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Developing the Skills of a Community Psychologist: Recommendations for Postgraduate Programmes in Australia

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Community psychology aims to develop existing strengths in both individuals and groups through guiding principles which include prevention, empowerment, respect for diversity, collaboration, social justice, from an ecological perspective (Duffy & Wong, 2000). In Australia, this branch of psychology is taught both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This paper focuses on community psychology courses at the postgraduate level which includes Masters, Doctor of Psychology, and Doctor of Philosophy levels at Edith Cowan University (ECU) and at Masters level as part of an applied psychology course at Victoria University of Technology (VUT). A student undertaking any of these postgraduate qualifications is required to complete coursework units and a research project, both of which are presented at the academic institution. In addition, completion of a practicum component of the course is required for graduation. The aim of the practicum is to develop skills and competencies required of psychologists by the Australian Psychological Society (1996) as prescribed by the College of Community Psychologists (1998). This paper presents student recommendations for postgraduate training in community psychology, and is confined to those issues associated with practica and practica issues units.

Community psychologist trainees need to develop the necessary skills in real life settings, ideally with supervision from a well-trained and experienced community psychologist. However, as there are few community psychologists in Australia, practicum supervision of community psychology students by other community psychologists is difficult to organise. This may present difficulties especially for students undertaking their first practicum, as they often need more direction than on subsequent practica. Furthermore finding a placement in an organisation can be difficult when the organisation has limited knowledge of community psychology.

The Role of Practicum Classes

Community psychology students at the Masters and PhD level are required to complete a minimum of 1000 hours of practica and for Doctor of Psychology students 1500 hours. Students may organise their placements in two to four different settings and organisation. At ECU, students attend three practicum issues classes to complement their field placement. These classes provide a forum for raising issues and difficulties associated with practicum placements and provide students with the opportunity for further skill development.

The authors of this paper have participated in all three practicum issues units and all students have completed at least one practicum placement. These practica were completed in diverse fields including health, remand, and community development. The skills acquired by students were diverse and included a needs assessment, group counselling, post-occupancy evaluation, programme development, submission writing, focus groups, community education, and research design and implementation.

In the first practicum issues classes students who had completed a placement as well as combined with students who were embarking on their first placement experience. This unit involved completing a skills audit (Cooper, 1997), devising ways to tailor practicum experiences to acquire skills, and focussing on sharing and solving practicum issues. It was especially valuable for students beginning their first practicum in the role of a community psychologist to benefit from the accounts of more experienced students.

For the second practicum issues class however, students felt they wanted to develop a different class format. It was decided to focus the unit on skill development, as the students were more experienced and comfortable with their roles as community psychologist trainees. To this end, the first half hour of every class was allocated to a discussion of practicum issues and specific skills were explored in the next two and a half hours. Initially, the students agreed on the skill areas they wanted to develop.
The unit facilitator organised guest speakers with expertise in each of these areas. It was decided to focus on developing skills in the areas of counselling, drug use prevention and intervention, grief, suicide prevention, group facilitation, working with Aboriginal people, and women's health. Knowledge gained from this arrangement was reciprocal as it provided students with the opportunity to meet practitioners who embraced the principles of community psychology. In addition, students were provided with an opportunity to develop future placements as well as a network system for future employment. Students were able to put these new skills into practice in their placements, with increased confidence and ability.

At the conclusion of the second unit, it was decided that the third practicum issues unit should now focus on in-depth skill development by completing integrated and practical workshops on a small number of issues chosen by the students. For example, focus was maintained on cultural issues, group work skills (including community counselling, conducting focus groups and workshop facilitation), submission writing, and suicide prevention.

Based on the experiences and reflections as postgraduate students, the following model (Table 1) has been proposed for the practicum issues units, which focuses on skill development and building strengths. The first unit focuses on auditing skills (Cooper, 1997) and discussing practicum issues, with the first and second year postgraduates sharing their experiences in the first three weeks of semester. The second unit focuses on skill development via guest speakers while still providing an opportunity to discuss practicum issues. The third unit focuses on in-depth, hands-on skill acquisition.

### Table 1

**Model for Practicum Issues Units**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semester 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Semester 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No practicum or practicum issues unit scheduled.</td>
<td>Practicum 2 &amp; practicum issues unit 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students study professional and ethical issues, psychological assessment, and are introduced to community psychology.</td>
<td>Skills development with guest speakers and some discussion of practicum issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semester 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Semester 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicum 1 &amp; practicum issues unit 1</td>
<td>Practicum 3 &amp; practicum issues unit 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of practicum issues with first and second year students attend class together for the first three weeks. First year students continue to attend weekly practicum issues classes.</td>
<td>Combine with first years for the first three weeks then 3 full day workshops with first year students invited.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Integration of the Practicum Issues Unit

During this unit, a forum was provided for discussing practicum issues. Various concerns and issues were raised by students that were generic and applied to the diverse placements. Recurring themes included logistical issues associated with beginning and completing a practicum. For example, some students were required to gain police clearances, which added considerable time and cost to the placement. To counteract this issue all postgraduate students could obtain clearance upon enrollment at the university. Other students were required to pay for petrol and/or parking related to their role within the organisation. These costs can be considerable over the average 45 day placement. Petrol costs could be
negated if the student used the organisation's vehicles. However, as students are not employees of the organisation in which they are based, they are not covered by the organisations motor vehicle insurance. This could present legal and financial problems if the student was involved in an incident.

The monetary costs associated with placements are often not apparent until the student has started work in the organisation. Information about these issues prior to the practicum will provide students with the opportunity to make an informed decision whether or not to agree to the practicum at the organisation based on a cost/benefit analysis.

Another issue was the discrepancies in the paperwork required to undertake a practicum. Students are required to keep a logbook (ECU, 1999) of the skills they have learned on practicum. A supervisor's handbook (ECU, 1998) requires the practicum supervisor to rate the student's skills. However, the skills in the student logbook, supervisor's handbook, and a list of APS core competencies for community psychologists are very different. Furthermore, the skills in the supervisor handbook are more appropriate for students in the clinical field and many are not appropriate to the placements of community psychology students. To rectify these issues, the authors have made suggestions for changes to the paperwork (see Appendix).

Organising meetings with supervisors may be problematic. Students are required to have three meetings; namely at the start of the placement, one mid placement, and one at the end of the placement. It is difficult to organise meetings and some students did not have these meetings which reduced the opportunity to discuss issues. A number of students therefore, began their second or third placement without having 'officially' finished their first placement. However, it is essential that the end of placement meeting take place to provide an opportunity for closure for the students and the supervisor.

**Student Placement**

**Supervisors Handbooks**

It is important to provide field supervisors with relevant and succinct information. Therefore, prior to the commencement of a placement, information should be sent to the prospective supervisor outlining the format of a placement, its duration and scope, relevant insurance issues, the role of the student, university, and field supervisor, as well as mechanisms for conflict management. Whether this information is in the form of a letter or a handbook is debatable, but the emphasis should be on concise and pertinent information rather than a pre-occupation with presentation style.

A final report from the field supervisor stating the level of satisfaction with the student and whether goals and objectives were achieved, may be an alternative format to the supervisor's handbook as a record of the placement. Contribution by the student in the form of a brief report about his or her experience of the placement, outlining the skills learnt or developed and any other process issues may be an added advantage. Copies of all documents and reports produced by the student while on placement should be presented to the field supervisor and practicum coordinator as evidence of achievement during the placement.

**Role of the Field Supervisor**

The purpose of the practicum experience as part of postgraduate training is to provide students with practical skills based experience in applying psychological principles and theory. The role of the field supervisor is to facilitate this learning. Therefore, the activities performed by the student should be relevant to the profession to enhance the student's skills. The field supervisor needs to meet regularly with the student to provide constructive feedback, guidance, and advice throughout the practicum. When the field supervisor does not have community psychology training, a university supervisor is also appointed.

**Role of University Supervisor**

The university supervisor supports the community psychology trainee to achieve the practicum goals. This ensures the community psychology trainee gains skills, direction, and support from a supervisor trained in community psychology as well as a field supervisor who is an expert in a related area.

It is important for the student to feel supported through the process. To this end, university supervisors need to be available and willing to help manage difficult situations that might arise such as differences in ethics and values as these could potentially lead to conflict in the practicum setting. The practicum issues unit provides a forum for students to express and discuss issues that are causing concern, and receive input from peers as well as the unit facilitator. Practical advice may help resolve the issue.

**Role of Practicum Coordinator**

The practicum coordinator is responsible for arranging and monitoring the progress of the student's practicum. He or she will meet with the student to discuss possible placement settings, the skills the student wishes to develop, and identify the goals and objectives for the practicum. This is especially important for the first placement where the student might not be aware of the scope of available placements. Even students who are
returning to study after many years working as a registered psychologist might find arranging a practicum difficult. Indeed the very fact that they have worked as a professional could present quite specific problems, especially if the student is used to acting autonomously or in a position of seniority. Depending on the field supervisor and the organisation, the student might be expected to act independently or to simply observe. These issues need to be addressed prior to the practicum and it is important for the practicum coordinator to be pro-active in facilitating discussion of these issues.

The field supervisor and student should decide the necessity of the optional mid-practicum meeting. If this is held, it may involve only the field supervisor and student. Contact with the practicum coordinator may be via telephone or e-mail. However, the final practicum meeting with all three parties is essential to ensure the goals and objectives have been met. It provides the opportunity to discuss the outcome of the practicum and assess the process as both the field supervisor and the student are able to express how the practicum related to their individual needs and development.

Conclusion

Students undertake practicum experience as part of their postgraduate skills development. Practicum issues units, in which related issues are discussed, support the experience and provide an opportunity for skills acquisition. Several recommendations for skills training in community psychology emerged. Firstly, students need to be encouraged to conduct skills audits (see Cooper, 1997) in their first practicum unit to enable them to assess their strengths and weaknesses and can choose practica and practicum unit activities to best meet their needs. Secondly, postgraduate students should be allowed a voice in determining what they want to do in the practicum issues units and these units need to be flexible and adaptable enough to suit students’ needs. Thirdly, supervisor’s handbooks should provide the student and supervisors with succinct and pertinent information relating to the practicum. Suggestions to improve the handbook in the School of Psychology have also been made by the authors. Finally, students needs on practicum should be managed by the collaborative relationship between field supervisor and university supervisor, and if required, the practicum coordinator. These recommendations have implications in the skill training of postgraduate community psychology students and have applications in informing the skills training provided by universities for community psychology at a postgraduate level.

References


