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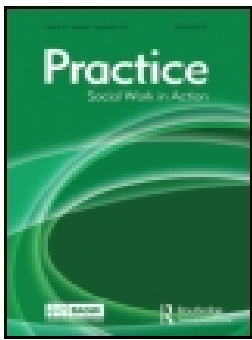
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Published version

BASTIN, Ruth and JOUBERT, Marelize (2021). Social Work Skills Days–‘Keeping It Real’. Practice.

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Practice

Social Work in Action

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpra20>

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To cite this article: Ruth Bastin & Marelize Joubert (2021): Social Work Skills Days – ‘Keeping It Real’, Practice, DOI: [10.1080/09503153.2021.1954152](https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2021.1954152)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2021.1954152>



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Published online: 17 Aug 2021.



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Social Work Skills Days - 'Keeping It Real'

Ruth Bastin and Marelize Joubert

As part of the South Yorkshire Teaching Partnership, a part time secondment of a Practice Consultant was made to the Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). The remit was to contribute to teaching from a practitioner's viewpoint. One example of curriculum development was working with the Social Work Skills lead on the report writing and court skills days offered on the BA Social Work course. The skills days on report writing and court skills, had previously been delivered separately. By using the same case study and linking the report writing to the evidence submitted as part of the court bundle, students could see the importance of ensuring their writing was clear, factual, and demonstrated analysis of the case. This strengthened their written and legal skills. When students were presented with a full court bundle on the same case, they could compare their writing to the examples in the bundle. This enabled them to critically reflect on their own writing and whether it would stand up to scrutiny during cross-examination. It offered students the opportunity to learn to write for different purposes and reflect on the tools and techniques of writing and developing their professional voice.

Keywords: Report writing; court skills; reflection; social work education; teaching partnership

Introduction

How do social work students learn best in applying factual and practice knowledge during skills days? By giving them the opportunity to put their learning into practice (Race 2014). When Social Workers write a report, they do it for a reason, sometimes to present it at Court. Sheffield Hallam University delivers 30 skills days, including one on Report Writing and one on Court Skills for the third year BA Social Work students. By linking the two days, the learning became more realistic, offered students the opportunity to critically analyse their own competence, and facilitated a reflective space (Osterman and Kottkamp 2004). This case study explores how.

What We Did

The skills days had previously been delivered using different case studies. Working together, the Social Work Skills Lead and a Practice Consultant on secondment from the local authority, developed the case material so it could be used on both days. The report writing day was timed to run first and students had the opportunity to work on the conclusion and recommendations for a report on a child protection case. This was then used in the court skills day.

What We Found

By using the same case study and linking the report writing to the evidence in the court bundle, students could see the importance of ensuring their writing was clear, factual, and demonstrated analysis of the case demonstrating accountability and professional responsibility (Jones 2016). This strengthened their written communication and legal skills, important in terms of social work activity, but also for the people who use social work services (Constable 2013). Students stated:

‘The court room skills days prepared me for the realities of children and families work’ and ‘It helps me to understand how important my analysis is when writing my court statement’.

Without the link, students had struggled to be critical of the reports they produced. Although students were offered the opportunity to submit their reports for feedback after the session, few chose to do this. It takes a brave student to expose their work, particularly when there are no academic credits for doing so! However, when students were presented with a full court bundle on the same case, they could compare their writing to the examples in the bundle. This enabled them to critically reflect on their own writing and whether it would stand up to scrutiny during cross-examination. Improving social work analysis, has been highlighted by numerous authors, including in serious case reviews (Wonacott 2014) and case law (Re B-S 2013). As well as the opportunity to practice skills and receive feedback, the exercise highlighted why report writing skills are important and encouraged them to improve, also important for successful learning (Race 2014).

A further element for successful learning is ‘digesting’ the learning (Race 2014). A reflective discussion exercise was added to the end of the report writing day to provide a formal point for students in small groups to critically analyse their written work. Students are asked to think about how they interpreted the information they were presented with, and to identify differences between the report writing attempts of the group members. The use of such discussions is suggested to benefit student understanding of the complex ‘normative judgement processes in social work’ (Roets et al. 2017). Evaluating

the skills days afterwards gives students an additional opportunity to digest the learning and offer a reflective account.

The two skills days offered students the opportunity to learn to write for different purposes and reflect on the tools and techniques of writing and developing their professional voice. One student commented:

I felt unsure when writing the analysis around the language and terminology as I had to think about how this would make the parents feel when they were to read the information I had provided. It is important to write the negative information as it is factual, however it is important to recognise this needs to be done sensitively.

They emphasised the importance of pre-proceeding preparations as part of the PLO timeframe, and offered a safe learning space for students to learn from each other and reflect on their capabilities and knowledge prior to their final placement.

The court skills day is further enhanced by taking place in the SHU Moot Court, and although plans for students to attend a tour round the local Family Hearing Centre and meet with a Judge were postponed due to concerns about rising Covid-19 infection rates, it is hoped this will be a feature of future delivery. The court skills days are currently virtual and in line with current practices within Family Court to provide a real-life experience to the students. Law students in their final year also attend to support social work students in understanding the role of the legal team and learn with and from each other to establish themselves as equal partners in the court setting. This provides the opportunity to influence events and make a difference to the experience of service users (Seymour and Seymour 2011).

In terms of experiential learning at its most basic, the two days provided the opportunity for action (report writing), reflection (reflecting on their writing and that of others) abstract conceptualisation (thinking about how their report compared to the court bundle) and experimentation (how to use these skills in the real-life court room and in their future career).

Conclusions

Why is this piece of work relevant for a special issue on the work of teaching partnerships? The Practice Consultant secondment was funded through the South Yorkshire Teaching Partnership, demonstrating the value of the pracademic voice in Social Work Education (Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths 2020), and ensuring the learning environment is 'keeping it real'.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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