

Chapter 6

A Considered Curriculum for Preparing Human Services Practitioners: Structuring Circles of Learning and Change

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6.1 Preparing Human Service Practitioners: A Considered Curriculum

Students who undertake practicum in human services and social work find themselves in a range of settings with a diverse range of people that are quite novel to them and, sometimes, can be quite confronting (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). The nature of human service work entails supporting and empowering individuals, families, and communities. Practitioners in this field are typically focused on working ‘towards combating injustices that beset people, communities and entire nations because of oppression, violence, exploitation or simply the denial of basic human needs’ (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 32). Sometimes, this work involves engaging with individuals and families who are experiencing challenging and adverse circumstances, which may be beyond the experiences and even expectations of novice practitioners. Therefore, the challenges for these practitioners can include interacting with individuals and groups who are vulnerable and feeling pressured emotionally, yet may express their circumstances in confronting behaviour. Human service students often refer to being ill-prepared for the challenges such as these that they experience in human service field placements (Cartmel & Thomson, 2007). It follows, therefore, that an adequate preparation for students entering the work-based learning environment requires a carefully constructed curriculum for these novice practitioners that allows them to be both effective in their work and retain their sense of self through that work.

In considering these issues, this chapter discusses the delicate balance in curriculum design and teaching practice – the considered curriculum – that is essential to guide and support students’ experience during their practicums. It describes strategies that seek to engage students in a straightforward critically reflective appraisal of professional issues that they may encounter and to which they need respond.

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Beyond the mere articulation of these professional issues, it is necessary to assist students to develop strategies for personal coping. Workers in social and human services need to have a clear understanding of how they position themselves in the world of human service work because 'knowing yourself' is an important prerequisite to being an effective practitioner (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). This sense of self is a seemingly a mandatory prerequisite for effective practice and for being sustained as a practitioner. When effective strategies are developed, students reported feeling well-equipped to respond effectively to situations that they may encounter during practicums. An effective response through a comprehensive preparation can also assist them to facilitate the requisite changes for individuals, groups, and communities to whom they are meant to be providing a service. That is, beyond sustaining self, they are likely to perform more effectively in their important role.

The challenges discussed in this chapter are about the balance between ensuring that students are cognisant of the potential problems, yet are still motivated to engage and learn (i.e. they are not put off or disengaged by the prospect or actual occurrence of confronting behaviour). If this balance can be achieved, the students are likely to be well-equipped with a certain resilience that can lead them through their professional career beyond graduation. The danger is that, if not approached in a considered way, the preparation for the clinical practicum can create the opposite outcome. That is, students may feel inadequately prepared or unable to cope, which leads to withdrawal from the programme or, of even more concern, their development as ineffective human service practitioners. The focus of this chapter is, therefore, on using learning circles as a strategy for the development of human service practitioners so that they become secure motivated and capable practitioners who are able to deal with confronting situations that are central to productive and healthy professional life in human services.

The chapter comprises two sections. The first examines learning circles and the complexity of structures and processes used to ensure that the balance is obtained in the preparation of human services practitioners around confronting situations that can be unavoidable during their clinical practicum. These strategies are important for both the practitioners who prepare the students for the field and the students themselves. It is necessary for the purposes of effective practice to ensure that students remain in the field placement organisation to complete their programme even when they are faced with challenging situations; and further that they are not 'frightened' about going to placements where such situations might arise. The second section describes the outcomes of the use of learning circles as an innovative teaching tool to explore the dilemmas faced by students as they engage in lengthy practicum periods in organisations that support the well-being of individuals, groups, and communities. Further, this section examines the value of these circles as support for the students. A process for preparing students is subsequently developed from the discussion of the dilemmas and students' experiences.

6.1.1 The Balancing Act

As noted, a key challenge for the human services and social work curriculum is to find ways of preparing and supporting students for their practicums that will lead to students having a positive approach to engaging in their practicum, which includes preparing them for the potential of negative experiences, such as acts of domestic violence or neglect of children. The students may well encounter a range of traumatic situations whilst on their field placements. This is a difficult position as the teaching staffs do not want to ‘scare’ the students about the experiences that they may well have to confront. However, staff need to disabuse students of a ‘romantic’ notion of the role of a social worker or human services worker, that is the notion that those community members in need are easily directed and resources effortlessly sourced through the assistance of professionals, or that they will appreciate the efforts of social workers and human service workers, which can be particularly detrimental to the evolving sense of professional selves of students in this field.

Helpfully, university teaching staffs preparing students are often quite knowledgeable professionals from the field, as well as experienced in the delivery of field education programmes. These practitioners, because of their broad experience, are usually aware of the difficulties students may encounter in the field. These teachers are, therefore, mindful of providing a preparation programme that adequately equips students to identify the issues and work through a problem-solving approach to professional practice in a manner that is helpful to the community they are serving, and also protective of their sense of self. Inadequate preparation of the social work and human services workforce is believed to contribute to burnout (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002). Individuals who experience high levels of emotional stress as they undertake their professional role, especially if feeling that they are not successful in helping clients, may begin to form negative sentiments about themselves and human service work. This can ultimately lead to poor work satisfaction and, eventually, may contribute to them leaving this form of employment. The intent, therefore, for preparatory programmes is to provide scaffolding to guide the novice practitioners who need to assist community members manage various difficult and, at times, tragic life circumstances. Such scaffolding is designed to ultimately prevent the burnout that can be experienced by professionals working in the human services sector, by preparing them adequately with strategies for dealing with this risk. The next section discusses the important role of scaffolding and its placement in the curriculum for preparing human service workers.

6.1.1.1 Scaffolding in the Curricula

Scaffolding refers to the manner in which university staff builds on students’ existing knowledge and skills to enhance their learning. Scaffolding can be provided through the structuring of the clinical practicum within the curriculum. There are

particular courses that include teaching activities and events that support the students' preparation and in-field education courses where targeted teaching strategies are used. One approach to this task trialled in an undergraduate programme is described as follows.

In the 1st year of the university programme, students are introduced to organisations and to individuals who contribute to the field placement programme in a session called Common Time. These sessions are designed to provide students with social and academic support within a flexible learning environment to assist their transition into university and their integration into their educational programmes and the field of human services. Students' skills and knowledge in areas such as essay writing, oral presentations, and professional development are enhanced through a mixture of structured academic and professional sessions which include contributions from guest speakers from the human service fields. Most importantly, Common Time provides the opportunity for students to establish peer networks and consult with teaching staff in an informal supportive environment. In the 2nd year of their programme, students undertake semester-long courses that provide them with more specific information about the roles and responsibilities of working in human service organisations. These courses are core elements of their programme and are titled and described as below:

- *Working in organisations* focuses on developing the skills and knowledge of students to work in human service organisations. Students will acquire an understanding of the organisational structures, accountability requirements, management responsibilities, and industrial issues which influence the nature of the work and work relations specifically in human service organisations.
- *Working in communities* introduces students to the theories and practices of community development within human service contexts. The evolution and current practice of community development are examined, as are the theories and key concepts underpinning practice models, strategies, and roles. Issues featuring in community work, such as urban planning, accommodation, and health are discussed with reference to particular community groups, for example women and families, indigenous and rural communities, and young people.

The exposure to human service and social work practice provided in these courses scaffolds development of the students' professional values and skills because they listen to the stories of successful human service and social work professionals. In the 3rd year of their programme, the students undertake an extended field placement (for the 3-year degree, this is their final activity). The students enrolled in the 4-year degree undertake a second extended placement in the final semester of their university programme. Together, and collectively, over the programme many opportunities for scaffolding that provide exposure to descriptions of confronting life circumstances are prioritised. These programmes support learners to understand and know about how to deal with the challenges as they are incrementally organised from awareness of issues, understanding the context in which these issues

arise and how they might manifest themselves through to actual engagement in circumstances where they might encounter such issues. Because of its pertinence as a site in which these experiences may be first encountered, particular consideration needs to be given to the scaffolding for the field education component of the programme.

6.1.1.2 Scaffolding in the Field Education Component

In the human services and social work programme being referred to here, the field experience in community and government organisations comprises a significant educational experience that is intended to draw on and extend the educational experiences provided earlier in the programme. The duration of this field experience varies in length from 13 to 18 weeks. Four days of each week the students are in their field placement organisation. The 5th day is spent at university in classroom activities. This is a lengthy period to spend in an organisation especially when you are required to ‘fit in’ and demonstrate competence for dealing with confronting situations. The emotional toll of dealing with the challenges of the work on these novice practitioners can be detrimental if it is not carefully managed as it impacts negatively on their resilience and attitude towards the profession.

University staffs have structured this period into four phases – from orientation to exit from the organisation. The descriptions of the phases have a dual purpose. They describe the expectations of professional growth and development of the student and the task to be undertaken – see below.

Stage 1 – Orientation phase (off-site)

- The orientation phase involves an interview at the organisation and briefing sessions by university staff about expectations, procedures, and protocols.

Stage 2 – The beginning phase (on-site)

- The beginning phase occurs during weeks 1–2 of the placement. It is essentially a ‘getting to know you’ time and focuses on orientation and observation. Students should use this time to become familiar with the organisation staff, functions, and procedures.
- Assessment Task 1: During this period the students should be developing their goals in the learning plan in conjunction with their supervisor.

Stage 3 – The middle phase (on-site)

- The middle phase is the bulk of the placement where, as the student and supervisor feel ready, the supervisor will direct the student into an agreed and appropriate level of involvement, set tasks, and assignments. The student will be included in all decision-making pertaining to their areas of learning and responsibility. This is the largest part of the placement and the

one that produces the greatest learning outcomes. Regular supervision time is essential here to monitor and assess the student's progress and capabilities. Students will be visited by their designated university supervisor and be required to participate in a three-way evaluation meeting with the university and field supervisors.

- Assessment Task 2: During this period students will write a weekly evaluation of their progress towards the goals they described in their learning plan.

Stage 4 – The final phase (on-site)

- Towards the end of the placement the student will be required to prepare for their departure. Students will finalise contact with clients or arrange handovers, finish administrative tasks and projects, and commence the processes of the final evaluation.
- Assessment Task 3: Students will complete their written assessment including a report about a special project undertaken whilst at the organisation and submit this to the field placement convenor.

However, despite the structuring of the field education period into these phases and the explicit statements about expectations for professional growth, the scaffolding was not sufficient to deal with the complexity of the emotional and cognitive development required by students to remain resilient when challenged by the confronting circumstances typical of daily work in the human services sector. If students were to be successful practitioners they needed to be encouraged to reflect about how they develop their self-identity as a professional. The dialogic of the reflective process encourages thinking about what has happened and how it can be changed.

Reflective practice is seen as a 'core activity' (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Moss & Petrie, 2002) for practitioners in the field of social service. It is understood as the ability to evaluate critical incidents within daily work and to use this evaluation as a means of improving practice and knowledge. This ability to reflect on practice has traditionally been offered as a way for practitioners to evaluate their own practice and the practice of others, with a view to developing their professional identity (Goodfellow, 1995; Mezirow, 1992; Patterson & Sumsion, 1996; Sumsion, 2003). Various methods of reflective practice are employed within the practice field, ranging from basic diary writing to the adoption of particular models, as a means of providing a framework for the reflective process. However, to reflect effectively, practitioners must see themselves not as the 'repository of objects of knowledge' (Moss & Petrie, 2002) but instead as creating new knowledge and understandings informed by contemporary theory, research, and practice. One way in which this process can be enacted and is aligned to the kinds of educational purposes being addressed here is through the use of learning circles.

Valuing the Learning Circles

Learning circles are sites of learning through shared inquiry and dialogue. The discussions start where people are at and involve a spiralling process of reflection and action. They were originally developed for American industries in the 1960s and later applied to adult learning for the purpose of promoting critical reflection amongst practitioners. A key feature of learning circles is that all participants are seen as being equal (Lovett & Gilmore, 2003). Sumsion (2003) states that the best principles of adult learning encourages and supports critical reflection about what individuals think they already know. Henceforth learning circles are a way for students to form new understandings with regard to important issues, in their own time (Gibson, 1998; Karasi & Segar, 2000). Learning circles are helpful in encouraging individuals to critically reflect on their values, attitudes, and practice with each other.

The use of learning circles in work-integrated learning programmes for the children's services sector has been proven to be a successful experience for helping practitioners, both novice and experienced, to understand and adjust to their chosen profession (Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2007). The practitioners in these programmes were aided in their ability to engage in professional conversations with colleagues. The programme arose out of the frustrations of university staff who are constantly involved in preparing mentors for students to work alongside in the children's services sector, yet who would then move on and are not available to mentor. The Australian children's services sector is under-professionalised and there is a high turnover of staff (Watson, 2006). Therefore, as one of the universities providing courses for this sector, there was a need to develop teaching approaches that would strengthen the professional links between novices and experienced practitioners, but at the same time not place further pressure on those working in children's services (Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2007). A teaching model called 'Circles of Change' was developed to be used within learning circles.

The intent of learning circles was to challenge thinking, that is to develop in students the ability to be critical and insightful thinkers. As critical thinkers they were able to reflect on everyday events and to consider changes to their practice. This process helped the students to make changes that would contribute to the well-being of the children with whom they worked. Therefore, the structure of the learning circles was extremely important. It was vital to use a model of critical reflection that would facilitate change in attitudes, thinking, and practice. The four-step model was in Circles of Change (Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2007). The first three steps – deconstruct, confront, and theorise (steps one to three) – teach students to inform their thinking through multiple perspectives in order that they might become more able to 'think otherwise' (step four) (Foucault, 1984) (see Table 6.1 – four-step action learning). This process enabled students to develop insights and explore ideas that would inform them around ways to deal with stressful situations (Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2007).

This Circles of Change approach also provided a process that enabled students and staff to understand the impact of the practices that were occurring in the field

Table 6.1 Four-step action learning model used in Circles of Change (Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2007)

Steps	Action
1. Deconstruct	Pull apart the main tenets of theory that govern particular practices and closely examine their make up, especially practices that have been enshrined as ‘normal’ and ‘proper’ practice. This stage is useful for prospective practitioners as a means of critiquing texts and understandings about practice
2. Confront	Approaching personal, social, and systemic issues head on by examining difficult, previously thought of as ‘untouchable,’ topics. This stage is useful for prospective practitioners as they focus on their own practice and confront issues that arise during the course of their day. The democracy and safety that Circle of Change provides and enables opportunities for more experienced practitioners to point out how important it is to confront issues pertinent to their own practice, for students to disclose any difficulties or uncertainties they may have and make the confronting process more understandable to the students engaging in it
3. Theorise	Carefully consider practice at all levels and question what is and what could be by thinking broadly. This stage is useful for prospective practitioners to understand the importance of linking theory to practice and the need to apply what is learned theoretically to what is implemented in the field. In Circle of Change students experience both academics and accomplished practitioners debating what constitutes best practice. They see the role theories and research play in shaping practice and identify what knowledge is privileged over other knowledge
4. Think otherwise	Challenge oneself to think outside the dominant frameworks and ideas and come up with other ways, or better ways of practising. This stage is useful for prospective practitioners as they recognise there are multiple perspectives and a variety of opinions about professional practice. As Circle of Change consists of experienced practitioners, academics, and students, and as each member contributes equally, then many perspectives are represented, explored, and contested

education settings. The university staff structured a teaching programme that had weekly learning circles as a core component. The reason for designing and enacting these learning circle tutorials in this way is to provide a ‘safe’ space for programme debriefing, to provide focused time to discuss workplace and practicum issues, to model critical thinking and reflection processes, and to encourage reciprocal and cooperative learning. The circles provided a safe place for these students and practitioners to consider professional practice (Macfarlane, Cartmel, & Maher, 2007). The learning circles were based on understandings and acknowledgement of the hard work of those who remain working in the sector. The privileging of time and space to converse in the learning circle did not place any additional burden on the workload of the practitioners. The workplace was not left with the sole responsibility of supporting the students. The university staff and the workplace supervisors worked in partnership to support the students.

In this way, similar parallels could be drawn between the children's services sector and the complexity of work in the human services and social work sector. The learning circle structure and process could be used to support the social work and human services students as they come to terms with confronting situations in their field education settings. The strategy has the potential to be adapted to the circumstances of large cohorts of human services and social work students engaged in extended periods of field placement.

Adapting the successful learning circle strategy used in the childcare field education required thoughtful consideration of the components of the process. In this case, the Circle of Change model (Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2007) provides participants with useful reflective tools and, as such, improves their capacity to engage in teamwork, collaborative decision-making, and reflective practices, and to finely tune generic skills required for effective lifelong learning and practice in the field. The model blends theoretical frameworks of community capacity building with critically reflective practices.

The reflective discussions allowed the students to consider their personal and professional attributes and their ability to use and develop these qualities as practitioners in social work and human services organisations. Initially, it is important that participants are accepted for their contribution and that recognition is given to the tacit knowledge (Cameron, 2000; Osmond & O'Connor, 2004) that each person already possesses. However, as discussions ensued in the learning circles, students created new understandings about their abilities to be effective in their professional role. Consequently, it was concluded that the learning circles were highly effective because the combination of the learning circle structure and the critical reflection process allows certain principles to be adopted. These include the following:

- An acknowledgement that quality is maintained through reflection on practice and through a focus on scholarship (deconstruct);
- The recognition that developing practitioners will face challenges in the workplace that may, at times, be overwhelming and that facing such challenges might require an examination of current practices (confront);
- An understanding that changes in practice will only occur through engagement and dialogue with others and via an openness to the knowledge and expertise of others (theorise);
- A respect for individual and multiple perspectives (think otherwise);
- A focus on time efficiency and effectiveness.

These principles underpin development of teaching approaches that use learning circles. The complexity of the use of the learning circles is not to be underestimated when adapting the strategy to other circumstances. The context of the situation as well as the proposed content of the learning circle discussion needs to be managed thoughtfully.

Using the Learning Circles as Reflective Communities

The scaffolding of the curriculum and learning circles was a complex activity for the academic staff in their attempts to find the balance in activities required to successfully prepare human services and social work practitioners. It was further complicated by large numbers of students, and the length of the placement period.

In practice, academics were assigned to groups of 50–80 students enrolled in the field education courses. Therefore, for securing success with debriefing processes for students, it was important that they provided each other with support and not rely on the university academic. Further, it was essential that these gatherings of students in learning circles were held at regular stages (fortnightly) throughout the field education placement. Because of the nature of the field and the constraints and complexity of the work being undertaken it was important for practitioners to be continually reflecting on practice (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). The students needed to be able to help each other because the academic did not have the time to meet with each individual student to discuss their professional growth and the associated personal development. Consequently, this also modelled the potential for providing support for each other as practitioners once the students had commenced work in the sector.

In the learning-circles approach, the academics were conscious of teaching techniques for group reflection, as these were important to a successful debriefing process. The process relied on the students being able to support each other. Techniques for group participation, including ensuring each person spoke about their concerns, were critical to the process. The academic staff member moved between the groups of students listening to the conversations taking place. The intervention of the academic into the discussion was sometimes at the request of the students and at other times if the academic was aware of a ‘teachable moment’ they would intervene and question the student to confront the challenges they had identified or to highlight the potential challenges impacting on the student’s practice.

During the orientation phase of the fieldwork programme, Stage 1, the students in the case described above were divided into groups which contained 6–12 participants who sat in a circle and partook in a four-step Circle of Change action learning model (see Table 6.1). Academics taught the students how to use the model to debrief about their field education experiences. They taught the students how to use learning circles within learning circles. To help initiate the discussion in the learning circle, the academic might suggest a focus to help concentrate the dialogue on a specific aspect of practice or the field education programme. During the orientation phase students were encouraged to consider the aspects of practicum about which they were most concerned as the focus of the discussion. As a stimulus to the learning circles, students were presented with examples of confronting circumstances that challenged the values and prior experiences of the novice practitioners. Prior to the shared discussion in the learning circle, students were asked to make individual written responses to the following questions:

1. What are you worried about as you go to placement (deconstruct)?
2. What will help you (confront)?
3. How will you go about this (theorise)?
4. How do you know that this has been successful (think otherwise)?

The students shared their written responses with each other. In the discussion that followed students were asked to consider things that concerned them (i.e. deconstruct), think about why they felt like that (i.e. confront), where they could source materials that would help them to resolve their feelings in order to practice in a positive manner for the people they were helping (i.e. theorise) and then describe what they would do differently (i.e. think otherwise). The written responses to the above questions formed a helpful basis for the data gathering process to gauge the effectiveness of the learning circle strategy. The students handed these responses into the academic staff who returned them to the students at the end of the placement period. The students re-read their written responses and made additional comments about the processes used to help them confront challenging circumstances.

During the initial weeks of practicum, in Stage 2, the students wrote their personal learning plan which contained personal and professional goals. This learning plan was important because it underpinned the professional development that students anticipated would occur during the placement period. The students were required to engage in reflecting on their professional growth through the writing of weekly journals. In the writing of their journal they were required to respond to four questions:

1. What progress has been made to your goal achievement (i.e. deconstruct)?
2. How have the macro-processes impacted on your goal achievement (i.e. confront)?
3. How does theory and literature help you understand your practice (i.e. theorise)?
4. What changes would you make (i.e. think otherwise)?

Students sometimes found it difficult to answer these questions in their journals if they have not had the chance to discuss their ideas with others. It is sharing with others that helped the students to consolidate their thinking about their experiences, because the consolidation through dialogue was a useful precursor for students before they wrote about their experiences. University staffs were aware that debriefing about the field experience was significant to the students' professional growth and competence. They provided opportunities for face-to-face debriefing in the form of fortnightly learning circles. The learning circles were planned as opportunities for the students to meet with their peers and university staff who were also challenged by similar experiences.

The links between the learning circles and the journal writing are multilayered. The learning circles are integral to fostering the language that enables students to express in written documentation their ideas about the practice in the field experience. The learning circles are facilitated reflective discussions that stimulate the students' thinking about their professional practice and provide the foundation for

the journal writing. At the same time, the writing of the weekly journals provides the stimulus for the discussions in the fortnightly learning circles. Both strategies are linked to each other. Through the journal writing and the discussions of situations and potential feelings and responses students are assisted to explore personal coping strategies that will directly impact on the students' ability to deliver effective practice. These opportunities seek to find solutions for students for either practice with individuals or with groups and for their ability to deal with the complexity of the professional role they are undertaking.

The teaching techniques used by the academic staff require a synthesis of theory and practice. The learning circles are a rich source of conversation about practices, however, the dialogue needs to be shaped by the reflective questions in order to draw students' thinking towards possible solutions for coping with the confronting challenges. The synthesis is achieved using tools such as tacit knowledge, critical reflection, and mastery (Raelin, 2007). In the learning circles, the academics can engage the students in reflective conversations where the process of communication and language use is a form of 'knowledge production' (Raelin, 2007, p. 497). The students can articulate the multiple ways of thinking about the dilemmas they are facing. This thinking can be converted into actions and students are able to make choices from these actions to direct their practice. In turn, this concurrent reflection on experience will not only expand knowledge, but also improve practice. Raelin (2007, p. 498) states that it is 'through conversations with other local practitioners, and using detailed language specific to a function practitioners develop their understanding of how to engage with the task.' The learning circles are designed as reflective communities in which the students, through a dialogic process, learnt to reason together. Undertaking this activity fosters communities of practice that support a participatory structure that is inclusive of all students irrespective of background or field education experience. The learning circles allow the students to share their personal experiences about confronting experiences and their reactions. The students are able to discuss solutions to their emotional response and develop resilience to sustain their commitment to their human services and social work profession.

Successful Conversations

The learning circle strategy produced many successful reflective dialogues amongst students. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies the academic staff gathered students' perspectives in a number of formal and informal ways. The following section of the chapter examines the outcomes of the enactment of the aforementioned learning circles in a university setting. A key source of data was responses students made to the questions prior to going to practicum, during the practicum, and at the end of the placement period.

Over a 1-year period, the academics referred to above evaluated the learning circles intervention as a strategy for supporting students during field education. The staff collected data during the orientation phase as well as from the student journals and learning circles. Analysis of the data showed that the students found the

learning-circle approach supported them during their placement. The learning circles were seen as a key educational intervention, because they provided the time and space for conversations that led to change in attitudes and practices, and were used here to prepare the students for the field placement experience. However, the main aim was for students to reflect upon their experiences in practicum settings and also share their learning with other students. The learning-circles approach was aimed to help them develop considered personal responses directed towards achieving the development of professional capacities and resilience that would be helpful during field education and when they joined the workforce.

The initial motivation for this project was a concern that human service students had reported being unprepared for the confronting situations they experienced in their practicums. Consequently, the learning circles concept had been introduced with a particular emphasis on preparing students for potentially confronting experiences through the development of resilience. Resilience here refers to the capacities to engage professionally and maintain a professional and personal sense of self in participation in human service work. As reported above, the learning-circles approach was used by students to be prepared for, discuss, and reflect upon issues which they found difficult or confronting. The students were able to exercise their rights to choose the focus of the discussions. The confronting experiences students reported were not only associated with the dealing with clients; they also referred to working with co-workers and supervisors who were not always supportive or considerate of the students' novice status. The students discussed many different issues and incidents.

Examination of the discussions in the learning circles and the documentation in the weekly journals found that the issues of concern extended beyond workplace issues to include personal circumstances. Students reported about the impact of their personal circumstances on their well-being and capacity to deal with the day-to-day experiences of the field placement experience. These circumstances had the potential to impact of individuals' ability to undertake their professional roles and responsibilities. Mastery of the management of personal circumstances gave the students confidence and agency to meet the professional demands of the workplaces. Simultaneously students' confidence and resilience were also evident in the manner in which they responded to workplace challenges.

The breadth of the students' concerns are evidenced in the students' responses contained in the transcripts from the learning circles and journal entries. These responses were able to alert the academic staff to the complexity of the issues that impacted on students' ability to be resilient in working with clients in vulnerable circumstances. The following examples are drawn from three student responses:

Example 1 – Leona

Leona was working with a client – a mother with a child with a disability who felt isolated and unsupported without any social networks. During the learning circle, Leona articulated the strategies she used to provide support for the client.

I helped a situation through my own personal experience. I relayed my personal experience and my coping strategies. I feel this lady realised someone does care about her. (Leona)

Leona's awareness of her professional skills including listening and networking were heightened as she shared her concerns with other students.

Example 2 – Rowena

Working with a client with mental health issues was a challenge that Rowena found confronting. She was distressed by the manner in which the client persisted in asking her if he could wear her glasses. Rowena discussed the context and circumstances with her student colleagues in the learning circle. She also described how she approached the client and she sought support for the approach she took.

The client pestered me for a turn to wear my glasses. I almost let him wear my glasses, as like my son, he was very manipulative. I was firm and told him not to ask again and that I would not let him wear my glasses. I wanted to stand by my boundaries. I realised that I could say 'no' to a client and I could say 'no' to my son, when he indulges in his manipulative behaviour. Doing this made me feel very empowered. (Rowena)

Rowena was able to test her ability to set parameters for relationships between clients and professionals within the environment of the field placement. At the same time, she believed that she could also manage her personal relationship with her son.

Example 3

Sarah was concerned about the negative and unprofessional behaviour of her workplace supervisor. She was uncertain about the potential consequences of her decision to confront the supervisor during her weekly supervision session. She discussed her concerns with her fellow students during the learning circle sessions. In discussing the kinds of strategies she could use to manage her situation, she decided that she would confront her supervisor. She used the learning circles to strategise about the process of confronting the supervisor.

I have been empowered for future practice particularly about using self reflection. I have also learnt how important it is to treat others with respect. (Sarah)

Sarah confronted the supervisor in a manner that had positive outcomes for the relationship between herself and the supervisor.

As well as the insight these examples provided for academic staff about the students' field education experiences, they also provide potentially valuable vignettes for use with subsequent student cohorts in the preparatory sessions. It is these kinds of experiences, responses, and reflections which provide an effective context for the students to consider how they will manage that placement and develop resilience.

The significance of critical reflection and collegiality was reinforced for the academic team involved in the project, as this opportunity had provided them with the platform for intense critical reflection on their work with students. Academic staff were forced to make the time to reflect on their teaching approaches and, further, they were alerted to the pressing issues that were concerning students. It

raised awareness of the academic staff that they need to consider the experiences of the students beyond the often taken-for-granted assumptions about field education. Not only were the students engaging in processes of building resilience and agency to meet the demands of challenging workplaces, equally the university staffs were engaged in processes that provided insight and assessment of the effectiveness of their teaching approaches that would strengthen their capacity and agency to be effective in their role. The delicate balance between telling the students what they should do and leaving them to their own devices to manage their learning was a constant concern for the academics. Just as the students were dealing with vulnerable individual and groups, so too were the academics working with students often in vulnerable circumstances learning how to be effective practitioners.

Students identified professional capacities that they needed to develop if they were to be resilient to the confronting and challenging circumstances they would potentially encounter working in the human services sector. The professional capacities included:

- Self-reflection
- Empowerment
- Ability to say 'no' and not feel guilty
- Managing manipulative clients
- Ability to make a difference

The self-identification of the professional capacities required for the human services workforce is critical to professional roles and responsibilities of the sector as it works to achieve social justice, equity, and social inclusion. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, social work and human services are challenging. The personal context is a significant predictor of one's ability to be able to practice effectively as a professional in the sector.

Students also identified an additional range of coping strategies that were pertinent to maintaining their ability to successfully meet the demands of the field placement experience. These included strategies for managing the balance between work and personal life (e.g. don't take reading home, drawing boundaries, the importance of debriefing before getting into the car to drive home), methods for dealing with the realities of human service work and the differences between what is espoused in university courses and what transpires in practice (e.g. difference between ethics in practice and as taught at the university, practical and ethical issues, approaches to and concerns about contacting people unknown to you), and considerations for improving the educational provision (e.g. more preparation and debriefing for challenging situations, more preparation in interacting with clients and other professionals) as well as strategies that address the demands made by the practicum experience (e.g. balancing practicum experience with necessary paperwork). All of these are useful in supporting students' development and improving the provision both in university and practice settings. These strategies could constitute the basis of establishing a set of practices which might be useful for future students. Their evaluation particularly highlighted the importance of the preparation phase prior

to the field education commencement. The academics have now introduced a field education preparation programme in the semester prior which contains a series of workshops on the topics identified as concerns for the students.

Further investigation of the students' data found mixed responses to the preparation process. Interestingly, some students reported that the concerns about confronting situation and the need to develop resilience had been overplayed and may have even caused unnecessary anxiety ahead of the practicum experience. Consequently, for these students some of the preparatory work seemed to be irrelevant because the reality had been far more benign than what had been predicted. Yet, university staff preparing novices for field placement and the workforce in the human services sector are constantly challenged to be mindful of the complexities that impact on the students' experiences in the field setting. The university staff came to be aware that there is not only one point in which they can intervene to support students to deal with confronting and challenging circumstances. Instead, the university programme needs an approach with multiple interventions that will support students throughout the field placement period to develop agency to most effectively integrate experiences in the practice settings with those provided through the university course.

The university staffs have revised the scaffolding of the curricula to include the following strategies and concepts:

Before the placement

Preparation for the placements includes opportunities to reflect upon and be advised about what is expected in placement. Staff discusses professional boundaries and how to maintain those when interacting with clients and other human service workers. Further they discuss strategies for leaving work behind at the end of the day (i.e. not taking the problems home with you); dealing with phone calls and difficult people; and developing resilience. Yet, within all this, there is not overt emphasis on the potential for confronting circumstances as, if overplayed, it might be generative of anxiety about practicum and professional practice more generally.

During the placement

Increased number of learning circles. These learning circles were extremely helpful because they included activities that were helpful for the students' capacity to manage their practicum experiences. The debriefing activities potentially will have a focus on personal as well as professional issues, for example consideration of debriefing processes, professional boundaries (i.e. their development and maintenance), and sharing and reflecting on challenging situations.

The staff uses the learning circles model for two distinct purposes. First, the learning circles are used as opportunities for students to reflect upon the totality of their experiences and share those experiences across the members of the learning circle. Second, the operation of the learning circle provides a model of ongoing professional development in which students can engage and which they can practice throughout their professional life. Debriefing about expectations, work requirements, professional practices, and capacities to work effectively manage difficult circumstances and leave problems at work are ongoing concerns as students move from novice to experienced practitioners.

The opportunities for 'real-world' experiences as provided in the field education for human services and social work students are significant to the preparation of effective practitioners. This is a highly complex activity for all involved. However, these opportunities need to be situated in a thoughtfully managed framework of curriculum and teaching strategies such as learning circles in order for students to maximise the professional learning from the confronting encounters. The learning circles need to be structured using a critical reflection model. Further, academics must be prepared to consider the impact of both professional and personal issues on students' capacity to develop their competencies as human services and social work practitioners. Consequently, academics and other professionals who are engaged in the process of practitioner preparation need to be prepared to use innovative and well-conceptualised strategies to meet such a challenge as well as ensure that their students do not become overwhelmed by what they might encounter in day-to-day operations.

Acknowledgement The author wishes to acknowledge the support provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for the inquiry referred to above.

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