

**Using *eLearning* to educate and support
social work students in
rural field education placements**

...opportunities but challenges...



***Context* of Social Work Field Education Program**

- **140 days of supervised practicum:**
 - ☉ **3rd year (60 days - 4 days a week)**
 - ☉ **4th year (80 days - 5 days a week)**
- **Concurrent placement classes - educational framework and assessment components**
- **Peer Support and Accountability Groups**

Rationale and challenges...

- City students '*go bush*' - why is Sydney University offering rural social work placements?
- Challenges for the students who choose to engage in this program
 - cost
 - relative isolation
 - a clash of cultures
- Challenges for field educators (practice teachers)
 - no financial support
 - isolation from mostly metropolitan based universities
- Challenges for online class teacher
 - Justifying cost
 - Context of pressure to limit intensive teaching
 - Under-estimation of time to design and facilitate the site

Challenges exacerbated in the online environment



- A potentially *sterile* text based environment
- Absence of face to face presence of peers and teachers
- Can reduce feelings of isolation from student peers but still limited social presence
- Text based communication - advantages as well as disadvantages
- Asynchronous classes - reason/challenge
- WebCT technology becoming out of date compared with technologies regularly used by students
- Use of teleconference facilities to complement online teaching

What we've learned over six years...

• Educational principles



- need for sound pedagogy in the online environment: cognitive presence; social presence; teaching presence
- importance of being aware of social and emotional components of learning
- efforts to engage field educators/practice teachers

• Our challenges in maintaining the course:

- ICT challenges in some rural and remote areas;
- varying field educator familiarity with technology
- resourcing \$\$\$ and capacity of existing teaching staff
- justifying small class and visits in the context of cost-cutting

Online field education class program (examples)

Example of discussion topics:



- Interview your field educator and/or colleagues about the issues s/he faces as a practitioner in a rural setting in relation to the key issues in the prescribed reading
- Students required to conduct a 'community capacity inventory' exercise in their particular agency locality - knowing the community
- As non-Aboriginal social workers engaging with Aboriginal service users, how are you grappling with your *own* identity and role issues in your current context of practice? (teleconference discussion)
- Reflecting back on your field education placement in a rural setting, how has your experience contributed to your capacity for creative and innovative social work practice?

What goes on in social work field education placements?

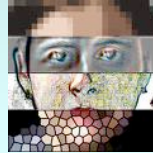


- ☉ daily novelty
- ☉ acute anxiety when confronting challenging or new situations
- ☉ complexity of human service work
- ☉ context of continuous assessment
- ☉ centrality of interpersonal interactions at all levels
- ☉ power dynamics
- ☉ anxiety may be exacerbated by isolation from normal social supports, student peers and university teachers

The role of EMOTION in deep learning and critical reflection

- **Deep learning** in social work comes from a sense of discomfort...practice experiences that UNSETTLE students and make them think deeply...
- Emotion can propel students in one of two ways (or sometimes both ways at different times...)
 - ☉ In a potentially negative sense.....
 - ☉ In a more empowering sense.....
- **Potential risks** with online teaching - students struggling with emotional responses but meeting educational requirements

Illustrating the challenges of eLearning...



- **Wanting to go beyond description of practice and processing of experience to use a critical reflection framework to work towards deep learning in the context of diverse and complex practice situations**
- **Introducing rural students to a critical reflection framework**

The 'Critical Incident' Framework

- **Begins from an artefact of the student's own practice**
- **Specific incident that seems significant to the student's learning about social work or about themselves as social workers**
- **Often stems from a pressing reality (Napier, 2005): '*something has occurred and we are strongly motivated to make sense of our reactions and actions*'**
- **Students focus on:**
 - memories of the event
 - perceptions of what happened
 - their actions
 - the incident may seem quite *banal* or *mundane* to others

The online critical reflection exercise



- This exercise runs over a period of 6 weeks
- Exercise completed in three parts - [telephone and online]:
 - *Describing* critical incident online (no explicit analysis - narrative)
 - Working with a '*critical friend*' to explore this narrative to draw out reasons and justifications for decisions, judgements and perceptions
 - Analysing incident using a critical reflection framework
 - Writing up and posting analysis on the WebCT site
- Readings and lecture notes provided (online)
- Discussions with the agency based field educator/practice teacher throughout
- Discussion with their university educator at mid-placement face to face visit

One rural student's 'critical incident'

- Student working with a 9 year old child who was living with foster carers because of child protection concerns. Critical incident involved conflict between birth parents, foster parents and statutory child protection agency workers as child was dying in hospital from cancer. Issue for student involved balancing the child's wishes with those of the various adults involved.

2007 student comment about this online exercise

“I learned that the more I reflect on my practice, the more different angles I can understand it from, the more effective I become. Through discussion with my critical friend and after doing the readings, I come to interpret the critical practice incident differently than when I first wrote about it. This has given me a deeper understanding of the factors involved in the situation and my response to it and a more open view of social work practice”.

To the site - *not much to look at...*

