

Going beyond remedial learning support: reframing learning development as a catalyst for practice learning. A case study exploring father involvement in social work education

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Presentation abstract

This conference paper presents Learning Development as transcending remedial and deficit notions of academic support. A Learning Developer based at London Metropolitan University, presents a case study that illustrates the values and impact of Learning Development and Praxis.

This research project piloted a Problem Based Learning (PBL) methodology in the curriculum area of Social Work. The project worked in collaboration with Social Work students, lecturers and university partners between 2019 to 2021. This session may be of particular interest to those working with students in the social professions and work based learning courses.

Key challenges and implications for practice:

- Subject specialists seeing the Learning Developer role as one of 'fixing students'.
- Potential of Problem Based Learning as part of accredited Social Work courses.
- Integrating Learning Development: embedded vs bolt on quick fixes.
- Learning Development as scaffolding reflective writing practice.

The project overcame these issues with a reach that rippled across six north east London Local Authorities as part of a Teaching Partnership. It has also been included as a topical issue for reflection, titled: 'Promoting positive father involvement' as part of modules in practice learning. Both students and staff engaged in a workshop programme that scaffolded a dialogue between them, addressing issues of father engagement as part of practice.

Students were able to synthesise themes of theory, policy, legislation and its application to practice. As a result, some students developed substantial case studies at both level 5 and 6, and these even informed their later dissertations and research projects. This demonstrates the social value and wider impact that Learning Development has had on improving outcomes for not only students, but fathers, children and their families.

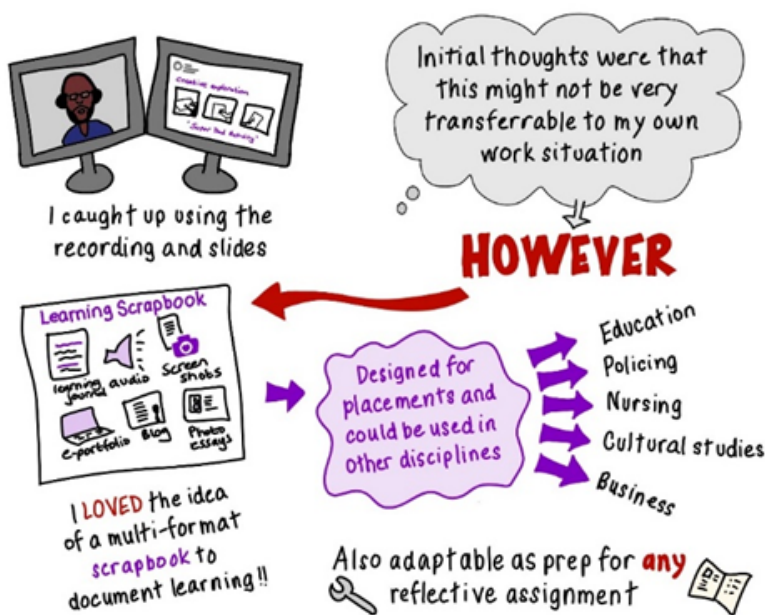
Keywords: practice learning; knowledge exchange; problem based learning.

Community response

This presentation examined use of Problem Based Learning with Social Work students to support and develop their learning in the field through compilation of a reflective portfolio. Reflections on this case study and its successful impact with students and the wider professional community were used as a vehicle to examine the role of the Learning Developer.

Image 1. Going beyond remedial learning support.

Going beyond remedial learning support - Kevin Brazant



The multi-media workbook used to aid reflections on learning appeared to be a really rich well thought through learning scaffold at the heart of this project.

Image 2. Documenting your learning.

Example, 2 – Annotate your assignment in relation to engaging fathers

As part of this exercise think about how your knowledge, issues or challenges to engaging fathers will be relevant to your assignment? Annotate (ask questions and take notes) on examples below. For example, How does absent/fathers impact on the efficacy of assessment? What do you need to develop in order to prepare for couple engagement male perpetrators of DV? See for tips below:

What are your own values and belief systems about men and fathers? How has this module challenged or affirmed them?

Do you have any preconceptions or preconceived notions about men and fathers? How has this module challenged or affirmed them?

How will you develop your skills in father engagement as part of Social Work practice?

What topics on other modules relate to this topic? How will this help you develop your practice?

How prepared are you for working with fathers? What aspects of Social Work skills, communication and values have been relevant to working with fathers?

What are your own values and belief systems about men and fathers? How has this module challenged or affirmed them?

TIP Use this process for assignments such as Case studies, dissertation and research projects. This is helpful in breaking down what the assignment brief is asking you to do.

Documenting your learning Scrapbook

How about creating a journal?

AUDIO NOTES

START A BLOG

SCREEN SHOT ARTICLES

MIND MAPPING

E-FOLDER/ PORTFOLIO OF ARTICLES

PHOTO ESSAYS

These are just some of the many ideas that you can use to capture your learning as part of your placements. If you would like to talk through any of these ideas, contact your Academic Mentor Kevin Brazant. You can email him at k.brazant@londonmet.ac.uk

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Kevin Brazant, Academic Mentor

1) What were some of the challenges facing fathers in the positive father involvement session?

10 minutes to read through your previous lecture/notes and any new ideas that you may have found of part of that lecture, how does the code of ethics or the Capabilities Framework (PCF) apply here?

a reflection for 5 minutes, here are some pointers to consider:

What are the roles, duties, responsibilities and powers of a Social Worker? – How does this relate to the engagement of fathers?

What are the professional communication skills of a Social Worker? – How will you use this in engaging men and fathers?

How will you apply the professional use of self as a Social Worker in readiness for your practice? – How will you prepare for placement and working with fathers?

Links to consider:

What are the different challenges for teenage and young fathers or BAME fathers? – How do you prepare for issues such as couple conflict, domestic violence or non resident fathers as part of assessment?

How will the seminar help you prepare for the role of a student social worker? – How does your attitude or conscious/unconscious bias impact on your engagement?

TIP This is a great way to start writing a plan for your assignment.

Kevin Brazant, Academic Mentor

Acti
Go to

The presenter has a rather unusual job title as an academic mentor, which implies something of an adjunct role when in fact he appeared to be working in a deeply embedded way within the faculty, and what was striking from the presentation was the sense of authenticity, the sustained engagement of students and professionals in the field in response to being asked real questions about learning that problematised their practice. This was a Learning Developer working close to source. This authenticity and clear passion of the speaker for his subject drew a really positive response from the audience on the first day of the digital conference:

This was such a powerful session delivered with energy and enthusiasm.

I was also inspired by Kevin's passion for the emancipatory effect of LD. It can sometimes be hard to envisage how this principle works in daily practice, let alone enact it. It was inspiring to hear not only Kevin's passion for this, but an amazing example of putting it into practice.

The speaker drew on the following definition of PBL:

PBL is a way of teaching in which students learn through facilitated problem solving, and according to most notions of PBL, learning is most fundamentally about

providing students with an active role in the acquisition and production of knowledge. In PBL, student learning is centred on the solving of a complex problem that usually does not have a single answer. (Hmelo-Silver, 2004, p241).

The open-ended nature of PBL repositions the developer (whatever their title) placing them alongside the students as partners in learning. This liberating impact of PBL was clear in the presentation and came through strongly in comments from the audience:

The message was so clear: be brave – offer to step outside the box that we as LDers are often put into. If they ask for a quick fix – suggest something more – go for integration – push the discipline academic to think about a different pedagogy: What about PBL? What about auto-ethnography? What about Image Mediated Dialogue? What about a Writing Retreat?

What came across was a sense of ambition, rather than working meekly within mechanistic conceptions of our work, to focus on what would drive learning forward. Combining this with creative exploration in delivery had a real impact on the audience who took from this encouragement to be more ambitious and to hold LD space more confidently. This is Learning Development in the service of learning (rather than the form of learning).

Other comments alluded to the porous boundaries between Learner and Educational Development, highlighting how a commitment to understanding disciplinary learning requires working in partnership with students and staff.

We hope that Kevin can have as transformational an impact on the Social Work staff with whom he works. Don't leave this innovative, engaging and agentic practice till the final year – this needs to start at Level 4!

Next steps and additional questions

This presentation and community response to it, brought to the fore terms of emancipation and liberation, the former term being notable for having recently been removed from our

community Values (see Dhillon (2023) and Webster (2019) for a taste of the debate around the term applied to Learning Development).

If we consider an objective of emancipatory learning ‘to free learners from the forces that limit their options and control over their lives and to move them to take action to bring about social and political change (Cranton 1994; Inglis 1997)’ (Imel, 1999), rather than focusing on the liberating impact on students, more reflexively what does this mean for our practice and self-conceptions as Learning Developers?

There's a warning here to avoid mechanistic definitions of learning and to not to be constrained by limited conceptions of our role or our own lack of ambition but rather to be creative in using a range of techniques to encourage students to bring their whole selves to university. Something that seemed very fitting for a 21 anniversary conference, this requires us to develop a sense of who we are and what we have to offer the university. If we are not ‘service providers’ supporting learning defined by content experts, how would you define our LD role?

And if you have a passionate project of your own – can you bring that in as well? For Kevin it was the realisation of how fathers are typically side-lined in Social Work and associated professions – so he brought that in too – and that is seeding amazing and seismic changes in practice.

Author's reflection

The community's response captures the dilemma we often find ourselves in exploring tensions in embedding and integrating Learning Development vs. quick fixes or bolt-on provision. It highlights the need to revisit our professional identities and scholarship consistently.

Some colleagues may well subscribe to the idea of the Learning Developer's role as being remedial with a simple focus on helping students develop academic skills while at university. There is an argument for students to be aware of these rules of engagement whilst at university and understand academic rigor, integrity and assessment expectations,

particularly within their subject context or discipline. However, this is only the start of the learner's journey; if our students expect to solve tomorrow's complex problems by grappling with the suitable tools of today, then indeed, enabling creativity in our students needs to be at the heart of our pedagogy (Robinson, 2007).

Does this understandably raise questions of how we apply creative approaches as part of Learning Development? Then, it might also help to share our mutual struggle in sustaining such practices, which contrasts with professionally accredited courses like Social Work. This latest offering in the form of a case study has at least contributed to starting a discourse on these challenges, and there is hope that the community are committed to continuing the dialogue.

Tips for applying creative approaches:

Since developing this project, academic colleagues within the School and the subject discipline of Social Work have yet to attempt to facilitate this approach independently, highlighting the need for this project to continue as part of collaborative efforts. However, the learning materials and workbook that colleagues have commented on as part of the presentation have now been added to the primary course materials of the BSc and MSc Social Work courses and form part of a body of learning materials as part of the formative assessment for the practice learning modules. Subsequent wins include an inner London Local Authority using the project as part of their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) accreditation for Newly Qualified Social Workers (London Metropolitan University, 2022).

Further ambitions lie in developing this as part of a stand-alone package for the *Higher Learning* website for colleagues seeking to employ similar strategies as part of work-based/ practice learning courses or modules within their respective institutions.

Social Work often requires students to embrace values of anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory practice and apply critical thinking early in their learning journey at university. A question for us is then, what role do we play in aiding their learning and metacognition as part of Learning Development, not only for passing assessments but for application in later life? Before we get caught up with what is or isn't within our roles and

capacities, a good starting point is to imagine what is possible through creativity and play (Abegglan et al., 2023). Creating a vision board or a thought shower of our roles helps to articulate a vision for Learning Development within our curriculum contexts and, eventually, our institutions. Facilitating problem-solving, creativity, and playful pedagogy requires a degree of flexibility and risk-taking on the part of the Learning Developer, all in service to learning. Risk-taking requires flexibility and a commitment to creating classrooms and environments that see students as co-creators and authors of their education.

However, this does involve a degree of introspection and reflexivity. First, we must assess our suitability in taking on such an endeavour as our attempts, if not authentic, could be perceived as disingenuous by the students and staff we intend to work with. In facilitating this particular approach illustrated at the conference, we play an essential role in creating this playful space in collaboration with academic staff and students, which requires scaffolding and diligence (Brazant and Tracey, 2023).

Making an impact requires thinking 'out of the box', which we are often placed in by others: other disciplines, academics, management and our students. It is a struggle that is inevitable when trying to get a new approach or way of doing things across to discipline academics and secure their buy-in. We expect our students to be resilient, pliable and durable in pursuit of doing well at university, so why should we be any different in trying new ideas in the service of learning? To truly help our students, if we can sit in the discomfort of trying something different with them and risk failing, we then have an opportunity to co-create together and perhaps, even learn something new.

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Further reading

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