

Practice-led curricula: driving from the front or rear seat?

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The imperative for social work education

[Social work graduates need to demonstrate] 'independent critical judgement', alongside the facility to work in much more innovative ways, for example through 'a fully developed capacity to take responsibility for the use of reflection and critical analysis' and through the ability 'to work creatively and effectively ... in a context of risk, uncertainty, conflict and contradiction'.

GSCC, 2005:19–20).

Voices from social work research

Lymbery's work (Lymbery, 2003; Eadie & Lymbery, 2007) describes the professional development of a social worker as moving from a competence to a creative stance, and from dealing with straightforward and certain situations to uncertainty and complexity. Burgess (2004) and 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.

Balanced against this remains many calls for social work to increase its professional standing through adherence to the tenets of EBP (e.g. Howard et al, 2003; McDonald, 1999).

Knowledge-driven or practice-led curricula?

Do knowledge-driven or practice-led models best serve the needs of social work practitioners engaging in complex situations?

Curriculum models and developing the reflexive practitioner

Model 1: Knowledge-driven curriculum



Model 2: Integrated Practice



Adapted from Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue (2005)

Model 3: Practice-led curriculum



- 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

Model adapted from an English social work degree

- acknowledges the importance of reflection in practitioner development
- retains structure of academic modules
- does not specifically locate practice learning as a site of reflection and learning
- allows knowledge and reflection to be integrated or discrete

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