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How practising social workers benefit from teaching social work students in university classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact on practising social workers who engage in teaching social work students in a university classroom setting. Using a narrative inquiry approach, focus group interviews were conducted with social workers from three London local authorities to understand how teaching opportunities influence their professional development and practice. The findings reveal that classroom interactions, characterized by dialogical engagement and student curiosity, prompt social workers to reflect on and reconsider established social work knowledge and practices. Teaching in a university environment invites practitioners to develop a revised understanding of their professional identity by enhancing self-reflexive opportunities and by freeing up new ways to think about social work. These insights, often cultivated by students asking unanticipated questions, are taken back to the practitioners' workplace, potentially leading to shifts in their practice with colleagues and service users. The paper concludes that teaching not only benefits students, but also offers practising social workers unique opportunities for continuous professional development, as university classrooms can foster a dynamic, social constructivist approach to learning.

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Social work discourse; continuous professional development; self-reflexivity; teaching; systemic-constructivist learning

Introduction

Social workers learn from the presence of social work students on practice placements (Bogo, 2015; Hunter & Poe, 2015; Zendell et al., 2007). We know less about how they might also learn from teaching social work students in university classrooms. Different learning theories (Aubrey & Riley, 2022) account for how we learn. I propose that classroom encounters between social work practitioners and students align with a social constructivist learning approach in which meaning-making occurs (Jordan et al., 2008). Social constructivism, as a learning theory, proposes that knowledge is co-constructed through interactive and collaborative discussions in specific cultural settings, taking into account learners' previous understanding and knowledge (Akpan et al., 2020). In this paper, I propose that the classroom is an interactive, interrelational learning space in which knowledge creation opportunities are created for both students and visiting practitioners. More specifically, practitioners' understanding of social work and its

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possibilities may change if classroom dialogic encounters promote self-reflexive opportunities for practitioners, opportunities created through the interaction of those familiar with day-to-day social work patterns and practices, and those curious about understanding them (Lee & Greene, 1999).

A university setting may cultivate a space for different types of practitioner reflections to emerge (Cranton & Carusetta, 2002) than is possible in a practice setting. For example, if social workers' thoughts and practices are seen as functions of a social work discourse, what happens when students less familiar with the discourse use language to unsettle social workers and the discourse in which they are embedded (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022)? Classroom encounters might therefore lead social workers to critique what they say, think and do, developing a revised ontological sense of themselves as social workers (Foucault, 1984).

Simultaneously, each of us exists and can be understood within the various systems we inhabit (Dallos & Vetere, 2021). If we accept that we are all part of a wider ecology in which our lives are 'connected through our relationships and co-created through and within our communication processes' (Hedges, 2005, p. 184), then we may wonder about the effects of teaching experiences on practitioners returning to practice. Does a new sense of who they are as social workers and what they think about social work lead to new ways of practising?

This paper examines the effects of teaching social work students on practising social workers in a London Higher Education Institution (HEI). The opportunity to teach arose from the Department for Education's (DfE) funded social work teaching partnership initiative in England, which led to a formal partnership between an HEI and three local authorities in London. The specific initiative leading to practising social workers teaching in university classrooms was called the teaching consultant programme. Social workers who taught on this programme were designated the role of 'teaching consultants'.

This paper presents and considers findings from three focus group interviews with teaching consultants, who discussed how their classroom teaching encounters with social work students affected them. The paper begins by establishing a theoretical framework to consider how practitioners might learn and benefit from classroom encounters with students. The paper then outlines the research approach undertaken, before introducing and discussing findings from focus group interviews with social workers. The paper concludes by briefly considering the policy and research implications of inviting practitioners to teach social work students in the classroom.

Social work teaching partnerships – nationally and locally

Recent developments in English social work education have been marked by significant transformations, whether spurred by political ideology (McNicoll, 2016) or concerns about the quality of social work education (Narey, 2014) (Forrester, 2016). describes this era as a 'period of unparalleled change.' One of the key innovations introduced in 2015 was the social work teaching partnership initiative, which initially resulted in the creation of four pilot partnerships between higher education institutions (HEIs) and social work employers. As of January 2020, 23 partnerships had evolved to include 110 local authorities and 51 HEIs (Interface Associates UK Limited, 2020).

Teaching Partnerships were judged to bring a range of benefits and outcomes in relation to academic and practitioner collaboration. These included closer academic and practitioner collaboration, leading to better working relationships between academics and practitioners, fostering joint learning experiences and a changing front-line working culture (Interface Associates UK Limited, 2020). However, more could be known about the influence of social work students on practitioners who are invited to teach in HEIs.

Secured through a competitive bid for DfE funding, the South East London Teaching Partnership (SELTP) was one of four pilot social work teaching partnerships established in 2015. The members of this partnership are Southwark Council, Lewisham Council, the Royal Borough of Greenwich and Goldsmiths, University of London. A primary aim of SELTP was to strengthen university-employer collaboration and establish a south east London Centre of Excellence in social work practice, education and research. One of SELTP's objectives (Hughes et al., 2018) was to develop innovative approaches to improve the quality of social work education and Continuous Professional Development (CPD). This objective translated into experienced social work practitioners and managers from the three local authorities working as 'teaching consultants' on the BA and MA Social Work Degree Programmes at Goldsmiths. Social workers from the local authorities were formally invited to apply to become teaching consultants and highlight curriculum areas they wished to teach. These teaching consultants were then 'matched' with the curriculum requirements of the BA and MA in Social Work programmes. Teaching consultants were offered a brief induction programme on teaching and given access to Goldsmiths library. Working alongside social work lecturers, these experienced social workers helped students to relate social work knowledge to everyday social work practice situations. Teaching opportunities ranged from supporting lecturers in the classroom, co-delivering teaching with lecturers, working on case study examples, and offering specialist skills workshops (e.g. systemic teaching, motivational interviewing, and restorative justice). Teaching opportunities for consultants varied, with some offered one-off encounters with students while others were offered several teaching opportunities, which employers had to agree to. The Teaching Partnership Initiative enabled the South East London Teaching Partnership to increase practitioner involvement in the classroom from 10% to over 60% of the curriculum. Students were informed in the start of start of year inductions that teaching consultants would be offering practice knowledge in modules, lectures and workshops. Module and workshop evaluations of the teaching consultant initiative indicated that social work students at Goldsmiths valued tremendously the presence of practising social workers in the classroom (Hughes et al., 2018).

How might practising social workers learn from teaching social work students in a university classroom?

How might teaching social work students in the classroom affect social work practitioners? Possibly very little if teaching embraces linear assumptions (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017) where instructors proceed along a sequential pattern to deliver reductive or deterministic explanations (Tomm, 1988) of practice to students. Passive learning for students is likely to follow (Aubrey & Riley, 2022), with students unable to challenge or

alter a teacher's understanding of a subject. Equally, a classroom witnessing this kind of pedagogy may be considered a closed system, in the sense that the outside environment is unlikely to be touched by the classroom teaching experiences of practitioners (Nichols & Davis, 2016), as students have few opportunities to interact with and influence them.

On the other hand, second-order cybernetics (Atkinson & Heath, 1990), a key concept in later systems thinking, contends that teachers should not be viewed as detached, independent observers. Instead, practitioners and students generate new ideas or alter their understanding through classroom interactions. Moreover, if we see the classroom as forming a sub-system as part of a wider ecological system (Bateson, 1972), then it opens the possibility that the effects of classroom interactions may be introduced into a practitioner's day-to-day working life in unforeseen ways.

Therefore, if the pedagogical approach is less linear and more interactive, classrooms may witness a form of circular causality (Bateson & Donaldson, 1991) between social work practitioners and students. Circular causality implies the mutuality of those present in the classroom, teachers and students—constitutive members of a learning system—who communicate with and influence one another through multiple and unpredictable interactions (Jackson, 1965).

Visiting practitioners are likely to be affected by circular interactions with students by asking different types of circular questions, such as hypothetical, contextual and reflexive questions (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018). In such a classroom, everybody can be understood as 'a process of relationships' (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018, p. 10), suggesting that a person's beliefs and understanding are open to being influenced by others (Becvar & Becvar, 2017) (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022; Lou-Barton & Davis, 2019). Classroom interactions can lead to a range of possible outcomes, known as multifinality (Lou-Barton & Davis, 2019), where the results of teaching experiences may be both unpredictable and unexpected. Furthermore, after the practitioner leaves the classroom, the future application of their newly acquired knowledge is uncertain, particularly when considering subsequent interactions characterized by reciprocal causality. Therefore, the outcomes of teaching encounters can be seen as another step in the practitioner's ongoing learning journey, which opens the door to further learning opportunities. Reflexive practitioners are continuously evolving (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022), never fully reaching the end of their learning journey.

Social work students and social workers study and work, respectively, in separate organizational or sub-systems. However, the consequences of circular causality may be felt if the goings-on within the classroom ripple out into the wider world. In such a representation, the classroom is a sub-system within a wider, ecological and open system (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Open systems witness an ongoing exchange of information, among other things, within and between various sub-systems (e.g. the HEI environment, the local authority environment) (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Thinking more carefully about what might happen in classrooms to promote new practitioner insights and learning, social constructivism is a helpful way to understand how practitioners learn, while acknowledging the significance of different systems which aid their learning. While systems theory acknowledges the effects of different systems, organizations and interrelationships on a person's behavior, the heart of social constructivism suggests our interpretation of reality is co-constructed in relationships through language (Hedges, 2005), underpinned by our socio-cultural beliefs (Barge & Fairhurst,

2008). In social work classroom encounters, this might lead to practitioners producing revised constructions or understandings of professional social work discourses.

There are a number of elements of social constructivism (Lee & Greene, 1999; Loyens & Gijbels, 2008) which are said to promote learners' understanding. While commentators (Loyens & Gijbels, 2008) usually have the student learner in mind, these features may also be relevant for understanding how classroom encounters affect practitioners.

First, the setting or context in which learning takes place is important (Sclater, 2011). Practitioners may experience a form of situated learning (Lave, 1988) in which new social work meanings might emerge because they are embedded, even for a short time, within the social and cultural context of a university classroom. The university environment is a different workspace for social workers. While there is a broader literature that can inform discussions of the spatial (and temporal) nature of social work practice and education, there is an attraction to turn to the emergence of a 'humanistic' turn in geography (Tuan, 1977), as it reminds us of the material quality of a place, in which its meaning both shapes and is shaped by our spatial practices. Such an environment promotes different learning opportunities than might be possible to acquire within their day-to-day work environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and may contribute to knowledge production in a different way. University classrooms might provide practitioners with 'a sensory experience that can both orientate and alienate' (Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013) and might provide a catalyst for new knowledge formation and activity. Although materials such as meeting rooms, chairs, desks, computers and screens occupy both university and local authority environments, these objects serve different functions. In a university setting, these objects coalesce to create a sense of place to serve goals such as knowledge consideration, exchange and creation, as critical incidents and social work cases are examined in different ways than in a social work setting. In a local authority setting, these same objects may be used to support practical decision-making processes such as case and crisis management. The focus is on service delivery by responding to community needs and outcomes. Consequently, the function of these objects adapts to the specific professional context in which they are located, facilitating practitioners to maneuver and think in different ways. Opportunities to spend time thinking about social work practice for different purposes within a university environment may therefore lead to new insights for social work practitioners.

Second, we may wish to consider the relational elements of what transpires in the classroom to foster learning. Social constructivist theorists highlight the benefits of co-operative interactions to aid learning and knowledge production (Steffe & Gale, 1995). Co-operative encounters can be aided if learning opportunities relate to real-life or authentic practice situations (Loyens & Gijbels, 2008). Students want to understand how social workers approach real-life situations and problems (Blumenfeld, 1992). By inviting practitioners into the classroom to discuss their work experiences through the lens of practice knowledge (Eraut, 2000), students are confronted with the types of social work dilemmas they will face in the future. Students are curious about making connections between the content of a subject and its value to their future career (Entwistle, 2009). Unanticipated questions, perspectives or statements from students about social work practice may stimulate practitioners to reflect on social work values and practices in unfamiliar ways (Tomm, 1988). These opportunities afford practitioners opportunities to

reconsider their knowledge, with the potential for new meanings to emerge as students query social workers about their roles, values and decision-making.

Third, if social work means something different for practitioners following classroom encounters, social constructivism (Loyens & Gijbels, 2008) suggests that this is because individuals actively build their understanding of the social world. Practitioners link previous understandings with ideas emerging from teaching encounters to generate a new understanding of social work. Dialogic encounters with curious social work students are likely to generate questions, leading to additional self-reflexive opportunities. For (Lee & Greene, 1999, p. 27), 'reflexivity involves the bending, turning, or referring back to oneself in response to dialogical interaction with other people'. Students may tacitly challenge social workers to develop metacognition (Hoshmand, 1994) concerning how they see social work, requiring them to tolerate disruption, leading them to reframe how social work discourses are understood (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022).

Similarly, drawing on Foucault's (1984) archeological approach, university classrooms may create conditions to question the 'truth' of discursive social work elements. Social work students are located at best on the edge of a community of social work practice (Taylor, 2018) and are unlikely to be embedded in social work discourses having had little or no practice experience. By asking questions in the classroom, students help to problematize (Foucault, 1998) what it means to be and to practice as a social worker. In preparing to teach, social workers may engage in reflective activities such as creating a narrative to explain or justify how they work (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018). Classroom encounters may also create self-reflexive opportunities for social workers to think again about their professional identities, power relations within their practice and the possibilities for practice. This may lead them to reconsider how the system in which they are embedded influences how they think and what they can do (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018). The classroom, therefore, becomes an environment for social workers to become objects of knowledge, not only for students but also for themselves. This may lead social workers to develop a revised ontological vision (Foucault, 1984) for social work in terms of how they see themselves as social workers, how they might practice and what might be the possibilities for social work.

In this paper I am therefore proposing that social constructivism as a learning theory, while also acknowledging the influence of different systemic environments in which practitioners find themselves, may lead to a new understanding of social work. After teaching, practitioners return to their day-to-day working environment, and this new understanding of social work may be introduced to the social worker's wider ecological system (Sennett, 2018; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Various elements of a systemic-constructivist model are represented in Figure 1 (below) to visualize the interconnectedness of sub-systems for practising social workers arising from their teaching experiences.

Methodology

Regarding research design, Crotty (1998) has advised employing methodological alignment to strengthen the soundness of research findings. The methodological approach used in this study considered alignment in terms of the study's aims, using narrative inquiry (Bamberg, 2012), employing instruments such as purposive sampling (Mason, 2017), creating focus groups (Ritchie et al., 2013) and using NVivo (Jackson & Bazeley,

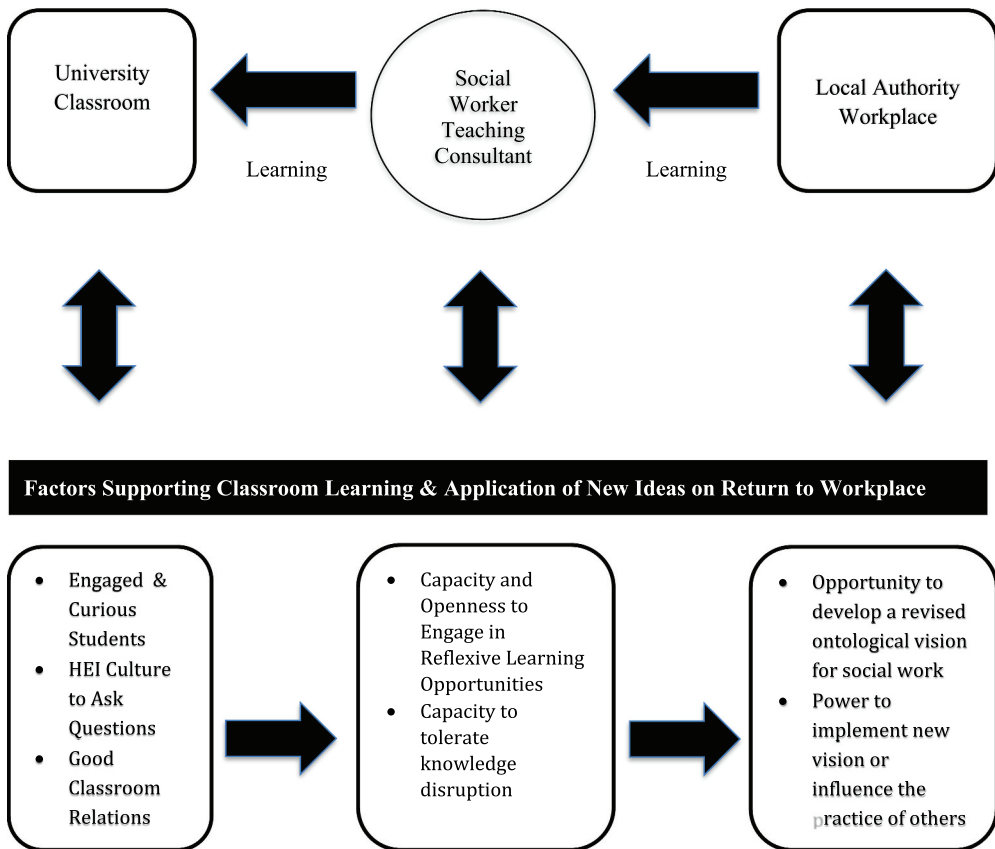


Figure 1. A systemic-constructivist model to explain how practitioners learn from teaching social work students in the classroom and how this learning affects their day-to-day practice.

2019) to identify, collect and analyze data. Before considering how these tools were used, I reflect on the theoretical elements of narrative inquiry to show how these served to meet the research aim of understanding the experiences and impact of teaching on social work practitioners.

Narrative inquiry aligns epistemologically with the social constructivist tradition (Ntinda, 2019) in that multiple constructed views of the world can be generated as people such as practising social workers actively make sense of their experience by creating and expressing constructions through intersubjective language. Clandinin and Huber (2010) suggest researchers employing narrative inquiry need to focus on three ‘commonplaces’ in stories: place, sociality and temporality. Narrative inquiry as a methodological approach therefore permitted me to reflect on practitioners’ stories of teaching experiences and the effects of teaching by considering the presence of university and day-to-day work spaces (i.e. place), practitioners’ relationships with others, including other versions of themselves (i.e. sociality), and possible changes over time in terms of their construction of social work constituents (i.e. temporality).

Ethical permission to conduct this research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the HEI. Social workers—designated the title ‘teaching consultant’ -

who volunteered to teach in the HEI setting as part of the English Government's Teaching Partnership initiative (Department for Education, & Department of Health, 2015) were recruited to the study. They were invited to participate in three focus groups using purposive sampling (Mason, 2017). The size of the focus groups varied between 6 and 14 people. The focus groups comprised social workers with different levels of experience (e.g. working for two years since qualification as a social worker, senior practitioners, and team managers). Some teaching consultants taught students by themselves, while others co-delivered teaching with academics. There were limitations to the sample (e.g. some teaching consultants may not have chosen to participate in a focus group because they did not enjoy the experience of teaching). At the same time, I tried to increase the validity of the findings by engaging in member checking (Birt et al., 2016) by providing a number of respondents with a draft copy of the findings and analysis. This led to findings being shared with the local teaching partnership (Hughes et al., 2018) and two co-produced in-depth case studies with teaching consultants, from management and social worker perspectives, about their experiences of teaching and its impact on their lives (Taylor & James, 2023; Taylor et al., 2023).

Before presenting the findings, the reflective positioning of the researcher needs acknowledgment to illuminate what decisions were made with the data (Etherington, 2004), thus rejecting the epistemological position of objectivism (Ritchie et al., 2013). I would support the principle of teaching partnerships to foster strong links between HEIs and local councils. Therefore, it is reasonable to challenge whether inherent biases are present in the presentation and discussion of these findings. In defense, every qualitative research study is constituted by historical and social conditions which not only frame respondents' responses to constructing representations of their experiences through language but also influence a researcher's reaction to what the data means for them (Mendelson, 1979). Arguably, if the researcher is mindful of and acknowledges these limitations, the reader is likely to trust the research findings.

Results

This section examines the key themes emerging from social workers' experiences of preparing to teach and interacting with students in a university setting. Teaching not only allows practitioners to describe their practice knowledge but also compels them to critically evaluate the theoretical and legislative frameworks that guide their work. The university classroom serves as a reflective space in which social workers step outside their routine environments and engage more deeply with their professional experiences. Social workers are encouraged to reconsider their assumptions through dynamic interactions with inquisitive and motivated students, leading to renewed insight and a refreshed sense of professional identity. The results discussed here illuminate how teaching fosters both reflective and self-reflexive processes, ultimately reshaping practitioners' approaches to social work. The following key themes—including the distinction between reflective and self-reflexive practices, the classroom as a situated learning environment, and the influence of student engagement—highlight the

transformative impact of these experiences on social work practice. These transformations include shifts in relational reflexivity and new approaches to multi-disciplinary teamwork.

Preparing to teach creates both reflective and self-reflexive learning opportunities for social workers

Reflective and self-reflexive learning opportunities emerge from classroom teaching opportunities for practitioners. Preparing to teach in a university classroom creates reflective opportunities for practising social workers to explain what they do (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018), a practice knowledge welcomed by students to aid their learning (Loyens & Gijbels, 2008). Invitations to teach problematize (Foucault, 1998) what constitutes social work knowledge for practitioners, in that they have to reflect, formulate and share their understanding of social work with students.

Practitioners illustrated the difference between reflective and self-reflective activities when considering social work theories or legislation while preparing to teach. For example, Sinead and Mark reflected on identifying academic and legislative knowledge to justify and explain their practice.

And I think for us as practitioners it just brings to life the fact that you're not practicing in a vacuum, actually the theory supports what we're doing and how we do it and I've been out of academics for a long time, so it was just good to be refreshed again and reiterating that what I'm doing is based on something as well. Source: (Sinead, social worker)

It encouraged me because I sort of found out that I do know some things, that I've absorbed along the years, sort of challenged me as well to go and look up things that I felt maybe I was a bit dodgy on. Source: (Mark, social worker)

By contrast, Martha adopted a more self-reflexive approach when considering social work legislation. Burnham (2005) suggests that self-reflexivity is a process in which a worker 'makes, takes, or grasps an opportunity to observe, listen to, and question the effects of their practice', and then uses these responses to decide how to continue with their work. Preparing to teach led Martha to question the knowledge assumptions underpinning the system in which she was embedded, influencing her practice of social work. Specifically, Martha dismantled the legislative assumptions that framed her social work practice. Rather than simply sharing this legislative framework with students, a type of metacognition (Hoshmand, 1994) and introspection (Ryan, 2005) took place for Martha. Thinking reflexively in this way resulted in Martha becoming re-energized about the possibilities of social work.

...I'm looking at my work as a social worker, being a social worker from a human rights perspective, and that's really good because you get re-energised into why you are doing this in the first place... I asked myself the question why do we have the Human Rights Act, why do we have the Mental Capacity Act, because I thought that might help the students to work out why we have it. Although I felt that I know why we have it, I just did some work thinking let's just strip it all back, and so it built it back up, if you see what I mean. Source: (Martha, social worker)

The classroom as a situated learning space for practitioners

A University classroom also permits practitioners to engage with not-knowing and curious social work students (Lee & Greene, 1999). Classroom encounters with students may facilitate a form of situated learning (Lave, 1988) for practitioners, in that new social work meanings can emerge as they are embedded, even for a short time, within the social and cultural context of a university classroom. Such an environment promotes different learning opportunities than might be possible within their day-to-day work environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this regard, the classroom provides a reflective space for some teaching consultants to think about social work, a space not always easy to create in their everyday social work environment (Cranton & Carusetta, 2002).

Respondents such as Keith identified a contrast between the workplace and university space in terms of what kinds of thinking can occur, possibly because the university environment might allow for more imaginative thinking to emerge.

I liked the freedom [of the classroom] and I think that's something which could be built on . . . we are two different kinds of organisms, local authority and university, I think it was nice to have that freedom . . . (Keith, social worker)

For senior social worker, Sally, the classroom environment allowed for a reflective space to materialize, a space difficult to achieve in her everyday busyness, a space and time to slow down to reflect. It allowed Sally to

Step back and just think about are we doing things the right way and so you're not just seeing, you can't see the woods for the trees or whatever it is all the time and I think you know we're bogged down even in our own supervision that- I know in my supervision I talk a lot about, you know, just whether this report is being done or whatever, it's not really that much of a reflective space and we are moving that way but to be able to do that with lots of different people in a different environment is really, really useful (Sally, senior social worker)

Social work students create opportunities for social workers to reflect on the constituents of social work knowledge

Students value practice knowledge and want to join practitioners' understandings to their own novice understanding of social work (Blumenfeld, 1992). By novice, I am not suggesting that students are unfamiliar with social work contexts, whether as service users or as unqualified social workers. Rather, I am implying that they are undertaking a learning journey to qualify as social workers. While teaching consultants received formal and anonymous feedback of their teaching encounters from students, these evaluations were not discussed in the focus groups. Instead, respondents were asked to reflect on their interactions with students. Teaching consultants encountered enthusiastic social work students, as they were inquisitive and motivated to understand the world of those they hoped to become in a few years (Entwistle, 2009). Classroom encounters are positive and enjoyable experiences for social workers when students are keen to understand their perspectives on practice. Positive encounters are infectious and help to rekindle social workers' enthusiasm for social work, as indicated by different focus group participants.

Students were actually very enthusiastic which I found really helped me to get some, you know, enthusiasm back generally.

I came away from the sessions feeling kind of you know like more enthusiasm about my job.

You were doing something that was really quite useful and that their feedback was very encouraging.

What do you get back? Some of it is about being re-energised. It's about the remembering, remembering why social work in the first place, so some of it is about that.

The enthusiasm you get from them kind of reinvigorates you.

Enthusiastic classroom encounters do not just leave teaching consultants feeling refreshed and re-energized. They also signal co-operative (Loyens & Gijbels, 2008) and dialogically interactive (Lee & Greene, 1999) encounters, key social constructivist elements, enhancing both student and practitioner understanding (Greeno et al., 1996). As social work students are keen to learn from those they want to follow in their profession, they engage with practitioners cooperatively and relationally to promote opportunities to think about social work in unexpected ways. Students do this by asking circular questions (Tomm, 1988), which are often hypothetical, contextual or reflexive (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018).

Practitioners shared several examples of how their interactions with students created valuable learning opportunities. One such example came from James, a social worker, who described how a student's question prompted him to reflect on his own experiences with trauma. The question encouraged James to think about how he could convey his experience in a higher education setting. In essence, the student's question led James to connect his personal experiences of trauma to the academic language needed to explain it.

We were talking about trauma and the impact of trauma on you as a practitioner and it made me go away, find an article for the group and when I was reading the article it kind of helped me think about some of the experiences that I've been feeling and some of the struggles that I've been having so that was really good for me coz it actually made me read something and put a name to some of the experiences I had ... so the article was for them but when I read it, it was for my (laughs) . . .

James also referred to an exercise with students in which they became a reflecting team for one of his cases. When James talks about students giving him ideas, what he might be saying is that students were offering hypothetical questions or statements (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980) as part of a reflecting team (Andersen, 1991), inviting James to adapt his social work practice to evoke a different response from family members.

I did a case where they were the reflecting team and they've given me ideas that I'm going to go away and write a, a, a therapeutic letter to a family that I've been working with where I was erm having some misgivings so yeah. Source: (James, social worker)

Malcolm, a social work team manager, talked about how contact with students within an educational setting allowed him to take a different perspective on work. He stated that the intentions (Tomm, 1988) of students (i.e. students focused on developing practice knowledge rather than framing work in terms of timescales and outcomes) resulted in different kinds of questions (i.e. students brought something new) about cases for

Malcolm. By asking circular, reflexive questions (Dallos & Draper, 2015), students invited Malcolm to reflect differently on his relationship with cases, leading him to think differently about his caseload. Arguably, Malcolm's students created epistemological shudders by unsettling long-held assumptions (Charteris, 2014).

I think leaving what is a very stressful non-stop environment and coming here allowed me time to breathe and reflect and think about cases in a different form, away from social workers and managing them and think about cases with students who brought something new and we could discuss it and there was no pressure to have time schedules or outcomes and so it was, it was very stress relieving and so it was, it was, it was very beneficial and I think, I think very different actually. Source: (Malcolm, Team Manager)

We can speculate that there are distinct benefits for social work managers who teach social work students. Teaching students allows managers, such as Malcolm, to step outside the immediate pressures of managing social work teams and cases. It offers them the opportunity to view cases through a different lens, influenced by the students' fresh perspectives and their focus on developing practice knowledge, rather than being constrained by local authority timelines or risk management. Managers gain the added advantage of a break from their line management duties, enabling a deeper reflection on cases.

Bringing it back to the workplace

When a new historical ontology (Foucault, 1984) of social work emerges for social workers after their higher education institution (HEI) teaching encounters, it can potentially lead to changes in their ways of acting and being (Packer, 2018) as social workers. This may include greater awareness of the significance of relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) in social work practice.

Shopna, a team manager, was reminded during her teaching session of how social work learning is an interactive and relational process between people. Teaching led Shopna to revisit and create a new understanding of reflective supervision and how it could be undertaken with colleagues. The invitation to teach facilitated Shopna to self-reflexively review her role in supervisory encounters.

That two-way process [during teaching] reminded me that we have to change our perspective and look at the work we are doing. That's come very much from having that relationship with students. It's also informed how I supervise the work of the social workers that I have. I've always been a big fan of reflective supervision. But I guess what it did, it refocused me on what that might mean, in relation to the way I choose to work and I choose to practice. I had to look at myself critically too. Source: (Shopna, team manager)

Coming to the University to teach invites social workers to reflect on the wider practice system in which they are located. Amy, a social worker, described how circular questions (Tomm, 1988) from students encouraged her to reflect on working in new ways with her health colleagues. Student curiosity (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980) led to unfamiliar questions for Amy, inviting her to reconsider the role of a multidisciplinary team.

I was doing a session in working in a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) which I'm part of and some of the students were asking different questions and I'm thinking do you know what

I'm going to go find out a bit more about that. I'm going to look at these themes in a slightly different way with my health colleagues so I've started to look at that in a different way and actually made a couple of suggestions, you know and extended it the following way because of what the students were saying, I'm like I never thought about that before, you know when you're stuck in something you can't, you're not on the outside looking in so much but they kind of were and I thought ooh I never looked at it this way, that was helpful. Source: (Amy, social worker)

The role and level of responsibility of a social worker can impact their ability to influence practice within their organization or team. A social worker who holds a managerial or leadership role may use her position, power and authority to make changes in the way her team approaches practice. In the case of Sandra, it seems that her interactions with students and their discussions around race, class, and social justice had a significant impact on her team's approach to practice and were able to 'galvanize' their approach to adoption placement decisions.

It's a two-way process because what I'm experiencing are students who are coming with that particular mindset already; they are already coming with the ideas of empowerment, equality; they are talking in terms of race and class . . . I don't think you really hear social workers talking about the notion of race or class or the impact that poverty may have on families and the choices that they make, so it's two-way from the perspective of being able to receive that information back again, but also about wanting to use it in a way which is also productive when I go back to work.

. . . It [Teaching] has galvanised for me a different way of discussing the cases. Within the adoption team, we had an opportunity to look at a case in its totality. We will look at a matrix, for example, we will look at a child in terms of matching criteria. We'll ask some very good questions about the identity, the location, contact, all of these quite vibrant issues. But actually, I wanted it to be broader than that. I wanted that before social workers who was a Family Social Worker, to come along and book a slot for the agency decision maker to decide or not whether they should apply for a placement order. I wanted to ask the social worker more questions about how they got to that particular point, because what I was hearing a lot about there's 26 weeks and we have to rush it forward. Source: (Sandra, Team Manager)

In the last section, Malcolm, a social work team manager, noted how he thought differently as a result of interacting with students. Here, we see what another manager can do with new knowledge. As a manager, Sandra holds a position of authority, which gives her the power to shape not only her own practice but also her team's practice. Her participation in the classroom, therefore, extends beyond personal reflexivity; it has the potential to ripple into organizational change. Sandra's reflection on race, class, and social justice discussions with students points to a critical element of her managerial role: the ability to incorporate fresh perspectives from the classroom into her team's decision-making processes. She mentions how these discussions helped her broaden the lens through which she approached adoption cases, emphasizing a shift from time-constrained procedural approaches to a more thoughtful, critical evaluation of each case's broader context. This suggests that as a manager, Sandra is in a unique position to translate reflexive learning from the classroom into practical policy changes or shifts in the culture of her team.

Discussion

Relational, temporal and spatial disruptions can occur for social workers teaching social work students in an HEI setting. This displacement opens up possibilities for social workers to consider their role and profession in innovative ways. In general, power relations in HEI classrooms tilt toward social work students when visiting practitioners enter the classroom. In contrast to social work placements, social workers in the classroom hold less power relative to students. They are invited to perform an irregular work activity (i.e. teaching) in an unfamiliar workspace with a group of strangers with a common identity. As a result, classroom power relations, different to student-social worker power relations in practice placements, may be conducive to creating a more egalitarian and dialogical learning environment. If students have the power to significantly influence the shaping of discussions, classrooms may witness a form of circular causality (Bateson & Donaldson, 1991) and mutuality between social work practitioners and students, resulting in multiple, unpredictable and thought-provoking interactions (Jackson, 1965). During circular encounters, teaching consultants may be asked to respond to circular questions, such as hypothetical, contextual and reflexive questions (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018). If these questions are unfamiliar, visiting practitioners are likely to consider their practice differently.

In contrast, power tilts away from students on social work placement. Placements are arguably framed by structuralist features (Kinchin & Gravett, 2022): there needs to be a clear rationale for a placement and a clear power delineation between the practice educator and social work student. Social work students pose questions on placement, but they do so within the context of the practice educator holding power over them to determine whether they pass their placement. Arguably, students are less free to challenge practice educators because of the hierarchical nature of placements; the practice educator's role is to guide and assess students' professional development. In this environment, students may have fewer opportunities to challenge social work knowledge in the same way as they do in the classroom. Their learning is structured around compliance with established procedures and meeting the expectations of their practice educators. The socially situated relationship within the agency setting arguably limits students' freedom to explore and question as they can in a more open and dialogical university space. In the classroom, students have more power to influence social workers' learning; in the agency, power is concentrated with the social worker or practice educator, and students are likely to be constrained by the hierarchical structure.

There are likely to be some implications for universities and social work curricula as a result of social workers taking a more active role in the classroom, especially in thinking about power dynamics and learning environments. The shift in power dynamics in Higher Education Institution (HEI) classrooms, where social work students hold more influence in shaping discussions, highlights the importance of creating a more egalitarian learning environment. This suggests that universities should foster classroom environments in which students are encouraged to ask challenging, unfamiliar questions. Doing so may help practitioners reflect on and reconsider their practice from new perspectives. Incorporating such opportunities into the social work curriculum would enhance critical thinking and reflexivity for both students and visiting practitioners. The social work curriculum should actively integrate opportunities for relational, temporal, and spatial

disruptions in both the classroom and placement settings. Pedagogical approaches that emphasize dialogical learning and critical questioning, rather than rigid hierarchical structures, could better prepare students for the complexities of social work practice. The contrast between the power dynamics in HEI classrooms and practice placements, where students typically have less power, suggests a need to reevaluate how practice placements are framed within the social work curriculum. Universities might consider fostering a more collaborative approach in placements where students feel empowered to ask critical questions without fear of jeopardizing their assessments. Revisiting the structural features of placements could ensure that they are not overly rigid, allowing for more dynamic exchanges between students and practice educators. In addition, there is merit in considering whether circular questions could play a more active role in practitioner-student encounters in placement agencies. While placement standards need to be maintained, circular questions may foster mutually respectful encounters in which it is recognized that everyone is affected by these encounters. Within circular causal interactions, one's reflection influences another's reflection, and that influence is reciprocated, creating a sequence of thought-provoking invitations. If everybody can be understood as 'a process of relationships' (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018) in a circular causal environment, then we can acknowledge that both a student's and a practitioner's beliefs and understanding are open to being influenced by each other (Becvar & Becvar, 2017).

Social workers have less power over students when invited to the classroom. Therefore, students in the classroom have a greater freedom to invite practitioners to think again about their practice by asking questions, posing hypotheses, and challenging decision-making. Temporally, the teaching space provides practitioners with a creative opportunity to reflect on cases and work, outside the deadline, procedural and organizational constraints of the local authority setting. Or in the words of Sally (senior social worker) 'to be able to do that [reflect] with lots of different people in a different environment is really, really useful'.

Practitioners serve as objects of study and reflection for social work students and for themselves. Classroom encounters call upon social workers to observe, analyze and interpret themselves, and to recognize themselves as dominions of knowledge (Foucault, 1984). From a poststructuralist perspective, social workers -through HEI teaching encounters—are invited to review the discursive structures of the ways in which they think about their work (St. Pierre, 2000).

Teaching invites social workers to think about their understanding of social work knowledge, practice and the context within which they work. Teaching can reveal the historical and cultural constituents of their working lives to practice as social workers. Teaching, for example, can lead social workers to question why they and their organizations conduct social work practices, including communicating (Hedges, 2005), in the ways they do. This creates freedom and curiosity for practitioners to explore the meaning of their work (Lang et al., 1990).

Teaching can lead social workers to critique what they say, think and do, and develop a revised ontological sense of themselves as social workers (Foucault, 1984). There is a historical ontological dimension to this: social workers draw on their practice of social work in their encounters with students which can lead to transformations in how they envisage their own and social work's role in society. Insights generated from teaching can then be brought back to a social worker's practice setting

to change the approach to, for example, supervision, working with other professionals, or engaging with service users. Furthermore, if the teaching consultant is also a manager, this can lead to new ways in which teams work and spawn innovative community practices. Therefore, teaching social work students can transform teaching consultants' ontological understanding of the potential of social work practice (Gadamer, 1986).

The findings highlight that social work teaching, in which students and visiting social workers interact in the classroom, is circular rather than linear in activity (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). If this is the case, then there are research and policy implications. First, more research is needed to understand the nature of circular questions in classroom interactions. For example, do certain types of circular questions (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018) promote self-reflexivity among visiting practitioners? Additionally, how can a visiting practitioner be supported to maintain a position of safe uncertainty (B. Mason, 1993) in their interactions with students in which the visitor is confronted by unexpected questions or questions where they do not know the answer? Second, this paper resulted from a policy initiative intended to improve the quality of social work graduates (Berry-Lound et al., 2016). Little attention was given in the policy to considering whether it might generate unintended benefits or consequences. Therefore, in designing future policies, attention should be given to considering the effects on other stakeholders in an open system (Von Bertalanffy, 1972), such as social work, if the focus of change is on one part of the system.

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