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Students Perceptions of volunteering during the first two years of studying a Social Work degree

Abstract
There are benefits to volunteering for both the community and the student undertaking the volunteering, it can help to enhance the students understanding of the area they are moving into, or it can show them where they do not want to work. It can assist the student to connect with the community and develop an awareness of the society around them. In most social work programs in Australia there is no practical experience until the last half of the program. This study wanted to identify if social work students undertaking volunteer work during the first two years of their course, found it helped to enhance their understanding of their studies, as well as human service work in general. The findings support that volunteering in the first two years of the degree would to enhance student learning.

Keywords
Higher education, Student, Student Perceptions, Social Work, Volunteer, Volunteering

Cover Page Footnote
Some of the survey this article is based on was used as part of a Graduate Certificate for one of the authors. Sandra Walsh for her encouragement and support.

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Introduction

The Social Work degree in the majority of universities in Australia takes four years full-time to complete and consists of both theoretical and practical components (University of South Australia [UniSA], 2013). It is in the latter part of the degree that students undertake field practicums, which affords students the opportunity to integrate academic studies with the practice requirements and expectations of the profession. The uniqueness of Social Work practice sees that practitioners have a key role in enhancing the quality of life for families and individuals, dealing with interpersonal issues, promoting self-determination, supporting and strengthening human functioning through the blending of values, knowledge and skills (Mass, 2000). Creating a link between theory and practice is not necessarily easy, particularly for first and second year Social Work students (Hudson & Kruger, 2009; Lemieux & Allen, 2007). In particular, students often 'are unable … to make links to the bigger picture of what social work is' (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007, p.138) and to connect Social Work theory and practice. Consequently, students may appear to be less engaged in their learning and this has been found particularly to be the case within the first two years of study.

At present there are about twenty universities in Australia that provide Social Work education, and the majority of these have their field placements in the second half of the course. This generally means that the first two years are purely academic with no practical experience. There is also one university that advises students with no previous experience, to undertake voluntary work in the human sciences area to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from the class room to the field prior to enrolling in the course (Monash University, 2013). Field placement is a component of study which allows students to develop a range of skills through the application of a knowledge base which is consistent with the principles of the profession, and is undertaken within a workplace context whilst being supervised (Wiebe, 2010). During these placements students are encouraged to engage in the development of their practice, in a supported learning environment which is located in a human service organisation. One of the strengths of field practicum experience is the

practical knowledge student's gain as they test their knowledge and skills in a practice context (Wiebe, 2010). Bringing a practice context to the classroom is not possible in the traditional sense but some teaching strategies can compensate, and the teaching-research nexus component of the new teaching and learning framework encourages the use of problem solving approaches and enquiry methods (Wiebe, 2010). These also influence the approach to teaching in the Social Work program; however, a deficiency of the Social Work program is the opportunity for students to engage in service learning activities in the first two years of the course. Williams and Reeves (2004) indicate that such opportunities are underutilised in Social Work education and thus it is important to investigate how these might be developed in partnership with human service organisations to enhance student learning. The purpose of this paper is to provide a rationale for developing volunteering opportunities for first and second year social work students to support early practical experience.

Social Work and Social Work Education

The nature of Social Work and Social Work education lends itself to service learning in the community, and student's learning will be enhanced by adopting this approach to education. The Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012a, p. 3) 'Guideline 1.2: Guidance on field education programs', states that the subjects for field education 'must be taken over two years within the professional social work program of study'. Even though field education is stipulated under this requirement for programs, and most appear to provide it in the last two years of the curriculum, there is no reason that some hands on practical experience can't be provided during the first two years and identified differently, such as 'experiential learning practicum'. There is also the possibility of universities building a volunteer component into the assessment criteria for some of the courses within the program to facilitate hands on practice in the first two years of the program, to link the concepts of social work theories and knowledge, to practice at an earlier stage.

Some of the skills for students to develop for Social Work practice include interpersonal and communication skills, reflective and critical thinking, collection and management of information while ensuring confidentiality is maintained (Yan, Tsui, Chu, & Pak, 2012). Through the use of such skills Social Workers are able to assist with 'problem solving' (Hardcastle, Powers & Wencour, 2011), 'client advocacy' (AASW, 2012b; Wiebe, 2010), help to address 'social inequalities' (Tan & Yuen, 2013), engage in 'research' (Kropf & Tracey, 2002) and 'analyse, challenge and develop social policies' (AASW, 2012b). Therefore Social Work education should be 'client-oriented' and 'value-based', and including real life experience through volunteering opportunities from first year, will assist in providing a valuable foundation for the student to build their practice on (Yan et al., 2012).

Social Work practice is informed by a professional knowledge base gained through study in accredited programs, and Social Work programs endeavour to provide students with an educational experience that is both rigorous and challenging. Underpinning Social Work education are both the practice standards set by the AASW (2012b) and universities' commitment to graduate qualities. Social Work education is enhanced by collaborative and productive partnerships between universities, human service organisations and the community, therefore, the goal of social work education is to produce professionals who meet the nine social work attributes that are 'underpinned by values, knowledge and skills' (AASW, 2012b, p.6).

Integrating theory and practice is central to the Social Work profession and Social Work education. However, meshing theory with practice can be particularly difficult for beginning students in a Social Work degree (Collingwood, Emond, & Woodward, 2008). Anecdotal evidence from students, in line with other findings (Collingwood, Emond & Woodward, 2008) suggests that students can in fact struggle to comprehend the very basic principles of theoretical application. In particular, students find it challenging reconciling what they have learnt in the classroom, with 'real world' issues and contemporary Social Work practice (Fisher & Somerton, 2000). Internalisation of Social Work values, beliefs, skills and

knowledge is instrumental to the learning process, and it appears that this can be difficult for students who have very little grounding or experience with people who have highly complex, multi-faceted and even volatile lives (Fisher & Somerton, 2000). Learning for understanding necessitates the theoretical underpinning of Social Work. If there are gaps in their understanding students may struggle to comprehend new material, especially as there are usually assumptions made that some prior knowledge already exists (Ramsden, 2003). Social Work educators must consider ways of linking academic learning to real world problems, so as to increase students' comprehension of the complexity of situations and the dilemmas Social Workers encounter (Kelly, 2013).

It must be noted that whilst Social Work students are given the opportunity to apply Social Work theory to actual practice, this does not occur until the third year (Uni SA, 2013). It is after this time that Social Work students are more intrinsically motivated and can, in most cases, incorporate this learning with existing theoretical knowledge. Literature suggests that placements do in fact lead to a much deeper level of understanding (Newman, Dannenfelser, Clemmons & Webster, 2007). There is however a large reliance on everything coming together in the final years of their studies, which is not necessarily an effective teaching strategy. It is evident that there are 'real world' practice voids in the first two years of study in the Social Work program and given this, students appear to adopt a surface approach to learning. Due to this void students can seem not to be actively engaged, which is consistent with the lower cognitive domains of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, Krathwohl, & Masia, 1956). Ramsden (2003) suggests that a way to overcome this is to make a special effort in the design of learning contexts for beginning students, and in this particular instance the case of first and second year Social Work students.

Volunteering

Volunteering can assist a student to develop new skills in an area they have not worked in before, or it can facilitate them to realise an area they may excel in, that was previously

unknown (Brewis & Holdsworth, 2011; Lee & Won, 2011; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). It assists the student to become part of the community as sometimes people take the community they live in for granted, and since volunteering is about helping others it is a way to connect with the community and develop an awareness of those around them (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

The potential to improve their career options is another benefit as a student can use volunteering to gain experience in areas that may be potential employment avenues, or it can assist them to explore areas to help them in identifying where they would like to work in the future (Peters, 2011; Jenkins, Douglas & Chamberlain, 2008). Volunteering provides an opportunity to work with a diverse range of people and can facilitate further development of interpersonal skills (Peters, 2011), as well as offer evidence to an employer, potential employer or educator that the student has a good work-life balance (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). When students undertake volunteer work it can help them gain the advantage of developing their employment skills, and gaining new perspectives by putting what they learn into practice (Darwen & Rannard, 2011; Peters, 2011).

In the United States of America (USA) there has been identified an improvement in critical thinking skills as well as writing proficiency when student participation in volunteering has been an evaluated practice (Darwen & Rannard, 2011; Peters, 2011). Volunteering, when in the right setting, assists the student to develop the ability to integrate knowledge from the classroom to the work environment (Darwen & Rannard, 2011; Edwards, Mooney & Heald, 2001). In the USA students are engaged in volunteering which they also refer to as community engagement, and this is connected to their curriculum for recognition (Darwen & Rannard, 2011; Peters, 2011). This can help students to increase their self-awareness and confidence while providing an avenue to reduce the boredom of classroom learning (Darwen & Rannard, 2011; Peters, 2011). With employability skills becoming embedded in university courses, linking practical learning experience can help to facilitate knowledge transfer into practice (Brewis & Holdsworth, 2011; Jenkins, et al., 2008).

In the United Kingdom (UK) there has also been a strong movement to student volunteering as part of their higher education courses (Darwen & Rannard, 2011). Darwen and Rannard (2011, p. 187) state that, 'volunteering makes a valuable contribution to priority areas of work in higher education, particularly: teaching and learning; employability, skills development and business engagement; and public engagement'. This is supported by Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) who maintain that students gain new skills through volunteering, as well as the university developing stronger relationships with community organisations. A report in the UK titled 'Bursting the Bubble' identified that universities in the UK have a crucial role with community engagement which student volunteering programs can facilitate (Brewis, Russell & Holdsworth, 2010).

Even though there is evidence that student volunteering is beneficial for both the community and students, universities are struggling to continue providing this mode of learning through lack of financial support to maintain volunteering programs (Darwen & Rannard, 2011). Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) identified that although there are benefits to students volunteering it is not integrated into the curriculum adequately, and the budgets provided to support the programs are only short term and not a permanent part of the education process. If not managed appropriately students can find themselves in areas that are vastly different to their previous experiences in life and this can challenge them significantly, and if supports are not put in place can ultimately provide a negative experience and make them question the education path they have chosen (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

Aim/Purpose

The aim of this study was to identify if undergraduate Social Work students participated in volunteer work in their first two years of the course, and if this volunteer work assisted them to enhance their understanding of the theories and concepts of Social Work. This study was conducted in one Australian university.

Method

The methodological framework for this study was drawn from an interpretive social science approach. The interpretivist perspective looks at shared understandings and the meanings placed on these, and the researcher looks at gaining an understanding of people's interpretation of aspects within their lives (Walters 2010). The interpretivist approach focusses on how different people interpret their social life and the meanings they place on what they do (Walters 2010).

The method of data collection for this study was an anonymous online survey, which was sent to Social Work students enrolled in a South Australian university. Through the use of the TellUs2 survey, students were asked a series of open ended and yes/no responses to questions relating to the Social Work program, assessment and volunteering (a copy of the survey and email sent to students is available from the author on request).

Thematic analysis was undertaken to code the open ended questions in the survey. The responses to the survey were read, and general ideas that emerged from the data were then coded into themes (Willis, 2010). These general themes were then interpreted and described in relation to how they fitted into the topic of the study (Willis, 2010).

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was received from the University of South Australia Ethics committee. Participation was strictly voluntary. Students' were able to refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. All information received was kept strictly confidential and was only seen by authorised members of the university staff. Ethics guidelines and processes in relation to any data was gathered in accordance with the guidelines for evaluation of activities involving UniSA students and staff (Mikilewicz, 2008). In particular points one and three which provides a statement that is to be included in all survey tools informing

the participant that the information gathered would remain confidential and be de-identified, and that data gathered to evaluate a course which is collected according to set criteria, may be included in publications and presentations outside of the organisation without formal ethics approval being needed (Mikilewicz, 2008)

Findings

The survey was sent to Social Work students enrolled in a South Australian university. There were 131 students who responded to the survey which equates to a 26% response rate.

The information collected from the survey was approached using a thematic analysis to identify themes that emerged from the data, and were synthesized to generate a set of statements that represented the themes, then categorised on the basis of similarity in meaning. These findings are presented in narrative form.

Question four asked students who undertook voluntary work during their Social Work degree to identify if the voluntary work helped them to understand the theories and concepts of Social Work better, and how they did this. For this question the student responses were identified as being related to four different themes. Theme One was that 'Improved understanding of social work theories and concepts' and 55.5% of those who responded to question four were identified as being in this theme**.** Theme Two had a response rate of eight percent and was 'No assistance to understand social work theory and concepts', Theme three had a response rate of 12% and was 'Neutral', there was no mention of how it helped to understand Social Work theory and concepts or not, and students just provided a description of what observed. Theme four had a response rate of 2.5% and was 'No voluntary work', there was just a discussion of employment prior to commencing studies and benefits as well as observations of other students.

Question five then asked students to respond with information on how volunteering influenced their perceptions about human service work and these responses were related to four

different themes. Theme one had a response rate of 47% and was 'A positive outcome was received from volunteering'. Theme two had a response rate of 11.8% and was 'No effect or a negative response was gained from volunteering', with Theme three having a response rate of 11.8% and being 'Neutral' as there was neither a positive or negative outcome to volunteering. Theme four had a response rate of 29.4% and was a 'Description of what the student discovered during the volunteering process'.

Of the original 26% respondents, 38% responded to the question asking students if they would recommend voluntary work to other students with 98% of these respondents stating yes they would recommend it. All respondents answered the last question, which asked if they thought that students should have the option of having volunteering as an assessable task with 83% agreeing that it should be and 17% stating that it shouldn't be an assessable task.

Discussion

In question four, Theme one identified that volunteering helped the students to understand Social Work theory and concepts better. One response stated they worked in an aged setting and it helped them to link the theories to the aged care sector mentioning the advocacy role, while another identified that it linked theory to practice. Respondent 109 stated: '*Opportunity to link theory with practice. Chance to develop confidence in engaging with people with diverse needs.'* There was the mention that volunteer work helped them to develop their decision making skills as well as interviewing, and communication skills to avoid adverse outcomes for the group they were working with. While others were able to develop a better understanding around lifespan diversity, attachment and systems theories, as well as grief and loss, enhancing the student's ability to gain an insight into the environments these people are living in that are different from the students own. One student stated that the concepts learnt during the Social Work degree were being used to benefit the clients they were working with. Other students identified that volunteering provided information on the scope of Social Work locations and programs available in

the community. Some students acknowledged that volunteering provided them with the opportunity to gain practical experience, which was beneficial to those with no previous experience.

Theme two: No assistance to understand Social Work theory and concepts. The responses to this theme were related to the statement that the volunteer work they undertook did not assist them to better understand the social work theories and concepts. One stated that it didn't help at all, while another identified their voluntary work was in a different field therefore it was difficult in linking it to anything other than community development. A further student stated that volunteering did not assist in gaining a better understanding however it did reinforce team work and helping others.

Theme three: 'Neutral' with no mention of if volunteering helped to understand Social Work theory and concepts they just provided a description of what was observed, and they did not link it to specific increases in understanding the Social Work theories and concepts. One student mentioned that they are now able to put themselves in other people's shoes and described the aspects a counsellor should have, however have not linked it to the Social Work theories and concepts at all. While another student discussed what they observed during their volunteering experience and how they felt about it.

Theme four: 'No voluntary work' was where a student who didn't undertake voluntary work commented on their views from having paid work, and that they felt voluntary work in the first two years of the Social Work degree would reduce the cultural shock students receive when undertaking their first course placement in the latter half of third year.

With question five students were asked to respond with information on how volunteering influenced their perceptions about human service work. For this question Theme one: 'A positive outcome was received from volunteering', where a student felt that volunteering would help human service workers in their role. While another student felt that their volunteering helped them to identify the skills that were good and where they still needed development. It helped to confirm

to a student that this was the line of work they did want to go into, rather than waiting until the third year for their first placement and finding out it wasn't where they wanted to be. Volunteering helped other students to observe what the role of the Social Worker actually is in the community and how different living situations impact on individuals.

Theme two: 'No effect or a negative response was gained from volunteering', is where students did not identify any benefit to volunteering on their studies or future career pathway, with one student stating that they decided it was not the career they wanted to follow, and another feeling there was a negative effect by volunteering.

Theme three: 'Neutral', was where there was neither a positive or negative outcome to volunteering and this theme provided opinions that were neither positive for enhancing the knowledge imparted in the Social Work degree or negatives to it. While another response identified that the work wasn't as easy as they first thought it would be.

Theme four: 'Description of what the student discovered during the volunteering process', where the responses in this theme gave an overview of what they had discovered during their volunteering, and not really identified if it enhanced their perceptions of human service work. One response identified that the volunteer work they undertook helped to confirm that not everyone can undertake Human Service Work. Another response provided information on how the volunteer work affected their approach to understanding and managing some systems, however did not link this with human service work.

This has provided evidence that the majority of students within the Social Work course in the university used for the study felt that volunteer work enhances the students understanding of Social Work theories and concepts. It has also shown that the majority of students responding to the survey felt that there was a positive influence on their perception about human service work.

The research supports the literature on volunteering which suggests that students who participate in volunteering activities develop a better understanding of critical thinking, problem solving and reflection (Darwen & Rannard, 2011;

Peters, 2011). In addition, volunteering activities emphasize empowerment, cooperation, reciprocity and equality (Jenkins, et al., 2008; Peters, 2011; Stern, 2010), which are central to the Social Work profession. Likewise, participation in volunteering activities assists students to understand social problems (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010; Peters, 2011), the development of interpersonal and leadership skills (Peters, 2011), and shows that students have a greater social responsibility (Lee & Won, 2011; Peters, 2011). The connection of real life experiences and course content leads to more effective learning as students are engaged, and active participants in the learning process (Peters, 2011).

The findings have also provided support with literature in regards to the fact that volunteer work for students in the human services field can be beneficial, however if it is not carried out properly it can provide a negative outcome for students (Brewis, et al., 2010: Peters, 2011). This provides an indication that if the program is not developed with adequate support for both the student and the participating organization there could be unwanted repercussions, such as students leaving the course, or organizations refusing to take students.

There are also concerns that student volunteering could have an adverse impact on disadvantaged communities, and this needs to be considered when setting up a volunteer program for students (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). When deciding to include student volunteering as part of the higher education curriculum, part of the development needs to ensure that exposure of students to different areas does not lead to social inequalities being viewed as a normal part of life, or that students don't perpetuate any social injustices (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). Even though there is the possibility of an unfavourable impact, the benefit of a program with volunteering integrated into the course can provide a bridge from the classroom to society, which can assist the student to transfer knowledge gained into practical situations and ultimately facilitate a smooth transition to employment (Eyler, 2009).

Challenges of incorporating volunteering into the curriculum

What is clear is that there are many different possibilities for incorporating volunteering activities into a Social Work program (Peters, 2011). In some countries there are staff who are responsible for arranging and promoting volunteering within the student body (Taniguchi, 2011). However, volunteering activities can bring with it many challenges for university staff, students and the community. For instance it may be time consuming for staff, scheduling conflicts with staff, students or the community agency, and it challenges traditional teaching practices (Peters, 2011; Kelly, 2013). To ensure that such issues can be addressed, Kelly (2013) suggests that when designing the incorporation of volunteering into a higher education curriculum aspects that need to be considered are; is the activity meaningful to the student and course outcomes, will it be engaging and relevant, and will it be completed as part of the designated time for the course and not as an added on extra requirement. There is the possibility that smaller programs might be better suited to implementing volunteering activities into them.

Universities could develop stronger relationships with human service organisations by developing agreements for students to undertake volunteering opportunities, within the first two years of their studies, which can be a joint initiative between the organisations and the university to share the responsibility for arrangement, managing and assessing student's participation.

Conclusion

This study has shown that some students in the Social Work program undertake volunteer work during the early stages of their studies, and the majority found that it enhanced the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the workplace. This study as well as other research supports the development of practical experience in the first two years of the Social Work program, and that volunteering could be an avenue to improve the student experience. Evidence has supported the integration of volunteer work into academic assessment within

the first two years of the Social Work program to augment the field placement component in the final years.

Recommendation

It is recommended that trialling a program which incorporates student volunteering as part of the curriculum in the first two years of the Social Work degree be developed, and then evaluate the outcomes in relation to student experience, staff experience and organisation experience. This along with the identification of whether the program supports and increases the knowledge base development for Social Work students, would be of benefit to ascertain if a program such as this would be more beneficial to student outcomes if added to the current curriculum.

Limitations of this study:

There were several limitations to this study. It was undertaken in one university therefore to establish if this is the general consensus across all Social Work students, further research across different university populations would be needed. Due to the nature of the study, self-selection and self-reporting is a limitation. Self-selection can result in biased data due to respondents choosing to participate who may not be representative of the total group. Self-reporting data relies on the honesty and recollection of participants as well as their understanding or interpretation of the questions. This can lead to bias where participants report some events and thoughts but not others, and they may modify information provided to meet what they feel the expectations are.

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