

Can collaboration and competition co-exist? Building a cross-institutional community of practice¹

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This paper is an exploratory case study into the opportunities for and constraints on collaboration in a sub-committee of social work fieldwork coordinators in New Zealand. It considers the potential for collaboration in a competitive environment, not only in terms of the tertiary institutional framework but also in respect of limited available placements for social work students. As well as these competitive arrangements, key factors that are affecting collaboration in this community of practice include institutional constraints such as workloading and resourcing; protectionism of institutional materials; frequent turnover of fieldwork staff; and limited leadership. These factors affect the motivation and commitment of the existing members. The study is intended to inform the future direction of the sub-committee as well as provide some of the lessons learned for other disciplinary networks working in the cooperative education domain who may be considering the establishment of a national, cross-institutional community of practice. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2011, 12(1), 31-38)

Key words: New Zealand, social work, cooperative learning, community of practice

INTRODUCTION

Operating in a largely self-interested, independent and competitive manner, the tertiary or higher education sector in New Zealand has, until very recently, significantly limited opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration (Debowski, 2008; Holland & Ramaley, 2008). Tertiary providers have traditionally sought to maintain institutional independence and have competed in both research and teaching terrains. Competition for student enrolments has contributed to isolating institutions from one another and restricted attempts at collaboration. Recent government policy on student enrolments may, however, decrease this emphasis on competition and, therefore, potentially increase the possibility of cross-institutional collaboration.

In 2006, in an effort to work collaboratively across tertiary institutions, a social work fieldwork coordinators³ group was established. This article briefly outlines the development and purpose of the group and discusses the factors that facilitate or constrain its collaborative potential as a community of practice⁴. Although the group is specific to social work fieldwork, the lessons learned from the group's brief history may be applied across disciplines.

BACKGROUND

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the New Zealand Association of Cooperative Education Conference, 14-16 April 2010 in Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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³ 'Fieldwork coordinator' refers to the academic staff member from the tertiary institution who is responsible for organising placements, teaching, administration, visiting students on placement, trouble shooting, training agency staff, assessing the student work and liaising with agencies.

⁴ A community of practice is defined here as, "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their understanding and knowledge of this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2001, pp.4-5 cited in le May, 2009, pp. 3).

During the 2006 Practical Experience in Professional Education Conference (PEPE conference), a group of social work fieldwork coordinators employed at universities, polytechnics and technical institutes throughout New Zealand gathered for an informal discussion on their teaching area. It became apparent that, in spite of their institutional contexts, there were strong similarities in the issues and challenges they faced in regards to their work. These challenges included competition for student placements; the perceived marginalisation of fieldwork within academic programmes; funding constraints; limited placement opportunities; and isolation in their role as fieldwork coordinators. Although these issues were acknowledged, there was a general consensus that it would be beneficial to take a more collaborative approach cross-institutionally. Subsequently, the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work (now the School of Health and Social Services) approached the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work Educators (ANZSWE, now the Council of Social Work Educators Aotearoa New Zealand or CSWEANZ) and tabled *Terms of Reference* (2007) for the establishment of a Field Education Sub-committee (herein, the sub-committee). The proposed sub-committee was ratified in 2007 with the membership comprising fieldwork coordinators from CSWEANZ institutions (currently sixteen schools of social work in universities, polytechnics and institutes throughout New Zealand).

The purpose of the sub-committee is to:

provide a forum for networking, research and the discussion and development of social work field education practices and processes in Aotearoa New Zealand. To support the advancement of social work field education and raise its profile in tertiary institutions and the social service sector. To recognise the political nature of field education and advocate for its position in the education sector. (*Terms of Reference*, 2007)

Since its inception, the sub-committee has communicated by email and during four face-to-face meetings; however, attempts to meet more regularly have been thwarted, primarily by institutional funding and workload constraints. On several occasions, sub-committee members have questioned the potential for, and limitations of, collaboration within the group. The following sections will consider the factors that are affecting collaboration as elicited from an evaluation that was undertaken in late 2009.⁵

POTENTIAL FOR COLLABORATION

The results of the evaluation demonstrated that there is potential for collaboration in the sub-committee despite the competitive environment that the fieldwork coordinators are working in. Participants had a range of involvement in the sub-committee, from no active participation to responding to the email discussions and attending the face-to-face meetings. The email contact operates on an ad hoc basis, and may be initiated by any member of the sub-committee. The face-to-face meetings, which occur annually at the end of the academic year, were perceived to be most beneficial, as illustrated in these comments:

Face-to-face meetings provide excellent opportunities to learn and discuss information that may not develop in an email discussion.

⁵ Nine out of fifteen questionnaires were returned.

Very helpful to identify current issues and to get an overview of fieldwork education in Aotearoa; to exchange challenges and ideas; to take issues to ANZSWE [CSWEANZ] forum for further attention and to network.

The potential for collaboration within the sub-committee was seen to be increasing “as relationships and goodwill develop.” As another participant noted, “With any collaboration the issue of trust and getting to know each other is a vital precursor to genuine collaboration.” Relationship building in the sub-committee, however, was considered challenging due to the frequently changing membership even though a small core group of fieldwork coordinators provides some stability. Welcoming new members by email and a bi-monthly newsletter was recommended as a way to encourage connections between members. While these additional initiatives would be undertaken by the chairperson, all members are already able to initiate discussions or disseminate information through the email network.

Cooperative and collaborative work is also occurring in the umbrella group of CSWEANZ within which the sub-committee is configured; therefore, this provides a platform for further collaborative work to occur in the fieldwork area. Being a sub-committee within a larger network was seen to be especially useful in regard to raising the profile of fieldwork and to having an additional and more powerful forum to which to take particular concerns. CSWEANZ includes Heads of Programmes, Professors of Social Work or other senior staff, many of whom have strong and direct links to influential decision-makers such as government ministers, the Social Work Registration Board, the social work professional body as well as within their own schools and institutions. The sub-committee supports CSWEANZ in their lobbying and advocacy work. Strengthening this aspect of the sub-committee, however, was considered both important and necessary if the status and core work of fieldwork education was to be enhanced, both at an institutional and a national level.

Two specific collaborative innovations have stemmed directly from the sub-committee. Firstly, a discussion forum for the sub-committee was set up in the Ako Aotearoa website.⁶ This was partly in response to the disjointed nature of some of the email communication. Having one thread of discussion, through the Ako website, was perceived to be more straightforward and potentially more useful. However, the uptake for the forum has been very low and it is currently inactive for the following reasons: limited time available to fieldwork coordinators, especially those who are new to their role; uncertainty as to how to access and participate; and lack of clarity around the purpose of the discussion board and its potential benefits. Although guidelines on how to access and participate in the site have been sent to members, this appears to have had little effect.

Secondly, the development of a written resource for field educators⁷ and students has been supported by the sub-committee. Funding for the project was granted by Ako Aotearoa to a sub-committee member in 2009. The sub-committee has been involved in project

⁶ Ako Aotearoa is a national centre promoting excellence in tertiary teaching. It has a collaborative focus and offers an online facility for this purpose which includes discussion forums, resources and other teaching-related materials.

⁷ The term ‘field educators’ refers to the people who supervise and manage students in the placement agency. Depending on institutional terminology, they are usually a qualified, experienced social worker.

mentoring, editing and trialling of the resource which includes a series of activities, questions and tasks for use during formal supervision sessions. While currently targeted at social work students, the resource could be adapted in the future for students undertaking practicums in different disciplines.

CONSTRAINTS ON COLLABORATION

The constraints identified on collaboration related to time/workload issues; changing personnel; competition for placements; and institutional policies. Given the applied nature of fieldwork papers, the coordinators have significant workloads. Organising and managing student placements is time consuming and is not confined to discrete time periods as for other academic papers. There is, therefore, limited time and energy to invest in an external sub-committee. Some institutions have not given permission or financial support to fieldwork coordinators to attend face-to-face meetings, thus limiting the extent of their involvement. In addition, there is a high turnover of fieldwork staff who are frequently employed on a part-time contractual basis. This raises issues in terms of continuity; shifting dynamics; motivation and commitment, both within the institution and in the sub-committee (Berg-Weger, Rochman, Rosenthal, Sporleder, & Birkenmaier, 2007; Lathlean & Myall, 2009). However, there is a core group within the sub-committee who have been working within the fieldwork domain for over 10 years and these members provide institutional knowledge and constancy.

Concerns as to the protection of intellectual property of programmes or institutions has also limited collaboration, with some study materials being copyrighted or rendered inaccessible. However, within the sub-committee, a broad range of ideas and resources have been discussed and made available, on the understanding that an individual institution is acknowledged if ideas or materials are used by another programme. International placements, assessment criteria, requirements as to levels of qualifications, and experience of field educators are examples of previously discussed issues.

Competition for placements was identified as another key factor limiting collaboration as illustrated by this comment: "I think it's important we don't 'poach' placements and communicate about who is doing what, where." Although the majority of the tertiary institutions are locally focused, some institutions incorporate a distance learning component and therefore students may reside and have social work placements in the proximity of another tertiary provider. Students in this locality may compete against one another for a specific placement opportunity. Within the sub-committee, there have been discussions about this issue and there is now an informal agreement to notify other fieldwork coordinators if a student is being placed in an agency within someone else's 'territory'. As individual relationships have strengthened within the sub-committee, there appears, anecdotally at least, to be an increase in communication around competition for placements. In general, there are limited placement opportunities and students within as well as across institutions are increasingly competing against one another for quality placements.

Discussion as to standardising aspects of social work field education across New Zealand has also occurred within the sub-committee. Developing nationalised learning objectives for field education and standards of assessment has been recommended, although, to date, minimal debate and consensus has occurred in respect of this issue (Hay &

O'Donoghue, 2009). One fieldwork coordinator commented on why lack of agreement on nationalised standards has thus far occurred: "[There are] different standards in each institution...different assessment approaches - we learn from each other but we often like our own approach." There are also different institutional procedures, policies and standards across the universities, polytechnics and institutes which may limit the possibility of a standardised set of assessment measures and detract from extensive collaboration between fieldwork coordinators.

INTO THE FUTURE

Building communities of practice or institutional networks takes considerable time, commitment and leadership (de Wit, 2004; Lathlean & Myall, 2009; le May, 2009). The evolution of the fieldwork sub-committee is still in its early stages and although there have been some examples of positive relationship building and joint endeavours, there is substantial work ahead before its full potential may be realised. In particular, institutional support is essential if the group is to continue, let alone achieve its full purpose. This has implications in terms of workload and financial contributions from the tertiary providers. Fieldwork coordinators need to be more proactive in their endeavours to have participation in the sub-committee included in their assigned tasks and also need to actively seek additional funding to attend the face-to-face meetings. Convincing their institutions of the value, relevance and importance of the sub-committee is essential (le May, 2009). Several fieldwork coordinators have expressed interest in having bi-annual meetings to enable greater traction in discussions and decision-making, although this is unlikely to occur if increased institutional support is not forthcoming. Given the importance of effective leadership in a community of practice, it is also necessary for the chairperson of the sub-committee to receive workloaded time for the role, as well as funding to attend the meeting(s) and ensure adequate hospitality for the other sub-committee members (le May, 2009). At present, leadership of the sub-committee is limited, as the chairperson is not allocated time or additional resources for the sub-committee work and other roles, such as a secretary, are not assigned to other members.

Protection of institutional knowledge and intellectual property also significantly impinges on the potential positive outcomes of this cross-institutional community of practice. Tertiary institutions are traditionally protective of their teaching materials and are generally reticent about sharing these resources. However, best practice throughout the social work sector would be improved if there was increased debate and discussion about teaching practices and wider dissemination of relevant research findings. Utilising national or regional forums such as the New Zealand Association of Cooperative Education (NZACE) and the Practical Experiences in Professional Education Association (PEPE) would also enable increased opportunities for discussion and consideration of improving best practice in fieldwork or cooperative education both within and across disciplines. Larger forums such as these may also be more effective vehicles for lobbying government on policies and processes, particularly those pertaining to competition for placement opportunities and other cooperative education issues.

Currently, the placing of students in social service agencies is a competitive process with restricted spaces available for placements and this has limited the relationships between fieldwork coordinators. Working cross-institutionally to access and manage placements has

not occurred to any significant extent, although occasionally a fieldwork coordinator has been alerted to placement opportunities that are not being used by another institution. In 2011, two institutions in the same city will be piloting a collaborative approach to managing placements with their local service agencies. This will mean that students from across these institutions will be given the same placement opportunities, which will decrease the levels of competition between institutions. The fieldwork coordinators from the two institutions will cooperate and share the placement organisation, although they will still be required to ensure all of their own students are placed within the required timeframe. This approach will be of particular benefit to agencies as they will only have to work with one designated fieldwork coordinator who will operate across the institutions.

Another aspiration of the sub-committee, as highlighted in the *Terms of Reference*, is to raise the profile of fieldwork education and advocate for its position in the education sector. To date, this objective has received little attention. In part, this goal has been sidelined due to the necessity of building relationships and establishing the foundation of the work of the sub-committee, especially by developing an understanding of each institution's field education programme. Now that this initial work has been largely completed, there is greater impetus by the group to become more proactive in addressing the political advocacy objective. Again, connecting with national or regional forums may also be of value when lobbying government or tertiary institutions on issues concerning cooperative education.

Furthermore, international academic networks and alliances are becoming increasingly common, especially with the use of information and communication technologies such as email and video-conferencing, so that connecting with similar groups overseas would be worth consideration (de Wit, 2004). Social work is a professional discipline based on internationally accepted definitions and networks of social work tertiary educators, and practitioners already exist at both regional and international levels. It is feasible, then, that an international network for social work fieldwork could evolve from current networked arrangements. Social work programmes in the United Kingdom and Australia are similar in curriculum and practice to programmes operating in New Zealand institutions and these countries are logical first choices for developing cooperative and collaborative links. Benefits for becoming part of a regional or international grouping include enhanced opportunities for learning about fieldwork processes, collaborative research, international placements, and dissemination of best practice methods. Challenges associated with such a development include workloading of staff members, resourcing for meetings, having adequate technological equipment to ensure access to the network, time-zone differences with countries in the Northern hemisphere, having a well-defined and relevant purpose and function, having champions in each country who provide adequate drive and momentum to sustain the network (de Wit, 2004). Although many New Zealand fieldwork coordinators have professional relationships with equivalent tertiary staff in other countries, discussion on an international network has not been discussed in the sub-committee at this stage. Similarly, developing connections with NZACE and PEPE would enable cross-disciplinary sharing and development of effective strategies and processes in the wider cooperative education domain.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that while there is potential for cross-institutional collaboration in the domain of cooperative education, this is, in large degree, restricted by the current competitive institutional environment operating in the New Zealand tertiary sector. Fieldwork coordinators and students alike want to secure quality placements that ensure excellent learning opportunities. As these opportunities are limited, competition is unavoidable. Institutions are protective of both students and resources, therefore, cross-institutional work is restricted. This tension prevents extensive collaboration between fieldwork coordinators, although it has been shown that some cooperation and collaboration is possible.

Despite the many challenges, there is goodwill by fieldwork coordinators for the ongoing development of the sub-committee and its work. The most significant limitations on the existing group include available time and commitment from the fieldwork coordinators for furthering the work of the sub-committee; frequent turnover of fieldwork staff; mutual understanding of the purpose and aims of the sub-committee; and balancing the competitive demands associated with organising placements with a commitment to furthering common approaches, understandings and best practice in fieldwork.

Although there are challenges with the cross-institutional model, several benefits have been identified. These include knowledge and information sharing, developing joint training or placement opportunities, collaborative research, provision of support, development of resources and other best practice tools, and a focus on improving the wider profession of social work. These areas provide future foci for the fieldwork sub-committee as it continues to develop its infrastructure, skills and membership (Berg-Weger et al., 2007; le May, 2009). Further research on the perceptions of tertiary staff, students and industry on collaboration and the work of the sub-committee would also increase understanding of the potential and limitations of this community of practice.

The innovation of the fieldwork sub-committee has relevance for other applied professional disciplines. In particular, lessons learned include the importance of building strong positive working relationships, developing a level of trust prior to entering discussions that may involve scrutinising the work of members and their institutions, and communicating consistently and on topics of widespread relevance so as to maintain the interest and involvement of the group's members. Leadership of any institutional network is also critical to maintaining momentum and direction (Joliffe & Hutchinson, 2007). In addition, adequate institutional support and resources support the network in being sustainable and effective in meeting its specified objectives (Berg-Weger et al., 2007). In combination, these factors provide a firm foundation for the establishment and ongoing work of an effective community of practice or institutional network.

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