The Use of immersive Learning Environments in Social Work Education.

Anne Llewellyn
Leeds Metropolitan University (UK)
a.llewellyn@leedsmet.ac.uk

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 [1]; Munro Report [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) [3]. 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.

Introduction

This paper evaluates the use of an experiential learning tool in social work education, exploring the key pedagogical principles that underpinned the design and intended outcomes of the tool. The context of Higher Education and social work education within Higher Education provide an important backdrop for an understanding of the issues and problems that social work educators face as well as key policy guidance and directives within social work that have identified problems in the area of safeguarding children. In 2010, the Social Work Reform Board identified the importance of the process of learning in preparing graduate practitioners [4], who are confident and competent for newly qualified social work practice. To address these issues, members of the social work team at Leeds Metropolitan University worked with a commercial company (Toolwire) to develop a photorealistic virtual learning environment (Learnscape) that offers students an opportunity to experience a realistic case study, following the process of child protection and providing formative and summative assessment points for students to evaluate and reflect on their learning. The learnscape was piloted on 12 prequalifying students on the 2nd Year of a full time two-year Master's programme. These students were selected as they had already undertaken several modules addressing issues concerned with social work with children as well as a one hundred day placement. The pilot study consisted of a pre and post self assessment of skills and competence and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were then evaluated This evaluation is very limited in scope in that it is a pilot study to inform a more in-depth evaluation, and as such, the findings need to be read as an early impact analysis.

Context

The Social Work degree was introduced in the UK in 2003 in an attempt to improve the quality and supply of social workers through an all graduate profession. Yet, there are continuing concerns about the preparation of Newly Qualified Social Workers and their readiness to practice in a complex and emotionally challenging environment, where practitioners are often engaged with vulnerable people in uncertain contexts. Five years after the introduction of the Degree, the Select Committee Report into

The Training of Children and Families Social Workers (2008) raised concerns about the extent to which Higher Education Social Work courses were fit for purpose and the implications of this.

"When social workers are poorly trained - lacking in knowledge, skills or experience - or left unsupported in highly pressured situations, children's lives are put in danger." (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2008) [5]

This is supported by successive reports into child abuse and child deaths (Laming Report 2003 [6], 2009 [7]; Munro Report, 2011 [8]) which have identified the need for professionals to be better equipped with the skills to manage child protection cases, making judgements based on sound evidence and having the confidence and skills to make decisions to protect the vulnerable from harm. These reports have identified the continuing challenges of safeguarding vulnerable children and have explored the role of education in preparing graduate social workers who have the skills and knowledge to "make the best judgments they can to protect a vulnerable child" (Munro Report, 2011: 6) [9].

Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010) [10] provides an important framework for multi-agency working to protect vulnerable children in the UK and yet concerns have been expressed about whether this is always followed effectively) [11].

The Munro Report [12] makes a number of recommendations and "sets out proposals for reform which, taken together, are intended to create the conditions that enable professionals to make the best judgments about the help to give to children, young people and families…and develops professional expertise and is focused on the safety and welfare of children and young people." (p6) [12]

At the same time, the Social Work Reform Board (2010) [13] was tasked with making recommendations for the reform of social work education and has produced a new framework to develop competence and skills with emphasis on the process of learning to address the theory practice gap. The new framework for social work education places emphasis on two key areas: improving the skills and expertise of social work graduates and more effective links between theory and research and practice. This fits with Dreyfus and Dreyfus' [14] model of professional development, where the learner moves along the continuum from novice to expert practitioner, moving from decisions and actions which are context free and based on rules and procedures to practitioners who use intuitive knowledge and conceptualisation with an integrated sense of self, empowered to act as social agents.

To develop professional practitioners Cantley [15] advocates an assessment, learning and teaching approach that engages the student more effectively in the real world of social work practice, based on creative and authentic assessment strategies. Sambell et al. [16] discuss the move from assessment of learning to a model based on assessment for learning, which seeks to empower and enable students within the learning process. However, there are challenges in providing opportunities for students to have concrete experiences of risk assessment and real time decision-making in social work education. Experiential learning can bridge the gap between theory and practice and provide an opportunity to develop the critical application of theory.

Experiential Learning

Building on Dewey's [17] theory that experience has an important part to play in the learning process, Kolb [18] developed a cyclical model of learning experience, arguing that learners can enter at any stage of the learning cycle. This cycle provides a basis for the student to observe and then reflect on actions. These reflections can then lead to conceptualisation of abstract theories and discovery of new knowlesge and understanding. This leads to a deeper level of understanding as the abstract concepts are applied in practice and the whole cycle starts again.

Research into the effectiveness of experiential learning theory in social work practice is relatively new [19], although it has been shown that students who used an experiential learning tool in a social work policy practice module were more likely to perceive themselves as competent and confident policy practitioners than students who had learned through traditional methods. Horwath and Thurlow [20] used an experiential learning experience with students in childcare practice and concluded that this was an effective way of developing reflective practice and making evidenced based judgements in practice. Parton [21] argues that when working with human problems, there is a need to explore indeterminancy, ambiguity and uncertainty and a good quality experiential learning experience can provide the means for this, as well as incorporating emotional context so that students can reflect on the influence of emotion on normative judgements [22].

Experiential learning is not new, but new technologies provide opportunities for different learning spaces and new discoveries. Learning technologies can be used to provide a "richly expressive environments that immerse the participant in a setting that includes sound and visual cues…and realistic perspective." (Johnson and Levine, 2008: 162) [23]

Virtual worlds are useful for providing a realistic situation where the real environment would be too dangerous or sensitive to access or to practice skills. "That is the unique promise of virtual worlds, as it is possible to experiment not only with little risk in terms of danger or costs, but also in a myriad of ways…" (Levine and Johnson, 2008: 169) [24].

A virtual learning tool on child protection is particularly valuable for helping students to practice skills and develop knowledge and understanding. There is a scene in the learnscape where a character is threatening, abusive and aggressive. The digital storyboard allows this to be portrayed realistically so that the student experiences the emotional impact of this in a safe environment, where they can reflect on their learning and develop knowledge for future practice

There are basically two types of experiential learning [25]: learning as a direct experience and learning from the experience of the learner's everyday world. This project focused on providing students with a direct experience, based on the creation of a photorealistic story board that provides an interactive learnscape, where the student plays the part of a newly qualified social worker in the virtual learning environment, following the process of a child protection case, under the supervision of their line manager. This learnscape merges current technological innovations with sound pedagogical principles underpinned by Kolb's model of experiential learning to offer students an opportunity for real life decision-making in practice [26]. Throughout the learnscape, students undertake observations, assessments and complete reports, interacting with parents and children and within the multi-disciplinary team. Students are taken through an authentic journey of assessment of risk and decisions about the legal and policy process in child protection. Learning is developed not just through observation and engagement in the virtual learning environemnt, but also through the use of embedded formative and summative assessment points for testing of knowledge and understanding and feedback loops are provided for remediation and further development of knowledge and understanding. Positioning of key documents within the learnscape facilitates the conceptualisation of knowledge alongside the experience and points of structured reflection are also embedded for students to reflect on their own learning and development, based on Schon's (1983) [27] theories of reflection in action.

Throughout the development of the learnscape, the focus was on the development of the digital story telling to achieve key learning outcomes that would develop knowledge and skills for child protection as advocated within the Munro Report [28], including knowledge of child development and parenting capacity, the ability to make sense of observations and use them to make decisions for intervention, knowledge and understanding of legal and policy frameworks, the importance of adopting a child centred and multi-agency approach to child protection. The learnscape was also mapped against the processes of Working Together to Safeguard Children [29], which sets out guidance for multi-agency working to safeguard vulnerable children and key documents are provided within the learnscape to support the development and application of knowledge.

Discussion

All 12 students evaluated a positive development in skills related to children's safeguarding after completing the learnscape and felt that they were significantly more confident to make decisions about the process of safeguarding and 11 of the 12 felt that their skills of observation and risk assessment had significantly improved. All students commented positively on the interactivity of the tool and the value of being avtively invovled an authentic environment. Although there were perceptions of positive developments across all categories, the least marked of these was in relation to presenting an evidence base to inform and justify decisions. This may be related to the way that the students used the learnscape, as they were not required to complete the final summative assessment, which asks the learner to reflect on the evidence base of the decisions made and alternative decisions. This needs to be explored further through a more in-depth analysis.

This virtual learning environment provides a valuable learning approach that is difficult to achieve with more traditional teaching and learning methods. Learners engage with a process of adaptation to scaffold their knowledge through engagement with the environment [30] Learners are assisted to resolve conflicts and make decisions in a safe environment to transform learning, through reflection in practice, exploring the assumptions and presuppositions underpinning that practice. [31]

Good social work practice involves having the skills and confidence to manage uncertainty and complexity. This immersive learning experience provides a learning tool that offers the learner an authentic environment, with well structured activities to develop that thinking and reflection in action. The learnscape offers a 3 dimensional learning experience where learners can have concrete experiences of sensitive and emotionally challenging scenarios, with opportunities to build on their existing knowledge, use theories to inform practice and reflect on their subjective experience within the interaction.

References

[1] Laming Report (2009) The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report. London, HMSO

[2] Munro Report (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: A Child Centred System. London, HMSO

[3] Social Work Reform Board (2010) Building a Safe and Confident Future. London, HMSO

[4] House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2008)

[5] Laming Report (2003) The Protection of Children in England. London, HMSO

[6] Ibid

[7] Laming Report (2009) Op Cit.

[8] Munro Report (2011) Op Cit.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) Working Together Safeguard Children. London, HMSO

[11] Laming Report (2009) Op Cit

[12] Munro Report (2011) Op Cit.

[13] Social Work Reform Board. Op Cit.

[14] Dreyfus, H and Dreyfus, S (1986) Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer. Oxford, Basil Blackwell

[15] Cartney, P (2010) Making changes to assessment methods in social work education: focusing on process and outcomes. Social Work Education. 29(2) 137-151

[16] Sambell, K., McDowell, L and Montgomery, C (2012) Assessment for Learning in Higher Education. London, Routledge..

[17] Dewey, J. (1933) How we Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking in the Educative Process. Boston, Health.

[18] Kolb, D.A. (1984) Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ; Prentice Hall

[19] Rocha, C.J. (2000) Evaluating experiential teaching methods in a policy practice course: the case for service learning to increase political participation. Journal of Social Work Education. 36(1) 53-63

[20] Horwath, J and Thurlow, C (2004) Preparing students for evidence-based child and family field social work: an experiential learning approach. Social Work Education. 23(1) 7-24

[21] Parton, N (2000) Some thoughts on the relationship between theory and practice in and for social work. British Journal of Social Work. 30. 449-463

[22] Taylor, C and White, S (2001) Knowledge, truth and reflexivity: the problem of judgement in social work. Journal of Social Work. 1(1) 37-59.

[23] Johnson, L and Levine, A (2008) Virtual worlds: inherently immersive, highly social learning spaces. Theory into Practice. 47. 161-170

[24] Ibid

[25] Smith, M. K. (2001). David A. Kolb on experiential learning. Encyclopedia of Informal education, 1-15.

[26] Kolb (1984) Op Cit.

[27] Schon (1983)

[28] Munro Report (2011) Op Cit.

[29] Department of Children, Schools and Families (2010) Op Cit.

[30] Kolb, DA and Kolb, AY (2006) Learning styles and Learning Spaces in R.R Sims and S.J Sims (eds) Learning Styles and Learning: A Key to Meeting the Accountability Demands in Education. New York, Nova Science

[31] Mezirow, J (1991) Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.