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## How Social Work Managers Can Benefit from Teaching Social Work Students in a University

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### Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank the Department for Education (England) and the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership.

## How Social Work Managers Can Benefit from Teaching Social Work Students in a University

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### Abstract

The UK Department for Education's Social Work Teaching Partnership initiative (Interface Associates UK Limited, 2020) in England created opportunities for social work practitioners to teach students at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This paper critically considers the effects of teaching on an experienced social work practitioner, co-author Selina, who is a manager in Local Authority/NHS Adult Social Care. Selina began teaching social work students after 27 years of practice. One could reasonably assume that social work students with little or no social work experience were unlikely to affect how Selina saw her role and the potential for social work practice. This was not the case. Instead, Selina's story of student classroom encounters locates her as a nomadic learner (Braidotti, 2019) in that she remains open to "becoming" a social work practitioner. Classroom encounters with students aided Selina's self-reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) as a practitioner, in turn assisting her in recalibrating the potential for social work practice. Furthermore, as Selina had some power in her role as a social work team manager, she drew on this new understanding to develop a High Street initiative to promote dementia awareness.

**Keywords:** continuous professional development; reflexive learning; nomadic learning; teaching.

## Introduction

Social work students generate benefits (e.g. offering new knowledge and enthusiasm) for practitioners in placement settings (Bogo, 2015; Hunter & Poe, 2015). We know less, however, about how practitioners might benefit and learn from teaching social work students in higher education institution (HEI) settings. While there are many learning theories (Aubrey & Riley, 2022), we propose that a poststructural lens (St. Pierre, 2000) combined with an appreciation of self-reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) may help to explain the powerful impact of classroom encounters with social work students on social work practitioners.

Poststructuralism licences us to critically consider the discursive framework influencing how we as social work professionals reflect on our work (St. Pierre, 2000). This permits us to re-examine the discursive and material elements which frame how we think about social work. As students can unintentionally question the “truth” of social work discursive elements, classroom encounters may provide an unanticipated opportunity for visiting practitioners to reconsider the purpose of social work. This is because social work students, with little or no practice experience, are located at best on the edge of a community of social work practice (Taylor, 2018) and are unlikely to be immersed in social work discourses. By asking questions in the classroom, students help to problematize (Foucault, 1998) what it means to be and to practice as a social worker. Drawing from systemic thinking, implausible or unusual statements from students may be effective ways to stimulate reflexive questions about values and practices in the minds of social workers (Tomm, 1988).

However, the poststructuralism lens is insufficient to account for how social workers may react to unusual questions posed by social work students. The concept of self-reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) is helpful because it focuses on the possibility that classroom encounters not only create opportunities for students to reflect. For Burnham (2005, p.3), self-reflexivity is a more immersive process in which a professional “makes, takes, or grasps an opportunity to observe, listen to, and questions the effects of their practice, then uses their responses to their observation/listening to decide ‘how to go on’ in...the work”. While visiting practitioners in HEI settings are objects of enquiry for social work students to explore social work identity and practice, a self-reflexive practitioner can also become an object of enquiry for themselves in the classroom. Pote et al. (2001) suggested that self-reflexivity allows practitioners to reflect on their “own constructions, functioning and prejudices”. In turn, these reflections allow for a new subjectivity to emerge, as practitioners may continue what they do, tweak their practice or

radically position themselves in terms of how they act towards themselves and others (Burnham, 2005). This new subjectivity cannot be regarded as an end state. Instead, this new subjectivity may be seen as the consequence of an ongoing process of continually becoming a subject, supported and challenged by a critique of discourses aiding this evolution (Braidotti, 2019).

Drawing on these ideas, we consider the impact of teaching encounters with students in a university environment for 'Selina', a highly experienced social work practitioner and manager. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. In a brief policy and research overview, we introduce the Social Work Teaching Partnership Policy Initiative, which has promoted stronger relationships between English HEIs and local authorities in social work education, and we consider the benefits of these links. After summarising our methodological approach, we present and discuss Selina's focus group reflections on how her teaching experiences with social work students affected her. Then, we consider why some social workers might be affected more than others by classroom encounters with social work students.

### **Teaching Partnerships, Social Workers and Social Work Students**

Social work students enrich agencies when they go on practice placements (Bogo, 2015). Students increase agency capacity to engage with clients and generate vitality and energy in placement settings (Hunter & Poe, 2015). They share their academic knowledge with their practice educators/supervisors and other social workers; new ways of critically thinking about practice can emerge from student questioning (Zendell, Fortune, Mertz, & Koelewyn, 2007). However, while we might speculate that these advantages may be present in all settings where social workers encounter social work students, less is known about whether practising social workers benefit from teaching social workers within the context of university classrooms. The recent introduction of Social Work Teaching Partnerships in England provides an opportunity to consider whether there are benefits.

The Department for Education (DfE) in England introduced Social Work Teaching Partnerships as a policy initiative in 2015 (Interface Associates UK Limited, 2020). A key driver for the Social Work Teaching Partnership (SWTP) programme was the aim to enhance partnership arrangements between HEIs and employers to produce more effective social

workers (Berry-Lound, Tate, & Greatbatch, 2016). Concerns had been raised about shortcomings in social work education (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014).

New research linked to the Teaching Partnership Initiative is now emerging in England regarding the effects of closer cooperation between HEIs and social workers in several areas. Some teaching partnerships have promoted practitioner research, leading to changes in supporting students with additional learning needs and in practice guidelines for recruiting social workers (Buck et al., 2023). Closer cooperation between agencies in teaching partnerships has also led to the re-evaluation and renegotiation of continuing professional development opportunities for social workers (Hamilton et al., 2023).

While there is little research to date on how practising social workers benefit from teaching students in HEIs, some recent findings are now emerging following the introduction of the partnerships programme. For example, for practitioners who enter HEI classrooms to teach, social work students leave them feeling affirmed about the relevance of their practice knowledge (Olivant & Greenwood, 2023). Students rate highly their up-to-date practice experience, and lecturers value how practitioners re-imagine the curriculum (Olivant & Greenwood, 2023). Furthermore, practising social workers have reflected that their HEI teaching experiences increased self-efficacy about their practice role, renewed their conviction about the potential for social work to make a constructive difference in people's lives, and reenergised their commitment to the profession (Taylor, Folarin, & Greenchester, 2023). However, relatively little is known about the effects of HEI teaching encounters with students on social work managers returning to the workplace.

## **Methods**

Practising social workers from the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership (SELTP), who were invited to teach social work students at Goldsmiths, University of London, were designated the title "teaching consultants". These social workers/teaching consultants, who worked in several South London local authorities, were offered teaching induction and paired with an academic to teach undergraduate and postgraduate social work students.

SELTP supported a small-scale qualitative study to explore teaching consultants' experience of teaching and its effects. Narrative inquiry was employed as a qualitative methodological approach (Crotty, 1998) to gather, understand and represent these experiences told through

stories in focus group interviews. Through purposive sampling (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013), teaching consultants, including Selina, were invited to participate in focus groups, which varied in size between six and fourteen people.

Willig (2012) suggests that narrative research is based on the proposition that telling stories is central to human experience; by constructing and telling stories, people make connections between experiences and come to understand them in a way that becomes meaningful for them. An epistemological assumption (Crotty, 1998) was made that teaching experiences and their effects could be communicated through stories in focus group interviews with other teaching consultants. An ontological assumption (Hammersley, 2012) was made that teaching consultants who taught social work students in the classroom could introduce the effects of these teaching experiences into their day-to-day social work practice.

Focus groups offer a number of strengths and limitations (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014), including stimulating conversation and spontaneity, and generating data more quickly and efficiently. Transcriptions were analysed using thematic and narrative analyses (Willig, 2012). Participants were given pseudonyms. After reading the transcriptions, academic partner and co-author Mark felt that Selina's rich focus group contribution warranted greater attention, as it demonstrated the positive impact of teaching social work students on her social work identity, vision and practice (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Hallmarks of narrative inquiry (Wang & Geale, 2015) shine through this account, revealing the dynamic nature of positioning (i.e. within classroom interactions) (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and the emergence of a developing subjectivity (i.e. as a social work manager) (Braidotti, 2019).

In this paper, we present Selina's perspectives from her focus group interview before offering joint reflections on her contributions. Selina's focus group contribution arguably constitutes a form of a first-person case study, as it represents a non-sequential structure used for descriptive purposes (Yin, 2009). We propose that readers are likely to be attracted to this type of account of teaching and its aftermath. This is because vernacular contributions offer an appealing and efficient way "to transform experience into knowledge in a colloquial, narrative style" (Becker & Renger, 2017). At the same time, we also offer some reflections on these teaching experiences and their effects, not least as it provided us with a generative opportunity to try to make sense of what occurred in the classroom and its aftermath.

The original ethical permission to conduct the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee, Goldsmiths, University of London, with the primary objective of ensuring that participants' identities would be safeguarded to reassure them if they offered critical reflections. In terms of presenting ideas in this paper, both authors considered the ethical benefits and risks of waiving anonymity during a discussion on our positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) in relation to the Teaching Partnership initiative. In particular, we considered our social and historical (i.e. careers to date) positioning (Packer, 2018) in relation to social work practice and teaching. Both of us are not only enthusiastic about closer HEI-practitioner cooperation; we are also appreciative of the benefits for classroom-based students that arise from discussing everyday practice knowledge (Trevithick, 2008) with practising social workers. Therefore, we have decided to waive our anonymity in presenting ideas in this paper.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to infer whether our contextual positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) in relation to teaching partnerships and what they aspire to achieve affects the extent to which this paper's findings can be considered sound (Crotty, 1998) or generalisable (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In response, we would contend that every qualitative research study is constituted by historical and social conditions which not only frame respondents' responses to constructing representations of their experiences through language but also influence a researcher's reaction to what the data can mean (Mendelson, 1979). Furthermore, we are sympathetic to the thesis that qualitative approaches should celebrate the richness of in-depth individual reflections and interpretations, while remaining cautious about generalising findings across cases (Packer, 2018). Arguably, if the research approach is mindful of and declares such boundaries, the reader is more likely to be trustworthy about the presentation and discussion of the data. With these caveats, we present and reflect on the experiences of Selina, a social work team manager, who taught social work students in classroom settings.

## **Results**

We offer Selina's focus group comments in an edited form. In reading these comments, we invite you to notice how Selina's interactions with students aided her self-reflexivity. Specifically, student encounters led Selina to consider how she practised social work and how she saw its potential.



*Results 1 – Practitioner’s Experience of Teaching Social Work Students in a HEI setting*

When the students ask me about empowerment, enablement, what are you able to do with your service users, what’s available out there. I start to think, gosh, it goes from bad to worse, in my head. I think how limited things are and available. I take it back to the team, and I’m thinking that there’s got to be a better way of dealing with this. It makes me question more...to say that we got to find a way around this...You know it’s there but when the students ask you really interesting questions, it makes me reflect on the practice that we have in our team and how we can do things differently... I know about legislation, but it is about the other more creative ways of working and the students have some great ideas, when they do workshops as well. I liked that idea. I’m going to see if I take that back somewhere. It refreshes your own practice.

*Discussion 1 – Reflections on Practitioner’s Experience of Teaching*

Selina is an extraordinary, reflective, and experienced social worker, but arguably, the day-to-day discursive formation in which she is located does not facilitate the type of reflections prompted by student questioning and interaction in an HEI classroom. Encounters with students expanded Selina's professional vista. For Selina, students were conduits for a self-reflexive critique of social work. This can happen when students, perhaps unintentionally, invite practitioners to respond to circular questions, a type of questioning that promotes discussion to consider their practice in unscripted ways.

Circular questions “seek to elicit information about relationships, differences, meanings, explanations and contexts” (Cohen & Williams, 2019). Where the pedagogical approach is more interactive, classrooms may witness a form of circular causality (Bateson & Donaldson, 1991) between social work practitioners and students, as students may ask further questions based on feedback or responses from visiting practitioners. Circular causality implies the mutuality of those present in the classroom, influencing and interacting with one another in unpredictable ways (Jackson, 1965). Arguably, a different type of circular causality might be present during a student’s practice placement, generating a different kind of mutuality, as the context and power relationships are dissimilar to those in the HEI classroom. For example, the role of practice educators/supervisors in placement settings is framed by the development and assessment of students’ capabilities against regulatory benchmarks.

Rivett and Buchmüller (2018) identified different categories of circular questions which help participants illuminate communicative, relational, and behavioural patterns. Arguably, by asking “interesting” circular questions, especially contextual and reflexive questions (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018), students not only invited Selina to make connections between concepts such as empowerment and enablement with her day-to-day practice, but also invited her to reflect on the relationship between herself and how she thinks, feels, and behaves as a social worker. Additionally, the “great ideas” offered by students can be understood as embedded suggestions (Erickson & Rossi, 1981), inviting Selina to adopt new creative ways of working.

These unexpected learning opportunities occur for social workers as social work students are less informed about the day-to-day inter-relational patterns in which they are engaged. Social work students may unintentionally pose questions which lead social workers to reflect on the nature of what they do and how they interact with others. For example, when students asked Selina how she empowered service users, they implicitly invited her to reflect on whether there might be other ways to enable them.

It may be difficult to distinguish between the trees and forests of a discursive framework (St. Pierre, 2000) in social work, especially when one is immersed in allied discursive practices on a daily basis. Therefore, circular questions promoting reflections on difference in social work practice may be more likely to be posed in the context of the HEI environment because questioning as a practice is likely to serve a different purpose in this context. However, we can also speculate that practitioners may vary in terms of their self-reflexive capacity to tolerate circular questions asked by students. Selina’s response demonstrated an openness to reflect on how she understood empowerment and what practices needed to be changed to support older people better (Pote et al., 2001).

### *Results 2 - Practitioner’s Experience after Teaching Social Work Students in a HEI setting*

**Interviewer:** Have you taken this [these ideas] forward?

**Selina:** We have linked up already with two teams in our building, so we’re doing some more closer work. So, we’re trying to do some work in the community with different shops and banks and things like that, so they become dementia aware...I’m linking up with them, so they said we were thinking about doing that, but we don’t know how to do it, so we got our heads together...We’re going to look at shops and banks and how to be a bit more dementia friendly. What to look for? If there is any safeguarding financial abuse in banks, would spot something,

if somebody was taking out £300 every day, would you not question that. So, let's tighten this up a bit more. It felt like it wasn't moving at a pace, I suddenly felt it needed to be moved at only because I was fired up by what the students were saying, so we are speeding up on that as well.

It's really interesting how it can make you - It just makes me revisit how much I love doing this job. And why I came into it in the first place, and it is to make a difference, yes, it is about social justice, yes, let's do something about. It was MA students that had these lovely conversations about what it must be like to go into a care home with somebody with dementia, a lack of resources, what's in the community, there's got to be something else'.

### *Discussion 2 – Reflections on Practitioner's Experience after Teaching*

Classroom encounters with social work students generated opportunities for Selina to reconsider the significance of the societal context in which social work service users were located, leading her to repurpose the practice of social work. Classroom encounters led Selina to recalibrate how she defined and identified solutions to a particular social problem. Students encouraged her to think about the impact of financial abuse operating at a meso-level on the lives of her service users and on what she and her team could do better to support them because of these meso-level effects. This led her to think about whether there was a role for community and commercial organisations to become more sensitive to individuals living with a dementia diagnosis.

Student classroom encounters promoted unexpected opportunities for Selina to review the discursive practices of social work (Foucault, 2006). By asking circular “contextual questions” (Tomm, 1988), students invited Selina to reflect on the “patterns that connect” her with different elements of her working life – the client, financial abuse, community, risk, and the role of social work. Through student questioning, Selina was invited to reflect on how the discursive practices of social work both ordered and formed objects (Foucault, 1972), including how she defined her capabilities and remit as a practitioner.

For (Foucault, 2006, p. 11), discursive practices are “characterized by the demarcation of a field of objects, by the definition of a legitimate perspective for a subject of knowledge, by the setting of norms for elaborating concepts and theories”. Arguably, until she encountered students in the classroom, Selina operated at a micro-level orientation to envisage certain objects, such as the problem of dementia and how she could respond to it. Reflexive questions

from students led Selina to reflect on how she thought about dementia, what she could do about dementia, and how she could communicate with others to influence how they could respond to dementia. In other words, there was an ontological shift (Foucault, 1984) in how Selina saw herself as a social work practitioner following her classroom encounters, as she critiqued what she could say, think and do as a social work manager.

If we can envisage the classroom as a sub-system of a wider ecological system (Bateson, 1972), then it opens the possibility that the effects of classroom interactions may be introduced into a manager's day-to-day working life in unforeseen ways, as Selina demonstrated. By immersing herself in a teaching role within another subsystem, Selina was afforded an opportunity to reimagine the positioning of the elements within her day-to-day work system. Simply put, Selina expanded her focus to consider operating more at a meso level in social work, reconnecting her vision of social work to values of social justice.

### **Unintended Policy Consequences Aiding Practitioner Self-Reflexivity**

A “period of unparalleled change” (Forrester, 2016) has occurred in recent years in English social work education. The Social Work Teaching Partnership Initiative is an example of this change and lends itself to analysis in terms of understanding the drivers for its introduction (Poppo & Leighninger, 2004). Berry-Lound et al. (2016) stated that one key driver was to enhance partnership arrangements between HEIs and social work employers to produce better-prepared and more effective social workers. Through the Teaching Partnership Initiative, closer relationships between HEIs and social work employers have been forged in different ways (Buck et al., 2023; Hamilton et al., 2023; Holland, 2010; Olivant & Greenwood, 2023), including inviting practitioners to share their practice knowledge in HEI classrooms (Taylor et al., 2023). The teaching partnership policy rationale is clearly defined, but what remains uncertain, as with any policy initiative, is whether the policy's implementation, such as greater participation by practising social workers in classroom teaching, might result in unintended policy outcomes (Chapin, 2017).

Selina's teaching experience suggests that unintended and positive policy outcomes occurred. Practitioners who teach social work students in HEI classrooms can also benefit from these experiences and can share these benefits when they return to their daily workplaces. Second-order cybernetics (Atkinson & Heath, 1990), a key concept in later systems thinking, helps us

understand why practitioners are affected by encounters with students in classrooms. Second-order cybernetics would profess that it would be difficult for practitioners to remain detached and independent observers in the classroom, unaffected by those whom they teach.

Practitioners like Selina and students bounce ideas from each other to explore, challenge, and reimagine possibilities for social work practice. Classroom spaces witness circular causality (Bateson & Donaldson, 1991) between social work practitioners and students. By asking circular questions, students invite practitioners to reflect on the discursive formation of social work, in other what are its “objects, subjects, concepts, and theories” (Packer, 2018) and can these be rearranged in different ways.

However, for circular questions to be reflexive and generative, leading to the emergence of an evolving social work manager (Braidotti, 2019), the interactive process with students may depend on the practitioner remaining tolerant of discomfort and open to change. We see this tension with Selina, as she hesitantly describes the reordering of her interpretation of a discursive social work formation (Foucault, 1972) in her first focus group reflection. Specifically, she refers to a rearrangement of certain discursive objects – question more, legislation, team, difference, creative ways of working, and reflection – indicating how complex the process can be in forming a new subjectivity as a social work manager. By doing so, Selina is demonstrating that she thinking, doing and talking about social work in a different way, revising her ontological awareness about the potential for social work (Foucault, 1984). Arguably, Selina demonstrates the practice of nomadic learning (Braidotti, 2019) in that she is able to tolerate the flux of challenges from students to long-established approaches to social work, while also negotiating different interpersonal power relations in subsystems as diverse as the classroom, workplace, and High Street.

## **Conclusion**

Social work students are arguably in the liminal stage of learning (Land, Meyer, & Baillie, 2010) and located on the fringes of a community of social work practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Simultaneously, as students, they are subject to an educational discourse permitting them to ask certain types of questions in an HEI classroom which they might be less able to ask in a placement setting. Therefore, the HEI environment, through encounters with students in classrooms, can offer social work practitioners an unorthodox and unpredictable invitation

to review their interpretation of discursive social work formations. This can lead to the emergence of new subjectivities regarding how social workers see their role, how they can practise, and how social work can transform the lives of others.

Nonetheless, we are also aware that Selina's experiences cannot be generalised to all practitioners who experience teaching, as some HEI teaching encounters may produce fewer self-reflexive opportunities. Additionally, not all practitioners will be receptive and open to reflecting on the constituents of social work, as Selina was in her classroom encounters. They may not want to or might not be able to grasp opportunities to become nomadic learners or review the potential of social work.

However, in terms of our researcher-practitioner positioning (Curtis, Murphy, & Shields, 2013), we believe that HEI teaching opportunities offer professional developmental benefits to social workers. This is because the discursive formation of Higher Education may accommodate more generative interactions than may be permitted in the local authority environment. Where the HEI classroom permits students to ask circular questions, especially those contextual and reflexive in nature, it is likely that self-reflexive opportunities will be created for visiting social workers to think again about social work and its possibilities. Therefore, we would recommend that any social work policy initiative encouraging closer interactions between different agencies consider the possibilities of systemic, interrelational, and multidirectional effects arising from promoting closer cooperation.

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