

Field Education as Signature Pedagogy – Insights for Australian social work

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ABSTRACT

Field education has been identified as the signature pedagogy of the profession. Field education is also being said to be in crisis. The attribution of signature pedagogy status is contested as there is limited research where Shulman's 2005 framework has been applied in its entirety either in the United States or Australia. A review of the literature concerning signature pedagogy in social work highlights an absence of Australian perspectives and contexts. This makes it unclear whether field education is signature pedagogy for the profession in Australia. Further research and professional reflection is required to identify congruence with signature pedagogy status and explore ways in which the curriculum design and pedagogical decision making for schools of social work are responding to pedagogical inertia or are being responsive to the needs of the 21st century and the field.

Keywords: *Social work education; Signature pedagogy; Field education; Social work pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

A signature pedagogy is the habitual and pervasive way in which a profession teaches and socialises students in preparation for practice. The application of the term *signature pedagogy* was derived from the framework of Shulman, his paper on signature pedagogies in professions (Shulman, 2005a), and his work with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The United States' Council of Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) identify field education as the signature pedagogy for the socialisation and professionalisation of student social workers to the profession of social work (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, 2015). The CSWE adopted this position as the interactive teaching and learning process in the field where the student acquires and demonstrates the values, skills and knowledge of a social worker.

In recent years, Australian and international scholars and field educators have provided commentary on implications of the status of signature pedagogy and its relevance for social work education (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011; Lyter, 2012; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Interestingly, social work field education, in contrast to broader social work practice research, is notably one of the most under-researched areas of the profession with some arguing an absence of pedagogical and theoretical frameworks to guide practice (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Holden et al., 2011; Holosko & Skinner, 2015; Miller, 2010). Within social work education, however, the field education research base is increasing. Indeed, Bogo (2015, p. 319) notes that “it is probable that *no other component* of the curriculum has been the subject of so much research, scholarly articles, and discussion of administrative issues... [and that] we are moving towards a robust *pedagogy for field education*” (original emphasis).

Despite the formalisation of signature pedagogy status in the United States, there is little research or an evidence base to make such an assertion in Australia with most published works contesting or rejecting either the validity or evidence base of this attribution to field education (Wayne et al., 2010).

The central argument for field education as signature pedagogy is related to themes of field education's centrality, importance, as a critical juncture and where the key learning for social work students occurs (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Hemy, Boddy, Chee, & Sauvage, 2016; Homonoff, 2008). More broadly, the debate surrounding signature pedagogy and field education is positioned between whether field education meets all of Shulman's characteristics, features and qualities. There is also an argument around the effectiveness of the field education model in light of evidentiary gaps related to the model and recent socio-political influences and changes in the field and how these impact on quality of this key student socialisation and preparation for practice event. This discussion tends to highlight some reflection around congruence with the social work field education model and the emancipatory beginnings of the profession; the servitude discourse (Homonoff, 2008; Preston, George, & Silver, 2014). Of note in the debate is an alternative discourse from Earls Larrison and Korr (2013) who not only reject field education as signature pedagogy, but suggest the entire social work learning experience is signature to the profession. They explicitly reject this positioning, arguing field education did not meet “the criteria for

signature pedagogy as understood by Shulman” (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013, p. 194) concluding social work’s signature pedagogy “occurs in all learning exchanges in our implicit and explicit curricula, and in both the classroom and the field” (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013, p. 204).

Hence, discussion on the attribution of signature status for the profession not only seeks to examine how students are socialised and prepared for professional practice and those pervasive and central ways of teaching but may also raise insights about what impacts on and influences student learning, including how schools of social work, human services organisations and students are impacted by 21st century socio-political influences and trends.

This paper is an Australian exploration of the attribution of signature pedagogy status to field education; reflecting on how Australian field education issues and trends may be a source of illumination to the broader profession and education area. It seeks to contribute to social work’s professional reflection and critical analysis of field education and, more broadly, how social work education is faring in Australia within the broader context of current research into signature pedagogies in Australian social work education.

SIGNATURE PEDAGOGIES – WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Signature pedagogies comprise the central forms of instruction that prepare students for future professional practice. Through analysing how a profession distinctively teaches its students and ultimately prepares them for practice, much can be gleaned about social work education and therefore, the profession. Shulman highlights the nuances of professional education versus academic or knowledge based education indicating “one learns in order to engage in practice” (Shulman, 2005b, p. 1). Three interacting apprenticeships ground this professional education – a cognitive, practice and a moral apprenticeship (Shulman, 2005a).

Shulman (2005b) presents how we think about various professions and their ways of imparting key knowledge to future practitioners as a cultural exercise. There is synergy here with social work education, a socially constructed profession influenced by socio-political and normative contexts. Shulman (2005a) cites Erickson’s psychosocial theory of development as influential: that cultural understanding can be achieved by studying a culture’s nursery, reinforcing the need for research into social work education and field education. While Shulman agrees that the key ways of socialising students to the profession are found in all areas of education, he believes it is specifically the professions (nursing, social work, education, law, medicine) rather than other academic disciplines that are more likely to have a signature way of achieving this outcome. This is largely to do with the dual imperatives required from academia and the professional field. Standards are required to be upheld from two directions that may indicate a leaning towards constructive and co-constructive teaching models. This is relevant for social work as evidenced by the shared and partnership field education model where teaching, assessing and evaluating student performance in the 1,000 hours of field placement is a partnership between the academy and the field. His emphasis is on pedagogy that extends beyond mere understanding but the preparedness to act, perform and practice irrespective of whether they have enough

information (Shulman, 2005a). It becomes clear that the study of field education in social work is ultimately bound in expectations of the field and social work employers.

Shulman's commentary on inertia in signature pedagogies resonates with the broader social work education narrative where the current pedagogies, teaching and learning approaches and field education model have remained largely unchanged. Simulated learning environments and other virtual mediums provide opportunity and mechanisms for substantial change to the pedagogies (Shulman, 2005b). Shulman's proposition suggests professional reflection and research would be warranted when the environmental context experiences radical changes. In this paper, I suggest that Australian social work education and practice is experiencing radical change. Therefore, it will be in the profession's best interest to examine these changes and position social work education, in particular field education, at the forefront of social work research and innovation.

The central forms of instruction (signature pedagogy) to prepare students for the "good work" espoused by Shulman (2005a) must stand up to the standards of both academy and the profession:

They implicitly define what counts as knowledge in a field and how things become known. They define how knowledge is analysed, criticised, accepted, or discarded. They define the functions of expertise in the field, the locus of authority, and the privileges of rank and standing. (Shulman, 2005a, p. 54)

Shulman (2005a) identifies three dimensions of signature pedagogy. These are surface structure, deep structure and implicit structure. Surface structure refers to "concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning, of showing and demonstrating, of questioning and answering, of interacting and withholding, of approaching and withdrawing" (Shulman, 2005a, p. 54-55). Deep structure refers to "a set of assumptions about how best to impart a certain body of knowledge and know-how" (Shulman, 2005a, pp. 54-55). Implicit structure refers to "a moral dimension that comprises a set of beliefs about the professional attitudes, values, and dispositions" (Shulman, 2005a, p. 55). Therefore, according to the three dimensions of signature pedagogy, field education would need to be offering the profession with the ideal and preferred concrete learning opportunities based in the pedagogical practice wisdom that it is the best way to impart knowledge and skills and that the field continues to provide the implicit professional values and beliefs to prepare social workers for practice.

Considering Shulman's assertion that much can be learned about a profession by studying its signature pedagogy, examination of how social work is taught in Australia and what constitutes signature pedagogy may shed much-needed light on the broader profession of social work. Shulman's work highlights the symbiotic relationship between theory and practice and places emphasis on the purpose of education to achieve practice. This is where the signature pedagogy is integral to the professional socialisation process (Shulman, 2005a). He also emphasises the need for a signature pedagogy to not only practise the habits of the "mind" but they must also teach habits of the "heart" and "hand." With respect to the "temporal" habits and the deep structures of signature pedagogy as identified by Shulman (2005a), Cornell-Swanson (2012) asserts that much of the literature on signature pedagogy in social

work education is lacking in any reference to these features and therefore, is not comprehensive in analysis. Shulman's (2005a) three typical temporal patterns for signature pedagogy include:

- a pervasive initial pedagogy that frames and prefigures professional preparation;
- the pervasive capstone apprenticeships; and
- the sequenced and balanced portfolio of academic study, tutorials, casework practice and received knowledge orientated courses.

Of the studies that have directly looked at signature pedagogies and the social work profession, only one (Cornell-Swanson, 2012) specifically addressed the three temporal patterns for signature pedagogy. However, there was no evidence that the findings of the research were drawn from undertaking specific research into the subject, but rather the analysis seems based on practice wisdom and professional knowledge. Cornell-Swanson argues the field education or "apprenticeship" as identified above is preceded by significant pervasive pedagogy and preparation teaching "theoretical constructs, practice skills sets, and ethical codes of conduct that prepare students to think and behave like social workers" (Cornell-Swanson, 2012, p. 207). She recommends social work signature pedagogy should be comprehensive and combine "all three of the temporal patterns that define what counts in social work" (Cornell-Swanson, 2012, p. 207). It is Cornell-Swanson's view that, "although field placement is the pinnacle of the social work degree, without the first two apprenticeships of learning, the social work's signature pedagogy would be incomplete" (2012, p. 213). Earls Larrison and Korr (2013, p. 198) support this view stating signature pedagogies occur "across the curriculum and are inherent in all aspects of social work education."

AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), (AASW, 2012) set the criteria for the accreditation of each social work course in Australia and guide the development of social work education, curriculum content, field education standards, governance for programs and general organisational requirements. Curriculum statements in the standards include direction on core content (explicit curriculum) such as mental health, child wellbeing and protection, cross-cultural practice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and skills, and the various values, levels of knowledge, skills and methods required to undertake social work practice as a graduate (AASW, 2012). Despite articulation of the knowledge, skills, and values that are required to be delivered in each social work program, there is limited guidance on how social work is to be taught by academic units. Section 4.3 of the standards outlines four educational philosophies that must be articulated; adult learning principles, education that fosters lifelong learning, mutual learning by student and education and finally, that social work education requires the integration of theory to practice (AASW, 2012). There is reference to pedagogy in the overall principles for social work education section:

Use of contemporary pedagogical knowledge and the associated processes of learning are requirements for developing core attributes and for building students' commitment to, and an identity with, professional social work. It is recognised that tensions exist between learning processes and requirements for content, and that there is a point at which the amount of content will compromise the processes of learning and the development of social work graduates as critically reflective professional practitioners. These standards strive for the appropriate balance. (AASW, 2012, p. 9)

While the ASWEAS provides an overview of the expected graduate attributes and broad reference to curriculum, pedagogic discussion or standard is distinctly lacking in the document. How schools of social work can achieve this balance has been questioned. Pedagogy encompasses “both the act of teaching and its contingent theories and debates” (Alexander, 2009, p. 13). In the absence of explicit direction or research, social work academics and education units may have to rely on broader scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) publications, social work pedagogy research, practice wisdom and experience gained from teaching social workers to inform the selected methods, tasks, activities, interactions, structure and forum utilised as part of pedagogical frameworks.

According to section 2.2 of the CSWE’s 2015 standards, signature pedagogy refers to the “elements of instruction and of socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline – to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity. Field education is the signature pedagogy for social work” (CSWE, 2015 p. 12).

The signature declaration has remained in place since the 2008 education standards until the most recent 2015 EPAS. The EPAS relies on a competency-based educational framework with nine social work competencies curriculum features, mission and goals and an explicit curriculum inclusive of field education, implicit curriculum and assessment (CSWE, 2015).

The notion that field education is signature pedagogy for the profession has been criticised and debated by social work academics and the field. Key to many of the arguments directed towards signature status is the view that field education is highly experiential; the student is involved with real experiences of performing the helping role combined with reflection and conceptualisation of the practice situation (Wayne et al., 2010). As a consequence of connecting experiential learning to signature pedagogy, it has conversely been argued that alternative structures and pedagogical techniques for successful student learning do not necessarily have to be in the field and can be achieved through observation and listening to case examples, reading process recordings, reports and other indirect experiences. An example of this is de Warren and Mensinga’s (2004) presentation of a pedagogy of social work education informed by problem-based learning and deployment of many of the processes of learning used traditionally in field education such as case-based learning, reflexivity, and supported, self-directed learning (2004).

Both 2008 and 2015 CSWE standards have highlighted equal importance placed on the “field” and the “classroom” in developing the social work skills and knowledge and

integration of theory to practice. While the new standards indicated equality, they have also noted field education as being *the* signature pedagogy for the education of students in social work (CSWE, 2015). The literature indicates this signature pedagogy status came directly after Shulman's work on signature pedagogies in various professions not inclusive of social work, rather than coming from research or enterprise in the social work field specifically. This raises the question of validity of the attribution and the motivation for applying the status. After the initial attribution was made by the CSWE in 2008 (CSWE, 2008), several authors sought to respond to this new development supporting or more rarely, questioning the signature pedagogy status attributed to field education (Holden et al., 2011; Holosko & Skinner, 2015; Morley & Dunstan, 2013; Wayne et al., 2010).

Despite the discipline-based dialogue, there is limited research applying all, or even some, of the framework and components as discussed by Shulman. There have been some studies on effectiveness of field education and the resulting centrality of place in social work education including Holden's systematic review where he was particularly interested in whether there was "evidence" for the position (Holden et al., 2011, p. 364). Holden argued that scholars stating field education is integral, important, central, indispensable, most significant and most powerful learning experience in social work is a form of evidence but not, according to Rubin (Rubin & Babbie, 2016), evidence of effectiveness. Furthermore, he considered the general themes from the literature that field education is important enough for the attribution of signature pedagogy but there is limited research on it (Holden et al., 2011). Outside of a small number of papers on the subject, the assumption of centrality or signature status has been the subject of limited professional reflection or critical analysis. Holden et al. (2011) assert that there is no evidence of effectiveness of field instruction in social work in the United States and furthermore suggests this is an under-researched area.

Perhaps the result is related to social work's preference for qualitative research or perhaps the result related to, as Holden ponders, social work's "low regard with which educational research seems to be held in the academy" (Holden et al., 2011 p. 369). However, signature pedagogy status is not only about the effectiveness of a model or approach, but rather the range of qualities and standards expected from a central form of imparting knowledge and skills and socialisation to a profession.

While there has been some focus on existing research on signature pedagogy and field education generally, more attention has been given to the social work practice context, impacts of the field education model on students and universities and how field education can support welfare and social service resource gaps and limitations. This narrative has been extended by Rosenman specifically arguing universities are under pressure from the ideological orientations of the federal government and that there is a growth in the user pay approach to higher education (Rosenman, 2007). While similar programs such as nursing and teaching have been identified as a "national priority" this is not the case for social work which she argues results in funding for the management of field education remaining limited and not properly recognised (Rosenman, 2007).

A research focus on social work education, specifically field education, may provide the profession with much-needed insight to the current status of the profession and in so

doing, offer a platform for strategic vision about the future for social work. As Pease and Fook (1999) note, often the prevailing view remains constant, as there is no knowledge of alternative views.

CONCLUSION

While the CSWE has attributed signature pedagogy to social work field education, there has been limited research where Shulman's framework has been applied in its entirety. Importantly, Shulman's characterisation of signature pedagogy includes an emphasis on a range of scaffolded learning that occurs in conjunction with or before (in the apprenticeships) the signature pedagogy is implemented. While field placement may be the capstone of the social work degree, it is clear that, without the preceding apprenticeships of learning, a balance between the field and curriculum content with some perhaps consistent and agreed-upon distinctive social work pedagogy, the signature pedagogy is not complete. This suggests only part of the social work story is illuminated by field education research. The symbiotic relationship between the academy and the field, while important, is also only part of the story. Social work education research, together with clearly defined pedagogical standards may be necessary for the profession's next decade of growth. Further research and radical action may be required to identify how social work educators understand and apply the signature pedagogy of field education to teaching and learning and explore the relevance, connection to, and suitability of, field education as signature for the profession.

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