
**Collecting mist,
herding cats and
student placements:
hard work with no
possibility of success?**

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A. Introduction

At the heart of all professionally qualifying programmes in youth work are a series of ‘placements’. These are opportunities for students to enter ‘practice’, in a structured way, to: (a) learn something about the activity of youth work and (b) display their competence¹. These placements are expensive to conduct on staff time, burdensome for students, and often for host agencies. What is more, there is general agreement within higher education institutions that placements are of variable quality, especially where there is no funding to support the host agency. Yet to suggest that we might dispose of the placement remains one of the few professional heresies. It is to this matter that this paper is addressed. In brief, I am concerned that there is limited justification for the cost of placements and that they fail to offer ‘value for money’. Justification for placements is made all the more difficult by the lack of critical accounts of what should, and can, be learnt on placement, and an equal dearth of work on underlying accounts of human agency. The language of ‘competence’ and ‘performance’, which is often used to articulate ‘what ought to be learnt in practice’, is also unhelpful in a higher education context. It looks towards conceptions of ‘technical occupations’ rather than the domain of professional judgement and practice, that is the acquisition of those higher cognitive skills and abilities (see Barnett, 1994).

In questioning the value of placements, I am not dismissing the value of engagement with practice, or with what might be termed the ‘craft knowledge’ of professional practice. What is more such accounts of what is valuable for students to learn, and how they actually go about learning it, are obviously a political battle. Barnett (1994:14) has argued that vocational higher education courses in ‘embracing new professional fields’ such as youth work have ‘been bewitched by a sense that real knowledge is scientific knowledge’, and that ‘this scientism, consequently, has neglected the tacit forms of knowing bound up in the professional’s concrete activities’. Whilst there are no doubt that this is, in many cases, true, it is equally the case that some higher education programmes in youth work, supported by their validating bodies, have bulwarked themselves against this scientism through engagement with practice.

¹ Note that ‘competence’ should not be confused with the more technical term ‘competencies’. Here I simply mean the ability to do the job.

In this paper I am not concerned primarily with this ongoing debate, but need to recognise that the question of placements and their value is located in this wider political context, primarily what is, and who controls, the knowledge necessary for professional status. Questioning the value of the placement may be seen as questioning this ‘shared knowledge base’ compromise and its joint emphasis on class-based and placement-based learning. What is more I am suggesting that a resolution of the ‘placement issue’ requires a clear, well-defined conception of human agency in a language defensible within an account of ‘higher order thinking’. Here I am limited to pointing to such an account rather than its detailed development.

The paper progresses in four sections. Firstly, I want to consider a few stage setting clarifications, unpicking some of my starting assumptions about what ought to be learnt and what a placement is. Secondly, I want to explore in more details what a student might learn on placement, and thirdly develop this account of potential learning in terms of Sen’s (1987, 1999) account of ‘capabilities’ and ‘functionings’. Finally, I shall return to the issue of the iconic status of the placement.

B. Initial assumptions

This paper is grounded in two particular sets of assumptions: (i) what do we think students ought to learn on a youth and community work programme, and (ii) what is going to count as a placement. It is these two matters I explore briefly here.

B.1 What should a student learn?

There are likely to be a range of hopes that we might have for our students’ development during their (our) degree. These might include higher order developments such as the acquisition of the liberally educated mind, or personality-focused hopes in terms of the student establishing a coherent identity and sense of purpose, or generally positive characteristics in terms of high self-esteem, resilience, honesty, and a range of other-regarding virtues. In addition to this range of hopes a student on a professionally qualifying youth and community work programme must acquire what is required to work ‘in the field’ on graduation (as a beginning worker). What this actually means in practice is of course problematic. Where professional qualification was particularly concerned with employment in state funded youth work provision, with strong nationally developed accounts of what that might look like, this made sense. Programmes were concerned with the training of workers of a well-understood set of roles and responsibilities (similar to what still occurs in initial teacher education) as well as perhaps the broader educational aspirations outlined above. However, such confidence in what might be expected on graduation has dissipated. We have divergence in terms of the organisation context in which graduates will work (statutory youth focused, broader statutory agencies, voluntary sector, faith based), the type of work they will be doing (centre based, health development, schooling, criminal justice, ministry, etc.), and its broad categorisation (non-formal education, social welfare, political action, community development, etc.).

What ought to be learnt has therefore to be set out in general terms, perhaps what we might consider to be the learning required of any people centred profession with concern for a vulnerable group. As a minimum, and at a general level, therefore I offer the following as a framework:

- i. The ability to satisfy the role of a professionally qualified worker in a range of 'common situations'
- ii. The ability to seek and acquire new knowledge, attitudes and skills (KSAs) where and when necessary to perform new tasks. Embedded in this ability is a judgement as to whether the necessary KSAs can be acquired 'on the job' with minimal risk to clients or require training before the new tasks are undertaken, and the level of supervision required to support the undertaking of new tasks
- iii. The professional judgement to decide, in each case, whether a particular work package falls within the remit of (i) or requires the preparation and support of (ii)
- iv. Ethical judgement as to whether a new task conflicts with tasks already undertaken and what the client group's reasonable expectations are of the worker

I shall return to a consideration of these issues later in the paper. Here I note them as a starting set of assumptions about what learning in this vocational area is intended to develop, and ones that are likely to mean the need to engage in some way with practice.

B.2 Placements and the like

It is clear that placements have a central and historically significant place in initial youth work education, as it does in other vocational education programmes. The placement embeds two contradictory themes. First, it was in practice that one gained 'one's spurs', a theme that spoke of the conflictual nature of practice with 'us' workers against the pesky 'young others'. Second, it was our secure place, we were good with young people and in practice (it was why we were on the course) and placements motivated one to endure the academic study. What is not in doubt is that engagement in the field with a particular professional role is necessary, and an integral part of professional education. However, there are a number of ways in which this can be managed, and a number of terms that can be mobilised in order to fine grain these different modes of engagement. Here, limited by words, I make just some clarifications.

We can talk of 'placements', 'engaging with practice', 'work experience', and 'apprenticeship' amongst others. It is perhaps worth differentiating between these at the beginning in some common sense, rather than technical, way. By technical way, I mean something like some HEIs use of the terms to indicate that placements are

assessed whereas work experience is not. Such technical definitions do not seem to get us very far.

It is without doubt that each of these four terms shares some ‘family resemblance’ (to use Wittgenstein) and that hard and fast distinction may be difficult to support. However, a placement does indicate some level of precision. One is ‘placed’ within an organisation, institution or location rather than simply asked to go out ‘into practice’. It is bounded in time, place and significantly in task. Work experience on the other hand does not share this boundary of task – one is to experience the work place, but the nature of that experience is rather diffuse. What is more on a placement one is not primarily ‘apprenticed’ to another, though one might have a mentor². The focus in a placement is on the agency and the work that goes on there, rather than directly a significant other, especially in latter placements (at say NQF level 6). I want to return to this notion of apprenticeship in a moment, but before doing so I want to emphasise both: (a) that these distinctions are not hard and fast, but are (b) intended to capture some implicit characteristics of different ways in which student could engage with practice.

I do not want to be heard in this paper to be claiming that students on vocational programmes ought not to engage in practice. This would be at odds with my Aristotelian predilections. Following Zagzebski (2008) this Aristotelian approach would suggest students be exposed to exemplars of good practice in order for them to ‘imitate’ such practice. It might be argued that although we may talk of ‘a placement’ we are often constructing apprentice-type learning activities through the support offered to the student by the mentor. This professional worker is supposed to take the student ‘under their wing’ and show them the ropes in a supportive way. It is perhaps how a number of mentors actually see their role. Of course this sets up two particular difficulties. The first is that such apprenticeship-type placements depend on the quality of the mentor *and* the quality of the organisational context (though these are often contingently linked). The second is the desire not simply to inculcate students into the ‘way things are’, but a critical understanding of the tensions between ‘how things are’ and ‘how they ought to be’. By this I mean that apparently good exemplars *in* practice might not be good exemplars *of* practice (understood as the historic tradition of youth work contextualised to our present culture).

I shall return to this point later.

C. What might we expect of a placement?

Returning then to the question of what students ought to learn, and my four-fold typology (see B.1). I stated that at a general level students ought to be able to ‘satisfy

² Mentor, work based supervisor, line manager [insert your university’s preferred title]. I mean the worker who supports the student in placement and often makes a judgement on their competency in practice.

the role of a professionally qualified worker in a range of common settings'. There are a number of difficulties with this statement. We do not have clarity as to the 'role of the professionally qualified worker', though we may simply turn to the national occupational standards for some, very general, account. The term 'common' is also problematic. Do we mean common to the working experience of all workers, or regularly experienced by a majority of workers? If we mean the former then leading religious education classes might be excluded, but if the latter then it might have a significant place. In a diverse field then what is required even in 'common situations' has to be articulated at an ever more general level in a manner in which context and purpose are removed from any articulation of what ought to be learnt. I want to consider four aspects that emerge from the need to prepare students to 'satisfy the role of a professionally qualified worker in common situations'.

Firstly, if we are to talk of learning from practice at all then at least one of the central abilities student need to acquire is the ability to extract general learning from specific experiences. This we might argue is the ability to reflect on practice. However, this ability must be temporally prior to any such general learning in practice. The ability of reflection comes not from practice, but from the classroom – though one must have some 'practice' on which to reflect.

Secondly, given the general nature of the learning required in order to meet the diversity of the field, there is a requirement that the student learns to identify what kind of situation they are experiencing, and make a judgement as to the best way to proceed. That is, there is a need to educate students' perceptions and their ability to relate agency to potential outcomes.

Thirdly, students will obviously have to gain some ability to know what the best way to act is, given the desire for a particular outcome. This requires sufficient knowledge of 'what works', and in particular what works for them, given their particular characteristics (among which we may include such issues as gender, ethnicity, publically acknowledged religious commitments). The 'what works' does seem to be most efficiently taught in the classroom, though we might want students to practice these approaches and ideas. The 'what works for you' may well require the student to explore, and experiment with different ways of presenting themselves to audiences and particularly audiences of young people.

Fourthly, there is a requirement that students begin to learn what the purpose of the particular activity is: both in organisational terms and in ethical terms. By this, I mean that students will need to be able to see what it is that the organisation, for whom and with whom they work, wants them to achieve. Allied to this is an understanding of the ethical principles that ought to guide their conduct, and the ability to manage conflicts that may exist between organisational priorities and the requirements for ethical conduct. Much here will depend on, the disputed arena, of the ethical nature of youth work and the values that ought to underpin all youth workers' actions (see Bernard Davies, 2005).

I have been exploring what a student needs in order to satisfy their role in common situations. Early on, however, workers are likely to need to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities as they are asked to take on specific roles and responsibilities. Students need to be prepared not only to be able to do what is expected at graduation, but also to develop as professional workers over time. Professional development of this sort entails the careful ordering of their experiences of any new role and adequate, detailed reflection. Alongside this, they are likely to need to read appropriate texts and discuss their ideas with colleagues already performing this role. As they begin this role, they are likely to have to adjust the way they are acting, a matter requiring reflection in practice as well as reflection on practice. As well as being able to respond to this requirement for development the worker must also be able to make a balanced judgement of 'risk' involved not only to themselves, but significantly to their 'client' group. Here 'risk' has a broad range from serious risk of harm through to minimal risk in the sense that the activity is a waste of time for the client group. Serious harm arising either, that is, because of the actions of the worker (e.g. in outdoor pursuits) or because of the ineffectiveness of the worker (e.g. drug counselling). One ethical requirement often placed on *the professional* is to decide if the risk of harm is sufficient for them to decline this role, rather than depend on the judgement of their line manager.

So far then I have attempted to explore the kinds of learning required by students under the headings (i) and (ii) earlier. Collected together these involve:

1. Underpinning theory about what works and in what circumstances
2. Ability to reflect on, and in practice
3. Judgement as to the most appropriate course of action
4. Perception as to the most salient features of the context
5. The impact and influence of the key features of the way they present themselves to an audience on 'what works'
6. An ability to understand the state of affairs required by the organisation, the ethical responsibilities they bear, and the ways in which tensions between the two can be addressed

What is I hope clear is that these focus on higher level cognitive abilities and the understanding of themselves as agents called upon to influence others and the contexts in which they work. Although we may talk of the role of the youth worker as being essentially performance, that is they act in the world in order to bring about certain, positive states of affairs, the abilities needed in order to do this are essentially cognitive.

What is more this raises questions as to the role of practice in developing such cognitive abilities. Whilst there is no doubt a need for practice to act as 'grit' on which to reflect and to see how things actually work out in the field, this does seem to be a marginal role in the development of the kinds of abilities required.

The above discussion has dealt with the first three elements (i – iii, B.1) of what students ought to learn. The fourth is of a slightly different order, that of the broader ethical responsibilities to one's client group. In particular, where a new role is to be undertaken to what extent, and in what ways should the worker take account of what their client group reasonably expects of them. For example, a worker has been developing some centre-based work on a rather deprived estate. This has been going well and good relationships have been formed with young people and the wider community. The local authority decides to use this as a vehicle to respond to local counsellors' concerns about anti-social behaviour, and the worker is firmly encouraged to introduce activities to this end. Is the worker to do as requested, or do they resist such a move, perhaps by suggesting this ought to be discussed with the young people attending the centre? This is the type of ethical judgement that is required and needs to be developed during initial education programmes.

D. A brief review of where we are

I want to briefly review the various elements that I have put into the mix. The question is one of the suitability of placements for the task in which we are engaged, namely the initial education of youth workers. I have suggested there are closely related activities such as work experience and apprenticeships which might do a better, or at least cheaper, job. However, I have noted in relation to apprenticeships that this requires good examples (exemplars) of practice. However, there is a plausible problem with the state of practice itself. Bluntly put, what passes for youth work today is only a faint reflection (or simulacra) of what it ought to be. Thus, what we need are not exemplars of good practice, but exemplars of what good practice ought to be, and these exemplars may be irreconcilable with each other (perhaps antagonistic). What is not required here is an articulation of those differences, merely a recognition that they potentially exist.

I have also sought to spell out the types of things that students may gain on a placement, which capture the kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes that seem most amenable to acquisition 'in the field'. However, I have also noted the need to move from performativity to transferability, and the problems that this may cause – learning what to do 'in this place' and 'at this time' is insufficient there must be something that 'transfers'. McPeck (1981, 1990) offers reasons as to why the transferability of skills is problematic, an argument with which I have sympathy. Underlying this problem of transferability is the language of competence. It is problematic in two ways. Firstly, that the language of competence is clearly useful at the level of simple tasks, for example if one can place clothes on a clothes hanger in a shop then one ought to be able to do it at home, and visa versa. However, what about a conversation (let us leave

it as a simple conversation rather than the kinds of learning conversations developed by youth workers), is this a transferable skill? It would seem empirically not to be the case, I know of many people able to hold a conversation down the pub, unable to manage more than a grunt at an academic gathering (and visa versa). Of course, we can start to reduce a skill to component skills and then talk of transferability. So we can reduce holding a conversation to a limited set of skills (say competence in forming intelligible sounds, competence to construct intelligible statements, ability to hear and decode the other's utterances, the ability to process a statement linked to the other's utterances in some reasonably clear way, etc.). Whilst transferring of these skills into another context is not sufficient to guarantee competency in relation to the higher order skill of holding a conversation, they might be, a weaker argument might run, necessary. This too seems a little strong in relation to a conversation, the ability to decode an utterance is itself contextually bound, as the speakers cannot be divorced from their particular environment. So whereas competence based accounts of transferability might operate at the level of tightly defined and context independent skills, and (and this may in fact be the same thing) at the level of relatively straightforward skills, they do not apply to 'higher order skills'. At this point much will depend on your view of youth work. If it is a matter of technical skills and expertise in relatively, low level and content independent skills, then the discussion above poses no problem³. However, effective work with young people appears to more like a conversation and one of a particularly complex type (extended over time, held in various contexts, and often conducted simultaneously with conversations with a number of other young people).

The language of competencies does not grasp the complexity which is at the heart of youth work, and this is not helped by a change of language (in the UK) towards reductionist 'occupational standards' the same problems remain. In the remaining sections of the paper I want to move towards an alternative language for addressing the issue, and alternative way of considering complex human agency.

E. A language for work based agency?

In a series of books and articles, Sen (1987, 1999; see also Nussbaum and Sen, 1993) argued for an alternative account of human agency and well-being. This account was essentially concerned with addressing social justice issues in relation to global economic development. Sen's work has migrated into educational thinking primarily through this link with social justice (see Walker and Unterhalter, 2007). At the heart of Sen's account is a concern not only with what individuals can do, but the range of possible actions from which the individual chooses at any time. On Sen's account descriptions of behaviour hide the freedom of the individual; the same behaviour might indicate either this is the only action available to the agent, or that it is a

³ This also implies a view of young people, that essentially being able to engage with one young person is essentially the same as engaging with another. They are homogenised.

reasoned choice from a wide range of possibilities. For Sen this is significant in terms of social justice, individuals ought to have a range of options from which to choose. In this paper I am not concerned, primarily, with issues of social justice, but the ability of students to act reasonably in a range of youth work situations. As such I am concerned with workers who are able to judge the most appropriate way of acting from the possibilities available.

Sen uses the terms ‘capability’ and ‘functionings’. Capabilities are potential functionings, and the ‘freer’ the individual the more appropriate capabilities they have. The relationship between the functionings and the capabilities gives some indication of the ability of the individual to make judgements as to the best course of action in this situation to bring about the desired state of affairs. The capabilities that an individual has at their disposal are a function of both the *capacities* of the individual and the *characteristics* of the context in which they act (and here I move away from Sen’s language). Hence, individuals may well have different ‘capability bundles’ and these ‘capability bundles’ may well differ in different contexts.

The language Sen develops focuses on three issues of significance for me in this paper. The first is that it emphasises the fact that a particular action is only possible if the individual has the possibility to act in that way. Increasing the range of options available, that is their capability bundle, offers greater professional freedom for the particular worker. Secondly, there is a focus on the professional judgement of the worker to move from capability to functioning, from potential to actual, a judgement that brings with it professional responsibility. Thirdly, Sen focuses on the fact that what is possible depends not only on the capacities of the individual agent, but the characteristics of the context in which they find themselves. As such the account is one with a concern for the development of cognitive abilities as well as, and as a requirement for, appropriate action.

Educationally, it generates three concerns, the first two of which are relatively straightforward: a concern with developing the capacities of the individual, and a concern with individual’s ability to modify the characteristics of their context. The third is a little less straightforward. Different sets of an individual’s capacities can, in different contexts, give rise to the same capabilities. Thus, a third concern is in enabling individuals to adapt sets of capacities to particular contexts in order to maximise the number of appropriate capabilities.

It is worth noting that capabilities are not reductionist in the way often applied to competencies, in fact they are difficult to define in detail, and what is more the relationship between a particular capability and action is highly complex.

F. Conclusion

The language of ‘capabilities’ and ‘functionings’ is not intended to provide a recipe for educational practice, it is not a psychological or educational ‘theory’. Rather the

language provides a framework to consider the agency of the autonomous professional operating in a complex environment, and particularly the educator preparing the student for such a task. As such in concluding, I want to do two things. The first is to articulate, within this framework, what a systematic initial education in youth work ought both to offer to, and demand of, the student. The second is to return, briefly, to the original question of the placement.

The learning seems to fall into three categories: learning what works and for whom, developing a broad range of the right capabilities, and developing the perception and judgement required to choose the best functioning in any particular circumstance.

The establishment of ‘what works’ is a tricky subject fraught with both empirical and philosophical problems. In this package will be a range of ideas to which the student ought to be introduced:

- the wisdom of experienced professionals of the ‘if you do X then Y will tend to follow’, for example, if you sense there is trouble brewing in a part of the youth centre moving there tends to reduce the likelihood of escalation
- The best evidence from systematic studies about the impact of interventions on young people, for example the factors that inhibit or motivate youth volunteering
- The underlying scientific knowledge that ought to underpin a worker’s action in order to maximise their effectiveness, for example social constructivism or labelling theory

Much of this will take place in the classroom, though there will clearly be a need for students to have some understanding of the realities of practice and the actual practice of professionals. For example, seeing experienced workers lining up responses of various sorts so as to quickly move from one intervention to another when it is clear the original idea is not working effectively.

The right range of capabilities is in need of a little unpacking. There seem to be four ‘types’ of capabilities that we could consider in need of development. The first are the general abilities of the worker to act in the world, be that: playing pool, motorcycle maintenance, knitting, telling jokes, filling in government forms, etc. and the second are vocationally necessary: developing a learning conversation, challenging prejudice, consciousness raising, empowering individuals, etc. The second set is necessary in order to do the job, but so is a broad range of the first. We need, if you like, to be well-rounded individuals able to use what we can do to engage, support, motivate, and challenge young people in their development. The third ‘capability bundle’ is that related to the ability to transform the characteristics of the context in order to make it more conducive to the development of other capabilities. The fourth capability bundle

is that concerned with the ability to continue to develop their ability as a worker, including the ability to take on, successfully, different and increasingly complex tasks.

In each case, the focus is on the development of the *capacities* of the individual, given that the actual capabilities are dependent not only on the individual, but also on the characteristics of the context. As I have noted above, given we do not know what the context will be in any detail, the focus needs to be supporting the development of a broad set of capacities including the flexibility for the individual to promote their 'self-education'.

Finally, we need to focus on developing a student's ability to judge the most effective functioning from the range of capabilities available to them. In part, this is likely to be a matter of developing perception of salient features and in part the ability to utilise 'what works' to attain the desired state of affairs. This includes the need to come to terms with the limitations and the possibilities embedded in certain personal characteristics (gender, height, accent, life story, etc.).

Let us return to the original concern with the iconic stature of the placement. Whilst there is no doubt a need for engagement with practice, observation of practitioners, and trying it out for oneself, I doubt the need for the types of strongly controlled and formulated placements. Further, there is still a need to justify *any* formal practice learning experience as part of a youth work programme. Much of what is required from the preceding analysis would seem to be possible from a range of ad hoc experiences, some of youth work practice, some of other types of interactions with people (e.g. shop or bar work, teaching, playing sports, running student societies, etc.). It may be the case that there is an argument for placements from the perspective of assessment, that workers must be able to show they can perform correctly. I doubt it, but I leave this for another time.

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