

Collaborative Experiential Learning (CEL) Model: supporting students and apprentices to develop knowledge and skills in practice learning

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Students on practice placements undertake a range of learning activities and are expected to reflect independently on their strengths and areas for development. This is often supplemented by reflective discussion in supervision and/or informally with a mentor. The uniqueness of this study was that it was one of the first research studies to include *both* supervision participants' perspectives and one of the first that observed social work student supervision, which enriched the significance of the findings.

The presentation will present a model of collaborative experiential learning (CEL) that outlines the importance of diligent preparation for and collaborative participation within supervision by both participants to reduce the inherent power differential. Whilst this model is designed for use in social work student supervision, it can be applied to any experiential learning, for example practice placements, apprenticeships or mentoring models that require the development of knowledge and skills through practice.

Full paper

Introduction

The notion that reflective discussion enhances individual learning is not new (Argyris and Schon, 1974). Reflective discussion can create a greater sense of connectedness between participants, reduce power differentials (Hair, 2014), and stimulate a greater sense of openness to learning (Fook, 2015). Reflective discussion is effective because

“reflection is most profound when it is done aloud with the aware attention of another person”.
(Knights, 1985, p85)

Previous research advocated for the use of collaborative social work student supervision (Lefevre, 2005, Miehl et al, 2013). Indeed, students preferred a mentor who balanced both direction and independence and who enabled them to show initiative within supervision (Lazar and Eisikovits, 1997). In contrast to the wealth of knowledge in relation to individual reflection, there is a smaller body

of knowledge in relation to reflective discussion in social work student supervision. However, further research was recommended to explore how students develop knowledge and skills within social work student supervision (Gardiner, 1988, Kanno and Koeske, 2010, Brodie and Williams, 2013, Rawles, 2021).

Method

The doctoral research aim was to consider what contributes to students' development of knowledge and skills in social work student supervision. This is a protected time for students to explore their experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) from their practice within placement. Nevertheless, this is undertaken in a private space, so has rarely been subject to scrutiny. This was one of the first research studies to include *both* supervision participants' perspectives and that observed social work student supervision, giving it a unique data perspective that enriched the significance of the findings. It gained ethical approval and required a reflective research approach. The methodology was Narrative Inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), which enabled the use of a range of data collection methods. Eight social work student supervisions were observed and audio-recorded, and each supervision participant (mentor and student) interviewed immediately afterwards to develop a significant data corpus.

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) identified that where supervision participants had a diligent approach, which included being committed and organised, it enabled collaborative social work student supervision, which reduced the inherent power differential and enabled the development of students' social work knowledge and skills.

Collaborative Experiential Learning (CEL) Model

A model of collaborative experiential learning (CEL) (figure 1) (Beesley, 2023) was developed that incorporated the core themes of diligence and collaboration. It illustrates the importance of collaborative turn-taking in supervision so that students are empowered to share their ideas and reflections. It is here that the importance of students' diligent pre-supervision reflection is identified, as without it, students' initial contributions will be limited thus restricting the foundation upon which to develop collaborative reflective discussion. Mentors develop students' ideas further through the use of both open questions to develop understanding and provision of practice wisdom and theory to develop knowledge. Again, diligent pre-supervision preparation here aids mentors' collaborative contributions as it enables effective, knowledgeable, and student-centred contributions that engage the student successfully.

Collaborative reflective discussion was found to reduce the power dynamic for the student yet use expert and referent power (French and Raven, 1959) to engage and motivate students. However, students need to remain diligently engaged in the collaborative, reflective discussion, as they are not being told the answers but instead supported to elaborate on their initial reflections and identify enhanced knowledge which can be applied to their social work skill development.

"I think that she's just not judgemental and she helps me to weigh things up from both perspectives and kind of put things into a like a, like a sort of jigsaw puzzle, putting the pieces into where they need to go. She never tells me the answers but guides me, prompts me to look further than what I can see, makes me go a bit further". S-Pat

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