

“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

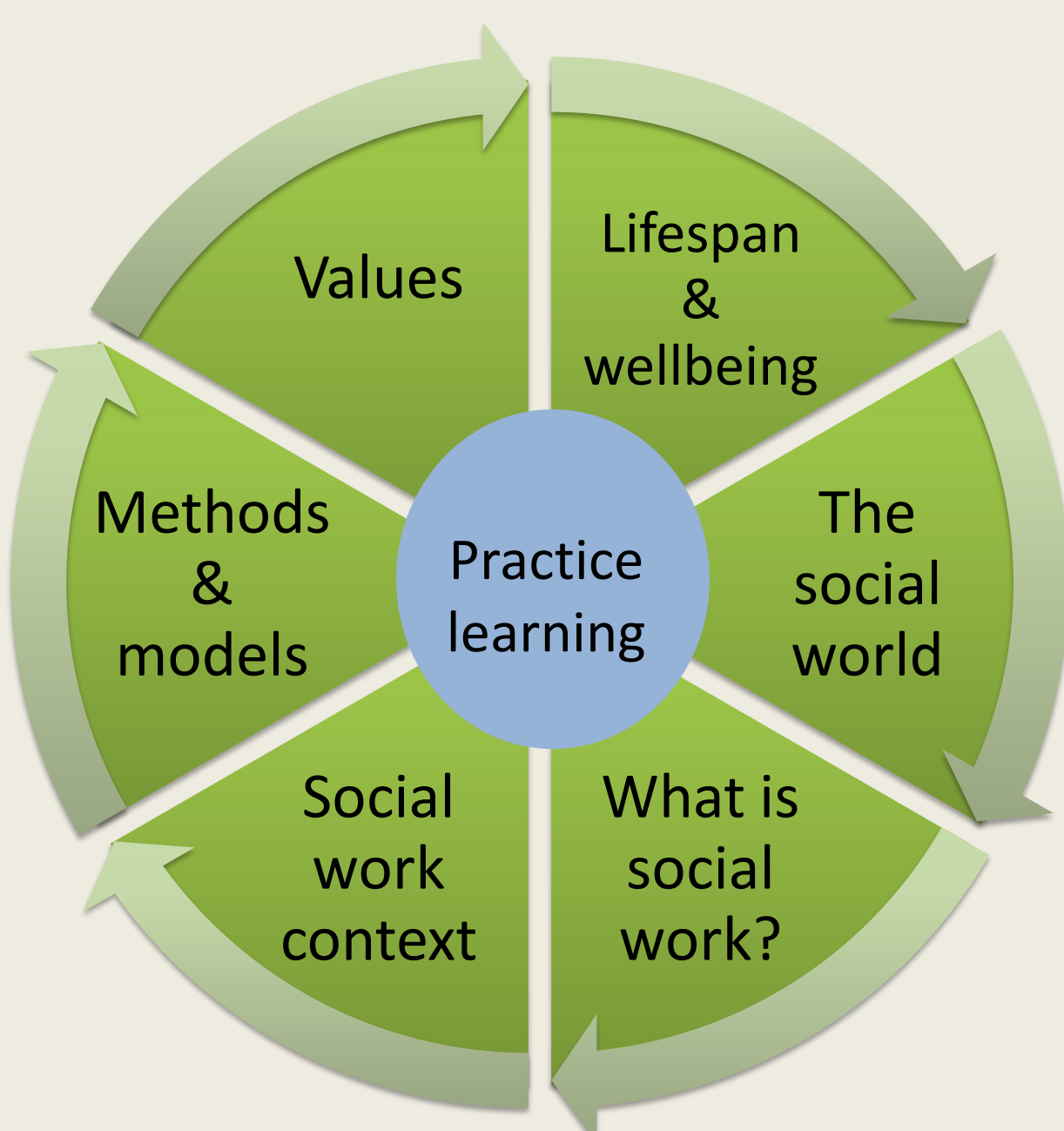
“... the job social workers do is critical to the nation. They play an essential role in protecting children and young people from harm and in supporting people of every age. The work they do can be difficult and very demanding, requiring careful professional judgements that can make all the difference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

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

The traditional knowledge-driven curriculum



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

Voices from social work research

Research challenges social work’s current micro-level, agency-based identity (Hugman, 2009). Critical reflection is essential in order to reveal sources of inequality and power (Brookfield, 2009). Lymbery (2003; Eadie & Lymbery, 2007) describes the professional development of a social worker as moving from a competent to a creative stance, and from dealing with predictable situations to uncertainty and complexity.

Burgess (2004) & Askeland & Fook (2009) stress the need to develop critically reflexive practitioners for what Butler et al (2007:285) term ‘*the messy complexities of practice*’ that require as much emphasis on process as outcome. Bellinger (2010a) argues that the integrity of practice learning (the site of much reflexive development) is threatened and can be a site of regeneration (2010b).

Balanced against this remain many calls for social work to increase its professionalism through adherence to the tenets of EBP (Howard et al, 2003; McDonald, 1999). We can do both!

Challenges in the curriculum design process

- academic knowledge assessment processes could lose rigour because of marking by non-specialists and fewer pieces of work.
- field and academic staff joint marking academic and practice in the same piece of work.
- high staff work load as fewer people marking
- assessment design requires constructive alignment, reflexive and sequential linking to promote skills, knowledge, values and critical reflective development.
- standards & outcomes for year levels must be clearly articulated but specified achievement targets produce an instrumental/ techno-rational, not holistic approach.
- marking the same student through the year may produce bias.
- teaching content is driven by practice experience and relevance not by internal subject discipline coherence.
- a potential shift in the balance of power towards ‘applied’ staff.
- disruption of traditional power relationships between knowledge and practice requiring a major culture shift.

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



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