

# Creating Connections between New Graduates and Social Work Students on Placement

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**Acknowledgement:** to Wayne Ardley and Anna Costa (geriatric social workers), co-leaders of Creating Connections.

## ABSTRACT

Coaching and mentoring programs are recognised as significant to the learning experience and sense of purpose as a social worker for both students on placement and for new graduate social workers. Both groups have their learning experiences and sense of purpose as social workers enhanced by coaching and mentoring programs.

This paper explores the ongoing endeavour to provide effective learning experiences for students on placement. A research initiative involving coaching and mentoring was trialled in the Student Education Unit of a social work department in a large teaching hospital in metropolitan Sydney. Entitled “Creating Connections,” and conducted by new graduate social workers and social work students on placement, this initiative utilised Participatory Action Research methodology (PAR) to explore the effectiveness of coaching and mentoring programs (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). The results revealed its effectiveness for both students and new graduate social workers’ learning experience, proving coaching and mentoring to be an innovative model of supplementary learning for field placements.

**Keywords:** *Student placement; Coaching and mentoring; Creating Connections; Participatory Action Research (PAR)*

## INTRODUCTION

Placements provide significant and valuable experiences for students as they cultivate and develop understandings, insights and skills in preparation for their future careers. Students on placement are commonly confronted by challenges, concerns and curiosities, which are encouraged to be reflected upon during their supervision. Competent supervisors encourage students to be reflective both of their emergent practice and their use of self (Coleman & Perrault, 2004). In addition, by offering a safe yet stimulating place for learning, supervision can foster resilience in students (Grant & Kinman, 2011). Corresponding to this, peer support provides safety where deep practicum learning can occur (Wayne et al., 2010). Further enhancing this notion, it is highlighted that groups with similarly placed individuals can maximise learning through open communication, sharing of experiences and exploration of in-depth dialogue pertaining to work with clients (Wayne et al., 2010). This invites the development of programs in which students can receive and share informal support and knowledge with colleagues as a supplement to their formal supervision.

This paper explores a research initiative conducted by two new graduate social workers and students on placement at a major teaching hospital; the initiative is entitled “Creating Connections.” The aim of Creating Connections is to develop an understanding of the effectiveness of a student-mentoring program facilitated by the new graduate social workers for an enriched learning process for students on placement. The research utilised the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model approach which encourages action, and working in partnership with the people being researched (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). The positive feedback from students who participated in the initiative highlights the coaching and mentoring programs’ positive effect for both the students on placement and new graduate social workers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social work students on placement are positioned to not only adapt to the student role but also to the role obligations inherent to the profession, exposing them to many concerns on how to use “self” in practice (Coleman & Perrault, 2004). Students may experience a period of anxiety and newness in placement due to perceptions of outsider status (Reidy, 2006). Reidy (2006) further alludes to the initial period of placement as a time where students are burdened to take on a social role and present themselves as proficient. Further, students need to simultaneously cope with the many demands associated with new opportunities, new people and specific kinds of expertise (Reidy, 2006). As the social work profession utilises self in practice, critical reflection is central for social workers in development, renewal, and self-correction of practice (Coleman & Perrault, 2004).

Peer support is shown to provide a sense of belonging and a safe learning space within placements where the use of self in practice is reflected upon. Furthering this notion, Shepherd and Tsuruda (2016) propose that students on placements feel a sense of belonging when they can relate to their peers. It is evident that peers are critically important sources of support during work placement (Reidy, 2006).

A reflective practice act was performed in a classroom utilising Porotaka Korero (Te Reo Māori for “talking circles”) with the aim of creating a safe and respectful co-learning environment among students (Shepherd & Tsuruda, 2016). This culturally responsive pedagogical framework aims to equalise power relations between students and teachers as well as researchers and subjects (Shepherd & Tsuruda, 2016). This pedagogy involves both students and educators in the process of healing, education and cultivating along the path guided by Aboriginal epistemology (Shepherd & Tsuruda, 2016). Porotaka Korero is founded on the principles and values of Indigenous pedagogy, consisting of attributes such as identity, relatedness, inclusiveness, reciprocity, nurturance and respect (Shepherd & Tsuruda, 2016). This framework also recognises the significance of students’ sense of belonging and identity for the cultivation and development of new understandings, insights and skills. A case study of a formal mentoring program in a state public child welfare agency in the United States found that mentoring processes positively influenced mentors as well as mentees (Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), 2014). As mentees achieved increased confidence and support networks, mentors identified for themselves, both personal satisfaction and a renewed sense of purpose in their mentoring roles (HSCB, 2014). Through peer interactions, trust, identity and a sense of belonging are built which assist with the deep learning that coaching and mentoring programs provide. Knowledge provision from facilitators who were once students themselves complements peer interactions. Coaching and mentoring programs have been shown to have positive impacts on both the facilitators and the students as they promote reflective learning, a sense of belonging and identity (Bell, Boyd-Turner, & Russell, 2016; Coleman & Perrault, 2004; Shepherd & Tsuruda, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

Creating Connections explores the effectiveness of coaching and mentoring programs for students’ learning process utilising a Participatory Action Research model (PAR model). PAR is a research model that seeks to partner with communities in a manner that leads to action for change (Baum et al., 2006). The distinctiveness of the PAR model is its acknowledgement of power dynamics within research while advocating for power to be deliberately shared between researcher and the researched (Baum et al., 2006). PAR contrasts with less dynamic approaches in that it links data with the contexts (Baum et al., 2006). All key parties, new graduates, students and the social work educator meet at each stage of the research process including the design, implementation and evaluation phases.

The culturally responsive pedagogy principles of “talking circles” (Shepherd & Tsuruda, 2016), which are Māori in origin, were adapted for creating connections due to the learning process being theoretically relevant and transferable. The talking circles became the forum for open collaborative communications between all parties as early as the design phase. All parties discussed ethically relevant issues via transparent communication. Issues pertaining to design, implementation, and evaluation and the writing up of results featured in collaborative discussions; terms of references assisted in providing rigour to the research activity. The PAR model’s partnership-driven focus reflects and supports the collaborative nature of Creating Connections.

Creating Connections invited all 20 students who were on placement over two separate placement periods in a 12-month period to participate in the research exploring the effectiveness of coaching and mentoring programs for students' learning. The two separate placement periods were of three months' duration, averaging 500 hours. Students were both entry level and master qualifying level in terms of degrees, were of mixed aged groups and all were female. One of the new graduate facilitators was female, the other was male.

The social work supervisors were supportive of this initiative and encouraged students to attend these sessions. The research group consisted of students who were on placement, two new graduate social workers and a social work educator. In recognising the contemporary experience and relatedness of new graduate social workers with students on placement, two new graduate social workers facilitated the sessions whilst consulting the social work educator.

## RESULTS

Creating Connections sessions took place for one hour weekly for the first month. As students felt that they were becoming more competent, skilled and supported, the educator, new graduates and the students all collaboratively made a decision for the group to meet fortnightly. This program proceeded for two complete placement periods; both of three months' duration, therefore student survey sheets and process recording notes were collected from two different Creating Connections groups. The same new graduates were the facilitators for all of the sessions. Because of an overlapping of students' commitments to their casework with Creating Connections, the group size varied from three students to nine students for each session. For every session, the two new graduates documented themes or topics that were discussed and the group dynamics of the associated session. Students' survey sheets were collected at the final Creating Connections session and were thematically analysed. Three common themes arose from the students' feedback. Students reported that Creating Connections was a safe space where concerns were shared and new learnings were attained; they derived benefit from having new graduate social workers as facilitators; and they valued the support received from supervisors.

Two main areas for improvements were suggested: to include a clearer structure for each session; and to increase educational resource provision.

## DISCUSSION

Creating Connections encouraged students to share any concerns or confusions, which they then discussed in a supportive peer group environment. One student commented, "It was helpful and nice to debrief about practice and 'common' worries students may have regarding practice" (Student 1). This reflects Creating Connections sessions as being valuable to students' learning and well-being.

Creating Connections not only provided reassurance and encouragement for students on placement but also created a space where new knowledge and learnings were being shared and attained. Reflecting this, one student commented, "I have gained not only friendships within the safe space created, I have also gained knowledge, insight and awareness of the hospital system, interventions and the role of social work" (Student 2).

It was also highlighted that the contemporary and relatedness of the new graduates facilitating these sessions were of significant value and benefit for the students' learning process. The "fresh" lived experience of the new graduates were highly appreciated by the students as one student stated, "It was helpful to have James and Jane (pseudonyms) as they only recently graduated and understand dilemmas I was going through relating to university" (Student 3).

Students also mentioned the support and encouragement of their supervisors, who enabled their participation in Creating Connections sessions. As one student recalled, "being on my clinical ward, I was always busy, however Creating Connections was a time when I looked forward to internal debriefing and reflection on personal development. My supervisor was understanding and allowed time for further interaction and learning experiences" (Student 4).

An area of improvement for this program was to have increased structure for each session. As one student recommended "Certain topics or questions to be covered within the hour but still leaving time for free talk and questions" (Student 5). An increase in educational resources provided during the sessions was another area of improvement commonly suggested by the students.

Utilising the PAR model, Creating Connections invited all students on placement to participate; inevitably, creating a platform where attending to all students' individual needs was a challenge. However, overall, it is undeniable that a coaching and mentoring program enabled an increase in knowledge, understanding and skills whilst attending to students' self-care and reflective requirements.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is evident that deep practicum learning provides support to students becoming accomplished in their professional practice (Beddoe & Chinnery, 2011). Moreover, the cornerstone of effective professional practice is the ability to attune to the interconnections between diverse elements of experience (Beddoe & Chinnery, 2011).

Taking a PAR model approach enabled the collaborative and insightful results attained from Creating Connections. The feedback and surveys collected from students who had participated in Creating Connections indicated the effectiveness of this coaching and mentoring program for students' learning processes during their placement. Based on the results of the research, Creating Connections will continue to be offered to students on placement in subsequent learning experiences. There appears to be great value in a coaching and mentoring program for students on placement, as students themselves have shown appreciation and recognition of Creating Connections' positive effects on their learning processes.

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