It is the paper published as:

Author: W. Bowles and S. Mlcek

Title: Extending the use of student units for both professional education and community solutions

Year: 2006
Editors: Mavis Haigh, Elizabeth Beddoe, Dennis Rose

Conference Name: Biennial Conference of the Association of Practical Experiences in Professional Education (PEPE)

Conference Location: Auckland, New Zealand

Publisher: Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland

Date: 1-3 February 2006

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URL: http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=38448&local_base=GEN01-CSU01   http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/26501565

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Extending the use of student units for both professional education and community solutions

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Theme:	Innovation
Key word and phrases:	*social work student units; pragmatic solutions for communities; triad supervision arrangements*

Abstract

In this paper we discuss a change from following a conservative model of 'one-student-to-one-agency' tradition to the innovative use of *social work student units* in meeting the practical field education requirements of the Bachelor of Social Work program at Charles Sturt University (CSU), Wagga Wagga, Australia. In a rural setting where placement opportunities are shrinking, these units are also *pragmatic solutions for communities* as well as exciting and demanding learning environments for the students. In 2004 we set up a four-student unit to work with local shire councils to produce mandatory social plans on behalf of rural communities. In 2005 a new unit of eight students began the task of researching issues around aged care needs, models and facilities in the region. In both cases the students were immersed in experiencing community development work at the grassroots level, with the design and implementation of the units reflecting similar practice espoused in effective community development models. For example, the students were supported in a *triad supervision arrangement* that included the regional organisation of councils in auspicing the field education opportunities and setting the research focus for the placement period, individual councils providing on-site field supervision, and CSU staff participating in field teaching and liaison roles.

Introduction

At CSU professional education is most commonly referred to as field education. In the social work/social welfare program it is the practical manifestation of applying abstract knowledge to situations in the profession. It is *"the centrepiece of social work*

education, providing an experiential overlay to theoretical underpinnings of practice" (Ganzer and Ornstein 1999, p. 231) and realised through a minimum of two years of theory and practicum subjects as well as compulsory preparatory and extension residential schools before students can negotiate to go out on an agency placement in their third year. Placements should include a range of social work tasks from counselling through group work, community development and social research. Over their two placement subjects students must complete a total of 980 hours (140 days) of practicum.

Of course the above guidelines give a minimalist overview of the professional education that is delivered at CSU. There is an explicit challenge in making theory and practice congruent and integrated with ethical challenges (AASW 2000, Clare 2001, McAuliffe & Ferman 2002). How is this realised at CSU? One effective way is through the use of models of adult education, students becoming responsible for their own learning and developing the skills of being a *reflective practitioner* (Brookfield 1995, Schön 1983). Students begin to *problematise* (Freire 1972) the social world around them in a cyclic fashion whereby professional experience is built upon with new professional experience which then forms the basis of the next learning process; *"the way of knowing, the way of choosing, the way of acting"* (van Kessel & Haan 1993, p. 29).

Social work student units

The practice of professional education is manifested in the social work course at CSU through both the one-student-to-one-agency model and more recently through the use of student units. Student units are groups of students, placed together in one organisation, usually with a project that may be shared, or with individual projects. Supervision can be collective or individual or a mixture of both. Processes in a student unit have a definite cyclical character to them. Webber (2000, pp32 – 33 outlines a whole range of models that professional placements may employ when supervising students. Whereas most traditional placements use one model rather another, our student unit model is based on a composite of three of the models identified by Webber: *reflective learner model; academic apprenticeship model; and individual development model* (Webber 2000, pp. 32 & 33). Student are encouraged to: base their actions and beliefs on sound theoretical constructs (the reflective learner model), work on a specific community development project and have weekly discussions about how to integrate theory and practice (the academic apprenticeship

model), and recognise their own skill levels and deficits and to be involved in their own personal and professional development in their learning plans, and feedback sessions with their field teachers and on-site supervisors (the individual development model).

The student units developed in 2004 and 2005 were involved in indirect community development/work placements. In each case their placements were negotiated as one composite unit, rather than on an individual basis. The unit in 2004 was composed of four students and the one in 2005 was made up of eight students. Once the placements began however, the learning needs of each individual became the focus of individual learning plans, and one-on-one or in-pairs supervision and liaison meetings. In a real sense the privileging of the individual fits well with an *"individual development model"* of field education practices because it allowed us to assume *"that students come with different types and levels of skills and knowledge and should, therefore, have individual learning objectives and schedules"* (Webber 2000, p. 33).

Being part of a unit gave students an opportunity to complete a field education placement when other opportunities were just not available. Particularly in rural areas, there is a growing demand for student placements but a shrinking agency base of opportunities. As part of the composite group each of our students was expected to work on individual and group tasks in order to achieve the placement outcomes of responding to the needs of the communities.

Pragmatic solutions for communities
Placement opportunities often occur because a community organisation identifies a need that it cannot meet within its existing resources. At different times, agencies may nominate a placement opportunity for a student to do a community program evaluation, design and produce a community brochure, conduct a needs analysis, design and implement a focus group program for a community centre or put together a funding proposal. The types of projects are endless. These opportunities have a four-fold gain; they are ideal for student placements, they increase the university's network of agencies, they ensure a positive outcome for communities, and they have the potential to provide future employment opportunities for graduate social workers.

Using a student unit has the possibility of achieving greater outcomes for a wider geographical area such as the rural and regional ones that involved our students in 2004 and 2005. Tasks can be spread over a group of people. They can also be prioritised based on the skill set of the participants and interface work with community members can be shared. Being part of a composite group meant that each student worked on both individual and group tasks to achieve the placement outcomes which were seen to be pragmatic solutions for communities.

In 2004 the pragmatic solution required by four local shire councils for their communities, was to produce a completed social plan that was a mandatory government requirement for all local councils for 2004. In 2005 the placement opportunity was just as challenging. The community need was a research project that would ultimately provide future projections for aged care facilities and resources. It required eight students to come together to conduct research about current aged care facilities in a regional area that covered thirteen local councils. The students then took their combined results to four individual groupings that together made up all the councils – we referred to it visually throughout the placement period as the 'flower and petal' metaphor (verbal discussion, On-site field supervisor X, 10.07.05).

There is no doubt that several authors agree about the potential radical nature of community work and our students in their units became part of that context in both implicit and explicit ways. In their first year of study they are all introduced to the concept of *pragmatics* to understand how the decisions they make will be based on a multitude of contrasting possibilities which could include, trying to make sense of the choices given, seeking the desired effect to change a particular situation, weighing up the number of competing agendas impacting a situation, and validating the number and types of people involved. Potential possibilities to guide practice are highlighted by Ife (2002, p. 240) when he writes that *"in the course of a single day, a community worker might find her/himself talking to a cabinet minister, a group of homeless young people, a priest, an Indigenous rights activist, a school principal, a 70-year-old woman from a minority cultural/ethnic community,* a community health *nurse, a group of 'long-term unemployed' and a senior police officer".* Any one of our students would be expected to communicate effectively in many different contexts. In order to facilitate some of these connections the students were encouraged to engage on four levels of communication (Kaye 1994, pp. 9-11) during their placement, with some of the outcomes embedded in the ongoing assessment items for field education at CSU; *intrapersonal* – through reflective journaling and learning

plan activities, *interpersonal* – through weekly supervision meetings with on-site supervisors, *trans-system* - regular group meetings [in 2005 these were weekly] with all parties invited to participate and check on the progress of the projects from the perspective of their own organisational and/or political agendas, and *extra-dimensional* – coming together on at least a weekly basis to discuss how practice activities were underpinned and enhanced by having a sound theoretical base. This latter activity was both pragmatic *and* critical for those students who were based away from the university because it gave them an opportunity 'to come into town' and minimise the sense of isolation. All activities were essential because they affected the overall mid-practicum and end-of-practicum reports that were used to evaluate each student's placement performance.

One of the satisfying aspects of engaging students in these kinds of practical and professional experiences is to note the lasting impact on both students and the communities. Social work student graduates may never have considered community development/work as a viable and relevant social worker activity but many now make the choice to move back into community work and this is a huge plus particularly for rural communities. They understand because they have seen that they have a real chance to be *"social innovators"* (Munn & Munn 2003, p. 28) and because of their commitment to social justice they are *"ideally placed to reshape the future of rural Australia"* (Alston 2002, p. 224).

Methodology – some considerations
Organising the student units
A combined number of twelve students were used in student units across 2004 and 2005; four full-time placements in the first year and eight mostly full-time in the second year. These were all first placements for the third-year students and they involved completing community development/work projects for the local regional organising council. In both cases an approach had been made by this latter council to CSU to initiate a community engagement program which would involve social work students, university staff and local councils. The placements were negotiated between two CSU field teachers and the manager of the regional organising council for both years. In 2004 the unit also involved one CSU liaison person for the four students plus four on-site field supervisors from the local councils (a total of 12 people). In 2005 the unit grew to accommodate three on-site field supervisors, one

off-site field supervisor, plus two liaison people for the eight students (a total of 12 people taking on 13 roles).

The placement of the students is worth a comment here because they posed quite different considerations. In the case of the 2004 students each was placed within separate local shire councils; they became a professional part of those offices and were aligned to the town planning function of the councils. Because of the geographical distance from the university, two of the students were given accommodation in their allocated towns. On a regular basis these students would meet together in the university library and also with the CSU field teachers in two-hourly blocks.

In 2005 the eight students divided themselves into two groups of four students where one group was located in the main council buildings with two on-site supervisors and the other students set themselves up within the local community centre with one on-site supervisor. Two students from this latter group had their supervisor off-site and while the demarcation of which student went with which supervisor was quite clear for more formal meetings, in actual practice the students were lucky enough to have access to all the supervisors whenever there was the need. Additionally, at least once per week one group would walk to the other's location for updates and meetings about their joint project, and there were weekly two-hour meetings at the university with the field teachers.

The units were set up to encompass processes that are typical of action research methodology and dialogic learning. In both situations this is most evident through the supervision and teaching arrangements. There was a shift from a *"traditional linear, hierarchical perspective to a cyclical one … where instruction is replaced by dialogue"* (Ganzer & Ornstein 1999, p. 232). The responsibility for knowledge and authority moved from a top-down approach to a relationship where all individuals involved in the placement arrangements engaged in open discussion, disagreement, and eventually clarification, integration or resolution about differing points or emphases.

For the 2005 students, in order to increase their trans-system and extra-dimensional communication/learning, we asked them to access as many and varied situations as possible within their agencies, to increase their knowledge and appreciation of what it meant to work in community development. We advised them of several appropriate

activities such as travelling out to remote areas with the home care manager and the Indigenous Liaison Officer to meet with Aboriginal Elders. All these activities were 'fed back' into each of the student's individual Learning Plans as part of the assessment criteria of the placements to meet learning goals and objectives.

Triad supervision arrangement

The students were supported in a *triad supervision arrangement.* In the first instance this involved the local area's regional organisation of councils networking the valuable link between the university and local councils/communities [which resulted in access to placements for students], as well as providing the focus for research during the placement period. The councils themselves then provided on-site field supervision for the students with CSU academic staff completing the arrangements by participating in field teaching and liaison roles. One of the important pedagogical underpinnings of such an arrangement is founded on the basis that CSU wanted to utilise the skill base of the practitioners in the field – *"the practice wisdom of field supervisors"* (Webber 1999, p. 4) – and pair this with the theory-practice link that would be provided by the university staff.

The 2004 managers were the students' one-on-one, on-site field supervisors. Their role was to provide resources for the students to be able to complete their social plans and this included providing access to community members in order to conduct surveys and focus group sessions. In 2005 each of the four supervisors worked with two students. The student-to-on-site-supervisor relationship ranged from informal discussions about 'finding an individual's voice', to formal meetings that had agendas listing points to do with professional development and project tasks.

Evaluation

In both 2004 and 2005 the evaluation was based on the action research methodology which departs from a linear model that normally begins with a question and ends with answers. We used this cyclical model to begin with actions and then to incorporate results and feedback continually in a spiral of refinement over the course of the field education programs. Processes took place in a series of continuous stages including planning, acting (whereby changes were implemented), observing and reflecting, in other words *"to work together with people to change ourselves, and the structures around us"* (Alston & Bowles 2003, p. 161). These student units and the placement

opportunity presented dynamic points for critique and ongoing improvement in the overall process. Throughout the placement periods our ongoing evaluation sought to cover the following criteria: at the student level; the agency/community level; and at the university level.

There is little doubt that *"student satisfaction … is directly linked to (the) necessary conditions of student learning"* (Beveridge 1994). Part of our role as field teachers was to make decisions about what we thought would be the most ideal conditions to enhance learning. We wanted to know whether the placement opportunities would indicate good *reflective* practice as well as sound *apprenticeship/professional* qualities in the students. With the 2005 group of students, field teaching sessions were held on a weekly basis. We learned from the 2004 cohort that coming together as a group was essential for their well-being and confidence and we planned this more effectively to happen once a week for at least one solid two-hour session with the 2005 group. Additional time together was planned consciously to provide further maintenance – both task and social – for the 2005 student unit and these were very successful. For example, research meetings were held in a community agency each Tuesday morning to enable all student members to report back to the larger group including on-site supervisors and project manager, about the results of their work to date. Individual students were given the task of rotating the chair position at these meetings and minutes were then shared with all *triad* participants.

Weekly two-hour focus group discussions were also held with students and field teachers only. Feedback from group members was either considered by field teachers to be addressed then or later, or channelled back via the students themselves for further problem-solving with their on-site supervisors. In keeping with the principles of the action research model, these meetings became opportunities to critique work, refine goals and objectives and set new directions for the following weeks.

We wanted to ensure that the students' work would result in positive outcomes and solutions for the agencies and communities. Not only is the social work profession in rural areas operating in an environment of resource poverty, but this situation impacts the way that agencies are able to meet the goals and objectives of their key result areas. Qualitative feedback from the local shire council representatives and the on-site field supervisors were unanimous in praising the students' work quality and effectiveness. In 2004 each of the students was either wholly or partly responsible for

producing a mandatory council social plan. The dependence on the students to produce these plans became critical with three of the councils prepared to pay students to stay on after their placements had finished so that the plans could be completed. All the students had become so skilled in producing such a plan that when they left no-one else was suitably placed to complete the project other than with external consultants. The fourth council was fortunate enough to have our student for not only the production phase of the plan, but the implementation phase as well.

It is the nature of all CSU field education that knowledge is built both incrementally and developmentally encouraged. This is in spite of the fact that in mirroring the actual work of the profession, students are often asked to take on huge amounts of knowledge at short notice because of the complex environment in which workers are expected to operate more and more strategically *"under conditions of resource poverty"* (Wagner & Mlcek 2005, p. 85). For both the 2004 and 2005 cohorts, one of the important levelling aspects of their placement experiences was that while students got to be involved at the coal-face of "*community resilience and sustainability"* (Chenoweth and Stehlik 2001, p.51) through witnessing positive community participation, they also experienced first hand the plight of rural communities to be able to maintain their sense of 'community' through ever-decreasing resources. The social justice framework that formed the foundation of their social work practices had been well and truly tested by the overlay of political and economical influences.

We wanted to ensure that the investment we had made at a university level was consistent with the quality and transparency we had designed for the whole process of social work student professional education. Sometimes however, things do not always go to plan. For example, the degree to which the supervision arrangements were problematic at the start of the placement period is best exemplified by Webber (1999, p. 1) when she asks *"is there a difference between bungie jumping and field supervision?* As a result of some of our experiences we would have to agree with her answer that, *"yes, bungie jumping is always well organised, 'clients' are fully briefed and supervisors must receive significant training before they can conduct a session and everyone knows the intended outcomes. Unfortunately this is not always the case in field supervision".* Qualitative feedback from on-site field supervisors during the liaison visits (first liaison – via teleconferencing for 2004 students and face-to-face with 2005 students, mid-practicum visit – face-to-face in all instances, final

liaison – mostly via teleconferencing) varied from *"this has been great for us",* to *"not knowing what to expect",* and *"I wish we had been given more information and preparation".* For the 2005 supervisors, it was interesting to note that in probably trying to allay their own anxieties they felt compelled to then transfer their energies to the problems the students were experiencing particularly at the beginning of the placement. Their roles appeared to become more focused on mentoring students through the process of working closely with the rest of the group of students as well as with the team of on-site council workers.

Further discussion – observations from the field
Student and supervisor learning – influence of group dynamics
"Social work is seldom routine and involves working with people all of whom are unique, in situations which are complex, frequently messy and obscure, rarely easy to understand and almost never amenable to standardised or prescribed responses" (Yelloly & Henkel 1995, p. 8). In reflecting upon these words, particularly in 2005 we had to keep reminding ourselves that we had a field education situation that was not linear, it was cyclical and it was deliberately encouraged as a dynamic learning opportunity for the students. Why then would we be fazed by *group dynamics* that did not seem to flow in an 'orderly' manner? Traditionally one thinks of group dynamics as the way that groups form and the way that individuals act out their roles. In group formation members go through *forming, storming, norming, performing,* and *mourning* stages (original foundations from Kurt Lewin 1947). Why should we be concerned that *performing* was happening while *storming* was still going on and with no sight of *norming* on the horizon?

There is another more important layer to group dynamics that relates to *cognitive dissonance theory* of Leon Festinger whereby *"people avoid information that is likely to increase dissonance"* (Griffin 1997, pp. 207-208) and this is pertinent to the way that the student units formed and functioned. In 2004 the students knew each other well, academically and socially, before they were part of the unit and had clear choices about not having to necessarily take the practicum if they did not think this was right for them. Their dissonance with what they heard about the placement opportunity was minimised because we gave them clear information from the beginning and they felt comfortable with what was expected.

The 2005 cohort however, were united mainly through some initial tenuous links (they have since bonded as an incredibly supportive group) such as: feeling treated by other students as the 'young ones who didn't know much at the residential schools'; in many respects not having an autonomous choice about their placement (several previous options had been explored but floundered); and not having much confidence in the role of such a unit to provide them with a meaningful social work experience. The arrangements for this student unit became complex with shifting supervision arrangements, accountabilities and responsibilities, and a complicated research project. The students experienced internal tensions that were most probably a result of the post-decision dissonance of accepting the placement opportunity and these tensions were not resolved until at least the third week. They would *storm* for some time until the student unit's function and validity was recognised in sound and steadfast supervision relationships.

Reflecting effective community development models – from parallel process to relational process

Both student groups used McArdle's (1998) community development tools in their placement community work. They are used by practitioners to enable communities to meet their own needs but for the students, they also mirrored the way that personal growth and social change are achieved through *information collection, awareness raising, advocacy or influencing decision-makers, self-help, networking, participation,* and *resource provision.* When they applied McArdle's model to the way they engaged with community members, they could see how 'from little things, big things grow' and the value of practice was transformed through having a definite theoretical base. This was also the case with using Bradshaw's (1981) *taxonomy of needs* to gauge the needs of the communities based on *normative need, felt need*, *expressed need,* and *comparative need,* because the processes involved in completing a needs analysis touched the very cornerstone of the social justice framework on which social work is built. In these situations the parallel process of transference and countertransference of knowledge related to the way that students used information gained from field teachers and supervisors to then mirror and model the hallmarks of social justice with community members including processes that addressed issues to do with *equity, access*, *participation* and the *rights* of human beings.

The degree to which students' and supervisors' anxieties ran both parallel and in contrast relates to their similar and different responses to the way that the

collaborations between the parties unfolded across the course of the placements. Huxham and Vangen (2000, p. 771) give an interesting insight into the way that the *structure* of such involvements is impacted by *"ambiguity and complexity … over many dimensions"* and how simple presumptions made for example, that 'everyone knew and agreed on who was involved and in what capacity' had the most critical effect on the success of the student unit and placement opportunities. This is where the cyclic principles of action research and the adult learning model became relevant. In order to offset anxious moments (and there were several) about and within the student units we needed to move from employing just the parallel process of supervisory transactions to a more relationally based form of supervision (Ganzer & Ornstein 1999, p. 236). The parallel process became the starting point for looking at what were the issues and what could be done about them, but essentially where *"feelings signalled the entry point to begin dialogue around the larger processes of the relational matrix"* (p. 237).

Conclusion

We continue to use the evaluation of the student units to inform our current and future practices in social work field education. Explicit in our practice is the recognition that complexity of professional field education reflects the complexity and dynamics of every workplace and the student units provide another layer of learning for all parties involved. There is not just the professional competencies and content to address, but the management of communication with self and others in a group, the impact of transference and countertransference of knowledge on effective learning practices, as well as the understandings of what it means to be accountable, ethical, responsible and professional and how behaviours that do not engage on these levels undermine successful field education placements.

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