goldstein 2001 p.4). Most recently, Dick et al 'detect in all the literature on social work education that the practice placement is still considered the key element to successfully teaching social work professionals' (Dick et al 2002 p.35). An official acknowledgement of the pivotal role of practice learning was expressed when the Government decided to increase the number of placement days in the requirements for the new social work degree (Jacqui Smith, Minister of State for Health 12 February 2003). And, undoubtedly, there has been much discussion and innovation in the field. Dick et al (2002) list most of the, by now, well-known methods and approaches to practice learning and teaching. These include simulated learning (see also Doel and Shardlow, 1996 for an in-depth discussion of the particular benefits of simulations), co-operations involving practitioners and users, inter-professional placement opportunities (e.g. with the police, nursing), integrated/network placements, 'long-arm' placements and discuss the use of technology and the internet to enhance learning (pp.s 42-49). Elsewhere, in an edited collection that offers a comprehensive framework for professional and vocational education, Cree and Macaulay (2000) explore the principles and practice that can maximise learning transfer. The book includes a series of chapters in which practitioners discuss in

detail the various techniques used to enhance placement learning such as the use of process recordings, critical incident analyses and reflective diaries.

Shapton, addressing the criticism that DipSW programmes fail to prepare students for the reality of practice, discusses the use of managers, court staff, and group-based simulations of high anxiety practice events such as child protection conferences (2002 pp.65-67). In the USA, Bogo and Globerman provide information in respect of advanced practices on placement - structured seminar programs for students, presentation by students of research to others in the agency and the integration of students into staff educational development programs (1999 p.270-271). They conclude their review of practice education initiatives by suggesting that the field work practice teacher should be seen as an 'educational co-ordinator' (p.270) in keeping with their expanded role within the agency as a whole.

Overall, according to Dick et al, it is a 'creative and dynamic time in the field' (2002 p.67) and there is much evidence to support this claim. The literature abounds with suggestions for the future e.g. in an echo of the call by Dick et al (ibid) to involve service users in practice learning, Kearney (2003) suggests that skills laboratories be established involving service users. These would give students the opportunity to rehearse communication skills and would draw on the expertise of service users and practitioners. These labs could be part of 'learning resource centres' that involve students and the wider workforce (p.10). More innovation can be seen in the suggestion by Dick et al that 'every care professional student should be allocated two user supervisors, drawn from two separate client groups, who would work closely with the student throughout the course' (2002 p. 42).

Helpfully, for the purposes of this discussion on the integration of learning, Dick et al (2002) refer in the summary of their review of literature on practice learning to the work of some key writers on practice learning (e.g. Evans 1999, Doel, Shardlow, Sawdon and Sawdon 1996) and suggest that 'the practice learning classroom is not to be found in any geographical location, but rather to be found where practice learning is occurring' (p.50). They then go on to question 'the distinction between practice placements, practice teachers, academic lecturers and university-education' (ibid.). Such thinking places 'the practice event (as) chronologically central to the learning process' (Evans 1999 p.4) and provides an example of the high quality of discussion to be found in the practice learning literature.

The particular point about distinctions between academic and practice learning is made in order to make the practice event central throughout the duration of a student's education and evidence is emerging of a more 'joined up' approach in relation to placements. Such steps are discussed below. However, before looking at combined efforts and activities to develop the integration of learning, it is necessary to give similar space to a review of key developments in class-based learning. Just as in practice teaching, thinking about how best to integrate learning has not stood still.

Frameworks, Methods and Techniques to integrate learning (II): The Classroom

At both the conceptual and practical levels, discussions about how to enhance learning within college/class has never ceased to be lively and there are a number of examples of innovatory practice. Macaulay identifies many of these including especially those that are intended to encourage 'deep learning' (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983) e.g. Enquiry and Action-based Learning (see below), critical incident analysis, role-playing and simulations (2000 p.18). Elsewhere, there is the use of work-books in Southampton University, Norwich City College's 'Blue Book' for students working through their final integrative assignment and Personal course-long manuals (Stern 1996 at Lancaster University) together with other efforts to make class-based learning relevant, such as practice skills laboratories (Dempsey et al 2001), the involvement of professional actors (Pieda Consulting, for the Scottish Social Work Inspectorate 2002) and Use of Self classes (Dempsey et al 2001). Additionally, Crisp and Lister's (2001) review of the literature on assessment in social work education cites a number of references to papers that discuss, for example, the value of infant observation, the most recent provides an historical overview of the teaching of child observation (Miles 2002). Elsewhere, in relation to assisting the assimilation of learning throughout a social work training programme, there are references to the introduction of structured de-briefings after placement (see Taylor, 1997 p.37 and Cooper et al 1999) - as distinct from the more common sessions on preparation for placement. The synchronisation of teaching and field placements has also come under scrutiny. In relation to the in-college calendar, Taylor recommends the value of: 'time spent at the beginning of each semester reminding students what has been covered to date.' (1997 p.59) A number of writers have made additional points about the overall chronology of training programmes e.g. Cree suggests that 'traditional modes of course organisation (where practice is

frequently preceded by academic input) may not provide the ideal sequencing for students learning to learn' (Cree forthcoming). In the same vein of timing, in nursing education, there is an example of efforts, in the final semester, to avoid the competing demands of final examinations and clinical experience (Nurses Registration Board of NSW 1997 x). The purpose of exams as a whole has been questioned; Macaulay observes that 'methods such as the one-off examination may, in fact, operate against it [the transfer of learning]' (2000 p.20).

Concrete efforts to enhance learning include that initiated by the University of North Texas. In the latter case, the student's readiness to practice is demonstrated via what is termed a 'Capstone Seminar'. This entails the successful presentation of a project or piece of work to a panel that consists of faculty members, student peers and other invited guests (who could include service users) thus 'topping-off' the course-based phase of the student's learning. This may be seen as an improved and more interactive form of what is undertaken by the student in relation to their final placement and goes by various titles such as 'Practice Study' or final 'Integrative Assignment'. The value of this final piece of work in assisting in the integration of learning has been acknowledged by academics on one UK DipSW training programme who have produced a popular interactive guide ('The Blue Book') to the entire process of preparing, undertaking and successfully completing final integrative assignments (Watson et al 2002). However, in terms of practice on training programmes, it is at both the conceptual and concrete where the emergence of the **Enquiry and Action Learning** (EAL) model has made the greatest impact.

Taylor (1997) charts the rise of the EAL approach and assesses its results in respect of the Bristol DipSW programme that first adopted the EAL approach in the UK. In brief, the EAL approach seeks to help students 'prepare for practice in a rapidly changing post modern world where little is certain or predictable and where the knowledge of today is likely to be defunct tomorrow' (Taylor 1997 p.4) by assisting them in learning 'to be independent, self-directed or autonomous learners' (ibid. p.5). A typical EAL exercise will involve students being given tasks (e.g. prepare a court report); they then work in small self-directed groups to achieve these. During the life of the group, the students are given the opportunity to 'develop conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge, strategic knowledge, personal knowledge and professional knowledge' (Cree and Davidson 2000

p.92) in the course of developing a social work response to a real-life scenario. Since its introduction in 1990 at Bristol University, the EAL approach has been adopted by numerous UK higher learning institutions. More recently, Cree and Davidson (2000) at the University of Edinburgh, have suggested that the Enquiry and Action Learning approach is a central model for ensuring the transfer of learning within the academic setting. Barr (2002) usefully enumerates other similar interactive learning methods, some of which are already used alongside the EAL approach e.g. problem-based learning.

The tutorial relationship may be one of the most significant factors in encouraging students to transfer learning (Cree et al 1998 p.41). However, aside from the role and responsibilities of the tutor when facilitating meetings of EAL groups (Taylor 1997 pp.82-88), little discussion of the role of the personal tutor in any part of training programmes could be found. The relative absence of discussion of the role of tutors accords with the view of Degenhardt (2002), 'the tutor's role in the education of social work students is rarely referred to in key texts on social work' (p.3). One brief example was contained in a report of an Australian University's relations with placement agencies and that was to note that most university academics did not go out to the work place at all (Cooper et al 1999). In the UK, Watson et al comment that now students 'have relatively little contact with tutors on placement' (2002 p13). This seems like a downward trend from a time during the 1970s and 80s when it was expected that tutors would be in touch with students on placement on at least three occasions and more should there difficulties arise. Watson et al acknowledge that increasing demands (e.g. RAE exercises, larger class sizes) impose restrictions on the amount of one-to-one support available to students whilst at the same time reporting that students on their course 'really needed (tutorial support) that they could access **whilst in their placements'** (op cit p.15 emphasis added). In her study of over 240 Australian students' perceptions of satisfaction with placement learning, Fernandez (1998) includes a discussion of the question of tutors' relationship to the placement. The one 'placement liaison' visit was felt to be helpful by a majority of students in the sample with first placement students recording higher levels of satisfaction. Across all placements 61% 'attributed value to the liaison visit in facilitating the linking of theory and practice…' (p177). On the other hand, Fernandez sounds a note of concern over the high level of student dissatisfaction (37%) in respect of tutor visits being unhelpful in resolving placement problems. Another aspect researched was students' consultation with faculty

and here it was found that 64% never consulted with university staff, the most common reason being not knowing if staff could help (36%) but other reasons included more decisive explanations for not being in contact; these included a concern about being labelled as having 'problems' (32%), anxiety about approaching staff and perceptions that staff were not approachable. Overall, 'Most students would have liked to talk to faculty about the relationship of university learning to placement' but they did not, choosing instead to discuss with peers or family and friends (p.179). It seems then that, if integration of learning is to be further enhanced, the role of the personal tutor could usefully be examined. I return to this below.

The Integration of Learning for Practice: a new model

The nature and future of the relationship between 'Field' and 'Classroom' is crucial if learning for practice is to be integrated yet it appears that the extensive literature on these two pillars of social work education has yet to produce a working synthesis to integrate learning for practice. It is not as though the split has not been recognised, in fact, arguably the division between what is learnt in college and what is learnt 'out on practice' is at the heart of all the discussions about how best to relate theory and practice, transfer learning and be ready for practice. In their exploration of the concept of transfer of learning, Cree et al note the 'split between theory/information (at the university or college) and skills/social work practice (in the placement agency)' (1998 p. 33). Efforts to bridge the gap between universities and agencies have generally be characterised by a one-way approach i.e. practitioners are 'invited in' - for example, to be involved in University committees and panels, give lectures and, less frequently, help develop curricula (Bogo and Globerman 1999 p.272). The one-way nature of bridge-building is exemplified in the words of two writers in Australia who congratulate the fact that: 'the Newcastle model has brought the field into the classroom' (Gibbons and Gray 2002 p.535). However, there seems to be an absence of discussion on the involvement of tutors and academics with and in the placement agencies. According to Bogo and Globerman, 'only anecdotal accounts of the exchange of resources between universities and organisations exist, such as examples of faculty members conducting research and offering consultation or workshops in the organization…' (1999 p.266).

Certainly it would seem that if any one agency should initiate further collaboration to assist the integration of learning then it would appear that there is scope for this within the academic institutions. An awareness of this and the fact that it might be an imperative has emerged recently. According to Moss (2000): 'one of the most fascinating issues facing us all in the restructuring of social work, and the training it will require, will be the extent to which academic colleagues on traditional social work courses will feel forced onto the defensive. At the very least, we will need to be able to demonstrate the critical relevance of what we do and how we do it…' (p.472). In Ireland, Dempsey et al (2001) make a similar observation: 'As social work educators, we consider that we need to re-examine our contribution to this developing scenario (contemporary developments in social work) and to take more responsibility for our piece of the training requirement in education for professional practice' (p.632). In Australia, Napier and George, in their discussion of how one programme provider set out to re-orient a social work course, start by saying that for them 'the survival of social work education, ourselves as educators and our idea of the university were at stake'. They then describe a move to make all class-based learning issue-based (Napier and George 2001 pp.83-84).

So what if, as well as bringing the field into the class room, we were to consider bringing the classroom to the field? Some thinking and activity in this direction has already taken place. Kearney (2003) suggests that DipSW programme providers could become 'more involved with social care agencies' practice standards' (p.10). Bogo and Globerman (1999) call for a closer Class-Field relationship: 'universities will need to discover additional ways to support organizational sites for field instruction' (p.273); they go further and suggest a more proactive role for universities that could 'partner with professional organisations to provide support and resources that some service organisations have withdrawn' - such support might include continuing education, research consultation and staff development (Bogo and Power 1992). The University of Washington would appear to have embraced such an approach in its adoption of a 'wrap-around' model in which academic course work literally wraps around practice. All teaching and learning is situated in the field. The rationale for Washington's 'collaborative community-based education' is as follows:

> The model reverses the traditional social work curriculum, which treats the university-based classroom as the principle vehicle for learning complex practice

> and research skills, and the field-based practicum as an auxiliary setting in which these skills may (or may not) apply. The Partnership model takes an enriched practicum experience as the core site of learning, and 'wraps' academic coursework around those experiences. It takes faculty and students out of the classroom and into the field for an extended (year-long) learning experience.
> (www.washington.edu/change/proposals/schcomp.html)

The model proposes the transition to community agency-based instruction in which academics and practice agency staff establish 'training units' to provide community-based centres that will not only provide student placements but will also offer courses and training sessions for both students and professionals. Other aspects of the model include a 'collective capstone' piece of research undertaken by students on behalf of the community or service agency with which the University is in partnership and benefit to service agencies through 'access to faculty expertise in research, practice, and supervision; opportunities for pro bono in-service training; and substantial faculty/student assistance in research and evaluation' (ibid.).

Such moves suggest a strategic answer as to how to enhance the integration of learning for practice

Summary and implications

This review of the literature relevant to the integration of learning for practice has identified a number of issues. Firstly, there seems to be no consensus as to a definition of integrated learning for social work practice and there are suggestions that perhaps it is only after training and in qualified practice that practitioners' can enhance and integrate their learning. Yet, there are pressures to make newly qualified social work students as ready to practise as possible.

Secondly, integrated learning would appear to mean more than the integration of theory and practice; it has been suggested that perhaps for theory and practice to be properly related to each other, integrated learning needs to have an organisational expression in the physical integration of 'field' and classroom'. Thirdly, a re-evaluation of the role of the personal tutor and the efficacy of placement visits would seem to be overdue. This is connected to

the next observation arising from this review. Fourthly, whilst both practice teaching and academic education have striven to develop the integration of learning in their own spheres and there are examples of the field coming to the class, this review, in its identification of the potential for development of the role of the tutor, has identified an opportunity for having the classroom go to the field. Concrete expressions of such a move remain to be seen, however it would seem that one opportunity presents itself in the placement period. Whilst roles would have to be negotiated, the presence of tutor/advisor in the practice agency during the placement period would benefit students in a more meaningful manner than that of placement visits at present; the practice teacher's links with the academic institution would be increased and there would be opportunities for co-leading student groups; the tutor/academic would gain through acquaintance with contemporary practice; and finally, the active presence of a tutor in the practice agency - even for a short period of time in the first instance – would begin the process, for the agency, of becoming a learning organisation. It would thus seem that there can be no meaningful moves to integrate learning for students in isolation. For learning to be enhanced in such a manner it would seem that all parts of the educational and learning system – college and tutor, field and practice teacher, student – must shift closer to each other.

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