“But what about the theory?”

Designing a social work curriculum around practice learning and reflection

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The history and the challenge:
Social work at Plymouth required re-approval and underwent a total curriculum re-design in 2008-9, with the first year of the new programme launched in September 2009. We asked ‘do knowledge-driven or practice-led models best serve the needs of social work practitioners engaging in complex situations? How best can a curriculum develop reflexive and resilient practitioners?’

Drivers for change in social work education
“... the job social workers do is critical to the nation. They play an essential role in protecting children and young people from harm and in supporting people of every age. The work they do can be difficult and very demanding, requiring careful professional judgements that can make all the difference to those they serve”.

Gibb, M., foreword to ‘Building a Safe and Confident Future’ (2010)

The traditional knowledge-driven curriculum

- social work education is modelled on traditional, Western professional education
- field education/practice learning is a separate (and sometimes marginalised) stream
- academic attainment is privileged within university-shaped degrees that favour scholarship over integration
- assessment is modular & hierarchical, with no in-built emphasis on integrative opportunities
- knowledge is deductive and potentially de-contextualised

The practice-led curriculum in Plymouth

- practice learning informs knowledge acquisition
- assessment is integrative and has reflection built in
- curriculum is envisaged as a staged rather than modular structure
- design allows for other processes – e.g. development of cultural identity/bi-cultural practice – to be integrated
- learning is conceptualised as a unique mix of self, context and process

Social work education in a complex world requires a curriculum that can balance the interrelationship between self, context and process
Bibliography


