

Student-Led Multi-disciplinary Team Case Conferences: A Reflective Narrative from a Social Work Student Perspective

Reflective Narrative

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Abstract

This reflective narrative article presents an analysis of student-led Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) case conferences from my perspective as a social work student completing a first placement in the social work clinic, in an on-campus multi-disciplinary allied health clinic at Griffith University in Queensland. I discuss how these conferences enhanced critical thinking and communication skills, as well as the broader implications for practice. I draw on my own experiences and observations to illustrate the collaborative nature of these conferences and recognise participating in student-led case conferences is effective for developing holistic problem-solving skills and interprofessional collaboration, as illustrated through an experiential lens.

Introduction

The Gibbs Reflective Cycle served as the framework for this reflection, aligning with its widespread use in various fields. Student-led clinics offer opportunities for undergraduate students from health disciplines to work in multi-disciplinary teams, addressing a need for practicum opportunities in fields like social work (Briggs & Fronek, 2020). Engaging in the fortnightly student-led MDT conferences enriched my skills and provided collaborative learning experiences with diverse peers and clinical educators (Briggs & Fronek, 2020). MDT case conferences included up to 16 students and 4 clinical educators. Experiential learning theory holds that learning occurs through the transformation of experience, and is considered central to the process (Morris, 2020).

‘Student-led’ in this narrative refers to social work students leading multi-disciplinary team case conferences. As the program lead for this activity, I coordinated the student social work team to conduct and facilitate case conferences. Leadership responsibilities are rotated among social work students, who lead discussions and coordinate contributions from placement students in the disciplines of psychology, exercise physiology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. To ensure the quality and effectiveness of the learning process, clinical educators supervised students, providing guidance and feedback.

The structure of the MDT case conference encompasses several key components: an Acknowledgement of Country, ice-breaker activity, collaborative problem-solving discussions, in-service presentations on students’ disciplines, client discussions, and referrals from other disciplines within the clinic. As the student lead, I facilitated the organisation of the MDT conferences, inviting individuals from various disciplines to present teaching and learning activities. My involvement in the MDT case conferences proved highly beneficial, fostering leadership development, enhancing comprehension of case management, refining problem-solving skills, and deepening understanding of interdisciplinary dynamics and client challenges.

Social work education is evolving away from traditional approaches (Morris, 2020). In this reflective narrative, I examine the transformative journey of student-led MDT case conferences from the perspective of social work, highlighting how MDT case conferences enhance critical thinking, communication skills, and interprofessional collaboration. Over the last two decades there has been a resurgence of experiential learning in higher education, prompting calls for more research on its facilitation (Briggs & Fronek, 2020; Morris, 2020).

The Collaborative Nature of Student-Led Case Conferences

Participating in collaborative MDT case conferences, integral to student-led sessions, exposed me, as a social work student, to diverse disciplines, fostering insightful discussions transcending disciplinary boundaries. Boshoff et al. (2020) highlight that professional development for emerging practitioners involves peer collaboration to enhance client partnerships and health outcomes. Additionally, they, alongside Bronstein (2003), identify five key elements for MDT case conferences: fostering interdependence, utilising each discipline’s expertise, flexible roles, shared goal ownership, and reflective practice. Boshoff et al. (2020) stress the importance of open-mindedness and appreciation for diverse experiences, vocabulary, theories, and philosophies to achieve learning goals. MDT case conferences provided me a safe space for exploring diverse viewpoints, promoting open dialogue, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility toward holistic client care.

Enhancement of Critical Thinking and Communication Skills

Multi-disciplinary case conferences helped develop my critical thinking skills by exposing me to diverse perspectives. Collaborating with professionals from different disciplines challenged me to consider alternative viewpoints, synthesize information, and make informed decisions. Active participation enhanced my ability to analyse complex problems, integrate multiple perspectives, and develop effective solutions to address complex social issues.

Communicating my thoughts and ideas across various fields has not always been easy for me. There were times when I struggled to express my insights clearly, the technical terms and professional language used in each field can be intimidating. Through my educational journey, I have realised the importance of being in an environment that fosters professional language in different fields. This has helped me improve my communication skills, and I have noticed a significant improvement in my ability to express social work concepts confidently.

Exposure to various theoretical practice frameworks has been rewarding, broadening my perspective, and equipping me with a comprehensive outlook for approaching cases critically. Participation in MDT case conferences prompted reflective practice, leading to critical insights, challenges, and opportunities for personal growth. Through this process, I evaluated my experiences to acquire knowledge, enhance skills, and shift mindsets, critically assessing assumptions, values, and biases. Additionally, I evaluated the effectiveness of interventions and communication strategies, identifying avenues for practice refinement. Chenoweth & McAuliffe (2021) emphasise social workers' need for a critical thinking approach, essential for integrating theory and practice. Students require practical experience, reflective practice, abstract thinking, and active learning to be effective (Kurt, 2020; Morris, 2020), with the MDT case conferencing model integrating all four types of abilities through content, case studies, outcomes, and future iterations.

Acknowledging the educator's pivotal role is crucial for effective learning (Isaac et al., 2018). The clinical supervisors provided support, professional insights, encouragement, and constructive criticism, helping students navigate challenges encountered during case conferences and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, the social work supervisor provided a post-MDT case conference supervision where our team had the opportunity to debrief, reflect, and receive feedback on performance within the MDT context.

Interprofessional Collaboration and its Implications

Participating in MDT case conferences offers numerous benefits for students, including increased motivation to learn, enhanced critical thinking skills, character development, and improved communication and group interaction abilities (Lamas & Gomes, 2010). During MDT case conferences, students exchanged knowledge and conducted complementary tasks to solve problems, resulting in meaningful interactions. Carefully structured cooperative learning strategies, such as the MDT case conferences involving positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, opportunities for group processing, and social skills, are conducive to learning content knowledge and fostering collaboration (Fook, 2022).

Collaboration with emerging practitioners from diverse disciplines is indispensable in social work. The student-led MDT case conferences reflected this reality and has shown me the strength of collaborative decision-making. Collaboration with diverse practitioners from various disciplines is essential in social work, and student-led MDT case conferences exemplify this collaborative decision-making approach (Cleak & Wilson, 2022). As a result of these sessions, I have been able to see firsthand the variety of perspectives and expertise of each discipline.

Initially, this diversity may appear to be a source of complexity, but ultimately it can serve as a source of strength. Morris (2019) states by removing professional silos, quality of interventions are enhanced, and ensures comprehensive care.

Encouraging student-led learning, along with online modules in communication, allied health roles, and challenges to placement in a clinical setting promoted self-confidence and enabled students to form a professional identity (Fook, 2022).

Challenges and Transformative Learning

Student-led MDT case conferences pose challenges due to conflicting schedules and viewpoints. However, these challenges offer opportunities for transformative learning, negotiation, and adaptability skills. Communication discrepancies among students from various disciplines can cause misunderstandings and impede consensus. Clear communication and effective collaboration are vital to overcome these hurdles. Additionally, power imbalances may emerge, with some students asserting dominance based on perceived clinical expertise, hindering open dialogue, and limiting contributions. In my role as student lead, I facilitated active engagement and equal advocacy for each discipline.

According to Hodge et al. (2011), students undergo transformative learning, where their frame of reference shifts, impacting their thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives. Empowering students and centring them in the learning experience enables a demonstration of subject matter grasp and influences peer learning (Craig et al., 2020). Active learning through student-led approaches allows students to control their learning under supervision, fostering knowledge discovery, connections, and sharing (Strang, 2021). MDT case conferences provide interactive opportunities for skill demonstration, peer feedback, and reflective practice (Strange, 2021). Encouraging student-led learning in such conferences and problem-based learning cultivates autonomy, teamwork, and self-regulation skills (Amerstorfer & von Münster-Kistner, 2021).

Conclusion

Student-led MDT case conferences, as depicted in this reflective narrative, have transformative effects from a social work student perspective. These conferences promote collaboration, enhance critical thinking, and facilitate interprofessional collaboration crucial for holistic client care in social work. As social work education evolves, such experiential learning opportunities ensure future practitioners are equipped to address real-world challenges. Participation in MDT case conferences has been invaluable, reinforcing the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to client care, supporting teamwork, appreciating discipline differences, and prioritising individual well-being. These conferences yield valuable learning outcomes, strengthening core practice skills, deepening knowledge of case conferencing, and encouraging the sharing of perspectives and clinical experiences. My involvement as a student lead for MDT case conferences has been instrumental in fostering personal and professional growth.

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