The Possibilities for Studio Pedagogy in Social Work Field Education: Reflections on a Pilot Case Study

Belinda Johnson, Melissa Laing and Charlotte Williams

Social Work & Human Services, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

Address for Correspondence:
belinda.johnson@rmit.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Studio pedagogy takes a situated approach to Higher Education learning that is used in many discipline areas but, as yet, is little explored in social work. Studio pedagogy sees collaborative groups using design thinking and co-design to approach real-world problems and their resolution in new ways. The collaboration and resourcefulness required in studio work reflects the social work ethos. Also, the studio skills base of interdisciplinary work and creative thinking are contemporary workplace requirements for social workers. This suggests the usefulness of studio learning in social work education. In this article we introduce the concept of a *social work studio* as a possible new form of project-based social work field education. We reflect upon a case study pilot project undertaken by RMIT, Melbourne with a major partner agency. Drawing on a consultation with the key stakeholders, our reflection on practice suggests the integration of design enquiry offers considerable potential to advance methodologies of field education in ways that better equip students to respond to some of the challenges of contemporary practice.

Keywords: *Studio pedagogy; Field education; Design thinking; Co-design; Interdisciplinary practice*

INTRODUCTION

Whilst there have been a number of innovations in field education, for example, group supervision models (Schiff & Zeira, 2016), multi-site placements, the use of simulation (Bogo & Rawlings, 2016), and the use of non-traditional placement settings (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2015), the bedrock methodology for practice learning based on the apprenticeship model has remained relatively undisturbed. Students learn and are socialised to the profession via the mentorship of an experienced practitioner, predominantly in a one-to-one relationship. This tried and tested method, it is argued, is the *signature pedagogy* of social work education (Bogo, 2015; Shulman, 2005), that is, the foundational learning design for a specific profession. In Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has consistently endorsed this approach to practice learning. The most recent Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2017, p. 25) outline the structure of field education, its governance and the role of the field educator, asserting:

Field education is a distinctive pedagogy for social work education….Supported by field education partners in practice settings, students achieve deep learning through experimentation, reflection, feedback and critique of practice experiences. Through the process of this engagement and refinement of their understanding of their role, and themselves as professionals, they understand the complex, changing and ambiguous nature of practice.

Few would contest the veracity of this approach. However, at least two arguments can be raised to prompt experimentation with new methodologies of practice learning. Firstly, it is widely suggested that social work field education in Australia and elsewhere is in crisis (Bogo, 2015; Hanlen, 2011; Noble & Sullivan, 2009). The model that has sustained social work education is largely based on a fragile system of reciprocal relationships, goodwill and established networks. The supply of placement opportunities is subject to the vagaries of the market and, with increasing downward pressure on agencies and practitioners, the current system cannot sustainably respond to the demand-led imperative in Higher Education in Australia. The one-to-one model of experienced practitioner supporting the single student over a three-month block is increasingly under pressure. Overstretched agencies will inevitably have to demand more investment from Higher Education institutions in cash or kind.

The second, and more compelling, argument for trialling new methodologies within social work field education addresses the ways in which social service delivery is changing in response to an era of hyper-complexity (van Ewijk, 2018). Herein, *wicked issues* demand complex problem solving. Appropriate responses are often designed by drawing upon inter-disciplinary, multi-agency and community/user collaborations (Sutton & Kemp, 2006). The involvement of diverse groups means that an expanded set of knowledge and practices can be drawn upon to understand a complex issue and design a course of action. One example of a hyper-complex issue given in the literature is a new migrant neighbourhood in a major city that is isolated by freeways and industrial zoning. The social services being developed there are difficult to access by foot or public transport which renders a marginalised group in society further under-resourced (Sutton & Kemp, 2006). In this case, architects, planners and social workers came together with adults and young people in the community to think through the problem and design a course of action. The disciplinary skills and knowledge

of each professional group are valuable in this situation, as is the lived experience of the issue. Yet, the complexities of working together require a skillset beyond disciplinary expertise.

These considerations suggest a new departure for social work pedagogy which we explore here, drawing on design thinking and "studio" pedagogy (Crowther, 2013). Borrowing from design thinking and critical social innovation, the practice-based studio pedagogy offers a model of collaboration, innovation, design and impact that engages all stakeholders in the learning and development process. In 2017, RMIT Social Work sought to explore applications of the concept of the "social work studio". RMIT Social Work Studios currently involve groups of students (usually six to eight) placed concurrently within the partner agency and its associated organisations in various locations and working under the auspices of a specialist practitioner knowledgeable in the specific field of practice. Students are oriented to, and immersed in, the real world activities of the agency, working and engaged in the co-design of projects with task supervisors within the organisation, service users, colleagues and other students.

In this article we reflect on a case study pilot project undertaken with six students and a major mental health organisation in Melbourne. We are not presenting formal research and findings. Rather, we share our reflections on an experiment in field education practice that addresses issues of field education sustainability and how students can develop complex skills required in contemporary social work. First, we review studio pedagogy and discuss its current intersections with social work education. Then we outline the pilot Social Work Studio project and critically reflect upon the project successes as well as difficulties encountered. We raise possibilities for this new type of pedagogy in social work education.

A social work studio?

Studio pedagogy is a well-established feature of teaching and learning in design industries such as architecture, fashion and the creative disciplines (Carpenter, 2013). Learning studios are spaces that promote collaboration and the integration of knowledge so that innovations emerge. The design professions use the concept to describe, not simply a physical space where learning takes place, but a pedagogical strategy that levers up collaborative effort. The thinking process that students undertake in a studio model is shared practice which requires techniques for creative thinking and also the diplomacy to negotiate the ideas proposed by others.

Studio pedagogy is a mode of learning that "accepts uncertainty, serendipity and happenstance as part of the nature of education" (Crowther, 2013, p. 19). One advantage of the studio approach is that it enables students to think beyond mere reproduction of existing ways of responding to problems towards creating something new (Crowther, 2013). The learning process within a studio model requires students to recognise the deeply situated context of an issue and to synthesise this with theories and concepts to develop their own understandings. Thus, studio pedagogy requires students to demonstrate that they are seeing something in a different way. Indeed, it obliges students to generate alternative solutions to the issues under consideration and their proposals stand or fall under the critical review of the group and field educator.

In its embrace of uncertainty and happenstance, the studio approach is a flexible pedagogy (Crowther 2013). While the studio process is basically linear, it has the inclusion of repeatable loops. These loops may return the studio participants to the design thinking question of whether the problem itself has been correctly identified (Brown & Wyatt 2010). Studio participants might return to the ideas generation phase in response to new issues identified in the proposed action or to incorporate an interesting new idea. This process has the advantage of not pre-empting the end-point, which is a major difference to traditional approaches to social work student projects within agencies. Indeed, uncertainty is key to the studio model process. As a learning process, studio activities build in a dynamic and integrated learning environment between the student group and the educator that emphasises both personal (professional) development as well as the project content development. This process has the interactive engagement and communication that is key to meaningful reflection, learning and outcomes (Schön, 1987). The flexibility of studio pedagogy means that a studio can be self-sustaining. The pathway and conclusions of one studio group can trigger a new inquiry.

The experiential, practical nature of the studio pedagogy lends itself well to field education, and disciplinary practices of social work such as critical reflection offer much to enhance a studio process. We are also well aware that social work placements can involve students in group projects. These points indicate that there are synergies between studio learning and social work field education. Yet, there are key ways that studio pedagogy differs from current practices in social work field education, and it is important to clarify these differences. A significant difference is how a studio project is led in order to maximise the potential for new ideas and new ways of thinking. Studio projects require skilled facilitation of the project group. However, the facilitator does not hold the authority of expertise in generating or privileging project ideas which is the standard model of student project work that reflects the master/apprentice model of learning. Alongside this model of operation, the uncertainty and flexibility within the studio process means that projects are not shaped at the outset by clearly defined parameters of the project object and aims.

In the social work context, what makes this pedagogy unique and a departure from the traditional field education methodology based on the apprenticeship model, is the potential that is generated within the student group itself. This approach can have considerable added value for the agency beyond the one-to-one student/teacher format. Each student will have their own learning agenda and may have their own project set within the aims of the agency setting, but the group as a whole will also be working collaboratively to affect the project outcomes of the studio. We argue that this more deliberate use of space, place, collaboration, co-design and critique affords a number of interesting potentials apposite to 21st century social work practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL WORK AND THE STUDIO MODEL

To date, applications of a studio concept to social work are thin on the ground, but here we review four studies that utilise aspects of this pedagogy. A further study by Sletto (2012), while not involving social workers, engages with community development strategies and reflects critical social work principles that are transferrable to the present study.

The studio concept has been loosely used to describe a physical space as well as a pedagogical strategy. Crowther (2013) incorporates both ideas into the studio as a locale of learning. In this vein, Zuffery and King (2016) created 'the Social Work Studio' – as a physical space delineated from other teaching spaces via a two-way mirror, and modelled on a social work office. There was a clear focus on space and place as a catalyst for learning to occur, as the Studio was designed to "integrate action and reflection" (2016, p. 396) in counselling and group work training. The aim of their research was to explore what effect a dedicated learning space could have on student engagement within a social work course. The authors found that the studio space built confidence and engagement with students' emergent practitioner skills by taking them out of their comfort zone. However, this study did not aim to co-design the learning space with students or experiment with design thinking, and therefore the studio maintained the conventional apprenticeship model, something the present pilot sought to disrupt. Zuffery and King's (2016) Social Work Studio aimed to replicate field engagements rather than taking the studio pedagogy to the field and focussing on real-world problem solving.

A key application of the studio pedagogy in social work has aimed to advance inter-disciplinary practice and cross-disciplinary learning. In Sutton and Kemp's study (2006) they constructed creative, intentional and interdisciplinary problem-solving workshops which they named *design charettes*. Their workshop design rested on the assumption that the time-limited fishbowl environment of the studio is conducive to innovation. Their methodology integrated both intuitive thinking and analysis in a participatory approach to student education and community partner engagement. Participants were both undergraduate and postgraduate students from the disciplines of art, architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, community and environmental planning, education, history, public health, social work, and urban planning. A strength of the interdisciplinary nature of Sutton and Kemp's (2006) study was to harness the skills of each discipline to contribute to the workshop processes and outcomes. Co-design with the service user community occurred through participants developing proposals and undertaking needs assessments. Although participant experiences of the processes were mixed, the reported projects produced a complex mix of community artefacts and innovations that showcased the scope of the creative design studio as a methodology.

Moxley, Feen-Calligan, and Washington's (2012) study analyses cases of creatively driven, design-based community work involving collaboration between arts and humanities students. They argue for creativity in the social work curriculum in the form of a collaborative design studio as a final year capstone learning experience. One project analysed within their study incorporated a range of creative storytelling methods for people recovering from the traumas of homelessness. The aim was to build participants' self-efficacy in their continuing journey out of homelessness. Moxley et al. advocate for the adoption of creative methods from the arts and humanities as an alternative means of empowering service users. They espouse the potential of these creative methods to help social work students "discover their creative voice" (2012, p. 721). The authors present a range of possible learning experiences for students in a studio setting including intensive writing opportunities, the design of interventions, the evaluation of practice, and use of artistic methods as a vehicle for community advocacy. Their research demonstrates the types of added value for service users, students and for agencies in engaging with studio-based learning.

The "Urban Studio" (Nsonwu, Gruber, & Charest, 2010) began as a project within a school of architecture. The realisation that clients had complex psychosocial needs that would be brought into the domain of the studio led to the architecture group inviting collaboration with representatives from the social work and human environmental sciences schools, as well as community agencies. This studio was located in the field and comprised student cohorts who would not traditionally work together. This interdisciplinary mix meant that a student-led construction project expanded its traditional project framing to include a feminist perspective. This project highlighted the benefits of interdisciplinary learning as creative practice for the student participants. It also demonstrated the value of interdisciplinary studio work as this project evolved to make a significant social justice impact for residents of a disadvantaged area forced to reside in substandard housing. Nsonwu et al. emphasise that, unlike typical student design projects, the value of the Urban Studio lay in its process of "collaboration, shared responsibility and consensus" (Nsonwu et al., 2010, p. 311). This foregrounds co-design techniques as a fundamental strength of studio pedagogy.

While located within the planning discipline and not involving social work students, Sletto's (2012) study is worth noting for the way the author applied theories resonant of critical social work to disrupt neoliberal planning policies. What he described as "insurgent studio pedagogy" (Sletto, 2012, p. 231) provided an opportunity for students to advocate for, and collaborate with, community partners. Students engaged in reflexive techniques to effect real-world change, in a context that would be considered a *wicked problem*.

Overall, this literature shows that studio thinking has begun to emerge in the training of social workers, albeit most commonly in an interdisciplinary context. The reviewed literature indicates that there is clearly a role for studio work in social work education. Studio projects support the development of skills in complex collaborative problem solving, in the ability to generate creative and innovative alternatives to the status quo, and in learning active co-design practices.

THE PILOT SOCIAL WORK STUDIO

A pilot Social Work Studio was arranged with a large mental health agency in Melbourne. This agency identified a complex issue that had the broad scope necessary for a design-thinking-based studio project brief (Brown & Wyatt, 2010) and they had the capacity to take a group of students on placement. Also, a good working relationship had already been established between the agency and the RMIT social work field education team. The agency had an established partner arrangement with RMIT Social Work and students had undertaken placements there in the previous two years. A trusting relationship with the agency was important as we did not know whether the pilot Social Work Studio would be successful.

This was a pilot project, engaging a hitherto untried approach to field education, and studio pedagogy emphasises refraining from pre-determined activity and direction (Crowther, 2013). As such, there was much at the outset of the Social Work Studio that was unknown. However, some arrangements were established before the pilot studio commenced. Six students would be placed for the whole of their field placements with the agency. For three days each week, students would separately engage in clinical work within the agency under the supervision

of different social workers in different work areas. This followed the traditional social work field education model. Students would then spend two days each week working together on the studio project. While the agency was still providing six student placements, the one-to-one component of the placement requiring individual social work supervision was only part time. This eased the resource demand of placements upon the agency, which is the first issue that the studio model sought to address. However, as we could not know how students would experience the studio pilot, students were given the option to withdraw from it and focus on their clinical placement work. The students worked on the pilot between August and November 2017.

The broad starting point for the studio project was the negative mainstream media reporting of the agency and its service-users, with particular concern for the destructive impact this has upon the wellbeing of service-users and their families and carers. Students needed to explore dimensions of this issue through research of scholarly as well as "grey" material in formal media, social media and other sources on the internet. Bringing design-thinking principles (Brown & Wyatt, 2010) and studio pedagogy (Crowther, 2013; Sutton & Kemp, 2006) together, they needed to consider what the problem really was, consult with stakeholders, and brainstorm ideas in order to produce a final artefact. At the completion of their studio work, students produced a written report and gave a formal presentation of their work to the agency's CEO, the Social Work team, and the Media and Communications person.

Governance arrangements for the Social Work Studio emerged through the process. This comprised an agency reference group of three senior social workers, a studio facilitator from the RMIT Social Work team, and some self-governing principles and mechanisms for the students. Students consulted the reference group on their progress and received feedback and direction on what sort of detail would have most traction in the broader organisation. The studio facilitator was also the liaison person for the students' overall placements (and an author on this paper). She facilitated five intensive studio sessions with the students at key points to enable reflection, consolidation, and to plan next steps. The facilitator established with the students that she was a resource for the group, but that they were collectively leading the project. Students used a shared Google spreadsheet to log their individual tasks and progress.

The studio project started with a meeting of the agency social workers, students, and the studio facilitator. The facilitator outlined key principles of studio pedagogy and design thinking and how this approach differed from more standard types of project work. The agency social workers provided context for the identified problem, describing events, media reporting, and their impact upon service users and their families. They gave us insight into the organisation and the field. Over the course of the pilot, students also met with a carers' group as well as an expert from RMIT, whose ideas and perspectives shaped the thinking and direction of the studio project.

The first phase of the studio project was exploratory, reflecting the "inspiration" and "ideation" phases of design thinking (Brown & Wyatt, 2010, pp. 30–31). Students needed to learn about the field, the history of media and stigma in relation to mental

health and ascertain the scope of materials available. This phase suspended students in a state of *unknownness*. Students followed diverse content threads and we did not know which threads would ultimately be relevant for the project outcome. Students worked in a shared space so that an organic exchange of emerging knowledge and ideas occurred. Once students had gathered substantial material across several areas, a facilitated studio session was held where brainstorming of the material and initial thoughts about it were organised thematically. This generated a possible structure for the final report and also identified some new content threads to explore. Students then took our outcome from the facilitated studio session to the agency social work reference group whose situated expertise further shaped the next steps. This process of exploration, consolidation and consultation continued until the final report was produced. The report and presentation to the agency CEO and media and communications person were very successful. The CEO was impressed with the scope of the students' work in the studio and he articulated the benefits of bringing a social work perspective to the broader organisation.

Reflecting upon the challenges of the pilot studio

The essence of a studio approach is to produce new and innovative approaches to complex social problems. On the day of the students' presentation of their studio project work, it became clear that the pilot was very successful in terms of producing important work for the agency. However, during the process of the studio, it was not always clear that the studio experiment was going well. Upon critical reflection, this was due to the unknownness that sits at the core of the studio ethos and is key to its benefits. Some students became frustrated at not knowing where their work was heading or whether it would be useful. This indicates the discomfort they experienced in sitting with unknownness. However, through their own critical reflection, students recognised that they would not have developed as valuable an outcome without the exploratory openness of the studio approach.

There was tension at some points around how open-ended and probing the work should be. It was decided that the final report needed to make clear recommendations and reject others. One studio participant was concerned that this went against the "what if" / "yes, and" principles of design thinking. However, the project had moved into a later stage at this point so that the development of recommendations reflected the prototype proposal stage of design thinking (Both & Baggereor, 2009). As we can now look ahead into the next phase of the studio, this was the right decision. In maintaining the spirit of studio pedagogy, the pilot report recommendations are now being used as a brainstorming trigger for the next phase of the studio's work rather than being understood as a locked-in proposal. This reflects the self-sustaining quality of studio pedagogy.

The unknownness that is key to the studio process was intensified by this being its trial as the facilitator, while an experienced higher education teacher, was also new to the studio process. Our critical reflections upon the pilot now inform strategies for the next studio project. In future studios we can advise and reassure students on the studio process, as we now know that points of discomfort and uncertainty in the studio are an important part of the process that contribute to its successful outcome. In the next iteration of the studio, the facilitator will also include a more structured approach to group reflection on the

experience of the studio process so that more explicit focus is given to the personal and professional development of students in the studio process.

The studio project also faced some practical challenges. Some tensions arose over the fairness of workload between students, particularly in the writing-up phase. Groupwork in coursework can produce student anxiety about the impact on grades (Strauss, U, & Young, 2011). Student placement is ungraded, however, student anxiety about the pass/fail outcome is ever-present. This could have been ameliorated by developing a secondary artefact that was perhaps a more visual, recorded representation of the studio work, as this would have been useful for the agency and drawn on the strengths of the students less involved in the writing and editing of the report. Sutton and Kemp (2006, p. 138) note the usefulness of such visual representations used by designers to explore and frame problems and issues. There was also the issue of a physical space for the studio, as both the agency and RMIT are pressed for space. Students did their studio work at RMIT, finding a group space on campus each morning of the studio, but this uncertainty of the workspace is not ideal (and added unnecessarily to the unknownness of their work).

The model also needs to consider the imperative for students to meet their individual learning outcomes as required by the accrediting body, given the current Standards (AASW, 2017) and to sustain the requirements regarding individualised supervision. One challenge from the university perspective is that greater investment is required to provide facilitation for the studio on top of individual student liaisons and supervision. At this point, it seems that the possibilities for deepening the agency partnership in intersections of practice, teaching and research could more than justify this.

Successes and looking ahead

The successes of the Social Work Studio pilot are manifold. The ultimate success of the studio lies in what the students produced in a substantial and valuable piece of work for the agency, and this is recognised by the agency executive beyond the Social Work team. The studio was also a successful learning experience for students. They benefitted from collaborating in a diverse group of co-students. They learnt to delegate tasks according to individual strengths, to remain open to the value of diverse contributions, were challenged to communicate effectively, and all of this deepened their understanding who they are in a group. While the unknownness of the studio co-design process created some discomfort and tensions at times, the studio also gave students a sense of camaraderie. Students enjoyed the fast-paced feel of the studio and that the studio remained a dynamic environment where there was space to learn and experiment.

As we move into the next phase of the social work studio, our experience within the pilot informs some new approaches. Early in the studio process, the facilitator will run a more detailed, reflexive session for students on working with the unknownness of the studio process. We will discuss the importance of not knowing, or rushing, ideas and decisions as adding depth and value to what the studio can achieve. Students can consider which parts of the studio process they anticipate finding most motivating or challenging. This will prepare students for the studio, validate the unknownness of a studio approach and provide grounding for the studio activity. There is scope for a supported reflective journal to accompany studio work.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Field education is recognised as the distinctive pedagogy of social work education and is frequently cited by students as one of the most rewarding elements of their degree program. Opening up the conventional model of field education in the ways studio pedagogy implies has significant advantages for both the partner agency and for students. On a practical level, social work studios for field education can address the increasingly pressing issue of providing placements for students.

Studio pedagogy also offers some enriched learning opportunities within social work education. Tackling the real-world problems presented by agencies is not new to social work field education, as students have long engaged in project work on behalf of agencies. However, we would argue that the studio model is geared to developing the types of 21st century meta-skills needed for the contemporary practice arena (Nurius et al., 2017; van Ewijk, 2018). Social problems have increased in complexity and are not as amenable to standardised responses as they have been in the past. Students have to learn to live with uncertainty and change in ways that reflect the dynamics of today's practice. The presenting problems and puzzles of practice more often require multi-disciplinary knowledges and inputs, the engagement of service user perspectives and the ability to design solutions collaboratively.

Arguably, the studio methodology creates a future-oriented workforce capability. It models the *living laboratory* processes of organisational learning and adaptations in the face of rapid and increasing change. Students are provided with the opportunity to learn about inter-disciplinary and inter-personal co-production. They are provided with opportunities for learning to innovate and develop the application of their skills in generating alternative solutions but, above all, they are engaged in extending the professional repertoire and norms in ways implied by the changing context of practice. We have argued here for the proto-typing of new forms of professional education congruent with the changing realities of practice. Our experimentation with studio pedagogy suggests fruitful ground on which to build.

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