Understanding and working in welfare organisations: helping students survive the workplace

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Abstract In preparing students to function as competent social workers, educational establishments have to be mindful both of the need to communicate the ideals and values of the profession and the requirement to produce practitioners who are capable of functioning productively within the organisational environment. It cannot be assumed that these two tasks are necessarily complementary. Feedback from former students suggests they feel less well prepared for the latter. This paper explores the way in which one Diploma in Social Work programme attempts to prepare its students for the realities of the organisational context of their work with service users. It focuses on a module which aims to teach students about some of the key tensions inherent in social welfare organisations by arranging for them to interview managers and practitioners in their chosen pathway setting. Their findings are analysed in relation to the theoretical teaching given at the start of the module. The positive feedback from the students suggests the overall learning experience for the student group is very positive.

Introduction

In preparing students to function as competent social workers, educational establishments have to be mindful both of the need to communicate the ideals and values of the profession and the requirement to produce practitioners who are capable of functioning productively within the organisational environment. It cannot be assumed that these two tasks are necessarily complementary. Professional values and organisational demands tend to clash in social welfare organisations, with the potential for increased restrictions on autonomy being experienced by practitioners as a questioning of ability. Indeed, there is evidence that the ways in which these organisations have responded to the pressures placed upon them have curtailed the discretion of social workers, and effectively challenged many of the core principles of social work in the process (Harris, 1998; Lymbery, 2001). This will have an impact on newly qualified social workers as well as those who are more experienced. Informal feedback from ex-Diploma in Social Work students suggests that many of them, whilst feeling well prepared for direct work with service users, regard the organisational context within which they work as problematic.

This tension between working with people and managing the organisational demands of the job stems in part from a potential mismatch between the ambitions and interests of...
students who enter social work and the nature of the job itself. Christie and Kruk (1998),
exploring the motives of social workers in training, found that the desire to work directly with
service users and the wish for a fulfilling professional career predominate. However, students
in their sample also recognised that various organisational factors—bureaucratic require-
ments, inadequate resources, high workloads, competing demands of users and the organisa-
tion—are the most significant areas of anxiety. The additional pressures created may be
particularly acute for black, gay and lesbian workers, due to the predominantly white,
heterosexual culture of most social services organisations (Appleby, 1998; Hearn et al.,
1989). In another study of human services professionals in North America (Cherniss, 1995),
the bureaucratic ethos of the agency context and public ambivalence towards its task
contributed to a loss of idealism and commitment by newly qualified workers. Learning to
survive organisational demands is therefore important if social workers are to sustain
satisfying careers in the personal social services.

While there is a danger that social work education may be dislocated from organisational
requirements (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996), it is insufficient to construct a form of training that
simply prepares students to be conformist employees. It can be argued that social work
education itself embodies an uncomfortable tension between bureaucratic conformity and
professional discretion (Lymbery et al., 2000). However, for many students there is an
evident gap between the nature of social work as taught on their courses and the reality of
their practice experiences in the workplace on placement or following qualification (Fook et
al., 1994). The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the MA/DipSW programme at the
University of Nottingham has sought to address this. The module it examines—Understanding
and Working in Welfare Organisations—aims to provide an educational experience that enables
students to comprehend the organisational requirements within which they will be working.
At the same time it provides an opportunity for them to explore ways in which they can retain
broader social work values—the promotion of social justice, combating oppression and
inequality, the valuing of diversity—within these organisational constraints. Placed at the end
of six taught modules in year one and prior to the first assessed practice placement, the
module is designed to bridge the theory–practice divide. As will be set out in more detail later
in the paper, students attend a short theoretical introduction and then work in small groups
to prepare and ask selected managers and practitioners a series of questions relating to
the organisational context of social welfare. In addition to relating theory to practice, the
learning approach offers an opportunity to develop research awareness and skills in data
collection.

The paper is constructed in two parts; the first reflects the theoretical material which forms
the basis of the introductory teaching on the module, and the second focuses on the
educational experience for the students and uses one particular intake to illustrate the core
themes examined in the module. Initially, then, the nature of the problem is identified
through a selective examination of literature that bears on the changing nature of social work
within the organisational context. The paper examines external factors that have affected
the recent development of welfare organisations. Mirroring the teaching, the paper moves to the
internal environment, exploring the nature of teams and team working, and the extent to
which the team can be either a support or an additional source of frustration and distress.
Anti-discriminatory practice is central to this discussion. Having established the organisa-
tional and team context, its impact on individuals—such as exacerbating the stresses inherent
within the social work task—is addressed.

Turning to the educational experience for the students, the second part of the paper starts
by outlining the module structure and identifies the learning theories that underpin this
design. It links the module to broader issues in the configuration of the MA/DipSW
programme, and explains the multiple purposes that it is intended to fulfil. It describes the students’ research during the module and gives a flavour of their investigative techniques and questions. It also contains material from the group presentations by which they were assessed at the end of the module. The paper concludes by summarising the main points to emerge from this method of learning about the nature of welfare organisations.

The organisational context

From student social worker to practitioner

The research of Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) has provided the fullest account of the transition from student to qualified practitioner. While it contains much of importance for the development of social work education, a few specific issues are particularly pertinent for this paper. First, they acknowledge that there is a mismatch between the emphasis managers place on ‘instrumental’ skills as opposed to the ‘process’ skills especially valued by social workers; this is particularly marked in the lower value managers give to counselling skills. More generally, they identify a number of organisational factors that cause frustrations and disappointments for newly qualified workers—including the weight of bureaucracy and paperwork, heavy workloads, resource limitations, lack of support and supervision, and the pressure of crisis work.

With the exception of the work undertaken by Marsh and Triseliotis, there is relatively little literature that bears directly on the transition from student to practitioner. There is, however, material that explores similar issues. This includes analyses of the changing nature of social work and the conflicts that social workers encounter within their work environment (see, for example, Howe, 1991; Pahl, 1994; Harris, 1998; McLean, 1999; May & Buck, 2000). Much of this literature is framed within the perspective that social workers have reduced levels of control over the circumstances of their daily work. In respect of community care, Pahl (1994) found that practitioners were significantly less enthusiastic about the direction of their organisations than managers; a crucial dimension in this was their perception that managers had more control over the form and content of their work, a key element in job satisfaction. Harris argues that community care changed the nature of social work practice, with ‘managerial’ skills supplanting traditional ‘professional’ skills, reinforced by mechanisms to control the technical aspects of social work practice (Harris, 1998, pp. 856–858). On a similar theme, May and Buck (2000) record the difficulties experienced by social workers deriving from decreased autonomy, reduction in importance of ‘traditional’ social work skills, and the weight of bureaucratic requirements. In respect of childcare, Howe (1992) has argued that social work practice is dominated by the need to follow rules rather than the exercise of professional judgement. Parton (1998) points out that the assessment and management of risk has become the key activity of social services, leading to practice that is defensible as opposed to right. As Jack (1997) observes, this process has the effect of minimising the exercise of professional discretion while maximising procedural regulation. Even in official documents that call for the enhancement of professionals’ capacity to exercise judgement and discretion in child care (see DoH, 1999, 2000) an inexorable increase in procedural regulation can be observed.

The recent social services workforce research (Balloch et al., 1999) has produced data that adds to our understanding of the pressures experienced by social workers. McLean (1999) notes the increasing levels of stress and decreasing levels of job satisfaction experienced by many in the social services workforce, with field social workers experiencing stress that is considerably higher than the norm. He observes that the amount of paperwork and constancy
of change have had particularly negative effects, and claims that there is an ‘association’ (p. 77) between stress, low job satisfaction and low levels of control over the work. McLean and Dolan (1999) confirm that dissatisfaction and stress are core influences on workers who change jobs, along with a sense of dissonance deriving from the ‘mismatch between their expectations and the day to day reality of the job’ (p. 172).

The overall picture to emerge suggests that while there are aspects of service user-related work that are of concern to social work students (Christie & Kruk, 1998), it is the organisational factors that constitute the major disincentives to people wishing to become social workers. The origins of many of these concerns can be located outside of social welfare organisations and it is to these external influences that the paper now turns.

**External influences on welfare organisations**

Many of the more malign influences on welfare organisations stem from the dominance of the New Right, associated with successive Conservative governments. Gamble (1994) has identified two contrasting strands of its political ideologies: neo-conservative views about the role of the state and neo-liberal economic ideas. In essence, the manifestations of neo-conservatism—the promotion of Victorian concepts of the family and social order and the demonising of those perceived as a threat to that order—have created considerable public disquiet about social work, charged as it is with negotiating the boundaries between the family and society. Media coverage of social work has been overwhelming critical (Franklin, 1998), directly contributing to a lack of certainty about the role and function of social services organisations and damagingly low levels of morale amongst many social workers. This has set the moral climate within which welfare organisations operate.

In addition, their work has been affected by numerous problems deriving from the application of neo-liberal economic ideas. These include significant reductions in expenditure on welfare and the adoption of market ‘solutions’ to public problems alongside a denial of the value and purpose of state welfare organisations, and a disparagement of their history and achievements (Pratt, 1997). There has been a concomitant emphasis on the importance of management in the public services and the development of managerialism as an ideological force in the transformation of welfare organisations (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Clarke et al., 2000).

Over the years, this has created particular problems for welfare organisations, which have been subjected to increased levels of scrutiny, while undergoing a continuous process of upheaval—directly increasing workers’ stress and their sense of job insecurity (Balloch et al., 1999). At the same time, they have been seeking to respond to increasing levels of social inequality and poverty (Jones & Novak, 1999), combined with more confident and articulate service user groups (Croft & Beresford, 1998). Both increase the levels of demand on scarce resources.

While the genesis of these issues can be traced back to successive Tory administrations, the accession of a Labour government has not significantly reduced the pressures on welfare organisations. Indeed, there are distinct continuities between the social policies of the Conservative and Labour parties, both generally (Jones & Novak, 1999) and with specific reference to social services (Johnson, 1999a), even if the rhetoric has changed. The development of the ‘Best Value’ regime for local government can be seen in this context, although it is presented as representing a decisive break with the Conservative past (DETR, 1998). However, it is heavily dependent on quantitative measures of performance—the Performance Assessment Framework—which can have the effect of distorting the priorities of local authorities (Sanderson, 1998). Therefore, despite the fact that the concentration on
economy, efficiency and effectiveness is leavened by considerations of quality and fair access (DETR, 1998), it is still the hard, quantifiable data that predominates.

This fits closely into what Sanderson (1998) has defined as a typical model of accountability under ‘new’ Labour—a progression that starts with ‘surveillance’, moves through ‘control’, and ends with ‘sanction’. This process is used to control what social services organisations do, while also governing the nature of professional activity (Lymbery & Shaw, 2000). Lipsky (1992) has argued that the combination of increased managerial control of professional practice with high workloads and limited resources leads to a reduction in service quality. Social workers are forced into a struggle to reconcile their professional practice standards with the performance measures imposed upon them.

The team dimension

Most qualified social workers, particularly in the statutory sector, will work in a team. The nature of these teams may differ markedly. Whereas some will comprise staff at a similar level and with the same professional orientation, it is increasingly likely that teams will be both multi-disciplinary and inter-professional (Loxley, 1997). In addition, many of these teams will contain members at different levels and grades.

The purpose of teams and teamwork is not always clear to qualifying social workers. In part, this can be explained by reference to the contradictory messages that social workers receive about teams. On the one hand, considerable attention is given to the development of effective teamwork, which is common within social services provision (Payne, 1982) as well as within health care (Pritchard & Pritchard, 1994) and multi-professional care (Payne, 2000). On the other hand, the majority of a social worker’s practice is carried out as an individual, unobserved either by colleagues or managers (Pithouse, 1998).

This is further complicated by the fact that, as Payne observes, there are a number of paradoxes inherent within the concept of teamwork. He defines these in the following ways (Payne, 2000, p. 1):

- The more focus is given to teamwork, the more practitioners may become inward looking, and therefore neglect the requirements to build productive relationships with others outside the team.
- While many people value teams as a source of support within the agency context, they are also an instrument for carrying out agency policy. In addition, some people view teams as limiting their capacity for personal and professional freedom. Therefore, the same team may be seen as both supportive and oppressive.
- Focusing on the internal workings of the team may cause practitioners to minimise the involvement of service users in decisions that affect their lives.

Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that individual social workers’ experiences of teamwork contain strong elements of ambiguity and ambivalence. On the one hand, an environment may be seen as either supportive or oppressive—with the potential for the latter experience being markedly increased in circumstances where other power dynamics (for example, race, gender, disability, sexuality) come into play (Thompson, 1998). In addition, as Payne (2000) reminds us, a team exists primarily as a vehicle for the implementation of agency policies. Students need to be given an opportunity to explore how these contradictions might be played out in practice as well as the means to understand how best to ‘survive’ within them (Douglas, 1995).

It is also important to recognise that teams may well feature a significant level of conflict. This may be concerned with issues such as overall policy direction; alternatively, the conflict
may be located in inter-personal disagreements and antipathies. The power dynamics noted above will affect both the way in which the conflict is played out and the strategies for conflict resolution that are subsequently adopted. It is worth remembering that conflict may be a positive experience. It can allow workers to talk about issues that are bothering them, and enable them to encourage service users to do the same. Without such discussions feelings can become trapped, resentments can build up. Conflict also encourages individuals to take ownership of their views. It is important, however, that conflict is managed carefully. Individuals should not be exposed, nor made to feel defenceless (Payne, 2000). If these factors are not properly resolved there is an increased likelihood that the team itself might become a significant source of stress for individuals (Thompson et al., 1996).

Managing stress

There is a substantial general literature on the impact of stress in the workplace (see, for example, Cherniss, 1995; Roney & Cooper, 1997). This is echoed in the literature that specifically examines stress within social work (Collings & Murray, 1996; Thompson et al., 1996; Balloch et al., 1998; Davies, 1998; McLean, 1999; Glasby, 2000). At the general level it is accepted that ‘stress at work is primarily caused by the fundamentals of change, uncertainty, lack of control and high workload; all of which have become characteristic of work today’ (Cooper, 1997, p. 28). The literature clearly indicates a move away from the ‘pathologisation’ of stress—that is, the tendency to perceive that the person experiencing stress must be in some way inadequate.

As far as social work is concerned, it is accepted that there are elements of the job that are inherently stressful; however, it has been argued that numerous organisational factors are of at least equal importance (Collings & Murray, 1996). For McLean (1999), the highest levels of stress are connected to the aspects of work over which individual practitioners have least control and are also strongly associated with lack of job satisfaction. He concludes that ‘most stress was caused by lack of resources and inability to provide the standard of service staff would like to provide’ (McLean, 1999, p. 83). He also recognises that wider organisational factors may affect the levels of stress experienced by individuals. Thompson et al. (1996) view the experience of stress as a dynamic interplay between personal and organisational elements.

Despite the fact that the literature is clear that the causes of stress are inherent in the nature of the work and magnified by the organisational culture within which social workers are located, individuals are still said to be unwilling to report that they are experiencing stress, lest unfavourable judgements be made about their ability to cope with the demands of the job (McLean, 1999). It is certainly convenient for the employers of social workers to explain the phenomenon of stress in such a way as to ‘blame the victim’. However, this is clearly an over-simplified approach to the subject. There are considerable external pressures placed on social services organisations and social workers by society; these have a significant effect on individual practitioners. While the teams within which social workers are located may help to ameliorate the worst consequences of stress, there are also tensions within the nature of those teams that may also serve to exacerbate these effects.

In summary, therefore, it is important for student social workers to recognise the ‘realities’ of social work practice within welfare organisations. There is little value in learning to become a social worker who cannot engage positively with the tensions inherent within the role. However, it is also vital to communicate a sense that it is possible to practise social work within the constraints that we have identified. In the classroom, we tend to focus most on the constraints and limitations of the role, ensuring that the groups are under no illusions about the nature of contemporary social work practice. In the agency settings, students are exposed
to a number of different perspectives about policy and practice that enable them to establish a critical perspective on the classroom-based learning.

**The educational experience**

*Module outline and design*

The module was designed to provide student social workers with an introduction to some of the tensions inherent in welfare organisations prior to their first assessed placement. As noted earlier, it aimed to relate theory to practice by offering both class-based teaching and an opportunity for students to visit managers and practitioners in local agencies to further explore organisational policies and practices. The visits took place in Social Services Departments and, because the DipSW at the University of Nottingham includes a Voluntary Sector Pathway, Voluntary Organisations providing social welfare services. Assessment is by small group presentations based on the overall learning during the module.

The module runs for three weeks, commencing with taught workshops offering critical reflections on current policy and practice, as discussed above. Themes are grouped loosely according to ‘policy’ or ‘practice’; the former include issues relating to the changing role and function of welfare organisations, and the development of concepts such as the enabling authority and managerialism. The latter focuses more on matters concerning individual practitioners—relationships between team members, acknowledging both formal and informal power dynamics which operate within both teams and the wider organisation, and ways of handling conflict and managing stress.

In the second and third weeks of the module students work in three pathway groups—Adult and Community Care, Children and Families, Voluntary Sector—of between 10 and 16 students. This provides them with a structured opportunity for self-directed group-based learning similar to the Enquiry and Action Learning method which has been used on a number of social work training courses (see Burgess, 1992; Taylor, 1993). The principles that underpin the module’s learning strategy are those that underpin all adult learning—that people are generally most motivated to learn when they have the capacity to make choices about the nature, form and outcome of that learning (Knowles, 1980). Each group has to work together to decide how best to manage its time and achieve its task. Given the tight time scales within which the students have to work, the dates and times of the agency visits are pre-arranged to ensure the availability of agency personnel. Each group has a total of four visits, of which two focus on policy issues and the other two on practice. Each group decided who would research which topics, what questions they would ask the agency interviewees, and how their overall learning would be demonstrated. There was a strong emphasis on Equal Opportunities, reflecting the programme philosophy, in relation to both staffing policies and service delivery. This linked to understandings of power and authority within organisations and the additional tensions these create. A base-line expectation is that each student attends two of the meetings. In addition, a comprehensive reading list is provided in order to direct the groups to additional theoretical material to support their presentations.

One of the important aspects of group presentations is the way in which each group has the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and understanding in ways felt to be most appropriate for that group. This encourages creative thinking and developing ways of presenting material through visual aids and imaginative techniques. For example, the Children and Families group set the context of their work through a mass of soft toys and child-related posters. The stress of always being at the end of a telephone was illustrated through a stage prop of a giant cardboard mobile phone. The Adult and Community Care group tested their audience’s
knowledge of the financial basis of community care through a game derived from the TV programme ‘The Price is Right’. The Voluntary Sector group adopted a very different style from the other two, highlighting the diversity of organisational forms that they encountered in their visits and reading.

It was interesting to note how each group approached the learning task. For example, the Voluntary Sector Pathway set itself some ground-rules. Commenting on the process of working together to produce the presentation, the group acknowledged that the ground-rules, once devised, had been put away and not referred to again. The link between this and what so often happens to agency equal opportunity policies was not lost on the group. They resolved to address their ground-rules much more proactively during the second year teaching when they would once again be working together as a group.

**Learning outcomes**

All three presentations were of a high standard and there was considerable evidence of each group working together to create an integrated performance around module themes. The level of analysis was generally good, with a number of telling points made through humour and irony. One presentation began with the making of a ‘Mixed Economy’ cake with the ‘cook’ stating, *In the past I would have been delighted to give you a slice. Today the cake isn’t going to be provided but I am enabling you to obtain the services you require!* Groups used role play to explore the impact of ‘top down’ instructions on teams and different styles of supervision and appraisal. Quotes from the interviews were woven into the scripts, including one from a social worker who had not had an appraisal in seven years! Also explored were the contrasting perspectives of managers and practitioners, drawing on experiences from the agency visits and linking these to the theoretical literature discussed in the initial workshops.

During the Adult and Community Care group’s ‘policy’ visits, it became apparent that managers had a clear sense of existing within a hierarchical structure and were responsible for the work of their teams, the control of a specific budget, and meeting assessed needs of the users in their area. Managers interviewed highlighted the political power exercised by elected Councillors, and concerns were raised about what influence they may have over formal assessments and eligibility, although they commented that clarity of procedures was often used as a defence against external pressures. Students noted that service managers felt that it was their role to make a case for the change and development of services, emphasising the managerialist/‘top down’ culture that pervades. This illustrated the practice reality of managerialist influences on welfare organisations, as outlined in the first section.

Notes prepared by the group to accompany the presentation demonstrated their understanding of the impact of neo-liberal thinking on social welfare organisations—the changing nature of local authorities from being providers of care to enabling organisations promoting the development of the private and voluntary care sectors within a mixed economy of welfare (Johnson, 1999b). The Voluntary Sector group addressed this from an alternative perspective—the different impact on voluntary organisations of the trend towards partnerships and contracts. They focused much more on questions relating to the changing role of the voluntary sector. Are organisations losing their autonomy? Do less rigid hierarchies in some smaller organisations lead to greater productivity? How are issues of diversity managed in the voluntary sector? Do service users have more of a voice? Are services shifting priorities from prevention to crisis intervention?

During the ‘practice’ visits, both the Children and Families and the Adult and Community Care groups drew on the theoretical discussion of the changing nature of social work addressed in the first section of this paper. They recognised the limited power of the
individual practitioner to influence policies, procedures and regulations in the current managerialist climate. The practitioner view offered within the Children and Families group was that of an ‘undervalued, de-motivated staff who certainly did not feel powerful’ working within an organisation that emphasised workload management and statistical guidelines. The Adult and Community Care group was able to contrast this with the degree of power and authority that a social worker has over the lives of service users—power to define boundaries in their relationship with the other person, power over information, power to intervene or not, power to offer services or not. The group also noted the different perspectives on supervision—contrasting a manager who regarded it as primarily a check on quality with a practitioner who saw it as a valuable means of support. The Children and Families group was particularly struck by the disparity between policy and practice in relation to supervision and appraisal. While policies clearly stated that monthly supervision and annual appraisals should take place, this was not the experience of the practitioners they met. In the Voluntary Sector group, the importance given to the empowerment of service users was in marked contrast to the more negative experiences reported by groups working within the statutory agencies. However, there was a recognition that this could be threatened by the growing managerialism within the voluntary sector combined with its changing nature, moving away from advocacy and campaigning work to more direct contracting with the statutory sector.

Following the presentation each group was asked a number of questions relating to the learning experience. Firstly, did they learn anything about working in organisations that they did not already know? For the Voluntary Sector group the extreme diversity of voluntary organisations was highlighted. For example, visits were made to the Children’s Society, part of a large national organisation, and the Gay & Lesbian Switchboard, a local organisation ‘run on a shoestring’. What particularly impressed the group was the structure of this latter organisation, with all members having an equal say in the development of policy and particular attention being paid to monitoring the nature of their work. This offered a marked contrast to the experience of visits undertaken in the statutory sector.

Specific learning highlighted by the Children and Families group centred around the different perspectives between managers and practitioners. The group interviewed both and found the barriers between the two more marked than they had expected—in fact they referred to this as a ‘chasm’! Open responses from social workers in one team about resource constraints contrasted with the denial from a manager in the same agency about budgetary problems. The group were also concerned about the blurring of accountability in one of the settings visited and uneasy about the lack of supervision and appraisal. Again, there was a gulf between managerial and practitioner perspectives in this respect. This gulf was less evident for the Adult and Community Care group. They were impressed, and not a little surprised, about the positive views expressed about the changes which have taken place in this setting and optimism for the future. Despite being aware of implementation problems, those interviewed were enthusiastic about the role of care manager, stressing the clarity and focus to the work that had been missing previously.

The groups were also asked whether they had developed their own thinking around how they would manage themselves in organisations. In general, students felt better prepared for the different types of organisational structure, especially in the voluntary sector. They spoke of the need to take responsibility for self-management, especially regarding the pressures of the work, and the importance of giving themselves time to settle into a new job, rather than ‘diving in head first’. They were also more aware of the significance of team support and the difference a good manager can make to job satisfaction. Their confidence to question things, to ask if they did not understand, to be open to new knowledge and to transfer learning from one setting to another increased. One commented ‘I can be more assertive’ and another
recognised that ‘knowledge is power’. Overall they felt that working in their Pathway groups had been valuable preparation for the second year teaching and, because the group experience had been positive in every case, there was general enthusiasm about returning to the classroom environment in six months time. Their emphasis on the importance of factors internal to the organisation appeared to reflect an acceptance that external factors are often more of a ‘given’, although there was some understanding of the fact that these can be mitigated by a supportive and well-managed team environment.

Finally, the groups were asked whether there had been any surprises regarding the type of learning experience. The greatest surprise to all three groups was their ability to work so well together and, more importantly, to produce high quality work. The work of Belbin (1993) was useful to the student group in highlighting the importance of what he termed ‘team roles’. He demonstrated that one of the great strengths of the effective team lies in its blend of different talents and abilities. Truly effective teams are able to use different personalities and approaches to suit differing situations and challenges if the team ‘mix’ is right. The value of a balance of personalities was recognised and the balance of roles within each group was acknowledged and worked with. There was a general consensus that the short time-scale allowed had made the task stressful but all students felt the final product was better for that, and had been fun. Any problems encountered along the way had to be addressed head on—they could not afford to wait and see if they were resolved without intervention. Complete ownership of the presentation given the open brief allowed the groups freedom to experiment. Negative factors included the size of two of the groups—especially the one with 16 members, which was experienced as too large to facilitate effective group working. Again, this appeared to mirror the experience of practitioners working to tight deadlines and feeling more supported in smaller teams and organisations than in larger ones.

Students were also asked to complete a Module Evaluation Form and 37 out of the 39 in the group did so. All rated the module as either ‘Excellent’ (16) or ‘Good’ (21). There is no doubt that the visits had a significant impact on the students and enabled them to link the theory to practice settings. They were described as an ‘eye-opener’ and students felt they had achieved a greater level of awareness about the nature of organisations through them. Asked what they particularly liked about the module, 28 students mentioned the visits with comments including the following:

- The chance to go to organisations: very informative and made the course seem much more relevant to why we’re here.
- Useful insight into the culture of organisations and good to compare the contrasting views of managers and practitioners.
- The visits gave us an idea of the ‘reality’ of social work practice in organisations.
- It made the stuff we had been learning make more sense, puts it all into a ‘real’ context with the agency visits.

There was a sense of ‘forewarned is forearmed’ with students feeling that they were going into their placements with increased knowledge and understanding about external pressures, resource constraints, the need for regular supervision, the potential for and signs of stress, and the importance of developing support networks. They were clearer about the complexities of organisational life—direct work with service users takes place within a context which is not necessarily benign or supportive. Asked to comment on the module as a whole, a range of reactions was received. These included: excellent; enjoyable; stressful; scary; hard work; a very positive experience; well organised; right balance of taught information and self-directed learning; learnt a lot; educational. While a few people would have liked more time to prepare the
presentation, most felt the short time-scale and the pressure it put them under led to more efficient and effective working, and also mirrored the ‘reality’ of lived practice.

**Conclusion**

Comparing the students’ evaluation of the 1999–2000 module with that of the previous year it is clear that its success or otherwise rests on the organisation of the visits and the extent to which the different groups work well together. For this particular year, all the visits were successfully undertaken and the general experience of working together in pathway groups was extremely positive. The fact that this was the final presentation of the first year also appeared to have a positive impact; group members were familiar with each other and were more willing to take risks than had been evident earlier in the course. They all put considerable thought into how to present their learning in ways that would engage their audience, as well as demonstrate theory–practice links.

In assessing the overall success of the module, we were struck by a number of important learning points relating more to the module style than its content.

- The module process confirmed the view that there are positive advantages to the deployment of a range of assessment processes (Brown et al., 1997). In particular, the fact that each group was assessed collectively helped to ensure that members took the task equally seriously—it was clear that all group members had worked extremely hard and were committed to the learning process. The other advantage of a presentation is in consolidating the learning—arguably, students need to understand a subject more thoroughly if they are required to present it coherently. It is hoped that this mechanism will better enable them to hold on to the learning achieved through the module.

- The process of working collectively during the project helped to ensure that students shared their knowledge and hence approached the subject from a broader base than would have been possible through individual working. They were able to cover more ground in this way than would have been possible had they worked independently. Each presentation enabled members of the other Pathway groups to compare and contrast the issues raised with their own learning in a way that individual essay writing could not have achieved.

- The principle that the best way to study the organisational context of social work is through engagement with people who inhabit that context seemed to be upheld. Students were given a range of perspectives on which to base their judgements; they also had plentiful literature on which to draw. The agency visits enabled them to make connections between theory, policy and practice, and helped the subject come alive.

- A key purpose of the module is to provide a bridge between college-based study and the impending Level 1 placement; the opportunity to visit agencies helped to put the forthcoming placements into context in a way that was regarded as helpful by the student group. In addition, the module provided a first opportunity for the Pathway groups to work together, therefore helpfully bridging the first year and second year teaching programmes.

- Finally, we were struck by the overwhelmingly positive feedback that the students gave to the module experience, both verbally and in written form. This is testimony to the effectiveness of the module in achieving its stated goals of preparing social work students for the practice realities of the organisational context in which they will be located, both as students and as practitioners.

**References**


