Lecturer Practitioners – straddling the divide between the field and classroom.

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Abstract:
The Department of Education’s evaluation into Social Work Teaching Partnerships (SWTPs) identified that there has been increased activity in the embedding of joint learning between practitioners and academics (Interface Associates, 2020). This article will reflect on the lecturer practitioner role introduced in one HEI, which has provided a vehicle to bring closer together the two strands of academic and practice which are fundamental for the development of social work practitioners.

Keywords:
Lecturer Practitioner; Social Work Teaching Partnership; SWTP; LP

This article will reflect on the introduction of our roles as Lecturer Practitioners (LP) within one Social Work Teaching Partnership (SWTP), which has provided a vehicle to bring closer together the two strands of academic and practice which are fundamental for the development of social work practitioners. SWTPs were developed to improve the quality of social work education and enhance collaboration between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and partner providers such as Local Authorities (LAs) (Interface Associates, 2020). Our SWTP was successfully established in the second phase of the programme, being fully operational by March 2017.

Practitioner involvement in social work education is valued by students. However, some pitfalls can manifest through the use of ad hoc approaches to practitioners’ involvement, such as repetition, content selection, time constraints and unavailability (Williams, Mostyn, and Fyson, 2009). Placement experiences alone are
not necessarily a sufficient source to cover the application of theoretical knowledge required (Simpson et al. 2010).

Formalising of the LP role can offer an enhanced way of embedding practitioner involvement in the education curriculum (Cavener, Phillips, and Shenton, 2020), allowing for an avoidance of some of the potential pitfalls described above. Recognising this, within our SWTP the LP role was introduced early on with the creation of our posts; one funded through the SWTP, and one funded separately by the LA and HEI. The creation of our specific roles has allowed for specialist subject practice knowledge in two much needed areas within the curriculum (mental health and disabilities), to be woven into the delivery and design of teaching activities from the start, rather than practitioner involvement being seen as an ‘addition to’ or purely ‘skills-based’ aspect of student learning.

Work with people with a disability is estimated to make up almost half of the traditional practice for social workers, however disability studies and social work studies have remained remarkably separate (Boxall and Beresford, 2013), with most social work programmes including limited disability-specific content in their curriculum (Kim and Sellmaier, 2020). Likewise, social work teaching programmes have also been found to be lacking emphasis on mental health issues (Kourgiantakis et al. 2019), despite the scope of social work practice in mental health care (Ashcroft et al. 2019).

Straddling the divide between the field and classroom, our LP roles have enabled the much needed embedding of contemporary practice knowledge and experience in the fields of disability and mental health, across the social work programmes. Indeed, in the
The national review of SWTPs, the LP role within our SWTP is reported as having positive impact on student learning, with all stakeholder types citing the benefits of a more practical curriculum (Interface Associates, 2020). Feedback from our students reflects this, with evaluations of our modules showing high preference for the practice focused elements of teaching and the capacity to connect the teaching to experiences from our own practice as social workers.

One of the ways in which LPs can add value to the curriculum is by supplementing practice studies in the classroom to facilitate student analysis and the integration of practice and theory. Drawing on current experience as a mental health social worker has allowed for the generation of several practice-informed case studies deployed in teaching sessions across various modules to challenge students to ‘think as practitioners’. These case studies were designed to include aspects of mental distress, addiction, and suicide, and required students to develop skills in assessing and managing risk as well as formulating care plans. These are areas where previous research suggests students have been less satisfied with preparatory classroom teaching (Wilson, 2013). Reflecting on our role in such teaching has highlighted that being embedded in both the design and delivery of teaching activities across the curriculum has been key, as this allowed for practice expertise to be targeted at students’ learning needs rather than simply providing case examples to illustrate practice.

By starting from a practice situation, students were cast in the practitioner role and asked to examine how theory and knowledge can develop their understanding of the case. The ‘practitioner’ role provided credibility and authenticity to the task, but the ‘lecturer’ aspects facilitated student analysis of the case studies to offset the danger that
only the story, and not the learning, was remembered (McSweeney and Williams, 2019). Students complimented the legitimacy the LP provided to the task, reacting with interest and curiosity to the nature and complexity of problems encountered in practice and the opportunities to unpick these issues in the classroom. Reflecting on this feedback affirmed to one author the value the role was bringing to the curriculum.

In line with the Department of Education’s (Interface Associates, 2020) evaluation of the SWTP programme, reflecting on the LP role at our HEI, we have increased the proportion of the academic curriculum that has some direct design and delivery by a LP to two-thirds. This input has benefits for the wider TP through reinforcing the curriculum with contemporary knowledge and practice skills, especially mental health and disabilities, that are needed in practice. It has also led to an increase in placement interest in these specialist areas, with over half of the current cohort of students preferencing a placement in a mental health or disability team within the SWTP’s Local Authorities. The LP role has enabled these benefits through rooting specialist subject knowledge and practice experience into the design and delivery of teaching and learning across the curriculum, rather than as an additional ingredient added to supplement academic content.

Balancing the twin demands of the LP role has been a challenge for both authors. In contrast to some descriptions of formal induction and skills development programmes used at other HEIs (for example see, Cavener, Phillips, and Shenton, 2020), our HEI provided little advance access to formal training in how to develop educational resources or enhance knowledge of pedagogical concepts, but did furnish us with invaluable informal support. Colleagues actively recognised the contemporary practice
experience available from our LP role and sought our involvement in modules across the curriculum. However, from our own experiences we would recommend a more formal transition into the LP role, with a robust induction into the teaching and marking elements of the position to further enhance the post.

The management of two roles across one working week is also demanding and firm boundaries are required to prevent the blurring of roles. One author particularly struggled with the lack of time for learning and development, which would allow for continued professional development and career progression in either post. Therefore, despite having insight into the benefits and importance of LP roles within HEIs, when offered a full-time post at the HEI, this was accepted. In order to continue to promote close links between teaching and practice in Social Work, the LP has been given the opportunity to continue some elements of practice, such as supervision and direct observations.

The extent to which LP or similar posts will continue to be funded through partner contributions is unclear (Interface Associates, 2020). However, reflecting on the advantages the LP role has brought to the SWTP, the HEI invested in creating a part-time post when the original LP secondment was due to end. This was filled by one LP, enabling this dual role to continue, and highlighting the value placed on the position.

References


