

# Bringing Business, Community and University into Partnership: Innovation in Field Education

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## ABSTRACT

In the current Australian context, social work field educators face a two-fold challenge – an increased demand for supervised field education placements, given the growth of social work programs and the student numbers within them, and a diminishing capacity for agencies to provide them. Innovative responses are needed to ensure that, not only are placements provided, but that they are of a high quality in terms of learning opportunities for students. This article describes an approach to field education that brought business, the community and the University into a new partnership. A new placement model initiated by our Faculty's Engagement Team was developed in collaboration with the Department of Social Work, a philanthropic group (the Hobsons Bay Community Fund), business groups and two local councils. This less-familiar territory of private sector collaboration enabled students to develop their social work skills in unanticipated ways. This article highlights the ways in which an innovative practice model and learning opportunities have provided insights into engagement in new areas of partnership.

**Keywords:** *Field education; Community; Private sector; philanthropy; social work students*

## INTRODUCTION

More than ten years ago, the call was made for radical change in social work field education. Wayne, Raskin, and Bogo (2006) highlighted the constraints of the agency-centred 20th century model of field education, which included a lack of appreciation of dramatically changing agency, educational institution and student bodies. Ongoing fiscal constraints on agencies and universities, the competing demands of research and teaching in academia alongside pressures to increase student load (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Karger, 2012), and the social and economic pressures affecting students (Nagy & Burch, 2009; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Teigiser, 2009) have continued to pose significant challenges to the delivery of social work field education in the Australian context. This article reflects on the opportunities that emerged through a shared and flexible approach to building new agency and educational institutional partnerships, enabling a locally situated, enquiry-oriented and action-focused community to form (Morley, 2016; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Our experience suggests that flexibility and coordination of interests may provide some answers to current challenges. This field education model brought together collaborators within the University to work with philanthropic, business and local government partners in ways that saw collaborators take on atypical and unexpected roles. It combined elements of community of practice (CoP) and problem based learning (PBL), and enabled students to engage in an innovative learning experience.

### Origins of Partnership

From a chance conversation between a Hobsons Bay Community Fund (HBCF) member and local businessman, and the Senior Director of Engagement at the University of Melbourne Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS), a new placement model was proposed. It was developed and trialled in 2016. Specifically, it enabled an existing relationship between the Faculty of MDHS and its Department of Social Work to extend into partnerships with a philanthropic community fund, two local government councils, and a real estate business in the Western suburbs of Melbourne.

Negotiations to establish the partnership were shared by the Faculty, minimising demands on the Department of Social Work's Field Education Director. Faculty engagement staff took advice from a cross-disciplinary Academic Advisory Group in which senior social work and other academic staff participated. For the Faculty, this increased the chance that a successful partnership would be brokered between the agency and one or more of its schools and departments. The process ensured agency needs were fully explored in a way that reduced the demands on social work academics, although they guided the process. The proposal for partnership reflected knowledge and recognition by the Faculty of what a department of social work could offer and confidence that this offering fitted the needs of the agency. It progressed because it tapped into the reciprocal interests of the agency, community, Faculty and Department of Social Work, and importantly, the learning needs of students.

### Coordination of Interests

For the Department of Social Work, it meant that, despite a very large, multidisciplinary Faculty context, the relatively small discipline of social work, with its unique strengths, was visible and fully engaged. The partnership made it possible to offer a group of students a

community-development-oriented placement. This was an imperative for both students and staff in and of itself, but the need was further compounded by the increasing costs of alternative placements, particularly those in the health sector.

For the Faculty, with an explicit strategy and commitment to PBL and active involvement in the western suburbs of Melbourne, it offered new possibilities for embedding teaching, learning and research in this community. It also presented an opportunity to expand the Faculty's engagement approach into community-centred work with the philanthropic sector and civil society more broadly. The Department and the Faculty had aligned goals in advancing the discipline of social work and its role in workforce development, but both also perceived additional opportunities through partnership.

Similarly, there was strong recognition from the outset by the philanthropic community fund of what the Department of Social Work, in particular, and academia, in general, could contribute towards improvement in child and youth health. HBCF made a commitment to invest \$10,000 and volunteer support each year for three years. The Faculty committed to providing a project manager and the structured involvement of Master of Social Work students for three years, and \$10,000 each year for two years. Both bodies would bring the knowledge, networks, goodwill and support from their backgrounds: all important assets that are often undervalued. The recognition of a specific set of problems that the collaborators could mutually address helped to establish the business case (necessary but not sufficient) for each to participate.

### **Motivational Incentives**

At the time the partnership was formed, local government councils were preparing to develop new four-year council plans. They were reviewing key policies such as their "Disability Access and Inclusion Strategies"; "Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans"; and "Early Years Plans." Partners also recognised that major changes and opportunities would come into play with the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2018, bringing considerable uncertainty into future directions. Staff of the University and the philanthropic community fund saw the opportunity to contribute to policy directions, community cohesion and social capital. The local councils saw the opportunity the partnership presented to increase the resources, expertise and diversity of actors that could contribute to policy and service development processes and community networks. Although the project was to be conducted over three years, parties agreed to plan one year at a time and to continue to shape the project by the research and findings at each stage, and respond to local context. Therefore, flexibility was a contributing factor to the stability of the partnership.

### **Influences on the Placement Model**

Common contemporary conditions and constraints in academia and agencies, described by Wayne et al. (2006), Teigiser (2009) and Nagy and Birch (2009), were important drivers in developing a new model of field education. These elements contributed to a CoP model of cooperation that suited the mutual objectives, shared values, and complementarity of skills of the participants. It also suited the situated nature of the issues the partners wanted to address (Fox, 2000).

PBL has been used in medicine and a range of other health disciplines for many years, and has gained international acceptance as an educational model (Lam, 2004). More recently, Lam (2004) has proposed PBL as a means of integrating theory and field education in social work. This, together with the desire to foster teamwork and adaptable knowledge application, influenced the model.

### **The Student Experience**

Six students from the first and second year of the Master of Social Work were allocated to the placement, each from a diverse range of backgrounds and experience, including three who lived in the local project areas. The placement focused specifically on a social inclusion project for young people. It examined the ways in which greater access to sports and recreational opportunities could be fostered for young people in the local community. Members of the partnership met with the students to discuss perspectives on local issues and assist them to negotiate scope and resources for their project. The placement model involved these students being physically based in a non-traditional setting – at a real estate business located in the local government area. Students had their own rooms and use of facilities, provided pro bono by the director of the business. From this location, they researched the local demographics, services, policies, and made arrangements to meet with local residents, advocates and professionals working in the region. Their activities included co-exploration of local issues, negotiation of objectives and methods with a range of stakeholders, policy analysis, demographic research, interviewing (parents, volunteers and professionals), qualitative analysis, development of a theory of change, report writing, strategic advice, and presenting to meetings. Ultimately, the students' role was to advise HBCF on how to spend their \$10,000 investment in the local community to increase social inclusion.

Students were supervised by a qualified social worker from the field education team at the University of Melbourne's Department of Social Work. Individual supervision was provided to each student once a week, along with additional group supervision, by this same social worker. Task supervision was provided 1–2 days per week, with email and phone support as needed, by the project manager from the Faculty's Engagement Team. Mentoring and additional project support and direction was provided by the chair of the HBCF, who brought extensive knowledge from a distinguished career in public, community and philanthropic sectors, and who is himself a University of Melbourne Social Work alumnus. This alumnus provided an important role in helping students translate their classroom learning to the practice situation through group sessions that reflected on the application of theory. A single University practice teacher was assigned to the six students for liaison and assessment. The supervision and assessment was paid for by the investment of the Faculty Engagement Office, enabling the partnership to become established before determining the longer-term sustainability of the placement arrangement.

### **The Learning Model: Blending PBL and CoP**

Within this model, students were encouraged to take a high level of initiative in the project and their work, while having a high level of support from experienced practitioners, in the form of facilitated exploration and modelling.

The learning conformed to the PBL model in that it was student-centred, small-group-based, teachers were facilitators, real-life problems were the stimulus for learning, and new insights were derived by self-directed learning (Lam, 2009). It was also a version of a CoP in that the students were engaged in a situated learning activity with a defined domain, community and practice, in which participants negotiated purpose, identity, and learning in collaboration (Nagy & Birch, 2009). Outcomes were not defined in advance – a situation that was surprising to the students. Where this placement model differed from a traditional CoP was in the sequence of learning development, which largely skipped over legitimate, peripheral participation for the students (though this was possible for co-located staff in the local business).

This project between the Hobsons Bay Community Fund and the University of Melbourne saw the students – as individuals and as a group – possessing from the outset the capacity to contribute valuable work and relevant leadership skills. The placement model positioned them in the role of co-collaborators, engaged in learning-by-doing. While they were supported with social work supervision, task supervision, and other opportunities for professional input, they were also tasked with the role of shaping the project and to participate in the process of negotiation with community stakeholders about the directions it would take. While this initially sat uncomfortably for the group, who were expecting to be more closely directed in their work, particularly in the early stages, the students, individually and as a group, met these learning outcomes. Yandel and Turvey (2007) advocate stages of peripheral participation before assuming full responsibility but, in this case, the partners wanted to acknowledge existing skills and support rapid full participation. This approach would not have been advisable without the partners' commitment to student learning and active encouragement of their efforts.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Under the model, the students met the learning requirements of their field education curriculum and their learning goals. At the same time, they produced evidence-informed advice (through written and verbal presentations) for the Hobsons Bay Community Fund and local councils, which was accepted as the foundation for planning the next steps in the project and allocation of resources. In addition, they rapidly developed and honed a range of communication, leadership and project skills, including group and team work, task management and stakeholder engagement. Although further research is needed to establish the effectiveness of the model, the apparent combination of educational value, student satisfaction and situated usefulness is promising.

Drawing on descriptive evaluation mechanisms (journaling and survey responses) built into the placement experience, learning challenges and opportunities were evident. For the students, the challenges of a placement demanding an active role in leadership from the students themselves were combined with the notable influence they were able to exert in the project's direction. For example, one student noted:

*I thought there would be more work done by HBCF members and councils, and we would be there to assist them. However, I liked having more independence and was surprised by how much our ideas and research meant to the HBCF.*

The non-traditional setting provided further challenges for the students. They had to actively make links with mentors and community organisations, rather than having these in their immediate placement setting to directly observe. They also had to structure their own time and coordinate their own group work, especially on the days they did not have formal supervision or task management, which required active organisation and mature management of group dynamics.

Significant opportunities for learning emerged in this context. As two students noted, they were able to recognise the transferability of skills they learnt into non-traditional =social work contexts:

*Seeing how social work values and strategies can operate through the private sector and commercial endeavours.*

And:

*Being able to work effectively within a team environment, communicating appropriately and effectively with all members, undertaking, delegating and monitoring tasks, motivating each other and responding effectively as a team to challenges and setbacks are all essential skills that have been a focus of this placement, and are directly transferable to any work setting that involves teamwork, or working with fellow colleagues.*

Another clearly articulated the skills they acquired in working with this uncertainty:

*My experience in a project management role and the time management, organisational and communication skills involved with this will also come into play in any work setting where I need to manage my own or others' work, and particularly should I ever take on a leadership role. Being able to manage and respond to uncertainty is also a very important skill, as regardless of the work setting, there will always be some uncertainty and lack of control present, regardless of how structured and directive the environment is. This has taught me that uncertainty is not always a negative thing, but is an opportunity to challenge myself and test my ability to anticipate and prepare for a range of different outcomes or setbacks, and respond flexibly to this.*

The partnerships involved in the placement model provided new opportunities for learning about macro-contexts of practice engagement:

*I was surprised about the "inner mechanisms" of community development, particularly the role of local businesses in supporting community development projects and ventures. Prior to this placement, I would have believed community development to be solely the domain of local government and not-for-profits. These relationships between businesses and other bodies involved in community development are strengthened by mutual interest and shared values. I was able to witness some of the "rapport building" between bodies, which highlighted to me the need for strong horizontal and vertical linkages.*

The project had a range of outcomes, both anticipated and unanticipated. It was uncertain at the outset whether the placement model and the partnership underpinning its



development would be a success. One of the difficulties with CoPs is that engagement and results are not guaranteed (Nagy & Birch, 2009), but in this case, the partners' willingness to proceed with full commitment in the face of uncertainty appears to have contributed to success and satisfaction of partners and thus to have built momentum. A significant effect of the student work was a commitment by all parties to continue into the next year with clearly identified priorities for action based closely on the students' recommendations.

Outputs of the project included a theoretically grounded, written strategy for change – against which to monitor progress towards community objectives – and evidence-informed recommendations for action and resource allocation, based on local consultation. Families, local sporting clubs, peak sporting bodies, council members and advocates were involved in the conversation about what inclusion could, or should, look like. For the local councils and HBCF especially, this was a welcome result.

For the students, there were unexpected outcomes: an ability to see that they could affect wider systems change in their roles as social workers; recognition of their acquisition of leadership, teamwork and project management skills; and their unique exposure to the contribution of business to community work. This challenged their perceived separation of community services from the broader business sector.

Importantly, student learning had broader value to the community because it was embedded in productive activity with significance as a social contribution. The Chair of the HBCF noted that:

*The Hobsons Bay Community Fund has been successful because it is underpinned by a very strong volunteer ethic of giving back to the community. Council has contributed, local business has contributed, service clubs have contributed, and the people on the committee give a great deal of time and work for the fund and nobody is paid so every dollar into the fund goes to community benefit ... So it is about building relationships and highlighting the good work that is being done by a broad cross-section of organisations in the community.*

He noted that it is, in fact, real engagement with the community that enables real influence and impact and that this is a powerful learning experience:

*What is significant about the partnership between Melbourne University and the Hobsons Bay Community Fund is the way in which it creates a real opportunity for engagement with community networks that influence the allocation of resources, policy decisions, and enable students to engage with a broad cross-section of interest groups, powerbrokers, and decision makers in a placement that is not just artificially creating the opportunity to influence decisions and resources, but a very real one.*

Arguably, the value of the “realness” of the learning experience in this case is more significant than the broadly acknowledged benefits of PBL (Lam, 2009). This benefit is likely to be directly related to the CoP elements of the placement: the situated, specific, negotiated nature of the shared endeavour. Without this negotiated form of power relationships and sufficient diversity of skills and perspectives to contribute to problem solving, CoPs are less reliable in having positive impacts (Fox, 2000).

Further benefits of CoP elements in the model are suggested by the comments of the business owner at whose premises the students were physically located. The value of legitimate peripheral participation is illustrated by his observation that his staff:

*... are involved in the community in multiple ways.... [the staff] enjoyed getting to know the students and they were excited by what they were getting involved in, what the students were getting involved in. So they were indirectly a part of it. That was never an objective. We never thought that was going to be a part of the outcome in any way, shape or form, and whilst it might only be a small part of the outcome, it's a really powerful one at a business level.*

### **Broader Implications**

The full assessment of the value of the model will only be possible in the next few years. At this point in time, critical features in the success of the model include the establishment of strong, trusting relationships between all partners, and a commitment to this continuing for a minimum of three years. They also include the active involvement in, and commitment to, student learning by all partners, with the recognition that students and communities can be mutually beneficial resources for each other. Importantly, each partner provided regular educational support for students throughout the placement, without which it is doubtful the community would have gained the same benefit. Financial investment was also a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in the success of the model because it enabled the placement to proceed, but the success of the model appears to have owed much to the sharing of values, goodwill and networks. These ingredients of success are not unusual, but the actors involved all played atypical roles, showing that a flexible arrangement can make a difference.

As noted in the community development literature (DeFilippis & Saegart, 2012), a key driver of success in this model was the mentoring and inspiration provided to the students by the senior leadership of each partner organisation, and the investment by local business in the project. Together, these elements provided students with the opportunity to be active participants, and to develop real influence, and real networks, in a process of community change. Enquiry-based and action-oriented, situated learning thus produced excellent learning opportunities that were just as valuable for other reasons than field education, and from other perspectives.

Situated PBL across the Faculty's disciplines may provide synergistic benefits to multiple fields of study and training, and for multiple communities of place and interest. The skills of teamwork, organisation, leadership and local knowledge, together with the asset development of relationships and networks, may add value to graduate education that other learning models do not provide to the same extent. Longitudinal research designed to explore these effects would be worthwhile.

Expansion of this type of learning model may increase the opportunities of community organisations, businesses, services and graduates to engage in inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral professional cooperation and learning, with potential benefits in the capacity for collaboration and the speed and creativity of problem-solving. This type of model is resource-intensive, however, and requires a high level of commitment in a context of uncertain outcomes. Planning for graduate training and local workforce development



could take these considerations into account. While individual contexts will determine the feasibility of the approach, the use of education as a contributing resource to local problem-solving using this model is suggestive of opportunities to explore new or different ways to mobilise local and institutional resources.

Many businesses have community links, and actively embrace a philosophy of corporate social responsibility. So a key challenge for social work is therefore to tap into this commitment and seek replication in other contexts. Such an investment raises the question as to how social work as a discipline can engage within its own faculty or university context to work in partnership, and seek to expand into the philanthropic and business sectors for placement opportunities (Lee, 2016). Many other businesses may well have the capacity and facilities to host students in a similar model. Flexible, partnered problem-solving to pursue common purposes in ways that recognise the value students can offer may present new ways to address educational challenges and resource constraints and would take social work placements into new contexts, beyond some of the constraints of 20th century models.

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