

The Impact on Two Practising Social Workers Who Taught Social Work Students in a University Setting

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Abstract

Social Work Teaching Partnerships were developed in 2015 by the Department for Education in England to foster stronger links between social work employers and educators to improve the quality of social work graduates leaving universities. The initiative resulted in practising social workers entering universities in greater numbers to teach social work students. This paper focuses on how two practicing social workers – Elizabeth and Alex - were affected by teaching social work students in a university setting. The paper presents the practitioners' reflections of teaching and its effects through short vignettes before examining these reflections by drawing on critical social theories. Social work teaching partnerships, which encourage practitioners to spend time as social work teachers in the University classroom, can produce unanticipated, positive effects for these practitioners. If the university classroom is seen as a "field" (Bourdieu, 1988), it can facilitate social workers to become objects of knowledge for social work students *and* to themselves. Interacting with students created opportunities for Elizabeth and Alex to reflect on their social work values, knowledge base, role, and practice. By asking unexpected questions in the classroom, students problematize (Foucault, 1998) what it means to be and to practice as a social worker. Consequently, classroom interactions with social work students can lead practitioners to think about how they would like to work. Elizabeth's and Alex's reflections of their classroom experiences may also help to inform and strengthen workforce retention policies in social work, as their self-efficacy increased and new possibilities for social work practice emerged.

Keywords: *social work teaching partnerships, continuous professional development, reflective case study narratives*

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Introduction

Southwark Council, Lewisham Council, the Royal Borough of Greenwich and Goldsmiths, University of London came together to form the South-East London Teaching Partnership (SELTP) in 2015. Funding for SELTP was provided through the social work teaching partnership initiative ([Department for Education and Department of Health](#), 2015). The rationale for creating teaching partnerships was the belief that the quality of social work education could be improved if universities and local authorities worked more closely together to deliver social work education in the classroom. SELTP created an initiative for practising social workers, working in different roles and at different organisational levels, to teach BA, MA, and Step Up social work students at Goldsmiths. Step Up to Social Work is a 14-month postgraduate intensive full-time social work qualifying programme, funded by the Department for Education in England ([Department for Education](#), 2021a). Social workers who taught at Goldsmiths were designated the role title 'teaching consultants'.

The paper initially considers why social workers and their practice might be affected by teaching social work students in a university environment. The paper then outlines the methodological approach undertaken, before presenting the reader with first-person reflections from the two social workers. Specifically, the paper presents reflective case study narratives of two 'teaching consultants' - Alex and Elizabeth - who were invited to reflect on their teaching experiences and the consequences of these experiences for their social work identities, values and practice.

Alex's and Elizabeth's reflections are then discussed by drawing on reflective and social theories. The paper concludes by briefly considering the policy implications arising from the teaching consultant initiative, especially around workforce retention.

Evidence and Possibilities for Social Workers to Learn from Social Work Students

We know the benefits, for example, generating new ideas; questioning practice; sharing theoretical and research knowledge ([Bogo](#), 2015) that social work students bring to social work agencies and practitioners while on their practice placements. However, we know little about the rewards, which might accrue to social work practitioners from teaching social work students in the University classroom. These benefits might not amount to much if teaching is seen as a unidirectional, unreflective activity in which social workers simply discuss their working lives. However, effective teaching depends on critical reflection ([Cimer et al.](#), 2013), and for [Fook](#) (2015), critical reflection consists of two elements, both of which might be taxing the social worker before she enters the classroom to teach.

First, preparing to teach may facilitate practitioners to reflect on the constituents (e.g., legislation; procedures; linking theory to practice; practice wisdom) of social work practice. Preparing to teach, in other words, invites social workers to think about what they do, how they do it and why they do it. Second, according to [Fook](#) (2015), critical reflection can make power relations more visible, not only in terms of a professional's relationship to versions of themselves over time but also in terms of how they see their positioning in relation to others within existing social structures. Seen through an anthropological lens ([Eriksen](#), 2015, p.63), preparing to teach social work students about social work may afford practitioners an opportunity to reflect upon the status and role aspects of being a social worker in relation to others (e.g., managers, colleagues, clients, and other professionals).

However, even if we accept [Fook's](#) (2015) explanatory model, it does not sufficiently explain why a university setting might offer rich benefits for social work practitioners who undergo a teaching experience. In workplace supervision, social workers are invited to reflect on their work activities by their managers. However, since social work agencies and higher education institutions comprise different forms of social life, other work reflections might arise from teaching students in the classroom. While social workers might prepare and reflect on what knowledge they want to impart before they enter the classroom, the University environment licences the formulation of unusual or unfamiliar questions, opening the possibility of disrupting what professionals intended to say and how they wanted to present themselves, through an exchange which promotes deep learning and critical reflexivity ([Clare](#), 2007). The

social context in which practitioners find themselves with students should therefore not be underestimated.

This is where [Bourdieu's](#) (1988) concepts of habitus and field may be helpful in that they permit us to imagine that students approach their learning experiences in ways reflecting the mental and cultural structures of the university. While power differentials do exist between social work students and qualified professionals in placement settings (e.g., [Parker, 2010](#); [Perry & Hughes, 2021](#)) a key element of the University environment is that it permits students to ask questions in a space, which is quite different to student-professional encounters in a social work placement setting. For [Bourdieu](#) (1988, p.784) the university classroom represents a field – a structured space – which frames the social work students' habitus in terms of how they behave in the classroom. This can be illustrated by comparing elements of the social worker-student dynamic within the classroom to the placement setting, opening the possibility for qualitatively different reflections to emerge for the practitioner from classroom encounters. For example, students are usually organised as a collective learning group in a university setting – interactions lead to other questions emerging with the potential for ideas to bounce off each other - and this is very different to the placement environment where practice educators marshal learning. During placements, [Perry and Hughes, \(2021, p.1051\)](#) note that “many findings identify the centrality of the practice educator relationship to students' satisfaction and perception of placement in addition to successful learning”.

Additionally, while some social work students find it harder to speak in large student groups ([Olivier et al., 2017](#)), the classroom space can be organised in a way where it can feel more permissible for students to ask questions of powerful visiting lecturers. Here the focus more on the practitioners' own experiences and less on the students' – another significant difference to what happens during a supervision session in a social work placement setting.

The HEI environment therefore opens a space for a social work practitioner to critically reflect as a visiting lecturer on their everyday social work practice. For Foucault ([Packer, 2018, p456](#)) knowledge about a profession such as social work, is constituted by more than what can be known but also by how a social worker sees themselves and what they can do. By considering themselves as an object of knowledge, in terms of what they know, their identity and practice, the experience of teaching can lay the groundwork for a new subjectivity to emerge for the practitioner in terms of how they see the potential for social work. In the classroom a social worker may be called upon “to observe himself, analyse himself, interpret himself, recognise himself as a domain of possible knowledge” ([Foucault, 1984](#)). Drawing from [Bourdieu](#) (1988, p.782), classroom encounters between students and visiting practitioners as lecturers may invoke the emergence of dialectic between objectivity (e.g., how am I seen by another as an “other”) and subjectivity (e.g., this is what constitutes me as a social worker) with the possibility of a new habitus emerging for practitioners. For [Fook](#) (2015, p.441) this ontological reframing is evident by an increased critique of underpinning assumptions related to practice frameworks and prevailing power relations, which ‘can provide a platform for transformative social action’ within social work practice. Therefore, unusual questions raised in the classroom may lead to moments for unexpected critical reflection and action by the social work practitioner.

Methods

Reflective case study narratives ([Becker & Renger, 2017](#)) offer a useful way to empower practitioners to articulate their feelings and reflections about these new experiences. Presenting a first-person account of events is also likely to engage the reader as it offers an effective means ‘to transform experience into knowledge in a colloquial, narrative style’ ([Becker and Renger, 2017, p.138](#)) and increase the readers' willingness to reflect on the issues raised by the practitioners. Vernacular writing is likely to connect more with the reader.

A successful ethical approval form was submitted to the University to undertake research on the experiences of teaching consultants in the classroom. Two practitioners were invited to write down their reflections about their teaching experiences and the effects that these experiences had on them and on their practice. The practitioners were identified through relationships built up during the teaching partnership initiative with the academic co-writer of this article. The invitation to practitioners specified a

word limit of approximately 750 words because the intention was to keep their reflections succinct, often a challenge in presenting reflective and engaging case narratives (Brandon, 2014). Yin (2009) proposes several formats in terms of presenting case studies; one of these is a non-sequential structure used for descriptive purposes and this structure best describes the presentation of the practitioners' reflections. Both participants were offered the same instructions for writing their accounts and what is presented in the findings section are their first-person unedited responses (except for clarity purposes) to this instruction. The accounts of both practitioners were analysed using basic thematic analysis, keeping in mind that social workers who teach in a University setting may experience new insights into the constituents of social work, such as what it means to be and to practice as social workers. Both practitioners had an opportunity to comment on this analysis, which is presented in the discussion part of this paper.

Finally, both practitioners should be applauded for presenting their accounts. The way they do so is revealing, powerful, humbling, and illuminative. Reading their accounts offers a powerful testimony of their teaching experiences and arguably adds a rich and thick qualitative contribution to understanding the impact of teaching partnership initiative on practising social workers who taught in the classroom.

Elizabeth and Alex have moved on to different roles and organisations since writing their testimonies. Both have extensive experiences of working across a range of roles in social work practice.

Social Workers' Reflective Accounts of Teaching Experiences and Their Effects

Reflective Case Study A - Elizabeth

Walking into my first session as a Teaching Consultant, I felt like an imposter. I questioned myself on my knowledge. How could I, as *just* a Social Worker, teach anyone anything? I was certain that I was going to be discovered at any given moment. I had premonitions that a student would stand up during one of my teaching segments and declare that I was 'winging it'.

Luckily, the opposite occurred, and the students seemed enthralled in my stories of frontline Social Work. Many of the questions the students posed were of the practicalities of the role and how I had managed uncomfortable situations with service users. I found that I was able to answer such questions fluidly providing countless examples from practice.

I have found delivering sessions on anti-discriminatory practice a deeply cathartic experience. I have been able to use my teaching platform to identify with the student experience. I shared with them that as a newly qualified Social Worker I felt I had to do away with my own identity as working-class black woman and take on a 'cloak' of professionalism. This was due to my experiences of being educated in white institutions and secondly being part of a social care workforce where the management team were predominately white. I subconsciously absorbed the message there was no room for me to be authentic. However, I now understand and value my 'otherness' as a strength when engaging with service users and their complex circumstances. I felt I was able to use the teaching partnership as an honest reflection of how through due process, I was able to be comfortable in my personal and professional identities and negotiate these statuses when working with service users whose backgrounds differed from my own. The teaching partnership has enabled me to share and discuss these quandaries and provide tools to the next generation of Social Workers to navigate such issues. In addition, I am of the view the role of a Teaching Consultant is pertinent, as it provides 'real time' insight into how Social Workers are perceived in the ever-changing socio-political climate.

I felt that the sessions have also validated my professional identity and reminded me that I am an experienced and skilled practitioner and should lean on this. It has also enhanced my confidence as a practitioner to take on more complex work and have the gumption to make difficult decisions within my casework.

Moreover, the teaching partnership has changed my perspective on the discipline that is Social Work. Entering into the teaching partnership, I realised I had taken a passive approach in my role as a Social

Worker. I assessed using pre-established legal frameworks, I followed best practice guidelines and hoped that I was able to make some lasting positive change to the service users I encountered.

However, I now see Social Work has an ever-evolving subject that requires the knowledge, insight, and experiences of those who practice the discipline. I believe this is essential, if the subject is to continue to be a relevant driver for social change within society.

Therefore, I now view myself as a pioneer who is continuously trialling various Social Work techniques and theories. Whilst simultaneously evaluating their effectiveness within the theoretically safe and nurturing grounds of an educational establishment.

I now take more time to actively reflect on all my interactions with the service users and find ways to incorporate lessons learnt into future teaching sessions.

Nonetheless, the dual role of practitioner and teacher has an array of complexities, as I often feel that I am in a cycle of endlessly critiquing my own practice. I feel a new sense of duty to ensure that my practice is beyond reproach. I now fear becoming a hypocrite that teaches best practice to students but does not do so in within my own work.

I have attempted to reconcile these feelings by acknowledging my best will differ from day to day depending on caseload, management support and allocated time.

I am often asked if I would go into teaching - as if the role of a Teaching Consultant does not reflect such a practice. I now inform enquirers that to teach, one must be committed to continuous learning and development. I feel that I require the active role as a practitioner to feed into my ability to effectively teach students, thus bridging the gap between Social Work theory and practice.

Reflective Case Study B - Alex

I have worked for a London local authority for ten years in different roles, in a mental health hospital social work team as a Care Coordinator in an Early Intervention Service and in the borough's out of hours Emergency Duty Team. When I heard about the South East London Teaching Partnership (SELTP) and the goals of the partnership, I felt inspired and motivated and wanted to become involved. I did my training at Goldsmiths, and I reflected on my time as student there and recognised the value of practitioners in social work education. I was able to commit time to SELTP as I work out of hours. I have always loved learning and am actively involved in my own continuous professional development and the opportunity to return to the classroom and to learn from students was an exciting and motivating opportunity. I have undertaken a number of teaching and teaching-related tasks, which have included co-teaching with social work academics on different subjects (e.g., LGBTQ+ and Social Work; Mental Capacity Act; Mental Health Social Work; Law and legal thresholds and Introduction to Social Policy, peer-group reflective learning).

For teaching, I prepared anonymised, real-life examples of practice, which helped to bring social work to life. I discussed how I approached my work with cases by reflecting on how legislation, theory, procedures, and ways of working came together. I brought it back to the European Convention on Human Rights and got really passionate about this. Students did not know the history of where human rights legislation came from, and how that is a grounding, and I'm looking at my work as a social worker, being a social worker from a human rights perspective, and that's really good because you get re-energised into why you are doing this in the first place. My insights and reflections were appreciated by students in their feedback, as they came to understand how I work and why I do what I do, and, crucially, to imagine themselves in the role of a social worker.

In terms of my own practice, teaching has given me an opportunity to reflect once again on the application of theory to practice. For example, revisiting fundamental theories around power and care and control and linking to my practice as an Approved Mental Health Professional. My experience and understanding of the nuances, practicalities and complexities of the work has led me to a deeper

appreciation of theory and research. Conversations with social work students benefited me and improved my work. Describing to students the ways in which I use my Self in my social work has enabled me to have a better understanding of my own social work identity and how this intersects with other parts of my identity. In practice, this has meant I am more relaxed, confident, and true to myself as part of my work.

I have more energy and enthusiasm for my role and in my work – it is invigorating being around the Goldsmiths campus and working with keen and enthusiastic students who ask questions and challenge how I think about things. Students have a thirst for knowledge beyond ‘what we do’ to ‘why we do it’. Some of my colleagues are also Teaching Consultants and our team meetings benefit from discussions about what we’ve done at Goldsmiths – examples include discussions about race and mental health in the context of the law and considering thresholds for social work intervention. Our involvement with the university has renewed our enthusiasm for social work and what it can achieve. This is because you can see the students learn, develop, and grow and you see them on placement doing excellent work with service users and bringing their energy and enthusiasm to the profession and making a real difference in peoples’ lives.

The experience I have had as a Teaching Consultant makes me want to continue to work for a local authority that has links with a Teaching Partnership, as I think the link with the university is so important and it shows that my employer values my experience and my input to the next generation and they are engaged in developing the profession I think it is a really positive part of working for Lewisham and one of the reasons I stay working for the borough.

I now have a broader perspective of social work and increased knowledge about the areas beyond what I do and where I work. My confidence has increased, and I have started to avail of education and training opportunities as well as being elected to the British Association of Social Work’s (BASW) England Committee and getting involved in the BASW London branch.

Discussion

At one level, classrooms are places where teachers and students interact to produce learning ([Komaraju et al.](#), 2010). However, seen more critically, a classroom setting is also a place with a function, both of which are elements of a discursive formation ([Foucault](#), 1972), with discursive opportunities varying between places. The discursive formations of higher education and social work are different, opening up possibilities for different kinds of questioning or ‘problematizations’ ([Foucault](#), 1998) to emerge about the possibilities of social work. Places such as classrooms are not sites where humans just perform, but are also catalysts and products of social action, in which humans are provided ‘a sensory experience that can both orientate and alienate’ ([Luhman & Cunliffe](#), 2013, p.135). Universities can generate discursive practices where social workers interact with social work students to explain, justify, and reflect on practice in ways different to what happens in social workers’ everyday lives. Classrooms are therefore, not impassive sites, but places that cultivate particular kinds of questioning, opening possibilities for different kinds of reflections and practices to emerge for the visiting social worker. Students in the classroom pose questions, which problematize what it means to think, be and act as a social worker. As a result, social workers who teach students at university may be rewarded with opportunities to reflect on their self-efficacy as professionals. These opportunities to reflect about the constituents of what it means to be a social worker can even loom before the social worker enters the classroom.

Elizabeth initially described feeling like an ‘imposter’ in taking on the teaching consultant role, suspicious about the depth of her knowledge and scared that students would reveal her inadequacies. Initial fears were dispelled as she successfully conveyed stories about her practice, a powerful learning tool to relay practice knowledge. Interactions with students revealed to her how much she knew about working through challenging situations with service users. Their teaching experiences led Elizabeth and Alex to acknowledge their professional capabilities, predicated on their extensive social work experience. Teaching revealed how much they understood the complexity of social work practice and led to increased confidence to take on more complex work or additional responsibilities. Teaching provided a confidence booster. Elizabeth and Alex assessed their worth as objects of knowledge and realised they were worthy, yet the knowledge they know goes well beyond social work knowledge or the curriculum. For example,

there is a sort of emerging craftsmanship present for Alex, as she synthesises her academic and practice knowledge (Trevithick, 2008). Teaching allows Alex to return to theories of power, care and control, enabling her to generate new insights by relating this academic understanding to her practice as an Approved Mental Health Professional.

Perhaps it is something to do with social work as a profession and/or with Elizabeth and Alex as individuals, but both their reflective case study narratives reveal how interactions with students led them to develop a greater sense of self-belief about their capabilities as social workers. For Foucault (Packer, 2018, p456) knowledge about a discipline or a way of life such as social work is revealed not just by what we know, but also by ways of acting and being a social worker. What is revealing about Elizabeth's account is how her emotions and identity came under the spotlight when she was in the classroom. Therefore, when Elizabeth enters the classroom, she becomes an object of knowledge (Foucault, 1984) not only for students but also to herself. What constitutes this object is also interesting. It is formed by what she understands as social work – revealed through Elizabeth's stories – and by her taking stock of her identity and values. Elizabeth examined how her professional and personal identities collide, creating a space to reflect on presence of intersectionality in her formation and the presence of structural barriers which impacted on her capability to be an "authentic" black working-class female social worker. Similarly, classroom encounters provided an opportunity for Alex to consider how one's identity as a social worker sits alongside other parts of one's identity to form one's self-constitution alongside other parts of her identity, with all going into the mix to form her self-constitution. For Alex and Elizabeth, encounters in the classroom provided a space to reflect on the changing nature of their professional identity in terms of their professional journey to date while creating opportunities to define what might happen in the future.

In particular, the classroom was not just about examining who they were; the classroom provided an opportunity to recalibrate their ambition for social work. Teaching afforded Alex an opportunity to reflect on the significance of human rights legislation, and reconnecting her to values, which had led her to become a social worker in the first place. The consequences of teaching for Elizabeth revealed itself in terms of reshaping her professional beliefs about the potential of social work as a discipline and reimagining her own values and visions as a practitioner (e.g., an active rather than passive engagement as a social worker). Teaching facilitates Elizabeth and Alex to get in touch with specific elements of critical reflection in social work practice (Fook, 2015), namely they are questioning the assumptions underpinning their practice and how power is distributed. By doing so, Elizabeth and Alex are reconstituting the ontological possibilities for social work practice.

Stepping out of their everyday working environment enabled Alex and Elizabeth to reflect on their political and ethical stance in relation to social work and the possibilities of social work practice. The discursive formation of the classroom setting generated discursive practices for Alex and Elizabeth to think critically about power relations in their work. Rather than just passively applying policy guidelines and legislative frameworks, Elizabeth wants to become a more powerful and pioneering practitioner to make a positive change in society.

This ontological recalibration opens a door to transformative practice actions. Evidence of different ways to practice emerge after Alex and Elizabeth return to their local authority settings. Alex acknowledged improvements in her work and the benefits of team discussions. There was a renewed focus to her work, and she embodied enthusiasm and confidence. Alex and Elizabeth also felt more strongly about the benefits of reflection. Alex thought more about the connections between theory and practice. Elizabeth reflected more about her interactions with service users. Alex revealed a desire to act as a sincere and authentic practitioner.

Conclusion

The two reflective narratives reveal that a government initiative promoting quality within social work education (Interface Associates UK Limited, 2020) can result in unanticipated outcomes. Practicing social workers who teach social work students in a university setting also benefit and learn from these encounters, and this learning takes different forms. The discursive formation associated with higher

education enables students to ask questions about practice. Students have the ability to problematize what it means to work as a social worker. Teaching social work students in the classroom provides a learning opportunity for social workers. Without having an opportunity such as this, social workers run the risk of existing and performing the same actions for a long time. Through these classroom encounters, social work students are the catalysts to generate an “effective problematization by thought” (Foucault, 1998, p.388).

Possibly this may cause challenges for some practitioners, but for others – like Alex and Elizabeth – such questioning revealed the depth of their social work experiences, which left them feeling reassured. Their self-efficacy concerning their social work abilities was strengthened. In addition, classroom interactions can lead social workers to re-examine their understanding of social work and to consider the possibilities of a new form of social work. In practice, this can result in social workers returning to their everyday lives and thinking and operating differently as social workers.

Given the crisis of retention especially in children’s and families social work (Department for Education, 2021b), the opportunities for social work practitioners to teach social work students in the classroom may become an important element in social work continuous professional development policies. Elizabeth’s and Alex’s accounts point to some unanticipated benefits from teaching students; both gained opportunities to reform their subjectivities as social workers, not only in terms of their appreciation of what they knew but also in terms of taking stock of their values and identities as social workers and imagining new possibilities for social work. In a systematic review, Turley et al. (2022) did not identify or recommend any service interventions to increase social work retention. However, Elizabeth’s and Alex’s own accounts reveal individuals who were re-energised to return to social work after teaching social work students in a University classroom. Both were reconnected to the values, which brought them into social work. Both identified visions to approach social work in a different way, with an increased self-efficacy to do so.

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