

For creating a signature pedagogy for students entering into the human services/community work field through a professional placement program

Overview

Different disciplines have prepared students for professional practice for centuries but closely examining how this is actually undertaken is relatively new. In my field of human services and community work, this has been a particular challenge as the profession is still emerging. As a result, there are significant gaps in the literature on appropriate discipline pedagogies (Pavelová, 2014).

In 2000, I took on the role of Course Coordinator and Team leader of the Scholarship Review of Community Studies programs at ECU. I began to draw on the work of Shulman (1986), an early researcher in this area. His work questioned how we translated knowledge into teaching practice and the connection in order to develop a pedagogy for human services/community work. This approach was pioneering as such linkages between knowledge and practice were not fully developed.

Shulman (2005) proposed that such connections could be examined through the creation of a signature pedagogy such as, *the types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions* (p. 52). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching undertook further research to understand how certain professions educate their members in applying the knowledge they have learnt to their field. This work however, was focussed in medicine, teaching, law, nursing and engineering. Signature pedagogies were considered important in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; according to Shulman they *implicitly define what counts as knowledge in the field and how things become known* (2005, p. 54). For Shulman a signature pedagogy has three dimensions: surface structure (operational strategies for teaching and learning); deep structure (the assumptions underlying how knowledge should be taught); and implicit structure that focuses on the professional values and attitudes (2005). However, Gurung, Chick, and Haynie (2009) ascertained that different academic disciplines considered a certain mindset in creating pedagogies to get their students to *understand and practice disciplinary ways of thinking or habits of mind ... in ethical, moral, and/or professionally-prescribed ways* (p. 2). This research provided me with the question to explore the connection between what is taught (new knowledge) and how students apply that new knowledge in their professions. I adapted Shulman's work to the human service/community work profession through developing modules on self-assessment, industry situational analysis, work-based practice, reflection and refinement. This provided students with direct links between the knowledge that was taught in their units and how knowledge was known in their field; For example one student commented that *What you get taught in class is different to what happens out there but the placement put it all into perspective, now I understand* (UTEI, 2017). The program based on Shulman's work has been undertaken by 15 students per year in the human/community service field between 2004 to 2010 (GAPS) and 20 students a year between 2010 to 2018.

Category 2: Development of curricula, resources or services that reflect a command of the field.

In 1992 I was Chair of Department of Human Services, in the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences at ECU. Since then, I have developed, revised and coordinated the Social Science degree that incorporates human services/community work. As a relatively new field of study within the university setting, and sitting between social work, counselling and psychology, students are taught to take a holistic approach when working alongside individuals, groups and communities to support their wellbeing and resilience in society. My academic experience demonstrated the lack of connection between the knowledge learnt in the classroom and the internalisation of that knowledge by the student to develop professional values and attributes to the field in which they work. Knowledge needed to be translated in situational contexts but as there was no signature pedagogy to create that link between core knowledge and the student's professional development and growth.

Then as Course Coordinator and Team leader of the Scholarship Review of Community Studies programs, I created a signature pedagogy to address this lack of connection. My signature pedagogy was presented at the 2001 International Practical Experience Professional Education Conference in a paper titled: GAPS: An

ecological approach to embedding work-based learning within the university system. The terms GAPS (Gaining Access to Practical Skills) was used to signify the 'gap' in how the knowledge is translated into practice. In 2002, development was funded through a \$8,000 research grant for a program to be available for all ECU students: *Transition from University to the World of Work program*. Two further papers were presented to seek additional feedback from the academic community in line with the outcomes of the research grant (Banham & Brown, 2002a; Banham & Brown 2002b). A further internal research grant of \$15,000 was gained to extend the units to ensure they included all the generic attributes and employability outcomes which would align to university and employability criteria. This early research and validation through presentations with other colleagues lead to the development of a signature pedagogy based on Shulman's three dimensions, through creating a professional placement program that is recognised by the field and the professional body. The outcome was a Professional Practice set of units, which focussed on the utilisation of generic graduate attribute skills. The program is a centralised one that overlaps all faculties allowing access to every student irrelevant of their cognate area. The microsystem of the student is nested within the university with support and guidance from the CAS (Careers Advisory Service) that utilises a Career Management Skills model to facilitate and develop lifelong learning within the student. This approach is embedded within the GAPS program where students engage in a process of self-assessment, industry situational analysis, work-based practice, reflection and refinement. This experience provides them with opportunities to explore their professional development needs through extended supervised professional development in their discipline field as an integral part of their undergraduate degree.

Once implemented, the GAPS Professional Placement program units were continually revised in line with current evidence. A review of the UTEI (ECU Unit Teaching Evaluation Instrument) data across the GAPS program from 2014 to 2018 indicates for Professional Placement Unit an increase in the Overall Satisfaction (OS) score from 75 (2104) to 100 (2018). Two significant questions in the data most relevant to translating knowledge into practice within the Professional Placement program units, showed an increase in scores from 2014-2018: for a *clear understanding of what was expected of me* (agreeance of 50%, 2014 to 100%, 2018); and the *Unit was well organised*: (agreeance of 25%, 2014 to 70%, 2018). Through two further restructures of the degree, it has morphed into a year-long Professional Placement unit within the degree in the final year of study. The program was then developed into modules for online delivery. At that time, it was challenging to include interactive sessions in a developing external online delivery environment utilising a 'best fit' and 'case management' approach. It needed to ensure there were mutual benefits for the student and the agency within this learning journey. Feedback from students validated the impact of undertaking the Professional Placement program in their learning journey; students said that *The best aspects of this program was the hands on practical experience that one acquired as compared to the theoretical experiences gathered in the class; The unit challenged my ability to perform to the standard required by the profession; Getting employed after my placement; Helped identify what I want and do not want as a profession* [UTEI 2017, 2018].

However, maintaining a signature pedagogy within a developing field through constant reconfigurations and administration restructures has been challenging. The issue of currency of required application for the field led me to work with the national body, the Association of Community Workers (ACWA) which at that time focused on training packages in the Vocational Educational Training sector. This association resulted in the ECU Social Science degree being the first in Western Australia to achieve accreditation with the Australian Community Workers (ACWA), recognised for the Professional placement program being embedded into the degree program. Working within the human services/community work field can be challenging due to changing funding arrangements and staffing issues but with a consolidated and consistent approach the Professional Placement program achieved positive outcomes.

Further challenges to maintaining the signature pedagogy for human services/community work arose following a university restructure into Schools and Disciplines. The new Discipline brought together Social Science, Social Work, Counselling, and Youth Work and each had its own signature pedagogy with each defining *what counts as knowledge in the field and how things become known* (Shulman, 2005). My role as Associate Dean of the newly formed Discipline was to bring together the differing signature pedagogies in the Discipline, respecting their individualities and accreditation requirements, but staying true to the original intent of the dimensions of a signature pedagogy as defined by Shulman. Preparing students for employment

that demonstrated the knowledge and skill requirements for graduate entry level positions in their respective fields was challenging.

To undertake this challenge, I created the Professional Placement Cluster Group within the School of Arts and Humanities in 2016. It was an interdisciplinary group in which we navigated what Gurung, Chick, and Haynie (2009) ascertained as the *understanding and practice disciplinary ways of thinking or habits of mind ... in ethical, moral, and/or professionally-prescribed ways* (p. 2) for each program. The aims of the Group was to consolidate processes across all programs, improve efficiency in delivery of professional placement programs, work as a team to create and undertake innovative practices that had a meaningful impact for students about to enter the world of work, and to encourage and support each other in developing skills in applied research in this space. This has become a unique place for discussion and sharing both the uniqueness and similarities of each signature pedagogy with positive outcomes. Significant outcomes include the development of a single website, collaboration in use of agencies for students through the SONIA database, and through regular meetings the sharing of ideas and refinements on how knowledge is translated into practice for students. The Professional Placement Cluster Group has enhanced the human services/community signature pedagogy as now it needs to explain itself to others: *By my colleagues questioning how the my placement program is translating what the students are learning in classes is leading me to question how I am doing that* (Placement Coordinator, Community Work, 2017). *I can see there are things that are similar in the community work program and the counselling program that we can share* (Placement Coordinator – Counselling, 2018). The creation of this team has impacted positively on the student's experience in the way in which students are effectively placed, supervised and supported in the professional placement program.

Recognition and Impact

Under my leadership, the Professional Placement programs, won the Dean's award in 2017 for leadership and innovation for being a new and innovative program in the social sciences. With the Professional Placement group, I have created a dedicated site on the School of Arts and Humanities home page that has consolidated all course professional placement information for students and field agencies. This the first time this is been undertaken within the Arts and Humanities across Australia. <https://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/arts-and-humanities/courses/professional-placement>. In 2010 I was also awarded an ECU Vice Chancellor's award for Excellence in Learning and Teaching.

At a national level, the Australian Community Work Association personally sought my assistance in the development of a Supervisor's online course for community work/human service supervisors in agencies. This will be the first such course in the field in Australia. My leadership in this space is recognised through an invitation to be on the inaugural Editorial Advisory Board of the Australian Journal of Community Work stating: *we would be delighted if you would accept our invitation to join the Editorial Advisory Board as we regard you a leader in the field* [Dr Annette Maher, Editor]. Under my leadership one member of the Cluster Group became the lead investigator in a study: *Student fitness and readiness for placement: A national exploration of university field education coordinators' understanding of student fitness and readiness for placement*, AAZSWWER Scholarship of Teaching Award (\$5,000).

Impact on student learning and industry partners

The link between the knowledge in the class and knowledge in the field brought a new focus on knowledge exchange between human service/community work students and the industry partners through examination and reflection of each other's practice. Triadic relationships were forming that impacted positively on the students' ability to transfer and reflect on their practice in the field. One student said that *Exciting to have a student who is so well prepared and has meaningful documentation – not usual for community work, happy to have more ECU students* [Community Service Organisation with a Community Work major student, 2018]. Students were building a better understanding of practice through idea sharing with their agencies. They considered and reflected on their work during and after placement building their critical reflection skills. As one student commented, *Undertaking my professional placement program has really opened my eyes, I can now see why I studied all those units – it brought it altogether being in this great agency. I now know where I want to work* (UTEI, Student 2018).

The formal student evaluation data also indicated the Professional Placement Program had an impact on their learning with *Unit extended my learning*; and *Unit improved my general skills* remaining at 100% for 2014 through to 2018. However, a major impact on student learning was the feedback from the field, as it is in this partnership they are sharing ideas and transferring their knowledge from classroom to practice. Field recognition is important in this process in validating how well the students as future practitioners are educated for their new professions. As one student commented, *I just called quickly to say thank you for all of the work, input and learning from [...]. As mentioned in feedback she took direction and worked independently and sensitively on some important projects with us. Needless to say we would be open to future placements and look forward to hearing from you.* [Community Services Organisation, 2018) and, *The major impact is students commence professional placement being prepared to validate the Standards of Practice with confidence* [Agency placement, 2017].

For students, a key goal is employability after graduation, and the development of our signature pedagogy has been validated by the field in the student's being prepared for application of their skills and knowledge in the field: *It's a pool for potential recruitment, demonstrated by the fact that 4 of the interns we've been provided with have been offered casual work with us. Overall, we are very grateful to have the partnership with yourself and the ECU. One of the most important things with internships is that students have the structure and discipline before they arrive to work with us. You have managed this well and we hope to continue the internship at our organisation* [Community Services Organisation, 2019].

The creation of a signature pedagogy for the human services/community work field, through the Professional Placement program embedded into the degree program, has identified important impacts on the student's learning journey. It has equipped them with the skills to undertake work in the real world confident that they have skills beyond those they have learnt in the discipline context. It has encouraged them to become lifelong learners by instilling learning processes that can be applied in diverse settings and to all aspects of their lives. It has impacted on their abilities to transfer knowledge from the classroom to the world of work increasing their employability opportunities.

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