



## The Use of Immersive Learning Environments in Social Work Education

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### Abstract

This paper evaluates the use of a 'photorealistic virtual learning environment' to provide social work students with an authentic experiential learning experience in the area of child protection. Reports into child protection policies in the UK (Laming Report, 2009 [1]; Munro Report, 2011 [2]) have emphasized the role of education in preparing graduates who have the skills and knowledge to work competently in very challenging and emotive situations and "make the best judgments they can to protect a vulnerable child" [Munro, 2011: 6]. The UK Social Work Reform Board (2010) [3] has provided a new framework for social work education in which it emphasises the importance of the actual process of learning to address the gap between learning the theory and implementing knowledge in practice. Experiential learning approaches acknowledge that learning by doing is an essential part of this learning process and can offer opportunities for real time decision-making. To address these issues, a learning environment was created through the use of a digital storyboard, which provides an interactive learnscape where student practitioners act as a qualified social worker within the virtual learning environment, following the process of a child protection case. This unique experiential learning tool merges current technological innovations with sound pedagogical principles to offer students an opportunity for real-life decision-making. It takes them through observations and risk assessments and requires them to interact with parents, children and other members of the multi-disciplinary team who are engaged in the child protection process. Assessments are embedded throughout the learnscape for students to evaluate their learning and key documents are signposted to develop knowledge in context. The learnscape has been piloted with pre-qualified social work students and the results have been overwhelmingly positive, with students reporting increases in their levels of contextual understanding of knowledge and skills for child protection.

### References

- [1]. Laming Report (2009) The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report
- [2]. Munro Report (2011) The Munro Review of Child protection: A Child Centred System.
- [3]. Social Work Reform Board (2010) Building a Safe and Confident Future.