

# DISTINGUISHED EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS

## Category: Professional Practice Innovation Award

### Case Study

**Title: Translating social work theory into professional practice.**

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**Summary:** Research suggests that social work practitioners do not have some of the required knowledge and skills to practice competently once qualified (McCafferty,2020). Consequently, key stakeholders have begun to question the quality of the learning experience students receive during their preliminary university training and education. They question the ability of traditional dyadic pedagogies to equip students with the knowledge and skills employers require of them to work in the complex and fluid world of professional practice. There is also a growing concern among stakeholders that curricula are ‘too academic’ and that academics fail to engage sufficiently well enough with experts in the field when designing learning outcomes, developing teaching materials and creating assessment methods and that as a result students lack the required sector skills needed by employers.

As educators, it is up to us to respond creatively to these concerns and generate innovative, balanced and more engaged pedagogies and curricula that serve the dual purpose of equipping students with the requisite academic knowledge to learn and subsequently graduate, and develop sector level skills that are aligned with employer and societal need.

**Keywords: Innovation. Engagement. Sector-skills.**

#### What was done:

In the five and fifty strategy under the theme of civic contribution, the key objective of ‘developing workplace readiness balanced with lifelong skills’ helped as I developed my unique authentic pedagogic approach.

Determined to provide my students with teaching and learning that developed their work based skills and not satisfied with the traditional chalk and talk approach, something Onger (2017) considers too passive, I decided to try something unique which would challenge me pedagogically and provide my students with engaging, authentic learning that would better prepare them for the world of work.

So, working in consultation with industry experts, I developed an innovative inclusive teaching approach, augmenting the industry/academia relationship, to help develop a teaching method that combined industry standard practice with academically stimulating content. This approach would increase students’ ability to immerse themselves in real-world problems encountered in practice yet recognise their status as novices (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986) who need to master both academic and practice requirements in a safe nurturing learning environment.

This approach was innovative as it goes beyond the walls of the *ivory tower*, reaching out to those that will employ our students, asking them, ‘what do you want our students to know?’ instead of mechanistically following curricula that is exclusively designed by academics and that is not necessarily allied to the skills and knowledge that employers value. This pedagogic philosophy goes to the heart of what Herrington *et al.* (2014) calls authentic learning and significantly enhances students’ readiness for work, equipping them with explicit targeted skills.

#### Motivation and aims:

In 2016, the Department for Education said that “too often social workers are poorly trained and not ready for frontline practice when they leave social work education”, and that they don’t spend enough time developing real-life skills. My own research confirmed this (McCafferty, 2020, McCafferty and Taylor, 2021). Based on an understanding that in some way social work education was not equipping students with the appropriate skills for practice, I became determined to address this gap. For me, the issue was a not only a pedagogic one but an

ethical one as well. If educators were not teaching the appropriate skills then students, once qualified, were not in a position to help society's most vulnerable. I refused to fall into the trap of slavishly following the mantra of 'more of the same will help' and instead set my sights on developing something more radical and innovative. So, from the beginning my purpose was always to see the bigger professional picture –to enable my students to enter a profession that I love and be able to help those most in need. For me this required a more collaborative approach to curricula design that involved agency partners to develop authentic learning which envisioned connecting what students were taught to real-world issues, problems, and applications. Learning therefore would be an experience that would mirror the intricacies and ambiguities of real life, one in which students would change from passive receivers of information, to ones that can make meaning from their learning and apply it critically to their practice, whilst simultaneously learning to solve on the job problems (Foley, 2020).

### **Implementation:**

In line with Knight's (2021) guidance on developing authentic learning, I contacted two expert practitioners in the field, asking them to work in partnership with me to develop two fictitious case vignettes that I could use as a teaching aid. Alongside the practitioners, I also developed five reflective questions connected to problems built into the vignettes which were in line with National Occupational Standards and best practice guidance that students had to answer. To help answer these questions successfully, students first needed to be taught what best practice was. To teach them, I interviewed six other experts via video, putting the questions to them to get their 'expert view', which I later showed to my students in class. I also developed an extensive suite of additional resources which I made available on BB. During seminars, I put the students into what I called 'social work teams' (furthering the *practice feel*), to discuss and reflect on the learning from the videos and to begin to answer the five set questions. Students recorded their weekly discussions and observations related to the five questions on a reflective tool I developed (Appendix 5), incrementally increasing their knowledge through iterative guided and peer led discussion and refinement. Their reflections on the five questions formed the basis of what they would write in their formally assessed pieces. The assessment of this 10-credit module was via a case study, where students answered the five set questions which they had already discussed in class, which was split into two linked parts, avoiding a one point of failure - something I learned to do on PHE705:

Part 1 case study plan (25%): In week 9, students to complete a 500-word plan outlining how they propose to answer the five reflective questions from the fictitious vignette. Students received detailed feedforward that informed Part 2.

Part 2 case study (75%): In week 12 students to complete a 1500-word case study which addressed the 5 reflective questions.

Scores were combined to get an overall mark and when marked, the average score was a pleasing 69%.

### **Successes and lessons learnt:**

What was so surprising was that agency partners so willingly gave their time. I was initially apprehensive that they would not be prepared to engage with doing the interviews, producing the case vignettes etc. as it required them to take time away from their day to day work. However, they said they were surprised not to be asked more often as 'they were the ones who knew the real job,' and what skills were needed to enter the profession successfully. So, it is important to reach out and engage with our professional sectors more often. They see themselves as protectors of their profession and genuinely want to engage with academia for the betterment of the profession they love.

From engaging with them, I am now confident that what I teach is current, based on best practice and genuinely aligned with academic requirements and practice standards. Working in this collaborative way to develop authentic learning appears to pay dividends and the success of the module can be seen in appendix 1 (student evaluation of the module), appendix 2 (student representative feedback on the module), appendix 3 (agency representative feedback x 2), appendix 4 (Course Director feedback).

Lewin (1947) said that it is well known that individuals naturally resist change, as they prefer processes and strategies that they know to those that they do not. This module is run in conjunction with Ulster's sister colleges, where this module has run unchanged for many years. My biggest challenge was to convince them to change their module approach without them feeling I was criticising what had gone before. To overcome this, I encouraged them to reflect on the ethos and ambition of the five and fifty strategy, see the big picture and examine current processes with a critical eye and be open to the possibility that a new process may produce a better outcome that would ultimately help social work clients. Appealing to their *social work brain* and values has had success and I have also worked hard at involving them in the refinement of the module. Changes we foresee are further refinement of the marking rubric and possibly reducing the reflective questions to four instead of five. More radically, we might involve agency partners in some way when marking the final scripts, although this will require much more work with the university to see how this might be managed.

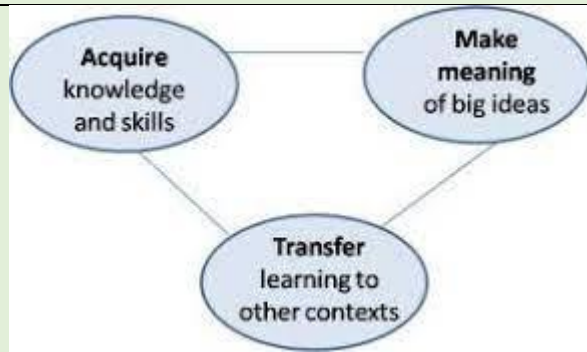
### **Transferability:**

This pedagogic approach is entirely transferrable. The approach is not subject specific, nor is it limited to professional degrees. The important point here is to remember that this is an approach to 'developing workplace readiness balanced with lifelong skills' (five & fifty). The approach is consequently and intentionally generic in orientation, with broad utility across disciplines, so long as the following eleven principles and practices are observed.

1. Vignettes need to be subject specific (e.g. nursing, engineering, law, etc.)
2. They need to be designed in partnership with industry experts.
3. They need to reflect a real-life work place issue that students can engage with.
4. Set reflective questions on the vignette that again need to be designed with industry experts (these questions will form the basis of the assessment).
5. The reflective questions need to mirror what you would want the students to do/know in real-life and need to be aligned with any NOS/regulatory frameworks/best practice etc.
6. Before assessing students' knowledge of the reflective questions, they first need to be taught what NOS/regulatory frameworks/best practice etc. are so they can respond correctly to the reflective questions set.
7. To help teach them, get industry input and this can be done via video or in-person once public health restrictions are lifted.
8. Put students into professional teams (not student groups, to give them a *work feel*) to problem solve and discuss their answers.
9. Regulate these discussions to help students critically analyse their responses, but also encourage peer feedback to further enhance understanding.
10. Provide a reflective template that students can use to record their thoughts which can be used in their assessment.
11. Don't have one point of failure. Break the assessment into two. First have a plan so you can provide feedforward. This ensures students are absorbing the teaching and can apply their knowledge to real-life practice. Then have the final assessment where students present their responses to the reflective questions set.

So, one can see how following this approach can be used in other courses. It is simply a matter of tailoring the approach to whatever subject one is teaching. This approach was influenced by McTighe (2010) and is known as the AMT model of learning summarised in figure 1.

Figure 1.



This is the first semester I've used this approach, so I was waiting to learn lessons and refine the approach before sharing it outside of social work. However, having discussed it with my social work colleagues, they see real merit in the approach and are enthusiastic about embedding it in our degree.

#### Further information:

This is an example of one of the videos. **It needs to be cut and pasted into your browser.**

[https://learning.ulster.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/pid-5699664-dt-content-rid-21037209\\_1/courses/87139\\_2021/SWK121%20F%26CC%201%281%29.mp4](https://learning.ulster.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/pid-5699664-dt-content-rid-21037209_1/courses/87139_2021/SWK121%20F%26CC%201%281%29.mp4)

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#### Appendices

Appendix 1 Student evaluation survey



Student Feedback  
Survey.html

Appendix 2 Student representative feedback on the module.



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Student%20Rep%20

Appendix 3 Agency representative feedback x 2.



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Agency%20Rep%20f



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Appendix 4 Course Director feedback.



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Course%20Director9

Appendix 5 Template for recording reflective discussions.



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Template%20to%20: