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Blended social work placements: New opportunities

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Abstract: Social work student placements were significantly impacted over the past two years as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but a 'new normal' of placement provision has started to emerge. This conference paper provides reflections on the experiences of social work education providers, placement providers and practice educators on the new opportunities that have been created as a result of flexible responses to the changing landscape of blended placement provision necessitated by the pandemic, which were gathered at two international workshops held virtually at academic conferences in 2021. The workshops identified common responses from higher education institutes (Higher Education Institutions) and practice educators, where loss and change created the need for connectivity and flexible and creative solutions. This article will present the themes identified within the teaching partnership as well as findings from the two workshops to enhance understanding of the sustainability of blended social work placement provision.

Keywords: social work placements; COVID-19; loss; connectivity; flexible and creative solutions

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Introduction

In early 2020 a global pandemic swept the world that changed both the short-term and long-term working patterns of many professions and had a significant impact on education provision. Whilst short-term consequences included buildings shutting and the adoption of the practice of holding meetings remotely on hitherto often ignored virtual platforms, as societies emerged from lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face meetings it was necessary to develop new systems of working that took the positive aspects learnt during the pandemic and apply them to current and future practice.

In England, the advice was to suspend, stop, shorten or replace the previous social work placement schedule (Social Work England 2020), which resulted in a wide variety of short-term responses (Beesley, 2022). In the academic year 2020-21, social work placements began to be re-established and new patterns of placement provision were developed. It can be argued that professional bodies' regulations had potentially restricted the development of creative and flexible responses to meet the changing needs of social work students on placement, but that the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated creative and flexible responses to be made quickly and with less regulation. As social work educators, often higher education institutes, and placement providers emerge into a post-pandemic world, a reflective approach was taken to the new placement strategies which facilitated different thinking around placement provision which had the potential to be adopted in the longer-term to the advantage of social work education providers, placement providers, practice educators and students alike. In England, practice educators are the qualified social workers who support students' development and are responsible for their assessment whilst they are on placement.

Blended placements have emerged, where students' activity on placement is a combination of office-based, home-based and service-user orientated activities combined in varying degrees dependent on agency requirements and procedures. This article does not seek to determine the optimum level of each strand of a blended placement, but instead focuses on the themes of good practice necessary to enhance student learning in a range of blended social work student placements.

Whilst blended learning in social work education is not a new concept - where previously blended learning was considered to be the addition of synchronous and asynchronous teaching through remote communication

methods to supplement classroom-based teaching, self-directed reading and activities - the COVID-19 pandemic required all education providers to change their practice in this area. Significantly, over a decade ago, Ayala (2009) reflected that social work education had been tardy in embracing blended learning despite recognising its benefits.

> Blended learning thus represents a new approach to social work education that may address at least some of our concerns about online learning, such as the lack of face-to-face contact with students. Blended learning may be the vehicle that allows us to provide students the increased flexibility, accessibility, and depth of learning offered by Internet based education, while at the same time keeping what we value most about face-to-face educational opportunities for our professional education'. (Ayala,2009, p 282)

Indeed, Ayala's literature review recommended research into the efficacy of blended learning in social work education. Singh and Hickman (2008) researched a blended teaching approach to preparing social work students to begin their placements in England and identified that, whilst online learning was helpful to engage students, it should only be used as one of a range of teaching strategies. They saw a blended approach as one that included a variety of teaching methods, which were designed to teach a variety of skills, building on Laurillard's (1993) suggestion that a variety of teaching styles increases engagement in learning. Similarly, de Boer et al (2011) self-evaluated blended social work teaching in Canada and found that it was important that all involved understood and were confident with the technology to enable them to use it effectively. Interestingly, they reflected on the fact that strategies used in the classroom could not be directly translated to online teaching techniques, and that adjustments had to be considered to ensure that they were appropriate and met the students' learning needs. Furthermore, they commented that relationship-building was more difficult in the online aspect of blended learning, but that this could be supported through the face-to-face teaching element. Previous research has identified the importance of the supervisory relationship, where Litvack et al (2010) interviewed twelve newly-qualified social workers in Canada and found that a strong, supportive relationship enabled students to survive and learn from difficult learning opportunities, whilst weak relationships resulted in less difficult learning opportunities becoming complex. In a more recent research article, Yeung et al (2021) published research following data collection through interviews with

thirteen practice educators and two focus groups with students in England, which recommended that practice educators nurture a supervisory relationship that is safe, supportive and takes account of the individual student and their learning needs and found that students are open to learning to engage the practice educator.

Developing the importance of relationships, Biggart et al (2017) undertook telephone interviews with children's social workers across several Local Authorities in Great Britain and identified that members of social work teams can support each other and enhance emotional wellbeing, through developing attachments and trust. They followed this with further telephone interviews in the first months of the pandemic and published research findings (Cook et al, 2020) that identified that the initial shift to home working resulted in a loss of peer support. Nevertheless, they found that social work teams reported adaptation to virtual team communication that resulted in increased check-ins through remote communication methods, and peer support was reinstated. Whilst not relating directly to social work placements, the importance of team support can also be seen in the importance of connectivity for both practice educator and student.

Singh et al (2021), in their discussion paper, reflected that, prior to the pandemic, virtual or blended social work placements were not considered appropriate by social work educators. Nevertheless, they reflected that the necessity to create virtual placement provision highlighted the role that technology can play in social work placements, recommending that creative and flexible use of technology can enhance learning for social work students on placement, as well as increase placement capacity.

Lange and Maynard (2021) provided an auto-reflective account as Practice and Learning Leads in a local authority in England and found that practice educators and students did not feel connected through the use of remote communication technology but identified the importance of the relationship being developed before remote communication began. They provide a timely reminder that practice educators should provide equal, if not more, support to those students whose learning needs are not met by remote learning and advocate a flexible and student-centred approach to supporting students of colour, students who were experiencing poverty, and those who had childcare or other dependent responsibilities in addition to engagement in placement learning activities.

Finally, Ray and Shklarski (2021) reflected on the loss of in-university learning for social work students when the pandemic began in March 2020 in America and identified that Kubler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief could be

applied to this period, beginning with shock and denial, moving into anger and depression, before reaching an acceptance that remote learning was in-situ. Indeed, they reported that, once students had accepted the reality of remote learning, they could identify positive elements, most noticeably a flexibility that enhanced their work-life balance and addressed their health concerns. However, the research identified the importance of support for both students and instructors on how to engage with remote learning.

Whilst Ray and Shklarski's (2021) research reflected on academic social work education, similar parallels can be drawn within social work practice education. Beesley (2022) outlines the changes that occurred in social work placements in England as the pandemic developed and what remained, became a 'new normal'. It can be seen that social work education in England has reached a point of acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969) of 'blended' placements, which enables a discussion about flexible and creative solutions and connectivity to enhance student outcomes.

Methodology

Within the Leeds and Wakefield Social Work Teaching Partnership (LWSWTP) in 2020, creative and flexible responses were anecdotally reported by students, practice educators, and tutors. These were collated and used as a rationale for the provision of additional support which was provided to practice educators and students to ensure that they were equipped to engage with blended placement provision. At workshops at the Joint Social Work Education and Research Conference (JSWEC) conference in July 2021 and the 13th International Conference on Practice Teaching and Field Education in Health and Social Work (IPTC) in October 2021, the authors presented the practice learning experiences of the Leeds and Wakefield Social Work Teaching Partnership. Author-led discussion at each conference enabled the reflective experiences of the roughly seventy practice educators, placement providers, and social work educator providers who attended the workshops from the four countries of the UK and across the world to be collated, with their permission. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the extensive comments from both conferences was undertaken.

Findings

Each workshop had approximately 20 participants. Three main themes were identified within the workshops: loss; the importance of connectivity and ongoing support; and flexible and creative solutions.

Loss

The JSWEC workshop participants identified a sense of loss, that they felt pervaded and affected both their personal and professional lives. The sense of loss of identity, professional relationships, social interaction, and freedom when the pandemic began - and offices were rapidly closed - was reflected upon. They reflected that practice educators had to adjust their practice to adhere to new and constantly changing health guidelines that restricted home visits, yet necessitated ongoing communication using new systems, which caused stress and anxiety for them (Beesley, 2022), resulting in a loss of self-confidence in communication skills, mirroring research findings by Cook et al (2020). They reflected that this was compounded by universal feelings of fear, bewilderment, and loss as a result of the unknown effects of the virus as it swept the country and the world. Workshop participants reflected that practice educators felt the loss of personal space at home as they juggled homeworking with housemates, spouses, and/or children with confidential calls to service users experiencing their own losses, which resonates with Cook et al's (2020) recommendation of the importance of boundaries in home working for social workers.

It was while experiencing this sense of loss that practice educators also attempted to support students on placement. Whilst many placements were terminated, suspended, or shortened (SWE, 2020), practice educators also had to process the loss of being able to support a student to develop their knowledge and skills effectively. Practice educators often cite in their training that one of the benefits of practice education is seeing the next generation of social workers develop. This is supported by research undertaken by Waterhouse et al (2011) who identified that practice educators valued being able to support students' development. Furthermore, they cite that it enriches their own development through discussion with students, and the loss of the opportunity to support the development of students with their own knowledge and skills was felt to stifle their own learning. Developing this further, workshop participants reflected that the inability to support

students as they had in the past when placements re-started was a further loss to their professional confidence. They discussed that this meant a loss of practical learning opportunities, both in shadowing colleagues and in students' opportunities to undertake the role themselves, so that the content of reflective discussion in social work student supervision was reduced, further limiting their learning opportunities. There was a sense of loss around face-to-face interventions with service users, which they felt initially had been detrimental to students' ability to develop assessment skills, but now they felt could be part of the development of a new social work skill, that of remote communication.

Similarly, workshop participants reflected on the loss of the supervisory relationship. Practice educators reported initially feeling that they could not engage students as robustly or assess students as effectively using remote communication methods to support them as in office-based placements, mirroring findings by de Boer et al (2011), but they noted that they had become increasingly confident and skilled in video-based communication and assessment. Indeed, they reflected that, once they had practice educated a student through COVID-19, they could see that, with flexible and creative solutions that could ensure connectivity, they could indeed continue to support students on placement effectively.

In addition, the workshop participants reflected on the losses that social work students had experienced. Social work education had been impacted by remote teaching and remote or taught placement opportunities, which may have altered students' development of social work knowledge and skills (Beesley, 2022). Furthermore, students may have had reduced opportunities for volunteering outside of the university, thus starting placement with a different level of experience and pre-existing skills. The workshop participants reflected that many social work students approached placement with feelings of anxiety and trepidation that were often caused by an anxiety or lack of confidence in their own preparedness for placement, as a result of their previous 'lost' placement or pre-placement face-to-face teaching. However, many workshop participants reflected this fear had been alleviated once students had begun their placement and received a high level of support.

Significantly, the JSWEC workshop candidates used the phrase 'the Covid generation' to describe this cohort and reflected on the long-term impact that the shortened/ suspended/ terminated social work placements might have on the newly qualified and future qualifying social workers and their practice. They recognised that these students' learning experiences

were different, not necessarily better or worse, but that they may have lost traditional learning opportunities which may impact on their confidence and/or ability as a qualified social worker.

Finally, the JSWEC workshop candidates recognised that students, practice educators, placement providers, and social work educators had developed an acceptance that blended placements are now the 'norm' and should be embraced; this reflects Ray and Shklarski's (2021) research findings that the loss of in-university learning for social work students can be seen to have followed the Kubler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief and they had reached an acceptance that remote learning had positive elements.

Connectivity

Having explored the multiple layers of professional and personal loss experienced by practice educators and social work students as a result of the pandemic, the workshop participants reflected on the importance of connectivity and proactive support for both students and practice educators, resonating with Lange and Maynard's (2021) findings (above).

As a result of the pandemic, many practice educators initially felt unable to support students on placement as they were themselves dealing with a range of professional and personal challenges and losses. As the pandemic continued and the profession adapted to a 'new normal' of social work practice and blended placement, practice educators expressed fear that blended placements do not enable them to provide their preferred level of support and education to remote students. LWSWTP created guidance for practice educators to support and reassure them that it was possible to support students effectively and offered guidance on flexible and creative practice education strategies and held support groups that allowed practice educators to express and explore their fears with peer support to reassure them. In moving forward, peer support was established as good practice and significantly more practice educator support groups were introduced to facilitate the positive impact of peer support and connectivity. This mirrored research by Waterhouse et al (2011), which found that practice educators valued support from both social work educators and placement providers, citing both supervision and peer support as invaluable.

The participants in the conference workshops identified that the supervisory relationship remained as critical as Litvack et al (2010) and Yeung et al (2021) had identified, and that time was required to nurture

and develop it within a blended placement. The first suggestion to facilitate the supervisory relationship was that additional time is spent in the office during induction. An office-based induction was thought to enable students to spend time with the practice educator to develop the requisite rapport that would enable them to seek support from the practice educator in the remainder of the placement, but also provided an opportunity to shadow the practice educator and develop an understanding of team practice. This was also supplemented by the presence of other team members in the office on their allocated days throughout the induction which enabled students to familiarise themselves with team culture and meet with other team members. Furthermore, it was considered important that practice educators had an understanding that students' pre-placement experience had been affected, so that appropriate and student-centred support could be offered. Potentially students may begin their placement with altered social, cultural, and educational experiences, necessitating the need for practice educators to ask students about their formative experiences rather than assuming ability (Tedam, 2011).

As the placement progressed, daily check-ins with students were felt to be beneficial to engage and support them and develop the supervisory relationship. A regular, albeit brief, video call with the student was considered ideal to review the work of the day, answer questions, offer advice and address any contentious or stressful points before they became significant issues. This was seen to replace the informal check-ins that would have occurred within the supervisory relationship if the student and practice educator were office-based daily; this reflects findings by Cook et al (2020) into social work team peer support. It was agreed that, where the placement was blended, it remained highly beneficial for both student and practice educator to remain in daily contact at times when one or the other was not office-based.

The pandemic seemed to have reinforced the importance of the team in which the student was located. Workshop participants reflected that, whilst they had hitherto always taken the lead in students' placement, the student was seen as the responsibility of the team as a whole – but when the pandemic began, practice educators felt that they had become solely responsible. This was because informal, unplanned contact between students and team members was less naturally achieved, and they identified the importance of regular team events, including the student, as being of increased importance. They suggested the use of a team 'What's App' group for social 'chitchat', regular virtual coffee mornings, and a buddy system

for the student with a different team member each week who was not their practice educator to widen their learning experiences. One workshop participant suggested informal learning through a series called 'Connect and Cuppa' (an informal chat over coffee) which could be adjusted to include student peer support or team support as required for individual students. In addition, it was recommended that, during induction, students were given a list of team members and their contact details and asked to contact each one to introduce themselves and be prepared with a question or two to ask them to engage them with the team.

Finally, it was identified that it was also beneficial for social work education providers to provide additional support to social work students whilst on placement. In England, established practice is for university tutors to provide structured support to develop placement expectations at the initial meeting and review progress at the interim meeting, supplemented by informal academic and pastoral support as necessary (Williams & Rutter, 2019). There can be an element of perceived separation between academic and practice that results in the 'teaching' of students on placement being considered to be the practice educator's realm. Nevertheless, Leeds Beckett University advocated the use of group tutorials with a themed subject to provide a more robust link between theory and practice, which students reported was highly beneficial and requested to be continued for future placement cohorts. Furthermore, a 'check-in' structure for tutors was introduced that ensured the avoidance of drift.

Flexible and creative solutions

An interesting observation that was offered in one of the workshops and agreed by all other participants, was that students were not generally adversely affected by reduced learning opportunities in blended placements because of 'all the good practice to support students'. This prompted a discussion that identified the importance of practice educator awareness of potential difficulties and the provision of flexible and creative solutions to ensure that students' learning needs were met. This was an important finding as it recognised the hard work undertaken by many involved in placement provision to sustain high quality learning opportunities.

The experiences of practice educators and students of flexible and creative blended placements within the Leeds and Wakefield Social Work Teaching Partnership were discussed and acknowledged within both

workshops. The first identifiable change was that, prior to the pandemic, the practice of students working at home had been frowned upon by many practice educators and placement providers, as they felt that students learnt more from being in the office and observing team practice, which reflects the findings of Singh et al (2021). However, the proof that students could develop social work knowledge and skills whilst working remotely during the pandemic had altered this perception and all conference participants agreed that some element of home-based placement was now considered acceptable. It was important to recognise that, in a society where poverty was increasing, home-based working decreased travel costs, making it possible for placements to become more student-centred (Beesley, 2020). Nevertheless, it was clear from the workshops that practice educators, placement providers, and social work educators still valued office-based placement learning and that a flexible blended approach maximised the development of knowledge and skills.

Similarly, it was agreed that flexible and responsive approaches and adjustments to other existing procedures were required, including, for example, supervision and direct observations. It was agreed that the traditional face-to-face method was highly beneficial as a means of developing the supervisory relationship within the initial social work student supervision session, offering support, and enabling assessment (Williams and Rutter, 2019). However, it was also recognised that other forms could provide equally effective supervision. The development of the use of remote communication internationally, nationally, and within the profession during the pandemic had developed a confidence in practice educators that they were able to develop relationships and identify non-verbal communication even with less frequent face-to-face contact. A previous concern about remote supervision had been that the nuances of the student's communication would be lost, but this concern had been addressed through the necessity of the use of video calls as the main communication method during the pandemic. Similarly, group supervision (McCafferty, 2004), which had been viewed as less student-centred than one-to-one supervision, was now considered a strong addition to the practice educator's supervision repertoire. The key theme was that practice educators and students should be afforded the flexibility and responsibility to understand what the placement providers' and students' needs were in relation to student supervision and provide it accordingly.

In relation to direct observations, the pandemic had introduced a hitherto largely unexplored area of observable practice: remote

communication. Where social work placements were held within distanced settings, and communication by students with practice educators, colleagues, service users, and other professionals was undertaken using telephone or video calls, a new social work communication skill was developed and approved. As such, conference participants agreed that the continued use of remote communication with a service user or as a part of a multi-disciplinary meeting was an acceptable intervention for a direct observation. Furthermore, where socially distanced appointments or those with restricted attendance requirements prevented practice educators from being present to direct observe home visits to service users, video calls to include practice educators and enable observation were adopted as an acceptable practice. Here, the importance of the collaborative planning of the task to be observed and the provision of immediate verbal feedback were considered of greater importance than the location of the direct observation (Williams and Rutter, 2019).

The workshop participants further identified that blended placements enhanced the flexibility for students working at home and addressed in part the potential issue of student poverty by the reduced requirement for travel. They also identified that blended placements had led to increased placement provision, mirroring Singh et al's (2020) findings. They reflected that remote communication for supervision gave greater flexibility and enhanced practice educator availability or required less allocated desk space for a student. In addition, they noted that they had seen increased opportunities for different placement types, where students could now undertake different types of work in different settings, such as telephone-based placements.

Conclusion

It was agreed by all participants that the future of social work placement provision would include flexible blended placements, which would require practice educators and placement providers to demonstrate flexibility and creativity to support students to be able to engage with robust and appropriate learning opportunities. However, it was also strongly advocated that students would still be required to meet the professional skills, expectations, and standards, as set out in the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) (BASW, 2019). Practice educators continued to see themselves as gatekeepers (Regehr et al, 2001) of quality assurance for

the profession and viewed their flexible, creative responses as a means to enable and enhance student learning.

Blended placements are a predominantly new development in the field of social work education, and little is known about their long-term efficacy and impact on students' development of knowledge and skills. Further qualitative research is recommended that explores practice educators' and students' experiences of blended placements to establish a knowledge base on which they can be developed from being seen as a creative solution to a crisis to an established and reliable placement option.

Limitations

The research sample was an availability sample (Engel and Schutt, 2017) of placement providers, practice educators, and social work educators who chose to attend the workshops. This may mean that only those interested in the subject of good practice in blended placements attended the workshops and should not necessarily be considered representative.

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