Professional Identity Development in Field Placement Learning: Simulation and Student-led Conferencing

Teaching note

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Abstract

Simulation-based learning is widely recognised as an effective tool for the development of core professional practice skills (Kourgiantakis, et al., 2019; Kourginatakis, et al., 2020). The interprofessional practice context is a key area for social work students to build their competence in practice and to develop their sense of professional identity. This teaching note will describe the development of a field placement student-led multi-disciplinary team case conference model supported by simulated learning. Reflections on the delivery of the case conference learning processes will be provided by the clinical lead, simulation practice advisor and student. Students in the driving seat and the utilisation of simulation to facilitate learning will be considered.

Keywords: *Simulation; Interprofessional learning; Fieldwork; Student-led*

This teaching note discusses the development of a multidisciplinary health team case conferencing teaching model with social work students taking the lead role in facilitating the delivery of the Multi-Disciplinary Team Case Conference (MDTCC).

Social work's role in health and interprofessional collaboration is seen as important but also, at times, a challenge for social workers. Social workers need to be clear on how to undertake their role and to navigate the health context (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). There is a need for social work graduates to develop a sense of who is who and who they are, to work effectively in the health context (Moorhead et al., 2019). Engaging social work students within an interdisciplinary learning environment provides an opportunity to increase students' awareness of the role of social work in relation to other disciplines (Rishel et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020). Further to this, student-led facilitation of case conferences builds confidence in undertaking and advocating for the role of social work in key health settings. The impetus for developing a student-led learning process evolved from observing the benefits of students taking more responsibility for their learning when provided with the opportunity. The social work clinical lead, (2nd author), sought to develop further student-led learning as a method to enhance students' development of a professional social work identity.

Griffith University Health Clinics provide field placements for students from various disciplines, ranging from social work, physiotherapy, exercise physiology, speech pathology and psychology. The clinic receives referrals from a range of health and NGO organisations. The clinic takes social work students from the Bachelor of Social Work, or the Master of Social Work who undertake a 500-hour placement, that can be either their first or second placement. The role of social work in the clinic is to engage with people experiencing issues of housing, financial hardship, family and carer issues, mental health concerns, social isolation, adjustment to diagnosis, disability, and chronic pain. From T1 2022 to T1 2024, 26 social work students and over 150 students from different disciplines have participated in placements at the clinic.

The Development of the Multidisciplinary Team Case Conference

Though co-located historically, the work of the different disciplines at Griffith Health Clinics operated independently. The pilot program initiated in 2022 aimed to foster mutually beneficial practice experiences of a multi-disciplinary team and to enhance the care of recipients of services delivered by the Griffith Health Clinics. In the first model of the MDTCC clinical supervisors led the discrete learning activities delivering information on working in an interprofessional context and the running of the case conference. Over time, with the intension to facilitate deeper engagement, roles were increasingly shared with students. It was noted that with reduced leadership by clinical educators and fewer interventions, student engagement and investment in learning increased. At the same time, social work students reported that, through their increased direct engagement with other disciplines, their understanding of the social work role and confidence in articulating that role had grown. After observation was made of these positive developments in 2023, the model evolved further to a trialing of a student-led model.

The MDTCC is now a significant interprofessional learning activity that incorporates a series of learning tasks focusing on developing interprofessional knowledge and collaboration skills across multiple disciplines. Social work students, with support from other discipline students, take responsibility for delivering the student learning experience from start to finish. Whilst clinical supervisors participate in offering guidance and consultation opportunities where necessary, the focus is on students leading the activity.

The Learning Process

There are four stages to the learning model for social work students with the facilitation of case conference a key capstone learning task. Through the four stages, students are encouraged to consider how they engage in the articulation and enactment of the social work role. Simulation is a key tool used in preparing students to facilitate case conferences. All social work students take turns in facilitating a case conference and there are eight case conferences during a placement period.

Stages:

1. Introduction to the MDTCC process and facilitator role;

2. Social work student team preparation and engagement with other disciplines and simulation of case conferences;

3. Facilitating the case conference; and

4. Post-case conference debrief.

Stage 1

On entering placement, social work students are provided with learning materials and resources detailing the stages and role of social work thus orientating them in the setting up and running of case conferences. The case conference's preparation and facilitation are described as key tasks for the placement. All activities are designed to enable students to develop their core skills, their ability to articulate the role of social work and the facilitation of a holistic model of service.

It is not usual for students to express uncertainty and lack of confidence in their ability to facilitate multi-disciplinary case conference meetings. Often this uncertainty is based on perceptions that students from other disciplines, though of the same year level, are more capable than they are.

An adult learning teaching approach (Merriam, 2001) shapes the work of engaging students, acknowledging them as emerging practitioners who bring with them their own experiences and knowledge and are now moving into a phase of taking responsibility for their own learning. Through a consultation process, a social work student project lead is chosen by the students, and this student will lead the collaboration with students from other disciplines.

Stage 2

Social work students preparing for running the case conferences meet as a team to plan the case conference delivery. The students participate in a demonstration of the case conference process provided by the clinical leads to ensure they understand the facilitator role. Students then undertake simulations of the case conferences to increase their confidence in facilitation, familiarity with the case conference process, consideration of challenges that may arise and how these may be responded to.

As part of leading the case conference process, the social work students will meet with students from other disciplines to share with them the format for the case conference and engage them in preparing to present their client work at the case conference. There are usually two clients discussed in each case conference. This communication and engagement strategy with other disciplines, and the introducing of the facilitation role of social work, is designed as the first outward-facing practice in the articulation of the roles of social work.

Stage 3

The content of the case conference has evolved over time to meet the clinic student placement rotation needs. For students from other disciplines on short-term placements, there is a requirement to provide introductory information on the case conference's work to ensure they can effectively participate in the conference.

The stages in the case conference include the Acknowledgement of Country, information on setting the scene for interprofessional practice, and an ice breaker before moving to the client case discussions.

 In leading the client discussion, social work facilitators introduce the specific student discipline who will be discussing their client and ask the student to present the case covering the client's history and presenting concerns. This is followed by the facilitator inviting other disciplines to comment on how they can support this client from their own specific discipline perspective. During this time, the observing clinical educators will consider how and when to share comments and provide further guidance. At times students might request support or the clinical educators might deem intervention to be beneficial.

Stage 4

Following the case conference, a group debrief takes place with the social work students. Students are guided through a process of reflection, drawing on the work of Fowler (2011). The four steps below support students to reflect on their learning experience; use of facilitation skills, use of self and the learning from engaging in the role of a social worker. The social work clinic lead facilitates this process and provides direct feedback to students on their facilitation skills and the application of a holistic model of service.

1. *Starting with the case conference facilitator "What do you think you did well?"*

2. *"What might you do differently next time, if you had the opportunity to facilitate again?"*

3. *Next, the rest of the group provide the facilitator with feedback.*

4. *Clinical lead then provides some suggestions for future facilitation.*

Students participate in one-on-one supervision throughout their placement. As the supervisor has observed the engagement process across the learning cycle, there is the ideal opportunity for reviewing and reflecting more deeply on an individual's work. In addition, the one-on-one sessions provide an effective opportunity for the formulation and consolidation of what it can mean to undertake "complex practice behavior" (Bogo, 2022).

Student response

Student feedback on the learning process of the MDTCC has been extremely positive from all disciplines. Social work students consider the case conferencing learning process to have increased their confidence in utilising their interpersonal communication practice skills, their ability to advocate for clients in a manner that engages other disciplines with their effective use of self.

On moving to a student-led model, students report a higher level of engagement and investment in their learning. Learning has become more of a *doing learning together* rather than being *taught how to do something* by clinicians. The collaborative student context has increased the willingness to take risks, with an emphasis on "we are all in this together". From the 2nd author's perspective, the student-led model has reduced the professional distance between students, whilst increasing social work students' sense of personal and professional agency. This experience is consistent with literature relating to student-led approaches (Hoogenes et al., 2015).

Commenting on the case conference overall learning activity, the student (3rd author) stated that using simulation to prepare for the case conferences was effective in building confidence to step into the practice environment. Moving from the safe simulation space of practising the facilitation skills to trying out these skills with "real work, real current client work" raised the level of challenge but also of learning. The debriefing of the facilitation of the experience, unpacking the detail, before facilitating again, added significantly to the learning.

Reflective discussion

Reflecting on the student-led model's development and delivery, the second author noted the increased extent to which students became more engaged with the sharing of roles and responsibilities. This positive development is consistent with Rishel et al.'s (2020) work where participation in "interprofessional education and training allows for a greater understanding of other professional roles and perspectives, while at the same time helping to solidify the role and identity of a social worker" (p. 440).

For the first author, who supported the development of the clinic's teaching pedagogy, it has been striking to observe the extent to which students reflect positively on the overall learning process. The opportunity to prepare, practise (simulate) before moving to do the real thing increased students' confidence. The staged process of learning through simulation, followed closely by the application of student learning to the real work (that is then debriefed), followed by another application of the learning to real work provides an effective learning cycle.

Whilst the activities are not without their challenges for students, there does appear to be a virtuous cycle of development. In each iteration, the practising of the *performance of being a social worker* and the trying out of this new identity, is shaping their relationship with the role and identity of social work practice.

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